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OFF-SIDE

**Ayon Sengupta**
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# IN INDIA, IPL REIGNS SUPREME

The Indian sports market has **grown 6.5 times** since the inception of the Indian Premier League in 2008.

For 17 seasons, the Indian Premier League carnival has not only captivated audiences but has also commandeered the wheel of the Indian sports industry and, perhaps, also its advertising vehicle. According to a report in the *The Hindu BusinessLine*, the franchises in the IPL are expected to witness a growth of between 15 and 20 per cent in sponsorship revenues compared to last season.

"For the advertisers, IPL is like an advertising festival. IPL, despite delivering four per cent TRP, is still the biggest show on earth, at least in India. It is a show where you get both men and women, young and old, and it cuts across income groups," says Ambi Parameswaran, Independent Brand Strategist and former CEO of FCB Ulka.

The five-time champion Mumbai Indians, after breaching the ₹100-crore mark in sponsorship last season, has brought in 26 partners for 2024, swelling its coffers by a further 20 per cent. The broadcasters, too, have benefitted as Disney Star, which earned between ₹2000 and ₹2500 crore during the last IPL, has signed on 15 sponsors, while Viacom18, the digital partner, boasts a tally of 18. Interestingly, digital media spending in sports saw a 40 per cent rise in 2023, while television witnessed a 16 per cent decline.

According to the 'India Sports Sponsorship Report' by GroupM ESP, the Indian sports market has grown 6.5 times since the inception of the IPL in 2008. From a modest ₹2,423 crore in 2008, it has ballooned to ₹15,766 crore in 2023. With cricket contributing to 87 per cent of this, the IPL continues to be the pied piper of commercialisation, contributing upwards of ₹3000 crore in sponsorship spend (including central and franchise).

The 10-team League's brand value has swelled by 433 per cent post astronomical media rights sales in 2022 — ₹23,575 crore for television and ₹23,758 crore for digital for 410 matches. With each match valued at ₹118.5 crore, the IPL is second only to the National Football League in the USA (₹141 crore per match). The sophomore year of the Women's Premier League, too, is expected to have generated ₹115 crore in sponsorship — 50 from central sponsorship and 65 from teams — a slight jump from the ₹110 crore last year.

According to the first edition of the Ormax 'Sports Audience Report: 2024', cricket, football, and kabaddi are the top three viewed sports in the country, with an audience base of 612, 305, and 280 million, respectively.

Non-cricket sports, however, despite India's phenomenal success at the Hangzhou Asian Games (107 medals) and Asian Para Games (111) in 2023, saw a one per cent decline (₹2,065 crore from ₹2,094 crore in 2022) in spending in 2023. The drop, perhaps, can be attributed to the bursting of the EdTech bubble, which had contributed significantly to the sports industry in 2022, including Byju's ₹316 crore deal with FIFA for the Qatar World Cup.

With the Paris Olympics and Paralympics looming on the horizon and global football events like the EUROs and Copa America, the expectations are high — both from the Indian athletes to improve the 2021 medal tally and the advertisers to bridge the disparity. The Indian Olympic Association recently signed a first-of-its kind ₹10 crore deal with Yes Bank as its official banking partner, and more such associations are expected to follow.

"Things are slowly changing, but this year you will not see a dramatic upswing in advertising for non-cricket sports despite the Olympics. There will be one or two nationalistic brands like Amul and Tata who will put money on the Olympics while most of the others will save it for cricket," says Parameswaran.

Ultimately, in India, where cricket is king, the IPL reigns supreme.

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## WORLD VIEW OF THE FORTNIGHT

**"I think we're living in 2024, not 1984, which means total transparency. I think everyone should welcome transparency."**
– McLaren boss Zak Brown on FIA transparency

**This is not directly at Simona, but if someone purposely cheats... it's my personal belief that I don't think people should be awarded wild cards afterwards."** – Caroline Wozniacki on Simona Halep's return to Miami Open after reduced doping ban

# 2028

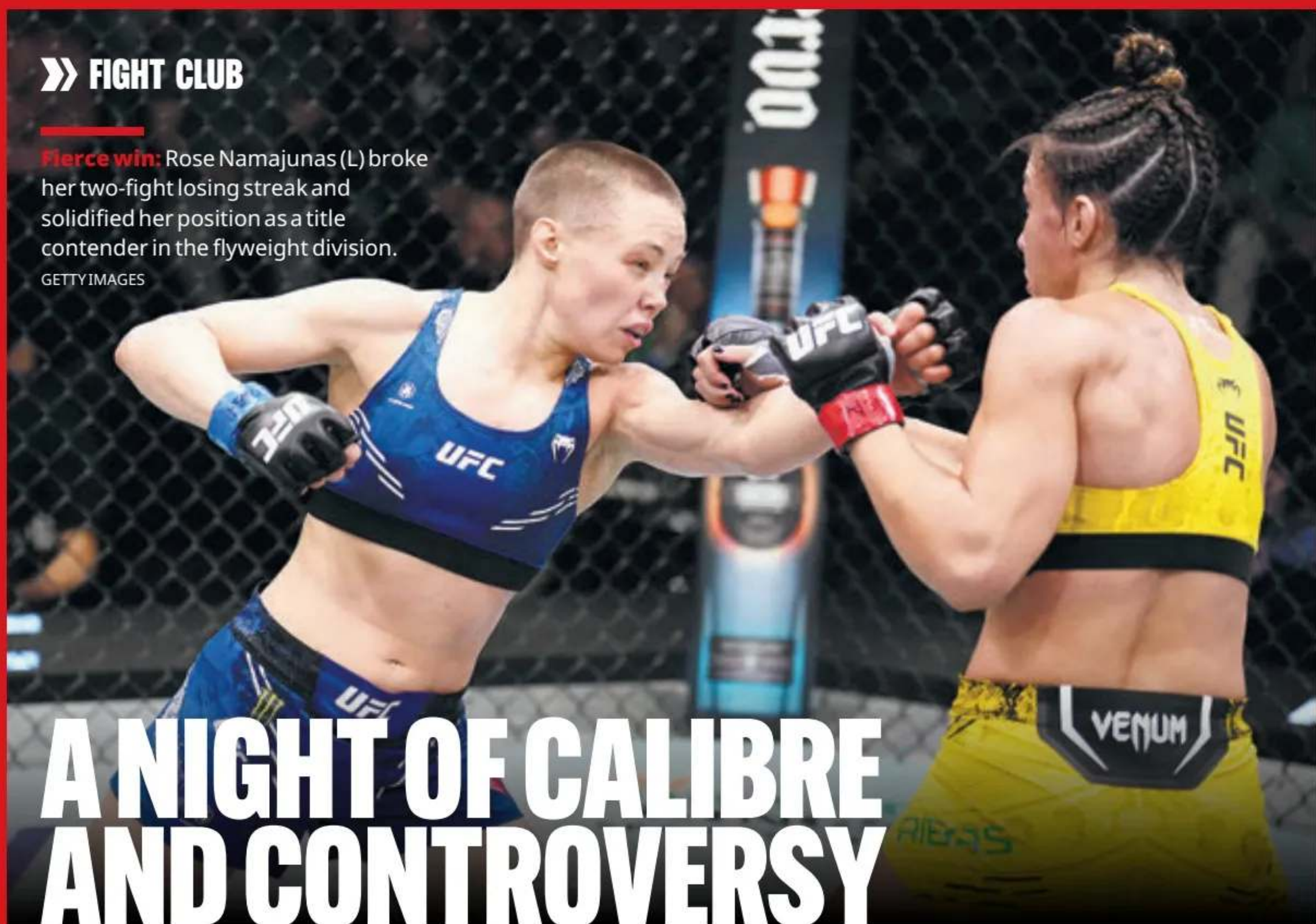
World Boxing will seek recognition from Olympic organisers to replace the Russian-led International Boxing Association and keep the troubled sport on the programme for the 2028 Los Angeles Games, the fledgling body said.
The International Olympic Committee (IOC) stripped the IBA of recognition last June after saying it had failed to complete reforms on governance, finance, and ethical issues.
The boxing tournaments at the Paris Games are being organised by the IOC, but sports director Kit McConnell **(in pic)** said that the Executive Board had stressed that the situation could not continue.
"This must be the last time that such a process can be undertaken by the IOC," he said.
"If there is no boxing body supported and driven by the National Federations, we will not be in a position to include boxing in the Olympic programme."

# 2024

Olympic chiefs announced that Russian and Belarusian athletes competing in this summer's Paris Games under a neutral flag will not be able to take part in the opening ceremony.
Athletes from both countries had already been banned from attending the opening ceremony of the Paralympics, a little more than two weeks after the Olympics finish.
In December, the IOC suspended Russia from the Paris 2024 Olympics,but gave the green light for Russian and Belarusian athletes to compete as neutrals.

## NOT GUILTY!

**British sprinter Victoria Ohuruogu said that she had been cleared of an anti-doping violation** relating to an alleged prohibited association with a banned athlete. Ohuruogu was allegedly being coached by her Italian boyfriend, Antonio Infantino, whose three-year doping ban ends in December, but this was dismissed by a UK Anti-Doping panel. "An independent panel has emphatically dismissed the charge of prohibited association against me, finding that it was 'not satisfied, let alone comfortably satisfied' that I have broken any rules," Ohuruogu said. REUTERS




**Fierce win:** Rose Namajunas (L) broke her two-fight losing streak and solidified her position as a title contender in the flyweight division.
GETTY IMAGES

# A NIGHT OF CALIBRE AND CONTROVERSY

Rose Namajunas emerged victorious over Amanda Ribas in their Fight Night showdown, while Igor Severino got **disqualified for biting** Andre Lima.

**Nigamanth P**
nigamanth.p@thehindu.co.in

The recently concluded UFC (Ultimate Fighting Championship) Fight Night's main event was wrapped up with an intense five-round showdown between veteran Rose Namajunas and Amanda Ribas in a flyweight bout.

After a full 25 minutes, the judges unanimously declared former strawweight champion Namajunas the winner, breaking her two-fight losing streak and solidifying her position as a title contender in the flyweight division.

The headlining duo ran fairly level throughout, especially on the feet, with neither Namajunas nor Ribas delivering any decisive blows, but each piling up quality lands throughout. On the mat, Namajunas was able to gain the upper hand for the majority of the fight, stifling Ribas' attempts to create openers and landing short blows.

Meanwhile, in the heavyweight co-main event, Karl Williams kept his winning run intact as he earned a unanimous decision win over Justin Tafa, who suffered his first loss in three years.

Tafa displayed greater explosiveness, consistently landing hits on Williams throughout the fight. However, Williams managed to close the distance and take Tafa to the ground, where he controlled the match by landing effective short strikes and maintaining dominant positions.

Despite enduring occasional

## Main card results

**UFC Fight Night: Namajunas vs Ribas**

**Rose Namajunas def. Amanda Ribas** by unanimous decision (49-46, 49-46, 48-47)

**Karl Williams def. Justin Tafa** by unanimous decision (30-27, 29-28, 29-28)

**Edmen Shahbazyan def. AJ Dobson** by KO (strikes) at 4:33 of Round 1

**Payton Talbott def. Cameron Saaiman** by TKO (strikes) at 0:21 of Round 2

**Youssef Zalal def. Billy Quarantillo** by submission (rear-naked choke) at 1:50 of Round 2

**Fernando Padilla def. Luis Pajuelo** by submission (D'arce choke) at 2:45 of Round 1

**Biting the dust:** Igor Severino (R) became the first-ever UFC fighter to be disqualified for biting his opponent, Andre Lima (L). GETTY IMAGES

setbacks, Williams showcased his athleticism and determination, ultimately securing his third consecutive win in the UFC.

### 'Bite of the night'

There was one other event, buried deep inside the preliminary card, that stole the spotlight from the main card.

A Luis Suarez-esque incident happened when Igor Severino took on Andre Lima in a men's flyweight bout.

Halfway through the second round, Severino pinned Lima to a corner of the cage and went on to bite the latter's biceps (pic, below) when he tried to shake off the former's body lock.

Referee Chris Tognoni stopped the fight, and the bizarre incident was reviewed. Severino initially denied biting Lima before visual evidence showed otherwise. Eventually, Severino was disqualified, and the win was awarded to Lima.

Severino became the first-ever UFC fighter to be disqualified for such an offence. The Brazilian's octagon career is all but over, as there are multiple reports suggesting that his contract might get terminated shortly.

To commemorate this absurd episode, Lima went straight to a tattoo studio to get the bite mark inked.

### Fight of the night

After failing to win in his first two UFC fights, Jarno Errens of Holland finally won, playing spoilsport in Steven Nguyen's official debut.

Errens had lost to William Gomis in Paris and SeungWoo Choi in Singapore, but his first business trip to Las Vegas paid off, with all three judges handing him victory in a clean sweep of the scorecards.

The Dutch featherweight found his range and rhythm right from the first round, shattering Nguyen's lip and continuing to unload and batter his opponent from then on.

Errens used his variations to perfection, pounding Nguyen's lead leg and flooring him at the conclusion of the second before continuing to dominate the bout.

### Up next

Yet another all-women main event is on the cards as the UFC wagon moves to Atlantic City on March 31.

Erin Blanchfield will take on Manon Fiorot in a women's flyweight bout, accompanied by the co-main event, which will see Vicente Luque go up against Joaquin Buckley in the men's welterweight division.

In their relatively short time in the promotion, Blanchfield and Fiorot have established themselves as the next generation of 125-pound contenders, routinely and decisively knocking off top-tier talent as they make their respective cases for a shot at the title.

The main event could potentially decide the next title contender, as Blanchfield is ranked second and Fiorot is third on the women's flyweight rankings.

**Severino initially denied biting Lima before visual evidence showed otherwise. To commemorate this absurd episode, Lima went straight to a tattoo studio to get the bite mark inked.**

# Quintet on a quest

As the highly anticipated FIDE Candidates 2024 tournament unfolds in Toronto, the spotlight is on **five Indian players** who are keen to etch their names in chess history.

**Rakesh Rao**

The biggest eyeball-grabber for Indian chess fans this year will take place in Toronto in April. In a cricket-loving nation, with the Indian Premier League in full swing, there will be several sports lovers keeping track of the FIDE Candidates 2024.

The eight-player event is designed to find the challenger to the reigning World champion, separately in the Open (men's) and women's sections. This will also be the first time these events will be held under one roof. The winners of the 14-round competitions earn the right to play the next World Championship match.

Since the inception of the Candidates Tournament in 1950, India never had it this good before in this tournament. To date, only

STEV BONHAGE

five-time World champion Viswanathan Anand played in this premier event between 1991 and 2014.

This time, five out of 16 Candidates are Indians. R. Praggnanandhaa, D. Gukesh and Vidit Gujrathi are among the eight men while K. Humpy and R. Vaishali are part of the eight ladies battling it out. Clearly, this is the best advertisement for the growing presence of Indians among the elite of the sport.

The double-round robin format and the time-control [see next page] suit the stronger players in the fray. Since the oldest players in their respective sections — 37-year-old Humpy and 36-year-old Hikaru Nakamura — are young enough to deal with the testing duration of the competition, their experience could come in handy.

Let us take a look at the prospects of the Indians, who are strong enough to upset the odds:

**R. Praggnanandhaa:** Firmly on the learning curve, his graph reflects an upward swing. Blessed with the right temperament and groomed for bigger challenges on a chess board, this 18-year-old is the strongest of the three Indians figuring in the bottom half of the seedings.

**PRAGGNANANDHAA IS CLEARLY THE ONE THAT NO CONTENDER CAN AFFORD TO TAKE LIGHTLY, HAVING FINISHED RUNNER-UP TO CARLSEN IN LAST YEAR'S WORLD CUP**

Going entirely by seedings, not many would give the Indians a chance of topping the field. But these days, barring the presence of Magnus Carlsen, no top seed seems to carry a better chance of winning than his closest challengers. With the World No. 1 and five-time World champion choosing to stay away from the World championship cycle, there are no clear favourites, in the strictest sense of the term.

The current bunch of Indians who have gate-crashed into elite competitions and periodically beat stronger players hold the promise of playing way above their rating. Praggnanandhaa is clearly the one that no contender can afford to take lightly. After all, exceeding all expectations, he finished runner-up to Carlsen in last year's World Cup. It was this result that earned Praggnanandhaa a place among the Candidates.

Going by his opening repertoire, Praggnanandhaa appears well prepared with both colours. He is willing to play the waiting game and stays alert to seize his chance. In situations where time is at a premium and quick calculations are needed, Praggnanandhaa can be trusted to stay cool and find the stronger of the available alternatives.

What makes him different from his compatriots is his ability to deal with disappointing results. Praggnanandhaa is quick to get over a missed win ending in a draw, or a rare loss from a seemingly drawn position. Mentally, he does not take long to get ready for the next game, without carrying any baggage of a disappointing result from the previous round.

From the days of the pandemic when cash-rich online Tour took roots in shorter duration formats, Praggnanandhaa slowly caught the attention of the chess world by getting some astounding victories, including a few over Carlsen. He stayed undefeated against several other elite players to underline his growing stature. After establishing himself as a serious contender among the elite in rapid and blitz, Praggnanandhaa turned his focus to the classical format. As a result, in the 24-month period between March 2022 to March 2024, his classical rating rose from 2619 to 2747 and established him firmly among the World's top-20.

Given his sustained training under illustrious coach R. B. Ramesh, Praggnanandhaa is expected to continue to add to his reputation. Toronto could see him pull off some stunning results.

**Format (Open): Players compete in a double round-robin basis for a total of 14 rounds. The time control is 120 minutes for the first 40 moves, followed by 30 more minutes for the rest of the game. There's a 30-second increment starting on move 41.**

**No draw agreement before Black's 40th move.**

**Prizes: Total prize-fund is 500,000 euros – 48,000 euros for the winner, 36,000 euros for the runner-up, and 24,000 euros for the second runner-up. Additionally, players receive 3,500 euros for every half-point scored.**

**Making history:** Gukesh became the first Indian in 37 years to figure ahead of Anand in FIDE's published rating list. HARRY GIELEN

**D. Gukesh:** One of the sensational success stories since March 2021, Gukesh is another teenager to look forward to. The youngest in the fray, the 17-year-old Chennai-mate of Praggnanandhaa is equally capable of enthralling the chess world in Toronto.

Gukesh's consistency, resulting in winning tournaments, is unmatched among the Indians in the past four years. His rise was phenomenal as all the hard work done during the lockdown with coach Grandmaster Vishnu Prasanna bore fruit in the first quarter of 2020. Since then, there has been no looking back for this bundle of talent.

A clutch of titles and a dramatic rise in the rating— from 2563 in March 2021 to 2747 in March 2024 — speaks of Gukesh's commitment to succeed. During this period, he became the talk of the chess world when he won eight straight games on the top board for

# Men

## Head-to-head record in Classical games (Open)

**Only decisive games. Drawn games not considered. DNP denotes Did Not Play**

| Players | Caru | Naka | Firo | Nepo | Pragg | Guk | Vid | Aba |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Fabiano Caruana (USA) | -- | 9-13 | 5-1 | 1-1 | 1-0 | 1-1 | 0-0 | 1-1 |
| Hikaru Nakamura (USA) | 13-9 | -- | 1-0 | 6-4 | 0-2 | 1-0 | 0-0 | 1-0 |
| Alireza Firouzja (FRANCE) | 1-5 | 0-1 | -- | 3-4 | 1-0 | 1-1 | 2-2 | 2-1 |
| Ian Nepomniachtchi (USA) | 1-1 | 4-6 | 4-3 | -- | 0-0 | 0-2 | 2-0 | 0-0 |
| R. Praggnanandhaa (INDIA) | 0-1 | 2-0 | 0-1 | 0-0 | -- | 2-2 | 3-3 | DNP |
| D. Gukesh (INDIA) | 1-1 | 0-1 | 1-1 | 2-0 | 2-2 | -- | 0-0 | 1-0 |
| Vidit Gujrathi (INDIA) | 0-0 | 0-0 | 2-2 | 0-2 | 3-3 | 0-0 | -- | 0-2 |
| Nijat Abasov (Azerbaijan) | 1-1 | 0-1 | 1-2 | 0-0 | DNP | 0-1 | 2-0 | -- |

India 'B' in the 2022 Chess Olympiad in Mahabalipuram. It was his performance that was instrumental in India winning the bronze medal. No wonder, Gukesh took the gold on the top board, much like teammates Nihal Sarin on Board Two and Praggnanandhaa on Board Three.

In the 2023 World Cup, in August, Gukesh overtook Anand in live ratings to become World No 9. After winning the two games in the second round against Misratdin Iskandarov, his live rating moved ahead of an almost inactive Anand's. He eventually stayed ahead till the next rating list was published on September 1, 2023, and became the first Indian in 37 years to figure ahead of Anand in FIDE's published rating list.

Though he missed the chance to qualify for the Candidates from the World Cup he did just enough to eventually grab a spot, by finishing second to Fabiano Caruana in the 2023 FIDE Circuit. Since Caruana had already qualified by being third in the World Cup, Gukesh took the spot meant for the FIDE Circuit winner.

But the days running up to the cut-off date to make the grade was suspenseful. Gukesh did his chances a huge favour by winning the 2023 Chennai Grandmasters title in late December. He then waited to see whether Dutch Anish Giri wins the World rapid or blitz titles. Once Giri faltered, Gukesh's path stood clear.

What makes him such a special talent? Many believe that Gukesh's ability to calculate accurately in complicated positions sets him apart. Much like Carlsen, he has the patience to wait for weaknesses or even a move of sub-optimal strength to seize his chance. That's the reason he has managed to emerge stronger from seemingly equal positions even until the late middle-game.

Unlike Praggnanandhaa, Gukesh takes his chances and that's the reason he is involved in more decisive battles than his more famous teammate.

**Vidit Gujrathi:** Vidit (right) is the one who gets a lot less credit than he deserves. He broke the barrier that kept the likes of P. Harikrishna and K. Sasikiran from firming up their spots among the top-25 players. Vidit surpassed the 2700-rating mark and stayed up there but soon the teen-brigade comprising Nihal Sarin, Praggnanandhaa, Arjun Erigaisi and Gukesh took the focus away from Vidit's consistency. His rise has been gradual but steady like some of his seniors.

It is indeed poetic justice that Vidit finds a place in the Candidates, after missing the route via the World Cup. Not many remember him

HARRY GIELEN

knocking out Ian Nepomniachtchi in the World Cup. That also meant four Indians were in the quarterfinals and not a single Russian!

Vidit booked his Candidates berth in style. He won the prestigious 2023 FIDE Grand Swiss — the strongest Open tournament of the year — despite being the 15th seed.

In a strong field with 114 players from 37 countries, Vidit scored 8.5 points to finish half a point ahead of second seed Hikaru Nakamura. To put things into perspective, it is pertinent to recall that 16th seed Arjun Erigaisi finished fourth (7.5 points), top seed Caruana (7) was 10th, eighth seed Praggnanandhaa (7) was 13th and fifth seed Gukesh (5) ended up a distant 81st!

The timely success also underlined Vidit's capabilities of excelling in strong fields and more importantly, his maturity to handle pressure. After starting with a defeat to Dutch Erwin L'Ami, Vidit won thrice on the trot, drew the next two and won twice to reach 5.5 from seven rounds.

He then drew with Nakamura and Andrey Esipenko before finishing off with victories over Bodgan-Daniel Deac and Alexandr Predke to cap the tournament of his life. Interestingly, during his campaign, the only higher seed Vidit faced was Nakamura.

Overall, Vidit's percentage of wins is way over his losses, with nearly 50 per cent of his games ending in draws. Though he had a forgettable Prague Masters recently where he stayed winless, drawing six and losing three in a row, Vidit is expected to use this as a wake-up call for Toronto.

A fine ambassador of Indian chess and widely followed on social media platforms, 29-year-old Vidit will be keen to make a show of this opportunity. He has the game, experience and the skill set to make his presence felt. A perpetual underdog without much pressure of expectations, trust Vidit to spring a surprise or two.

**K. Humpy:** What can be said about the most experienced player in the fray! She has been India's signature in women's chess for nearly two decades. She is not only the 2011 World Championship runner-up but also the 2019 World rapid champion! That shows she has the game to deal with any challenge on a chess board. And this format is just right for the 36-year-old to prove she is ready to add the World crown that is missing from her collection.

As the third seed, Humpy is among the six players who've retained their Candidates spots from the previous edition, held in a

# Women

## Head-to-head record in Classical games (women)

**Only decisive games. Drawn games not considered. DNP denotes Did Not Play**

| Players | Gor | Tin | Hum | Lag | Zho | Muz | Vai | Sal |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Aleksandra Goryachkina **(FIDE)** | -- | 1-1 | 0-1 | 2-0 | 3-4 | 1-1 | 0-0 | 1-0 |
| Lei Tingjie **(CHINA)** | 1-1 | -- | 0-4 | 0-2 | 5-6 | 1-0 | 0-0 | 0-0 |
| K.Humpy **(INDIA)** | 1-0 | 4-0 | -- | 3-1 | 4-0 | 4-5 | 0-0 | DNP |
| Kateryna Lagno **(FIDE)** | 0-2 | 2-0 | 1-3 | -- | 4-3 | 1-3 | 1-0 | DNP |
| Tan Zhongyi **(CHINA)** | 4-3 | 6-5 | 0-4 | 3-4 | -- | 6-3 | 1-1 | DNP |
| Anna Muzychuk **(UKRAINE)** | 1-1 | 0-1 | 5-4 | 3-1 | 3-6 | -- | 0-0 | 1-1 |
| R. Vaishali **(INDIA)** | 0-0 | 0-0 | 0-0 | 0-1 | 1-1 | 0-0 | -- | 0-0 |
| Nurgyul Salimovav **(Bulgaria)** | 0-1 | 0-0 | DNP | DNP | DNP | 1-1 | 0-0 | -- |

**As the third seed, Humpy retained her Candidates spot from the previous edition. Going by her head-to-head record against the seven other contenders, Humpy's prospects look very bright.**

knockout format, in 2022. Going entirely by her head-to-head record against the seven other contenders, Humpy's prospects look very bright. She won the only decisive game against top seed Aleksandra Goryachkina and has a 4-0 record against second-seeded defending champion Lei Tingjie.

Even against fourth seed Kateryna Lagno (3-1) and fifth seed Tan Zhongyi (4-0) Humpy has a clear psychological edge. Though she needs to improve her narrow 4-5 record against Anna Muzychuk, Humpy will be keen to prove her superiority over the last two lower-rated players — R. Vaishali and Nurgyul Salimova.

For the record, Humpy and Vaishali have been involved in a drawn game while the experienced Indian is yet to face the 20-year-old Salimova.

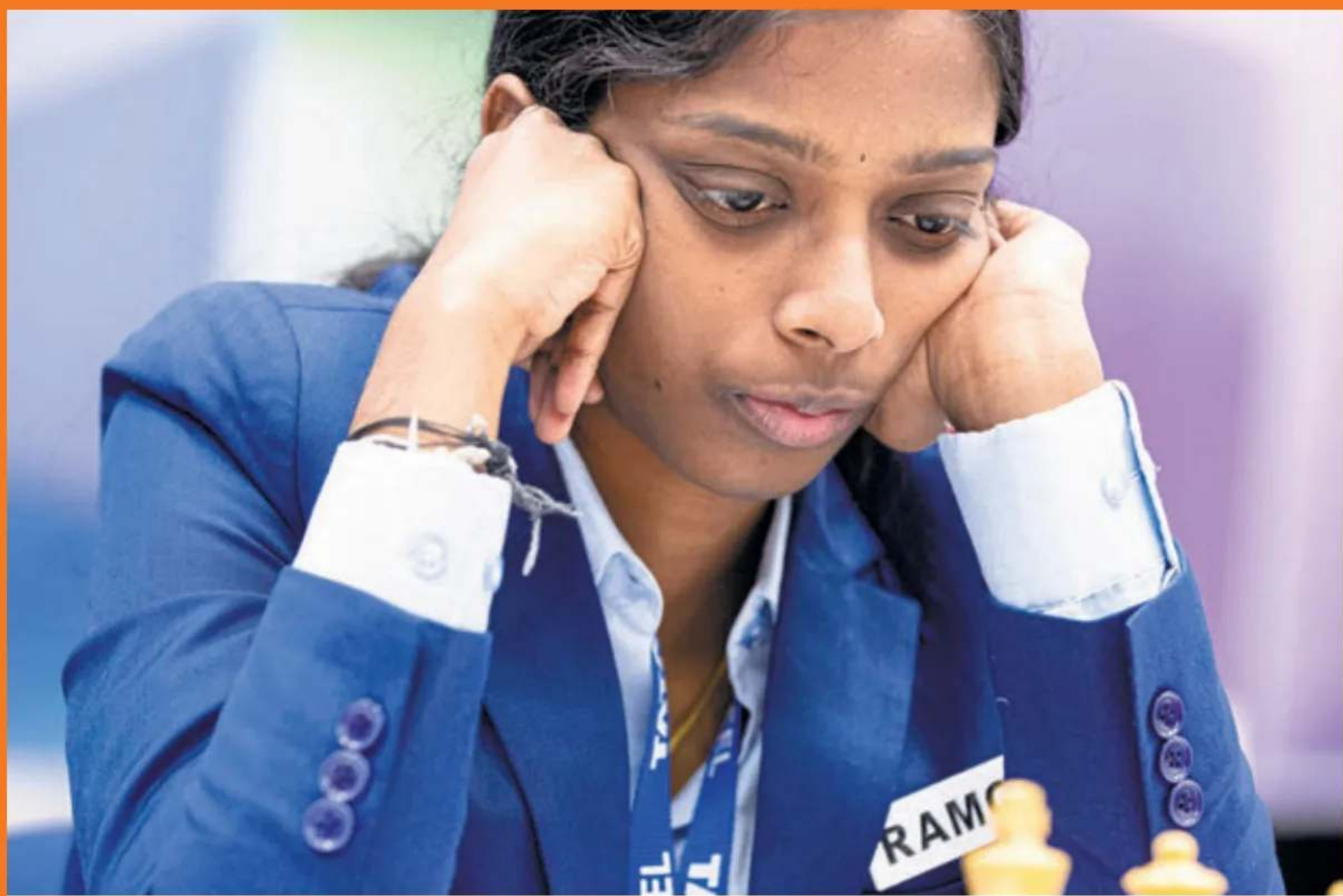
Since the format allows a player to face the other twice, once with each colour, Humpy is expected to do well. Her vast experience should come in handy in a field that has a fine mix of players, young and seasoned. Preparation is the key in events and Humpy is known to be a keen student. What is truly heartening to note is that she has lost none of the spark of the past when she made a comeback after becoming a parent.

She has the patience needed to do well in the classical format. Her consistency is testimony to her determination to give her best each time. No wonder, she stands third in the all-time list of women players with the highest rating. Only Judit Polgar (2735), who tops the list, and Hou Yifan (2687) are ahead of Humpy (2625).

So overall, Humpy enters the field knowing that she has a great chance to make this opportunity count. It is all about getting the right momentum for her campaign. Of the five Indian Candidates in Toronto, Humpy has the best chance of returning home as a World championship challenger.

**R. Vaishali:** She is the surprise package. In a field where the top six

**As dependable as ever:** Humpy has the game to deal with any challenge on a chess board. LENNART OOTES



players belong to the World's top-10 list, Vaishali took the path that's least expected from a lesser-rated player. Like Vidit in the Open section of the 2023 FIDE Grand Swiss, Vaishali took the honours in the women's section. She also ensured one of the two spots available for the Candidates with a round to spare!

Though new to the world's elite and thereby lacking the experience of playing top notch tournaments, Vaishali could find the going tough. Being the penultimate seed, there are no expectations from her and that could work to her advantage. She surely has the game to scale greater heights in the women's circuit and this opportunity should make her a better player.

In her own opinion, she is getting better at dealing with disappointing results. Unlike her brother Praggnanandhaa, Vaishali finds it difficult to overcome losses or blown-away winning possibilities. A good start should steady the nerves and thereafter, Vaishali can be expected to spring surprises. With coach Ramesh around in Toronto, she will be in her comfort zone.

Vaishali appears better prepared with a few more additions to her opening repertoire. No doubt, she has sound chess basics, good calculating abilities and defensive skills. In addition, the rise of her brother in the chess world has inspired this simple girl to perform amazingly well.

The past six months have been amazing for Vaishali. A place in the Candidates, the Grandmaster title and the Arjuna Awards have helped improve her self-belief and made her work harder.

**Steady rise:** The past six months have been amazing for Vaishali. A place in the Candidates, the Grandmaster title and the Arjuna Awards have all come her way. HARRY GIELEN

Unlike in the past, she can be expected to play to win tournaments. In Toronto, even a draw against six higher rated rivals is going to fetch her rating points that could take 15th-ranked Vaishali closer to the World top-10 bracket.

Vaishali has everything to play for. Though no one counts this rising Indian to be among the favourites for the title, expect this determined girl to make a strong bid. Expect her to play freely, bring down or slow down the progress of the front-runners and stay in the hunt.

***Candidates tournament from April 4-22. Rest days on April 8, 12, 16 & 19. Tie-break rounds on April 22 if required.***

**Format (Women): Players compete in a double round-robin basis for a total of 14 rounds. The time control is 90 minutes for the first 40 moves, followed by 30 more minutes for the rest of the game. There's a 30-second increment starting on move 1.**

**No draw agreement before Black's 40th move.**

**Prizes: Total prize-fund is 250,000 euros – 24,000 euros for the winner, 18,000 euros for the runner-up, and 12,000 euros for the second runner-up. Additionally, players receive 1,750 euros for every half-point scored.**

# Checkmate in Canada

India has its **task cut out** against some serious competition in its FIDE Candidates showdown.

**Firm favourite:** Caruana is a former winner of the Candidates. He had won it in 2018 and took on Carlsen for the World championship later that year. LENNART OOTES

**P. K. Ajith Kumar**
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The flavour may be more Indian at the Candidates in Toronto, but two Americans look the strongest contenders along with a Russian who has won the tournament's last two editions.

R. Praggnanandhaa, D. Gukesh and Vidit Gujrathi have ensured India has a strong presence — not to mention Koneru Humpy and R. Vaishali in the women's event. But they are up against very strong opposition.

Americans Fabiano Caruana and Hikaru Nakamura should be most people's favourites. And Russia's Ian Nepomniachtchi cannot be ignored.

In order to win the tournament and thus earn the right to challenge Ding Liren for the World Chess Championship, the Indians have to find ways to race ahead of their formidable opponents.

Caruana and Nakamura have been among the world's best players for a long time. Caruana is ranked second in the world behind five-time World champion Magnus Carlsen, who relinquished the title, paving the way for last year's World title match between Ding and Nepomniachtchi.

Caruana is the player to beat in Toronto. With 2804 Elo points, he is just 26 behind Carlsen, the world's strongest player of all time. Caruana's peak rating was 2844 and, apart from Carlsen (2882), only one other player has ever been rated higher — Garry Kasparov (2851).

Caruana is also a former winner of the

**Ready for any challenge:** Nakamura is a formidable presence in classical chess, in which he is ranked third in the world with 2789 points, behind Carlsen and Caruana. LENNART OOTES

Candidates. He won it in 2018 and took on Carlsen for the World championship later that year. After all the 12 games (classical format) were drawn, he lost in the tiebreaker (rapid). Caruana, in fact, had an opportunity to challenge Carlsen in the 2016 World championship as well: he finished second to Sergey Karjakin in the Candidates that year.

Caruana, who became the World No. 2 for the first time in 2014, has been a consistent performer. He has a strong game with no apparent weakness. Carlsen has in fact gone on record saying that he is the world's second-best player.

Nakamura may not be as consistent as Caruana in classical chess, but he too has been one of the world's top talents for a long time. And he has been a beast in speed chess.

Besides the formats of shorter time controls, he also enjoys playing Fischer random chess, a format in which he won the world title in 2022. He is, of course, a formidable presence in classical chess, in which he is ranked third in the world with 2789 points, behind Carlsen and Caruana.

He had become the World No. 2 in 2015 and a year before that, when FIDE began publishing ratings for the rapid and blitz variations of chess, he was the World No. 1 in both the lists.

Nakamura, who is also a hugely popular streamer, will certainly be one player that all his competitors will be wary of in Toronto. "He has very good chances," says veteran Indian Grandmaster Pravin Thipsay.

"I feel Caruana has the best game suited to win a tournament like the Candidates, with its double round-robin format. I will be surprised if anybody other than Caruana or Nakamura wins the Candidates this time around. Those two look easily the best players in the field."

If you want to bet on someone other than the talented American duo, there is Nepomniachtchi, who is playing under the flag of FIDE because of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. He has already contested two World title matches (against Carlsen in 2021, and then against Ding last year).

Nepomniachtchi, ranked seventh in the world, is the winner of the last two Candidates tournaments. He won the 2020-21 Candidates tournament, which was disrupted by COVID-19, and then again in 2022,

when he remained unbeaten, finishing 1.5 points ahead of the second-placed Ding. Later, Ding got the chance to play the World title after Carlsen decided not to defend his crown.

So Nepomniachtchi clearly knows a thing or two about winning the Candidates tournament. Expect him to mount a strong challenge for his third straight Candidates title.

The Iranian-born French prodigy Alireza Firouzja may not have been as experienced or as successful as Nepomniachtchi at the Candidates, but he is a young exciting talent.

Carlsen had in fact said that he would be defending his World title only if Firouzja had emerged as the Candidate in 2022.

The teenager, however, could only finish sixth in a field of eight in that Candidates tournament. The World No. 6 will want to put up a better performance this time around.

**Defending champion:** Expect Ian Nepomniachtchi to mount a strong challenge for his third straight Candidates title. LENNART OOTES

The women's section looks more open. Humpy certainly has chances, while her younger compatriot Vaishali has shown remarkable improvement of late.

The reigning Candidates champion Lei Tingjie **(right)**, who lost to compatriot Ju Wenjun in the World championship last year, is one of the main contenders. The other Chinese in the field, Tan Zhongyi, is a former World champion.

Russia's Aleksandra Goryachkina is the highest ranked female player in Toronto, with a rating of 2553.

The other Russian, Kateryna Lagno, and Ukraine's Anna Muzychuk are experienced campaigners, too.

STEV BONHAGE

EN PASSANT

Viswanathan Anand

# A thrilling challenger hunt on the cards

The world's best chess players will fight for the **right to challenge** the defending world champions, Ding Liren and Ju Wenjun.

The Candidates tournament is always an eagerly anticipated one. All the world's best players compete fiercely to qualify to fight for the right to challenge the defending world champions — Ding Liren in the open section and Ju Wenjun in the women's section.

This year, in Toronto, both the men's and the women's Candidates events are being held simultaneously. Both are eight-player double-round robin events.

The men's field splits evenly into two groups. Four of the players have played in the candidates previously, while the other four are competing for the first time in this event.

Fabiano Caruana was the dominant player in 2023; he took unshared first place both in Bucharest and in St. Louis and has been impressive throughout.

Hikaru Nakamura also had a sensational year, though he does not play as much. He is ruthless in grabbing any opportunities that come his way. He demonstrated this by winning Norway Chess and qualifying in the Grand Swiss.

Ian Nepomniachtchi hasn't fully recovered from his defeat in the world championship against Ding Liren last year. His play since then has been fairly subdued.

Alireza Firouzja is enormously talented and can be a danger to anyone, but both Ian and Alireza struggle with unpredictable form.

Since the Candidates tournament favours stability as much as ability, I lean towards Nakamura or Caruana as favourites.

Among the four players who are competing in the Candidates for the first time are three Indians. The chess world is very excited to see how they will fare. Their leap in strength in the last year and a half has been spectacular.

Praggnanandhaa has a classical dependable style but has recently been working hard on increasing his aggression and risk-taking.

Gukesh has an aggressive tactical style and therefore has more decisive results. He has shown a lot of maturity in dealing with setbacks and goings-on. His long journey to qualify for the candidates via the FIDE Circuit is a good example of this.

Vidit is the oldest of the Indian candidates. His recent achievements show that he has reached a new peak. He has gained in confidence but can be vulnerable when success is near (World Rapid and Tata Steel 24). Abasov is the clear underdog. He will be the one everyone tries to beat, and therein lies his opportunity as well.

All the newcomers will face tension and pressure that they are not accustomed to.

Amongst the women, six of them have experience at the highest levels, even though none of them has experience in this specific

**Apex mentality:** Ding Liren and Ju Wunjen await the respective winners of the men's and women's Candidates for their World Championship duels. LENNART OOTES & HARRY GIELEN

double-round robin format.

Tan Zhongyi was the world champion and the world rapid champion, while Lei Tingjie, Aleksandra Goryachkina, Kateryna Lagno, Anna Muzychuk and Koneru Humpy have all been losing finalists in the World Championship.

Muzychuk and Lagno have been World Rapid and Blitz champions as well. Humpy won the World Rapid in 2019 and narrowly missed winning it again in 2023. She plays fewer events nowadays, but she is able to compete at the highest levels and keep her strength.

Aleksandra Goryachkina won the FIDE World Cup last year. From their performances, I am unable to pick a favourite amongst these six players. The two first-timers here are Vaishali and Nurgyul Salimova, who are also the two youngest participants.

Vaishali won the Grand Swiss last year and achieved the title of Grandmaster as well, leaving only Salimova without that title in the Candidates. Just like their male counterparts, their excitement can compensate for their lack of experience.

Vaishali can enjoy a historic moment together with her brother Praggnanandhaa as the first brother-sister pair in the Candidates!

I am confident that the Candidates tournament of 2024 will not disappoint in intensity or excitement.

**Since the Candidates tournament favours stability as much as ability, I lean towards Nakamura or Caruana as favourites.**

# Blueprint for a better future, on and off the field

While the first edition of WPL needed to be thrust up by performances from proven international pros, season two saw the **Indian talent pool** come to the fore.

**Lavanya Lakshmi Narayanan**
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A shattered sponsor car window, a team captain tackling a pitch invader, sprinklers turning on during a tense finish, and a title triumph for the Royal Challengers Bangalore — it's safe to say that most of these things were not expected in the Women's Premier League (WPL) this season. From unusual moments like those mentioned above to a final week that featured incredible turnarounds and outstanding performances from special players facing tough challenges, the league's second chapter provided plenty of entertainment.

One does not get to see a captain of Meg Lanning's stature cry every day. There were eerie similarities to last season's summit clash. Delhi Capitals won the toss, batted first, collapsed, and then took the defence to the last over before the low total came back to bite it. After a hellish loop of three hours where she fought tooth and nail to find victory in a hopeless place, Lanning and her side came up short.

Glassy eyed at first, consolation from teammates opened the floodgates as she remained rooted to the dugout, a towel covering her face as the tears rolled down. These tears were shed in a country she has tormented internationally for a decade, en route to five World Cup

**Crowning moment:** Royal Challengers Bangalore claimed its first Women's Premier League title with an eight-wicket victory over Delhi Capitals in the final in Delhi. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

crowns as skipper (seven overall). However, on March 17, even the most ardent RCB fan couldn't help but feel for the decorated Australian. Yet another thing no one saw coming.

However, there was one change that everyone in the ecosystem predicted. While the first edition needed to be thrust up by performances from proven international pros, season two saw the Indian talent pool tap the overseas contingent on the shoulder and say, "We've got this. Take some rest."

### Indian dividends

Asha Sobhana Joy, true to her name, brought hope and happiness to RCB with a five-wicket haul early in the tournament, where she proved unplayable against UP Warriorz. She emerged as a vital cog in the RCB spin wheel alongside Shreyanka Patil, Sophie Molineux, and Georgia Wareham.

Shreyanka surpassed last year's impressive performances by winning the Purple Cap, despite a slow start to the season and a hairline fracture in her non-bowling arm.

Sixteen-year-old Shabnam Shakil made her debut for the Gujarat Giants, becoming the youngest player in the league. Her talent was recognised by Charlotte Edwards, coach of the Mumbai Indians, who believed she would only improve with time.

UP Warriorz's pacer Saima Thakor didn't accumulate as many wickets as she would have liked, but her spirited dismissal of Shafali Verma won her a fan in teammate Grace Harris. "I loved that fiery nature. If you want to last in international cricket, you need to have that in your belly and be able to take down the best. When Shafali Verma is walking down to you, you must be able to say, 'Alright, get back in your crease!'"

Before the start of the season, Giants' vice-captain Sneh Rana told this publication that it's time people stopped making age a barometer for cricket. The entire edition and the players in it worked overtime to uphold her words. Mumbai Indians' pacer Shabnim Ismail, 35, bowled the fastest recorded delivery in women's cricket — a 132.1 kmph ripper, sent darting at none other than Lanning. Asha is 33 and made heads turn, hoping to find more opportunities. Another MI star, all-rounder Sajeevan Sajana, is 29. After that last-ball six in the tournament opener, which turned the spotlight on her and her story, she hopes to make her way to an India cap. Gouher Sultana (UP Warriorz) and Ekta Bisht (Royal Challengers Bangalore) are 35 and 38, respectively, while Harmanpreet Kaur rang in her 35th birthday a day later with an unbeaten 48-ball 95 against the Giants.

### Old chinks return to haunt India

This edition provided key insights for the Indian national team: Deepti Sharma showcased power-hitting prowess, earning the MVP award with 295 runs and 10 wickets, while Jemimah Rodrigues improved

**Purple patch:** Ellyse Perry of the Royal Challengers Bangalore amassed 347 runs at an astounding average of 69.40 and a strike rate of 125.72, while also claiming seven wickets at an economy rate of 6.81. SPORTZPICS / WPL

**Smashing effort:** Ellyse Perry's explosive 58 runs off 37 balls for the Royal Challengers Bangalore against UP Warriorz included a powerful shot that broke the window of a sponsor's car parked near the boundary. SPORTZPICS / WPL

boundary-finding skills, valuable lessons ahead of the T20 World Cup later this year.

The women's team has been struggling with its tail's inability to contribute with the bat. In the 2017 World Cup final, India fell short against England by nine runs, with the lower-order batters, including Shikha Pandey, Poonam Yadav, Rajeshwari Gayakwad, and Jhulan Goswami, only managing to score five runs during a relatively comfortable chase. This issue has also affected teams like Mumbai Indians and Delhi Capitals in the WPL, costing them a place in the final and the trophy. Instead of patiently accumulating runs, impulsive hitting and attempts to hit glory shots have been the preferred approach, something that head coach Amol Muzumdar must address.

India opener and vice-captain Smriti Mandhana has been known to make similar errors, but in the final match, she adjusted her approach to score 31 runs off 39 balls. Typically, she might have been critical of herself for approaching what seemed like an easy chase in this manner. "We wanted to take it easy and get the top four to finish the job. We had time, and we didn't want to lose wickets and trigger panic," she revealed later.

Smriti had a remarkable tournament as captain, too. Widely loved, easygoing, and not one to dictate terms, Smriti underlines that the factor that made all the difference in her leadership from last season to this one was time.

"There was a meeting post-season last year with the management

# HONOUR ROLL

Orange cap

**Ellyse Perry (RCB)**

**347**
RUNS IN NINE MATCHES

Purple cap

**Shreyanka Patil (RCB)**

**13**
WICKETS IN EIGHT MATCHES

MVP

**Deepti Sharma (UPW)**

**295**
RUNS & 10 WICKETS IN EIGHT MATCHES

MOST SIXES

**Shafali Verma (DC)**

**20**
SIXES

**So near yet so far:** A teary-eyed Delhi Capitals skipper Meg Lanning after her team's loss to Royal Challengers Bangalore in the WPL final.

SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

where we discussed what went wrong. We had just come off a World Cup and dove straight into the WPL. I need time to get to know people and the management... I am not that person. I, too, needed to understand where they came from. So, we spoke about a lot of important things for a couple of hours. The takeaway of the conversation was what I've said before - This is your team; build it the way you want and set the culture. That was a very big deal for me," she revealed.

Throughout the season, one saw an introverted Smriti being her most expressive self — with pumped-up celebrations, extreme disappointment when something didn't pan out to plan, giving constant pep talks to her bowlers and fielders, and giving her players room to be their authentic selves. That comfort with leadership will come in handy for Harmanpreet Kaur, who relies on Smriti as her deputy in the national side. Smriti, the batter, being kinder to herself and judging a game by its merit and not the weight on her shoulders is an added plus.

For others in the mix, like Saika Ishaque, the going might get tough. Saika got among the wickets a tad late in the season, but her fielding has been a cause for concern since

MOST FIFTIES

**Meg Lanning (DC)**

4
FIFTIES

FASTEST FIFTY

**Kiran Navgire (UPW)**

25
BALLS

BEST BOWLING

**Ellyse Perry (RCB)**

6/15
WICKETS

NO. OF HAT-TRICKS

**Deepti Sharma (UPW)**

1
HAT-TRICK

**Batting powerhouse:** Mumbai Indians captain Harmanpreet Kaur's unbeaten 95 against Gujarat Giants in Delhi is the highest by an Indian in the WPL, going past Shafali Verma's 84 against Royal Challengers Bangalore in 2023. K. MURALI KUMAR

**Breathing fire:** Former South African fast bowler Shabnim Ismail holds the record for bowling the fastest delivery in women's cricket, clocking 132.1 km/h while playing for Mumbai Indians against Delhi Capitals. K. MURALI KUMAR

the turn of the year. With the likes of Radha Yadav and even Tanuja Kanwer staking a claim to don the Indian jersey, some fierce competition is in the offing when selectors sit down to decide the squad headed to Bangladesh later this year.

### Balancing act

The WPL's inaugural season was held over two venues in the same city: the Brabourne Stadium in Mumbai and the D.Y. Patil Stadium in Navi Mumbai. This year, the league moved out of the Maharashtra capital with two new hosts: the M. Chinnaswamy Stadium in Bengaluru and the Arun Jaitley Stadium in New Delhi. While the short boundaries and largely flat wickets made Bengaluru a batters' paradise, with games largely decided by the toss of the coin, Delhi offered a closer contest between bat and ball. The

| EMERGING PLAYER | BEST CATCH | BEST STRIKE RATE | FAIRPLAY AWARD | PLAYER OF THE FINAL |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Shreyanka Patil | Sanjeevan Sajana | Georgia Wareham | RCB | Sophie Molineux |
| | | | | |
| (RCB) | (MI) | (RCB) | | (RCB) |

**Young Turk:** At 16, Shabnam Shakil was the youngest debutant in the WPL when she took the field for Gujarat Giants against Royal Challengers Bangalore. R.V. MOORTHY

surfaces used there were low and slow, with barely any bounce but plenty of turn on the odd night. Batters who learned to stay down and play to the conditions found a way to hit back, while others found themselves with their stumps in disarray. The testing conditions in Delhi also produced a final week with back-to-back nail-biting finishes, and the team that took that challenge in stride — Royal Challengers Bangalore — ultimately finished with its name inscribed on the trophy.

Multiple pitches used at the same venue meant having a much shorter boundary on some nights, which sometimes made the game a bit lopsided in the batter's favour, especially if they were left-handed. Lanning called for bigger boundaries. "It is a nightmare to have a 40m boundary on one side. That is one thing I haven't necessarily enjoyed as a captain. We could look at potentially having slightly bigger boundaries. If it is even all the way around, that makes sense. But there's so much more power in the game now that people are clearing the ropes easily. I have lost a lot of sleep over games where there's only a 40m boundary on one side, especially when there's left-handers like Smriti," she stated before the final.

The franchises are constantly striving to maximise their presence in the cricket ecosystem from a business standpoint. Although the Board of Control for Cricket in India centrally manages the venues, it has allowed two franchises, RCB and DC, to attract home fans. The support from Bengaluru's crowd was unparalleled, and even in Delhi, the average spectator was often an RCB fan wearing different colours. It helps that the team's biggest male star, Virat Kohli, hails from the city. The tournament also provided an opportunity for fans to get to know the female players better.

"Our biggest star is Meg Lanning. Her achievements and resume speak for themselves. Shafali Verma and Jemimah Rodrigues — these are all very popular personalities; We've seen Jemimah's engagement numbers on social media are better than most of her male counterparts. They are all important to the brand of Delhi Capitals," Divyanshu Singh,

**MVP:** Deepti Sharma unlocked her power-hitting potential, finishing with the Most Valuable Player Award for scoring 295 runs and taking 10 wickets. R.V. MOORTHY

COO - JSW Sports, told *Sportstar*.

Brand activations were key to WPL franchises this time around. UP Warriorz forged key partnerships with successful commercial and social entities, including Kay Beauty (run by Katrina Kaif), UN Women's 'Generation Equality Ally' drive, and others. Sanjay Adesara, CBO of Adani Sportsline, which owns Gujarat Giants, believes this trajectory is natural.

"Four to five years ago, there were only a couple of names we were familiar with in the sport. Today, not just the Indian team but so many foreign players have become household names here. It's natural to maximise that on and off the field," he told this publication.

**In the firing line:** UP Warriorz captain Alyssa Healy tackled a pitch invader during her team's seven-wicket victory over the Mumbai Indians in Bengaluru. PTI

Giants and Warriorz are the two franchises yet to gain experience of hosting games in the cities that won the bids. Adesara believes it is too soon for an IPL-like home-and-away format in the WPL.

"It's equally important for all teams to get matches back to the cities they've built their franchises around. With five teams, a home-and-away season becomes a big financial challenge early on. As the league grows, we might head in this direction with more certainty. Ahmedabad is more than ready to host the league in the best stadiums in the world," he says.

Building a fanbase is challenging, whether you're an existing IPL franchise branching out in the WPL or a fresh entity.

Merchandising has been a key aspect of conversations in business boardrooms for these franchises, and each one is trying to strike a balance between commercial upswing and value for the consumer.

"There were good lessons for us from the experience of the World Cup. Adidas cracked it in terms of the product and price point. We've got Puma as a partner. We are the first Indian franchise to launch its jersey with the women's team. They are also a part of our Kabaddi franchise. Brands are beginning to see value," Singh explains.

"From here, we need to look at strategies to promote sales. Everyone is buying on Instagram today, so maybe that's an area for us to maximise. I am an eternal optimist. I won't say sports merchandise won't work in India. Decathlon, Puma, and others have shown the way and proved that the Indian customer is extremely value conscious, and if we provide a good product, there's no reason why it won't sell."

However, he believes there are other areas to prioritise, one of which is the fan experience at stadiums, particularly for women. Incidentally, apparel brand Puma released a film during the WPL that revealed that only 18 per cent of women who watch men's cricket watch women's games. Singh explains that, as JSW addressed this with football and Bengaluru FC's stadium experience for women fans at the Sree Kanteerava Stadium, the WPL is not far behind.

"The Indian stadium experience needs a fresh outlook. My mom and sister don't like coming to the stadium to watch a game as much. We rave about experiences of heading to an EPL match or other sports abroad. So, we want to do that here.

"With BFC, we have a healthy number of female supporters and have taken small steps to ensure their match-viewing comfort and safety are kept in mind, and that has been well received. Given that we stand at the centre of multiple sporting franchises, we have the unique opportunity to make a difference," he said.

## FACT FILE

**With the victory in the final,** RCB finally registered its first win against Delhi Capitals. It has lost all four previous meetings against this side. Mumbai Indians' 4-0 head-to-head record against Gujarat Giants is the only unbeaten match-up left in the tournament.

**RCB's spinners claimed** nine out of the 10 DC wickets in the final, this is the most taken by a team's spinners in a WPL game bettering the eight taken by UP Warriorz against RCB in season one.

**Big collapse:** After a comfortable 64/0 in seven overs, Delhi Capitals crumbled, losing 10 wickets for just 49 runs in 11.3 overs in the final.

**Smriti Mandhana** has been dismissed nine times by off spinners in WPL history, this is the most for any batter (five dismissals in WPL 2023, four times in the 2024 edition)

**Royal night:** Royal Challengers Bangalore claimed its first Women's Premier League title with an eight-wicket victory over Delhi Capitals in the final in Delhi. LAVANYA LAKSHMI NARAYANAN

# Grand, exhausting and rewarding

The diary flew to Delhi, **aiming to balance sightseeing with cricket at the Arun Jaitley Stadium**, but the plan came to fruition only in the final week, mirroring RCB's swift ascent from mid-table to title win in just seven days.

**Lavanya Lakshmi Narayanan**
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After a largely toss-decided run-fest that was the Bengaluru leg, the Women's Premier League (WPL) moved to New Delhi for the second half. Over two weeks, the tournament saw twists and turns akin to the winding galis of Purani Dilli (Old Delhi), culminating in a nervy final week that saw Royal Challengers Bangalore take home its maiden WPL crown.

The diary took the flight to Delhi with grand plans to strike a balance between sightseeing and watching cricket at the Arun Jaitley Stadium in the evenings. It is safe to say that the plan came to fruition only in the final week, much like RCB's title fortunes, which turned from a mid-table finish to the champion's podium in seven days.

With a few colleagues across

publications for company, the WPL accreds drew questions every day from the e-rickshaw or cab drivers ferrying us to the ground at the Feroz Shah Kotla premises, with many thinking it was preparations for the Indian Premier League (IPL) that were drawing crowds to the venue.

The diary decided to step into the daunting world of shopping in Delhi's famous markets with a first pitstop at Janpath. Despite having a Delhi native along (for moral support and protection from being fleeced), shopkeepers had a knack for targeting the diary with higher prices, like they could sniff the non-Delhiite around them.

The hour before a game was spent getting to know some of the fans. Many had only ever heard of Smriti Mandhana. There were big Ellyse Perry fans and the odd Harmanpreet Kaur, Shafali Verma, and Jemimah Rodrigues admirers as well. However, when quizzed about who the five-time World Cup-winning captain (Meg Lanning, skipper of Delhi Capitals) participating in the tournament was, nine out of 10 wore puzzled looks.

And so it was particularly delightful to run into Sneh Rishav, a student from Delhi School of Journalism, who turned out to be a Lanning encyclopaedia, rattling out stats and milestones from her career like a town crier announcing the impending arrival of royalty. There was even a time when retired South African cricketer Dane van Niekerk, supporting her wife Marizanne Kapp in Delhi Capitals, walked through the busy peripheries of the Kotla largely unrecognised.

During the Delhi leg, the diary noticed knock-off jersey sellers near the stadium, including Meera Didi, who's attended India matches for 25 years, favouring women's cricket recently. She shares a guesthouse with other vendors, paying Rs. 800 in rent. Meera can't read or write, so she relies on journalists for player names. Only three hawkers, including Meera, had women's names on jerseys (Smriti, Jemimah, and Harmanpreet), all selling out during the first two days in Bengaluru.

After a few days, the police cleared the roads to allow an easier flow of people through the narrow lane around the stadium, leaving these sellers with no place to go. The case was the same for a few face painters, who were not allowed to settle near the gate entrances. One of them even decided not to return, declaring it was just easier to return for the IPL when such restrictions wouldn't be in place.

Another mandatory pre-match ritual was a verbal tussle with the police stationed outside the stadium. Accreditation cards did not suffice to convince them that the diary was a member of the press. *"Do press wale andar chale gaye. Aap kaise keh rahe ho ki aap press ho?* (Two members of the press are already in. How are you claiming to be from the media?)" and "You can get in, sure. But no laptop," were some of the responses

**Fuelling fervour of WPL:** Meera Didi, vending jerseys for 25 years at India matches, now avidly follows women's cricket. Meanwhile, the world heritage site of Qutb Minar was lit up with the faces of Royal Challengers Bangalore and Delhi Capitals captains ahead of the WPL final. LAVANYA LAKSHMI NARAYANAN

**Divine experience:** A qawwali session at the Hazrat Nizamuddin Dargah provided the diary with a much-needed reprieve amid a tight schedule. Elsewhere, the face-painters were kept on their toes during the Delhi leg of WPL.

LAVANYA LAKSHMI NARAYANAN

from the cops with slightly infuriating shrugs when asked how the diary was to file the reports without laptops.

A Delhi Capitals game against UP Warriorz left reporters particularly chagrined. DC's lower end, composed of Indian players, botched up what looked like a comfortable chase, losing against UP Warriorz by a solitary run. It brought back memories of the 2017 Women's World Cup final, where the Indian tail fell short in a nine-run loss to England. The night was endured with some waffles and ice cream.

The DC vs UPW match initiated a series of nail-biting final-over finishes, depleting the diary's energy. Amidst frantic story filing, she sought comfort in a soulful qawwali session at Hazrat Nizamuddin Dargah. The diary explored Delhi's night charm, visiting India Gate, Parliament, and Khan Market. On Eliminator day, the diary unwound in 'Delhi-6', indulging in Kake di Hatti's famous naans and Jama Masjid's beauty.

On the eve of the final, the WPL had organised a light and sound show at the iconic Qutb Minar, a towering 13th-century sandstone marvel. While filing previews and researching ahead of the summit clash meant the diary could not visit the monument, she spotted a tower with projections similar to what she had seen on WPL's social media handles in the background of a preview video recorded outside the Kotla.

In a comical sequence of events to follow, the diary and her colleagues were convinced that this was the Qutb Minar they had seen. After a few minutes spent wondering why the UNESCO heritage site was not spotted in the 10 days prior, the diary and her colleagues impulsively redirected the rickshaw, undertaking a 40-minute ride to the site. The diary reached the monument 10 minutes after the show was done, but she consoled herself by saying that she had tried.

The diary proceeded to narrate this story quite proudly to her colleagues, even determined to show them this 'Qutb Minar' she had spotted beyond the Kotla Stadium. That it turned out to be quite an unremarkable industrial tower was enough to make the diary want to bury her head in the sand forever.

The RCB players did not sleep after winning the trophy. Neither did the diary. The next afternoon was spent with the champions, trying to draw out as many anecdotes as possible.

After spending the day in the company of veterans of the women's game, the diary could take solace in knowing that it had one thing in common with the likes of Perry: they both just about made it in time for their flights back to their respective destinations.

# Mumbai's invincible ethos culminates in 42nd Ranji Trophy title

This is the story of how Rahane's men ended an **eight-year wait** for the Ranji Trophy title.

**Amol Karhadkar**
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Undoubtedly, smaller teams have shown remarkable improvement, challenging the traditional dominance of domestic powerhouses on the cricket field. However, amidst this shifting landscape, Mumbai remained a stalwart, consistently asserting its supremacy. As evidenced by its 41st Ranji Trophy triumph in 2015-16, Mumbai has historically boasted an impressive success rate, clinching the inter-state First-Class cricket championship title more than half the time.

Yet, a period of drought ensued, deviating from Mumbai's illustrious standards. This dry spell persisted, marking one of the longest title hiatuses in Mumbai's esteemed Ranji Trophy history. At the commencement of the recent domestic season, Mumbai's eight-year wait was its

**AJINKYA RAHANE DISPLAYED EXCEPTIONAL CHARACTER BY SEPARATING THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF CAPTAINCY FROM HIS BATTING WOES.**

second-longest title drought, trailing only the nine-year gap experienced between 1984–85 and 1993–94.

However, on March 14, the prolonged wait came to an end as Ajinkya Rahane lifted the Ranji Trophy for the first time as captain, achieving a mission he embarked on three months prior. While Rahane assumed leadership only at the onset of the Vijay Hazare Trophy, the domestic 50-over tournament, head coach Omkar Salvi had been mapping out the roadmap since his appointment in June of the previous year.

Throughout the three knockout matches, Mumbai found itself in precarious situations at various junctures, yet it was rescued by different individuals, showcasing the true character and essence of the Lion's crest that adorns a Mumbai cricketer's whites with pride. Here are several key factors that played a pivotal role in guiding Mumbai back to its glory days.

**# B for bowlers, C for Championship**

The cricketing adage holds true for the Mumbai team's performance in the 2023–24 season: "Batters win games, and bowlers win championships." Throughout the league stage, it was the bowling unit, spearheaded by the unassuming Mohit Avasthi, that not only secured Mumbai's qualification for the knockouts but also propelled it to the top of the league standings.

Out of a possible 140 wickets in the league stage, Mumbai claimed an impressive 128, laying the groundwork for its triumph in five out of seven matches. This stellar performance compensated for Mumbai's relatively shaky batting lineup, both on paper and on the field, in recent times.

Although Mumbai registered only four centuries during the league stage, the bowlers' consistency and dominance enabled the team to accumulate bonus points at ease,

**Ending long wait:** Mumbai's victory in the 2023-24 season marked its first title in eight years, with its previous win dating back to 2015-16. EMMANUAL YOGINI

## BRIEF SCORES

**Mumbai** 224 (Shardul Thakur 75, Yash Thakur 3-54, Dubey 3-62) and 418 (Musheer 136, Iyer 95, Dubey 5-144) **beat Vidarbha** 105 (Rathod 27, Kotian 3-7, Kulkarni 3-15) and 368 (Wadkar 102, Nair 74, Kotian 4-95, Musheer 2-48) by 169 runs

**Champion's farewell:** Mumbai players carry Dhawal Kulkarni on their shoulders as he thanks the crowd after winning the Ranji Trophy final.
EMMANUAL YOGINI

ultimately securing the top position in the league standings. This achievement was crucial, as finishing with the highest points meant Mumbai would host all its knockout matches.

Furthermore, credit must be attributed to Dhawal Kulkarni, the veteran whose career culminated in a fairy-tale ending.

Despite featuring in only three games, Kulkarni remained actively involved throughout the season, shouldering the responsibility of nurturing a younger pace attack. This was particularly significant, with Shardul Thakur and Tushar Deshpande occupied with national and India A duties for a significant portion of the league stage, with Kulkarni providing guidance and support from the sidelines.

**# T for team effort**

Despite the absence of any Mumbai batter among the top 10 run-scorers, opener Bhupen Lalwani's 588 runs placed him 15th in the Elite Group. Similarly, Avasthi and Shams Mulani, with 35 wickets each, found themselves jointly placed 11th among the wicket-takers.

However, despite these individual statistics, Mumbai stood proudly at the summit of both the league and knockout stages. This achievement underscores the deeply ingrained culture fostered by Rahane and Salvi.

The ethos of "Team first" resonated throughout the season. Players like Avasthi and Shivam Dube in the league stage, and Shardul and Musheer Khan in the knockouts — alongside consistent contributors like Tanush Kotian and Mulani — consistently came to the team's rescue.

Furthermore, the inclusion of Rahane, Salvi, Kulkarni, and Mulani in the core planning group proved pivotal.

**# A for all-rounders**

The secret to Mumbai's remarkable success in the Ranji Trophy knockouts lies in its batting depth and ability to post substantial totals. Throughout the tournament's history, Mumbai's formidable batting

**The cricketing adage holds true for the Mumbai team's performance in the 2023-24 season: "Batters win games, and bowlers win championships."**

**Leading from the front:** Ajinkya Rahane shrugged off his poor form with the willow to win his fourth Ranji Trophy title as a player and his first as captain. EMMANUAL YOGINI

lineup has often haunted its opponents.

This time was no different, as Mumbai showcased its batting prowess, bolstered by a cadre of all-rounders.

Despite the absence of Dube, its top all-rounder, who had made significant contributions in the league stages, Mumbai's batting remained formidable.

Players like Shardul, Kotian, Mulani, and the emerging talent of Musheer demonstrated their mettle.

In the quarterfinal against Baroda, Mumbai found itself in a precarious position at 142 for five. However, Musheer's double century propelled it to a total of 384 in the first innings. Remarkably, in the second innings, Kotian and Deshpande rewrote records by scoring centuries while batting at No. 10 and 11, respectively.

The semifinals showcased Mumbai's batting depth once again. Chasing Tamil Nadu's modest total of 146, Mumbai stumbled at 106 for seven. Yet, Shardul and Kotian's resilient partnership added 272 runs, setting up an emphatic innings win.

In the final against Vidarbha, Mumbai faced a similar challenge, but Shardul's aggressive batting salvaged the innings, doubling its total to 224.

Mulani and Kotian then contributed with both bat and ball, building on Musheer's impressive hundred in the second innings.

Mumbai's wealth of genuine all-rounders proved invaluable.

**# L for leader**

Throughout the tournament, Rahane's struggles with the bat became a major talking point. But his resilience shone through, culminating in a classy innings of 73 in the final, his best of the season. However, his overall tally of 214 runs in 13 innings, at an average of 17.83, was far from impressive. For someone with 85 Test caps, such a dip in form could have warranted a break or even led to a loss of interest.

Yet, Rahane displayed exceptional character by separating the responsibilities of captaincy from his batting woes. His determination to lead his team to victory, securing his fourth title as a player, served as a driving force, showcasing his unwavering commitment to the team's success.

"The moment I got out, I switched into the role of being the captain," Rahane told Sportstar as a matter of fact.

"There are times when you don't score; you just have to take it in your stride and not let it affect your role as captain, and more importantly, not pass it on to the team."

Rahane never allowed his personal frustrations to affect his interactions with other players. Instead, his teammates acknowledged his active involvement as a motivating factor that spurred them on to achieve glory.

Captains are not made; they are born, after all!

# Making a better Ranji Trophy schedule the need of the hour

The Ranji Trophy has undergone significant changes, **transitioning from a 99-day tournament with breaks to a tightly packed schedule** of consecutive matches.

**Amol Karhadkar**
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Workload management has emerged as a ubiquitous term in Indian cricket, perhaps even surpassing the use of phrases like "following processes" or "sticking to the basics." Once an Indian cricketer enters the national team or becomes a regular fixture in the Indian Premier League (IPL), these two words swiftly become part of their lexicon. Even the custodian of the game in India, the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI), has adopted this terminology in its sporadic official statements regarding player availability.

The support staff of the national cricket team emphasises the importance of managing the workload of players due to the hectic cricket schedule. However, this same approach seems to be disregarded when it comes to domestic cricket. Although most cricketers start their journey by playing in the Ranji Trophy, they tend to overlook the mismanagement of workload in the premier First-Class championship.

Naturally, Shardul Thakur, a member of India's ODI World Cup squad who played a key role in the knockouts to help Mumbai regain the trophy, voicing concerns about the stretched Ranji schedule was a welcomed relief for the domestic cricket community. He didn't hold back in expressing his dissatisfaction with the tightly packed 10 consecutive rounds of Ranji matches, with only three days' respite in between games. "I think next year they will have to have a look at it and give more breaks. The schedule is becoming tighter and tighter. If the boys keep playing like this for two more seasons, there will be a lot of injuries across the country," Thakur remarked during a media interaction after scoring his maiden First-Class hundred in Mumbai's Ranji semifinal against Tamil Nadu. The following day, when Thakur reiterated his sentiments during the post-match presentation of the Ranji semifinal, all his Mumbai teammates applauded in agreement. Some of the disappointed Tamil Nadu players, despite the visible dismay of a crushing innings defeat, also joined in the applause.

Over the past decade, the IPL has taken centre stage in the global cricket calendar, often at the expense of domestic cricket. Issues like starting the season during the monsoon and holding important matches in foggy regions have plagued domestic cricket. Additionally, the focus on the Syed Mushtaq Ali T20 Trophy (SMAT) before the IPL player auction has further marginalised the Ranji Trophy. The most recent edition of the Ranji Trophy, the 89th, was crammed into a tight 70-day window, with teams constantly travelling between matches. This hectic schedule left finalists Mumbai and Vidarbha fatigued. Players like Mohit Avasthi from Mumbai and the Vidarbha pace trio were visibly worn out, with little time to recover between matches. Contrastingly, the tournament was more spread out in the 2013–14 season — a maximum of 47 match days — allowing teams adequate rest before crucial games. Overall, the Ranji Trophy has undergone significant changes, transitioning from a 99-day tournament with breaks to a tightly packed schedule of consecutive matches. In Australia's red-ball domestic tournament, the Sheffield Shield, the six teams play 10 league stage fixtures each, with the top two contesting the final. The gap between consecutive league stage fixtures ranges from 6–11 days.

England, on the other hand, has 10 teams in the County Championship Division One. Each team plays 14 games, with the table-topper crowned the Division One champion. There is a gap of three days between each County

**Voicing concern:** India and Mumbai all-rounder Shardul Thakur recently expressed his dissatisfaction with the tightly packed 10 consecutive rounds of Ranji matches, with only three days' respite in between games. EMMANUAL YOGINI

fixture until the One-Day Cup and the Vitality Blast intersperse the championship games.

Siddharth Kaul, the veteran Punjab speedster, echoed his sentiments about the issue during the Sportstar Sports Conclave in Chandigarh in February. But when a current Indian star speaks out, it has an immediate impact. That is what happened after Thakur's statement. It set in motion a chain of events. First, India head coach Rahul Dravid reacted to Thakur's statement after the Test series against England culminated in Dharamsala. While Dravid admitted the "need to look at and see how we can manage our domestic schedules," he stressed the need to rework the schedule and hear from domestic players and coaches more.

The week after, the BCCI found itself in a damage-control mode and formed an internal panel consisting of Dravid, National Cricket Academy head VVS Laxman, chief selector Ajit Agarkar, and general manager Abey Kuruvilla. All four members of the panel have been through the grind of domestic cricket since the 1990s, and they will put their heads together to try and resolve the conundrum.

However, Kuruvilla, who is now responsible for the conduct of domestic cricket, will have his hands tied unless given the freedom to do away with a couple of redundant tournaments. The appointment of the panel is a welcome step, although it has yet to be announced officially.

The BCCI must bring back the annual captains and coaches conclave during the off-season. The last time the domestic captains and coaches assembled and shared their suggestions with the BCCI was in 2016 when the Committee of Administrators appointed by the Supreme Court was in charge. Despite the elected office-bearers taking over, the captains and coaches conclave, a regular feature for more than a decade, has not been revived yet. In fact, Dravid hinted at resuming the practice.

## Ranji Trophy duration

**2012-13:** 86 days – 11 rounds – 47 match-days per team
**2013-14:** 99 days – 11 rounds – 47 match-days per team
**2015-16:** 65 days – 8 rounds – 32 match-days per team
**2016-17:** 101 days – 11/12 rounds – 47/51 match-days per team
**2019-20:** 96 days – 11/12 rounds – 47/51 match-days per team
**2023-24:** 70 days – 10 rounds – 43 match-days per team

"Maybe we need to re-look and see whether some of the tournaments we are conducting are necessary in this day and age or if they are not necessary. There needs to be an all-round review [involving] coaches and players, especially the guys who are part of the domestic circuit," he said in Dharamsala.

At a time when the BCCI has issued a directive to top cricketers to start playing Ranji Trophy regularly, getting the schedule right for the premiere domestic cricket championships is its responsibility. When teams have to play 10 rounds until the final, the tournament has to have at least a three-month window.

The problem is that if the BCCI starts the Ranji Trophy on October 1 and finishes it without any break, it will be unable to schedule the SMAT before the IPL auction. Perhaps the most sensible option is to start the Inter-State tournaments with the Ranji Trophy league stage and end the domestic season with the Ranji knockouts. It would mean the Ranji League stage — even with a four-day break between games, a basic necessity for travel and recovery — can be completed in October and November. It can be followed by the SMAT T20 Trophy in November–December and the Vijay Hazare Trophy in January.

Will the domestic cricketers' plea be heard in time ahead of the next season? Watch this space.

# 1st

**Show Begins:** Defending Champion Chennai Super Kings' captain Ruturaj Gaikwad carries the IPL trophy during the opening ceremony of the new season. M. VEDHAN

FOR MORE IMAGES

# 2nd

**Fizzy:** Mustafizur Rahman sparkled on his CSK debut as his four-fer broke the spine of Royal Challengers Bengaluru's batting line-up and set up the game for his team. M. VEDHAN

3rd

**Homecoming:** Rishabh Pant returned to professional cricket after a gap of 453 days when he led Delhi Capitals in its opening match against Punjab Kings. R. V. MOORTHY

4th

**Muscled:** Andre Russell smashed seven sixes on his way to a 25-ball 64 to turn the tide in favour of Kolkata Knight Riders against Sunrisers Hyderabad. K. R. DEEPAK

5th

**Maverick:** Heinrich Klaasen's 29-ball 63 wasn't enough as Sunrisers Hyderabad fell short of KKR's 209-run target by four runs. K. R. DEEPAK

# 6th

**Samsonite:** Sanju Samson's unbeaten 52-ball 82 set up Rajasthan Royals' comfortable 20-run win over Lucknow Super Giants in Jaipur. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

# 7th

**Old and the new:** The passing of the captaincy baton from Rohit Sharma to Hardik Pandya didn't go quite so well. Rohit, who led Mumbai to five IPL titles, is the joint-most-successful captain in the tournament's history alongside Chennai Super Kings' M.S. Dhoni. AFP

# 8th

**Promising start:** New Gujarat Titans' skipper Shubman Gill began his IPL captaincy stint with a win over Mumbai Indians in front of the home crowd. AFP

**He's still got it:** Virat Kohli went on a rampage, sending a packed Bengaluru crowd into delirium with a 49-ball 77 that set up RCB's first win of the season. Dropped on 0 in the first over, Kohli struck his 100th 50-plus score in T20 cricket but fell just short of seeing his team home. K. MURALI KUMAR

**Nailed it:** Dinesh Karthik made a seamless transition from the commentary box to the pitch with a match-winning 10-ball 28 after RCB almost made a mess of a straightforward run-chase with Virat Kohli and Anuj Rawat falling in quick succession. With 10 runs needed off the last over, Karthik premeditated a scoop shot to perfection for a six and sealed the win with a four down the ground. K. MURALI KUMAR

# IPL 2024: REMAINING SCHEDULE

| M.No | Date | Time | | | Venue |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 22 | 08-Apr-24 | 7:30PM | Chennai Super Kings | Kolkata Knight Riders | Chennai |
| 23 | 09-Apr-24 | 7:30PM | Punjab Kings | Sunrisers Hyderabad | Mullanpur |
| 24 | 10-Apr-24 | 7:30PM | Rajasthan Royals | Gujarat Titans | Jaipur |
| 25 | 11-Apr-24 | 7:30PM | Mumbai Indians | Royal Challengers Bengaluru | Mumbai |
| 26 | 12-Apr-24 | 7:30PM | Lucknow Super Giants | Delhi Capitals | Lucknow |
| 27 | 13-Apr-24 | 7:30PM | Punjab Kings | Rajasthan Royals | Mullanpur |
| 28 | 14-Apr-24 | 3:30PM | Kolkata Knight Riders | Lucknow Super Giants | Kolkata |
| 29 | 14-Apr-24 | 7:30PM | Mumbai Indians | Chennai Super Kings | Mumbai |
| 30 | 15-Apr-24 | 7:30PM | Royal Challengers Bengaluru | Sunrisers Hyderabad | Bengaluru |
| 31 | 16-Apr-24 | 7:30PM | Gujarat Titans | Delhi Capitals | Ahmedabad |
| 32 | 17-Apr-24 | 7:30PM | Kolkata Knight Riders | Rajasthan Royals | Kolkata |
| 33 | 18-Apr-24 | 7:30PM | Punjab Kings | Mumbai Indians | Mullanpur |
| 34 | 19-Apr-24 | 7:30PM | Lucknow Super Giants | Chennai Super Kings | Lucknow |
| 35 | 20-Apr-24 | 7:30PM | Delhi Capitals | Sunrisers Hyderabad | Delhi |
| 36 | 21-Apr-24 | 3:30PM | Kolkata Knight Riders | Royal Challengers Bengaluru | Kolkata |
| 37 | 21-Apr-24 | 7:30PM | Punjab Kings | Gujarat Titans | Mullanpur |
| 38 | 22-Apr-24 | 7:30PM | Rajasthan Royals | Mumbai Indians | Jaipur |
| 39 | 23-Apr-24 | 7:30PM | Chennai Super Kings | Lucknow Super Giants | Chennai |
| 40 | 24-Apr-24 | 7:30PM | Delhi Capitals | Gujarat Titans | Delhi |
| 41 | 25-Apr-24 | 7:30PM | Sunrisers Hyderabad | Royal Challengers Bengaluru | Hyderabad |
| 42 | 26-Apr-24 | 7:30PM | Kolkata Knight Riders | Punjab Kings | Kolkata |
| 43 | 27-Apr-24 | 3:30PM | Delhi Capitals | Mumbai Indians | Delhi |
| 44 | 27-Apr-24 | 7:30PM | Lucknow Super Giants | Rajasthan Royals | Lucknow |
| 45 | 28-Apr-24 | 3:30PM | Gujarat Titans | Royal Challengers Bengaluru | Ahmedabad |
| 46 | 28-Apr-24 | 7:30PM | Chennai Super Kings | Sunrisers Hyderabad | Chennai |
| 47 | 29-Apr-24 | 7:30PM | Kolkata Knight Riders | Delhi Capitals | Kolkata |
| 48 | 30-Apr-24 | 7:30PM | Lucknow Super Giants | Mumbai Indians | Lucknow |
| 49 | 01-May-24 | 7:30PM | Chennai Super Kings | Punjab Kings | Chennai |
| 50 | 02-May-24 | 7:30PM | Sunrisers Hyderabad | Rajasthan Royals | Hyderabad |
| 51 | 03-May-24 | 7:30PM | Mumbai Indians | Kolkata Knight Riders | Mumbai |
| 52 | 04-May-24 | 7:30PM | Royal Challengers Bengaluru | Gujarat Titans | Bengaluru |
| 53 | 05-May-24 | 3:30PM | Punjab Kings | Chennai Super Kings | Dharamshala |
| 54 | 05-May-24 | 7:30PM | Lucknow Super Giants | Kolkata Knight Riders | Lucknow |
| 55 | 06-May-24 | 7:30PM | Mumbai Indians | Sunrisers Hyderabad | Mumbai |
| 56 | 07-May-24 | 7:30PM | Delhi Capitals | Rajasthan Royals | Delhi |
| 57 | 08-May-24 | 7:30PM | Sunrisers Hyderabad | Lucknow Super Giants | Hyderabad |
| 58 | 09-May-24 | 7:30PM | Punjab Kings | Royal Challengers Bengaluru | Dharamshala |
| 59 | 10-May-24 | 7:30PM | Gujarat Titans | Chennai Super Kings | Ahmedabad |
| 60 | 11-May-24 | 7:30PM | Kolkata Knight Riders | Mumbai Indians | Kolkata |
| 61 | 12-May-24 | 3:30PM | Chennai Super Kings | Rajasthan Royals | Chennai |
| 62 | 12-May-24 | 7:30PM | Royal Challengers Bengaluru | Delhi Capitals | Bengaluru |
| 63 | 13-May-24 | 7:30PM | Gujarat Titans | Kolkata Knight Riders | Ahmedabad |
| 64 | 14-May-24 | 7:30PM | Delhi Capitals | Lucknow Super Giants | Delhi |
| 65 | 15-May-24 | 7:30PM | Rajasthan Royals | Punjab Kings | Guwahati |
| 66 | 16-May-24 | 7:30PM | Sunrisers Hyderabad | Gujarat Titans | Hyderabad |
| 67 | 17-May-24 | 7:30PM | Mumbai Indians | Lucknow Super Giants | Mumbai |
| 68 | 18-May-24 | 7:30PM | Royal Challengers Bengaluru | Chennai Super Kings | Bengaluru |
| 69 | 19-May-24 | 3:30PM | Sunrisers Hyderabad | Punjab Kings | Hyderabad |
| 70 | 19-May-24 | 7:30PM | Rajasthan Royals | Kolkata Knight Riders | Guwahati |
| | 20-May-24 | | Break Day | | |
| 71 | 21-May-24 | 7:30PM | **Qualifier 1** | | Ahmedabad |
| 72 | 22-May-24 | 7:30PM | **Eliminator** | | Ahmedabad |
| | 23-May-24 | | Break Day | | |
| 73 | 24-May-24 | 7:30PM | **Qualifier 2** | | Chennai |
| | 25-May-24 | | Break Day | | |
| 74 | 26-May-24 | 7:30PM | **FINAL** | | Chennai |

ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar

FOR MORE STORIES

# TWO-BOUNCER RULE IN IPL HAS TILTED SCALES A LITTLE BIT IN FAVOUR OF BOWLERS

If somehow the ground staff **can increase the size of the boundaries, say even by a couple of metres**, that could mean some of the mishits that go for a six could be caught inside the boundary.

Cricket's glitziest tournament, the Indian Premier League, started its 17th season with the defending champions, the Chennai Super Kings, winning their first match. It was not as halfway exciting as the first-ever IPL match in 2008 when Brendon McCullum scored an explosive 158, and the Kolkata Knight Riders (KKR) won with plenty to spare.

It was just the kind of takeoff that a new tournament needed. Royal Challengers Bangalore (RCB) were on the losing side then, and the 17th season also began with a loss for them. They will surely take heart from the fact that their women's team won the Women's Premier League (WPL) in only their second season.

Though it's early days yet, the new rule allowing bowlers to bowl two bouncers in an over has made it just that little bit difficult for the batters. In previous seasons, with the 'one bouncer in an over' rule, if a bowler bowled a bouncer in the first half of the over, the batsman could safely put his front foot forward for the remainder of the over, knowing that nothing would come around his shoulders.

So, the new rule has certainly tilted the scales a little bit towards the bowler in a format that is incredibly hard for their tribe. If somehow the ground staff can increase the size of the boundaries, say even by a couple of metres, that could mean some of the mishits that go for a six could be caught inside the boundary.

The weather, at least for now, is still not very hot, but as the days go on and we come to mid-April and May, then the heat can be telling on the batsmen as well.

Ever since the Ranji Trophy finished, it became public knowledge as to what the players of both teams that played the finals got for playing all the Ranji Trophy matches. There has been a lot of talk about the need to increase the remuneration for playing in the country's national championship. With corporate jobs drying up for the players, the Ranji Trophy is the only source of income for those who do not play in the IPL. The Ranji Trophy is also the feeder tournament for those aspiring to play Test cricket for the country. Since those cricket players who make themselves available to play most of the Test matches are now going to be rewarded with double or triple their fees, it would be terrific if the same yardstick was used for players who played the Ranji Trophy.

One would have expected the current superstars of Indian cricket to raise their voices and ask for an increase in Ranji Trophy remuneration for their Ranji teammates. Sadly, since the IPL began, apart from Harbhajan Singh, who played the Ranji Trophy after he finished playing international cricket, nobody has spoken about

**On an even keel:** IPL 2024 will allow bowlers to deliver two bouncers an over to facilitate a more even contest between bat and ball. SPORTZPICS / IPL

the trials and tribulations of the Ranji player. Whenever the superstars want to get their form back, they are quick to go and play the Ranji Trophy, but speaking out for their Ranji brothers seems to be a complete 'No, No'.

There was also some talk during the Ranji season about the need to have a gap between matches to allow for some recovery of minor injuries, and that is something that needs to be given some thought. Many years ago, when Shri Jagmohan Dalmiya was the president of the BCCI, he started a Captains and Coaches Conclave at the end of the season where the captains and coaches of all the state teams gathered in one city and talked about what they felt needed to be done.

This was most refreshing because, even though it wasn't possible to implement all the suggestions, the fact that the captains and coaches felt that they were being given a hearing by the BCCI made them feel that much more attached to Indian cricket.

Perhaps this Conclave could be revived on the eve of the BCCI Apex Council meeting so that they would be aware of how those who play the non-glamourous but still national championship, the Ranji Trophy, feel about Indian cricket.

Let me add that, having attended all the previous conclaves as chairman of the BCCI Technical Committee, not once was there any discussion about remuneration.

All the talk at the conclaves was simply about Ranji cricket and what the captains and coaches felt could be done to enhance the quality and standard even further. It might not be possible to do the conclave this time, but it certainly is worth giving a thought from next season onward.

**Since those cricket players who make themselves available to play most of the Test matches are now going to be rewarded with double or triple their fees, it would be terrific if the same yardstick was used for players who played the Ranji Trophy.**

# Yashasvi Jaiswal's phenomenal feat

**5** } The number of batters to reach the career milestone of 1000 Test runs in less than 10 Test matches. Yashasvi Jaiswal has made history by becoming the first Indian and the fifth player ever to reach the career milestone of 1000 Test runs in less than 10 Test matches. Jaiswal achieved this feat during his ninth Test, in Dharamsala.

**Batters reaching 1000 runs in less than 10 Test matches**

| Tests | Inns | Batter | For | Achieved on | Runs | Ave. | HS | 100/50 | Opp | Venue |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 7 | 13 | Don Bradman | Aus | 11 Jul 1930 | 1196 | 99.67 | 334 | 5/2 | Eng | Leeds |
| 9 | 12 | Herbert Sutcliffe | Eng | 13 Feb 1925 | 1015 | 92.27 | 176 | 5/4 | Aus | Melbourne |
| 9 | 17 | George Headley | WI | 27 Feb 1931 | 1009 | 63.06 | 223 | 6/0 | Aus | Sydney |
| 9 | 12 | Everton Weekes | WI | 4 Feb 1949 | 1024 | 85.33 | 194 | 5/2 | Ind | Mumbai BS |
| 9 | 16 | Yashasvi Jaiswal | Ind | 7 Mar 2024 | 1028 | 68.53 | 214* | 3/4 | Eng | Dharamsala |

**16** } The number of innings Jaiswal needed to reach 1000 Test runs. He is now the second quickest to achieve the landmark for India after Vinod Kambli, another left-hander. However, Jaiswal is now the quickest Indian to reach 1000 Test runs while opening the batting. He bettered Rohit Sharma's previous record of 17 innings. The second table below lists the players who reached 1000 Test runs while opening the batting.

**Fewest innings to reach 1000 Test runs for India**

| Inns | Tests | Batter | Achieved on | Runs | Ave. | HS | 100/50 | Opp | Venue |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 14 | 12 | Vinod Kambli | 18 Nov 1994 | 1005 | 77.31 | 227 | 4/3 | WI | Mumbai WS |
| 16 | 9 | Yashasvi Jaiswal | 7 Mar 2024 | 1028 | 68.53 | 214* | 3/4 | Eng | Dharamsala |
| 18 | 11 | Cheteshwar Pujara | 4 Mar 2013 | 1017 | 67.80 | 206* | 4/1 | Aus | Hyderabad |
| 19 | 12 | Mayank Agarwal | 19 Dec 2020 | 1000 | 52.63 | 243 | 3/4 | Aus | Adelaide |
| 21 | 11 | Sunil Gavaskar | 25 Jan 1973 | 1047 | 61.59 | 220 | 4/6 | Eng | Kanpur |

**Fewest innings to 1000 Test runs while opening the batting (at number 1 or 2)**

| Inns | Tests | Batter | For | Achieved on | Runs | Ave. | HS | 100/50 | Opp | Venue |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 12 | 10 | Herbert Sutcliffe | Eng | 28 Feb 1925 | 1004 | 91.27 | 176 | 5/4 | Aus | Sydney |
| 13 | 10 | Graeme Smith | SA | 1 Aug 2003 | 1144 | 95.33 | 277 | 4/2 | Eng | Lord's |
| 15 | 10 | Usman Khawaja | Aus | 29 Jun 2022 | 1068 | 97.09 | 160 | 4/5 | SL | Galle |
| 16 | 11 | Len Hutton | Eng | 26 Jun 1939 | 1061 | 66.31 | 364 | 4/2 | WI | Lord's |
| 16 | 9 | Yashasvi Jaiswal | Ind | 7 Mar 2024 | 1028 | 68.53 | 214* | 3/4 | Eng | Dharamsala |
| 17 | 11 | Rohit Sharma | Ind | 5 Mar 2021 | 1030 | 64.38 | 212 | 4/2 | Eng | Ahmedabad |

India's Yashaswi Jaiswal.
VIJAY SONEJI

**26** } The number of sixes hit by Jaiswal in the recent five-match Test series against England. This is now the most hit by an individual batter in a Test series. He became the first to smack 20 or more sixes in a series in Test cricket history. Overall, only four batters have hit 15 or more sixes in a Test series. England's Walter Hammond was the first batter to hit 10 sixes during the two-match Test series in New Zealand in 1932/33. Interestingly, all his 10 sixes came during his knock of 336 not out in Auckland in April 1933. Since then, five other players have held the Test record for hitting the maximum number of sixes in a series.

**Most sixes hit by a batter in a Test series**

| 6s | Batter | For | Against | Venue | Series | Matches | Series result |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 26 | Yashasvi Jaiswal | India | England | India | 2023/24 | 5 | India won 4-1 |
| 19 | Rohit Sharma | India | South Africa | India | 2019/20 | 3 | India won 3-0 |
| 15 | Shimron Hetmyer | West Indies | Bangladesh | Bangladesh | 2018/19 | 2 | WI lost 0-2 |
| 15 | Ben Stokes | England | Australia | England | 2023 | 5 | Drawn 2-2 |

Note: England's off-spinner Shoaib Bashir conceded 20 sixes in the recent Test series in India, which is the most ever conceded by any bowler in a series.

### From Hammond to Jaiswal — the men who held the record for the most sixes in a Test series

| 6s | The record holder | For | Against | Series | Matches | Venue |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 10 | **Walter Hammond** | England | NZ | 1932/33 | 2 | in NZ |
| 12 | **Denis Lindsay** | South Africa | Aus | 1966/67 | 5 | in SA |
| 14 | **Wasim Raja** | Pakistan | WI | 1976/77 | 5 | in WI |
| 15 | **Shimron Hetmyer** | West Indies | Ban | 2018/19 | 2 | in Ban |
| 19 | **Rohit Sharma** | India | SA | 2019/20 | 3 | in Ind |
| 26 | **Yashasvi Jaiswal** | India | Eng | 2023/24 | 5 | in Ind |

**102** } The number of sixes hit in the recent Test series in India is the most ever in Test cricket history. This is the first time the three-figure mark has been breached. Likewise, India's tally of 72 sixes in this series is also the first time the sixes hit by a side has crossed the 50-mark in Tests.

### Most sixes hit in a Test series (by both sides)

| 6s | Team1 (6s) | Team2 (6s) | Venue | Series | Mts | Series result |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 102 | **Ind (72)** | **Eng (30)** | Ind | 2023/24 | 5 | Ind won 4-1 |
| 74 | **Eng (43)** | **Aus (31)** | Eng | 2023 | 5 | Drawn 2-2 |
| 65 | **Aus (40)** | **Eng (25)** | Aus | 2013/14 | 5 | Aus won 5-0 |
| 65 | **Ind (47)** | **SA (18)** | Ind | 2019/20 | 3 | Ind won 3-0 |
| 59 | **Pak (27)** | **NZ (32)** | UAE | 2014/15 | 3 | Drawn 1-1 |
| 51 | **Eng (36)** | **Aus (15)** | Eng | 2005 | 5 | Eng won 2-1 |

### Most sixes hit by a side in a Test series

| 6s | For | Opp | Venue | Series | Mts | Series result |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 72 | **Ind** | Eng | Ind | 2023/24 | 5 | Ind won 4-1 |
| 47 | **Ind** | SA | Ind | 2019/20 | 3 | Ind won 3-0 |
| 43 | **Eng** | Aus | Eng | 2023 | 5 | Drawn 2-2 |
| 40 | **Aus** | Eng | Aus | 2013/14 | 5 | Aus won 5-0 |
| 37 | **Pak** | Ind | Pak | 2005/06 | 3 | Pak won 1-0 |
| 36 | **Eng** | Aus | Eng | 2005 | 5 | Eng won 2-1 |

**2** } The number of occasions a player, appearing in his 100th Test match, has managed to claim most number of wickets on that special occasion. R. Ashwin, in Dharamsala, emulated Sri Lankan M. Muralitharan by claiming nine England wickets in his 100th Test match. However, Ashwin's match bowling figures are statistically the best, which puts him on top of the table, as seen below. Also, Ashwin's five-wicket haul in the second innings is the third-best for a player in his 100th Test match (see the second table).

### Best match bowling figures in a player's 100th Test

| Match Figures | Player | For | Against | Venue | Month, Year | Result |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 9/128 | **R. Ashwin** | India | England | Dharamsala | Mar 2024 | Won |
| 9/141 | **M. Muralitharan** | Sri Lanka | Bangladesh | Chattogram | Mar 2006 | Won |
| 8/231 | **Shane Warne** | Australia | South Africa | Cape Town | Mar 2002 | Won |
| 7/151 | **Kapil Dev** | India | Pakistan | Karachi | Nov 1989 | Drawn |
| 7/176 | **Anil Kumble** | India | Sri Lanka | Ahmedabad | Dec 2005 | Won |

### Five-wicket hauls in a player's 100th Test

| Bowling Figures | Player | For | Against | Venue | Month, Year | Result |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 6/54 | **M. Muralitharan** | Sri Lanka | Bangladesh | Chattogram | Mar 2006 | Won |
| 6/161 | **Shane Warne** | Australia | South Africa | Cape Town | Mar 2002 | Won |
| 5/77 | **R. Ashwin** | India | England | Dharamsala | Mar 2024 | Won |
| 5/89 | **Anil Kumble** | India | Sri Lanka | Ahmedabad | Dec 2005 | Won |

India's R. Ashwin. PTI

**3** } The number of bowlers who are members of the 700-plus Test wickets Club. England's James Anderson became the first pacer to do so.

### The 700-plus wickets club (listed chronologically)

| Bowler | For | Against | Venue | Achieved on | Test# | Age | 700th victim |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Shane Warne** | Australia | England | Melbourne | 26 Dec 2006 | 144 | 37y-104d | Andrew Strauss |
| **M. Muralitharan** | Sri Lanka | Bangladesh | Kandy | 14 Jul 2007 | 113 | 35y-88d | Syed Rasel |
| **James Anderson** | England | India | Dharamsala | 9 Mar 2024 | 187 | 41y-223d | Kuldeep Yadav |

**3** } The number of times Team India has won a maximum number of Test matches in a series.

### India winning maximum matches in a Test series

| Series result | Test result sequence | Opponent | Series | From | To | Captain |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 4-0 (4) | W W W W | beat Australia | 2012/13 | 22 Feb 2013 | 24 Mar 2013 | M. S. Dhoni |
| 4-0 (5) | D W W W W | beat England | 2016/17 | 9 Nov 2016 | 20 Dec 2016 | Virat Kohli |
| 4-1 (5) | L W W W W | beat England | 2023/24 | 25 Jan 2024 | 9 Mar 2024 | Rohit Sharma |

All records are correct and updated until 23 March 2024.

AFP

# Dhananjaya and Kamindu enter record books

**1** The two became only the **third pair** in Test history to score a century in both innings as Sri Lanka thrashed Bangladesh by 328 runs

**Dhananjaya de Silva and Kamindu Mendis** became only the third pair in Test history to score a century in both innings as Sri Lanka thrashed Bangladesh by 328 runs. Skipper De Silva and Mendis added 202 runs for the sixth wicket and 173 runs for the seventh in the first and second innings, respectively. The only other pairs to emulate the feat are Australia's Greg and Ian Chappell (vs New Zealand) in 1974 and Pakistan's Misbah-ul-Haq and Azhar Ali (vs Australia) in 2014.

REUTERS

**Kenyan all-rounder Collins Obuya,** who led his country to a historic semifinal spot at the 2003 ODI World Cup, announced his retirement. Obuya notably picked five for 24 against Sri Lanka in Kenya's remarkable 53-run win in that edition of the World Cup. Following his exploits in that tournament, Obuya became the first Kenyan cricketer to play for an English county team when Warwickshire signed him on a one-year contract. In his final international appearance on March 23, Obuya scored a five-ball duck against Uganda at the African Games.

REUTERS

**Pakistan left-arm pacer Mohammad Amir** came out of international retirement and made himself available for the upcoming T20 World Cup in June. Amir, who was banned from 2010 to 2015 following spot-fixing charges, had announced his international retirement in 2021. Spin all-rounder Imad Wasim also announced his availability for national selection after announcing his international retirement four months ago. Both Amir and Wasim were selected by the Pakistan Cricket Board for a two-week fitness training camp with the army to prepare for the T20 World Cup.

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**Western Australia reasserted its dominance** by clinching its third consecutive Sheffield Shield title after trouncing Tasmania by 377 runs in the final of the domestic First-Class cricket competition. The team also became the first in the history of Australian cricket to claim both the First-Class and one-day cricket crowns for three successive seasons. Western Australia rode on skipper Sam Whiteman's 104 in the first innings and pacer Cameron Gannon's eight-wicket haul in the final to seal the historic triumph.

SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

**Shaharyar Khan,** who served two terms as Pakistan Cricket Board chairman, passed away in Lahore on March 23. He was 89 years old. Considered a great promoter of India-Pakistan cricket relations, Shaharyar represented an era when administrators worked tirelessly to promote the sport. He was born in Bhopal and was former India captain Mansur Ali Khan Pataudi's cousin. He also served as the Pakistan team manager on the 1999 tour to India and the ICC Cricket World Cup 2003 in South Africa.

# LAKSHYA KEEPS FINDING A WAY

At one point, Indian badminton star Lakshya Sen's Olympic qualification looked uncertain, but he seems to have **regained his form just in time.**

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Over the past week at the All England Championships, thanks to his decision to swap half-sleeved T-shirts for sleeveless ones, Lakshya Sen's love of ink has been getting more airtime. On the skin of his left deltoid are a couple of tattoos that read 'Believe' and 'Never Give Up'. That's been the theme for Lakshya over the last fortnight.

When he headed into the French Open at the start of March, the 22-year-old seemed to be treading water. In a streak that began last August, he had never made it past the first round in eight tournaments as he racked up a dismal 3-11 record. Ranked 12th in the world in July last year, the extended plunge in form saw him nearly fall off the top 20 rankings by the start of February 2024. The dip had even seemed to follow him in domestic competition; he lost to unheralded Bharat Raghav in the quarterfinals of the national championships.

A temporary slump might be something most athletes take in their stride. But in this Olympic year, where only the top 16 of the world are guaranteed qualification for the Paris Games in July, there was the very real possibility that the former world bronze medallist, who was once considered one of India's best bets at the Olympics, might not even make the cut.

But when it mattered the most, Lakshya seems to have rediscovered

**For a player who's no stranger to success at the international level and who has made the final at All England previously, a semifinal finish left Lakshya a little unsatisfied.**

his mojo. A semifinal finish at the French Open brought him some much-needed breathing room. Then, at the All England Championships, Lakshya looked like he had rediscovered some of the touch that saw him make the 2022 finals in Birmingham, with a semifinal finish this time.

He beat World No. 4 and the form player of the season, Anders Antonsen, in the second round and former All-England champion Lee Zii Jia in the quarterfinals. At times, Lakshya was teetering on the edge in both matches; he shrugged off a 6-12 deficit in the decider against Antonsen and was soundly beaten 13-21 in the opening game of his quarterfinals against Jia.

Then, in the semifinals, he bounced back from a game down to force a decider and even briefly held the edge before falling short against Indonesia's Jonatan Christie, who would go on to win the title.

The result leapfrogged Lakshya five places to 13 in the latest world ranking and assured that he would be in Paris in four months. But more significantly, Lakshya is not just scraping his way through anymore. Having found himself in a rich vein of form, he now has a significant tailwind behind him to take him to the French capital.

This outcome again places Lakshya's name in the discussion of India's top hopes for Paris. While he didn't start the week among the favourites, Lakshya proved his mettle in men's singles as other Indian players faltered: H.S. Prannoy lost to Su Li Yang, P.V. Sindhu to An Se Young, and Chirag Shetty with Satwiksairaj Rankireddy in men's doubles to Bagas Maulana and Muhammad Shohibul Fikri. During an interview with Sportstar at the India Open, Lakshya's coach, Vimal Kumar, highlighted that the issue lies more in his mindset than his physical ability.

"He is injury-free, and he's training well, but of course, if you look at the last 4-5 months, he's been struggling at events," Kumar had said. "At the moment, he is low on confidence, and he's not playing the right game. That variation, he's not bringing in. He's trying to hit through in these sorts of (slow) conditions. He has to

## WINNERS

**Men's Singles:** Jonatan Christie (Indonesia)
**Women's Singles:** An Seyoung (Korea)
**Men's Doubles:** Fajar Alfian/Muhammad Rian Ardianto (Indonesia)
**Women's Doubles:** Baek Ha-na/Lee So-hee (Korea)
**Mixed Doubles:** Zheng Siwei/Huang Yaqiong (China)

## WHERE INDIANS FINISHED

**Men's Singles:** Lakshya Sen (Semifinals), HS Prannoy (1st round), Kidambi Srikanth (1st round), Priyanshu Rajawat (1st round)
**Women's Singles:** P V Sindhu (2nd round), Aakarshi Kashyap (1st round)
**Men's Doubles:** Satwiksairaj Rankireddy/Chirag Shetty (2nd round)
**Women's Doubles:** Ashwini Ponnappa/Tanisha Crasto (2nd round), Treesa Jolly/Gayatri Gopichand (1st round), Rutaparna Panda/Swetaparna Panda (1st round)

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**In the mind:** Lakshya Sen's coach, Vimal Kumar, believes that his recent decline in form was mainly due to his mindset rather than his physical abilities. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

**HAVING FOUND HIMSELF IN A RICH VEIN OF FORM, LAKSHYA NOW HAS A SIGNIFICANT TAILWIND BEHIND HIM HEADING INTO THE OLYMPICS**

be patient, and [he isn't]. He's a little anxious; that's also an issue. Every athlete goes through this, but he's taking time to come out of it."

For now, at least, it seems Lakshya has found his way out of the maze.

It's true that some work still needs to be done. Lakshya admitted as much following his loss in the semifinals at All England.

Although he had seemingly swung the momentum with a dominant second game against Christie, the Indonesian found a second wind in the decider, which Lakshya wasn't able to match. Despite having won two consecutive three-game matches in the run-up to the semifinal, it was clear that the Indian was not quite as quick towards the end of his match against Christie. Net shots that would usually kiss the net and fall on the other side were now being lifted a few extra inches, giving Christie just enough time to hit winners.

The reason was obvious. While Lakshya had been drained after spending two and a half hours of high-intensity badminton in the two days before his semifinal, Christie had spent just one hour and 33 minutes (owing to China's Shi Yuqi pulling out after the first game in his quarterfinal match) on the court.

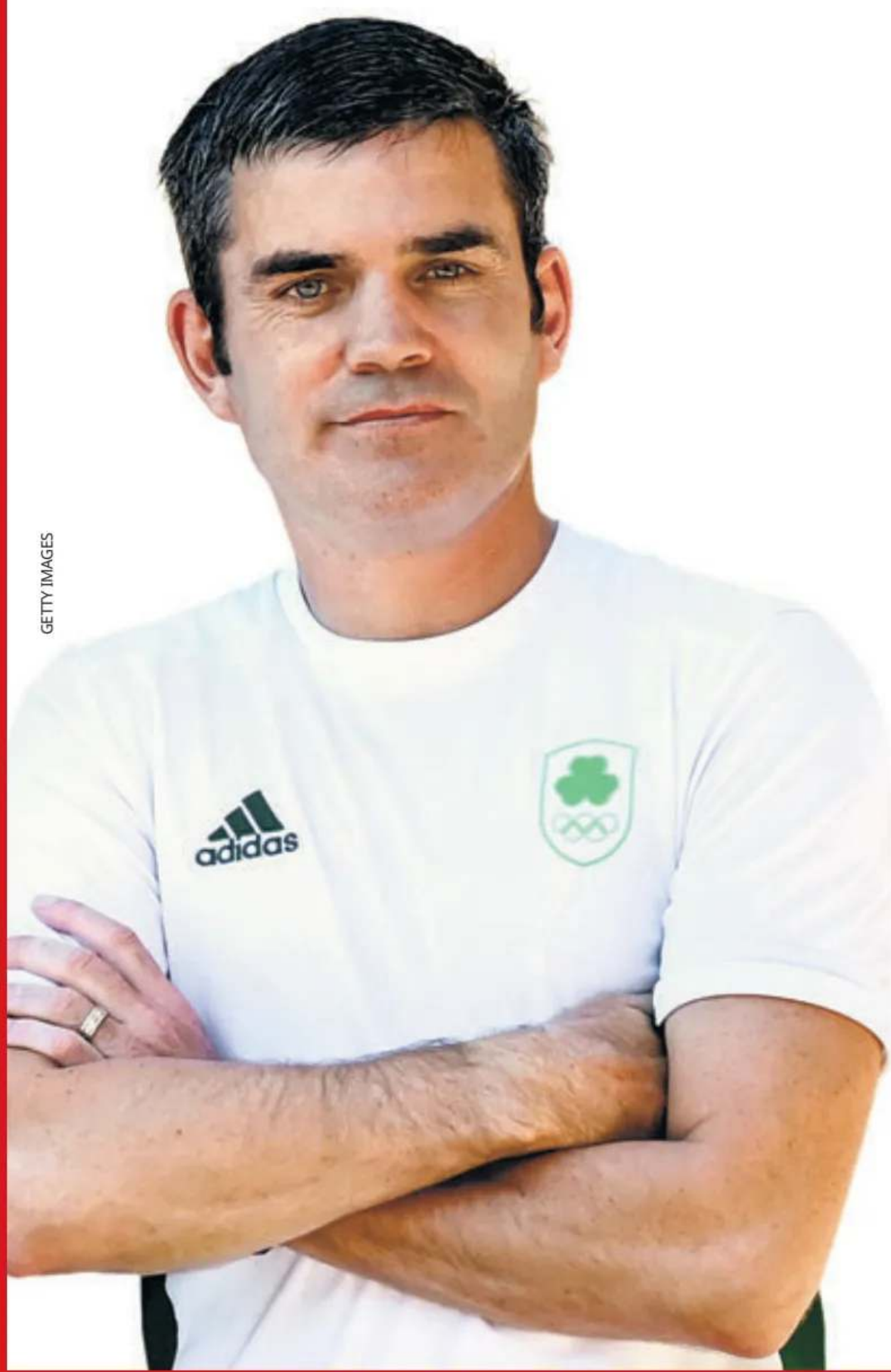
"All the matches that I've played were long, and I could feel it in the recovery and the next day's match preparation," Lakshya would say in the BWF mixed zone after the defeat. "Some matches, I started slow in the first set, even having a good lead and then not being able to convert those first-setters that then went on to three games. I won some of those, but I know this is one thing that I want to improve: close matches in two games. So that I'm a bit fresher," he would say.

For a player who's no stranger to success at the international level and who has made the final at All England previously, a semifinal finish did indeed leave him a little unsatisfied, but he's able to see the bigger picture as well.

"I'm pretty disappointed with the result. But overall, the way I played over two weeks, surely I have the level to be up there and win in the big tournaments," Lakshya said. "I'll discuss with my coaches and try to analyse the two weeks much better because, as of now, I was just focusing on the next match after every game. Now it's time to reflect and watch those matches again. Take good things and keep learning from the mistakes," Lakshya said.

# Dunne and dusted

After the resignation of the High-Performance Director, whose selection criteria and training methods **came under the scanner,** India's boxers and coaches will have to find their own path ahead of the next Qualifier.

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In January 2023, over a video conference call with Indian coaches and officials of the Boxing Federation of India, Bernard Dunne (the newly appointed High-Performance Director of Indian boxing) laid out his plan for the sport in the country. Dunne (left), a former professional world champion, had a radical new approach to training compared to how things had been done previously.

Indian national camps, said Dunne, would feature only two boxers in each weight class — in contrast to the four being previously accommodated. The camps would only be organised for boxers in the 12 Olympic weight categories (seven for men and six for women). Most significantly, teams for major competitions like the Asian Games, World Championships, or Olympic qualifiers would be selected based on an internal assessment by himself and the coaches rather than through trials, as was the case earlier.

Dunne's plans would come in for criticism during the call itself. It is learnt that one senior coach said the proposals would be the 'end of Indian boxing'. As it turned out, Dunne would get his way. Within a few months, coaches who weren't willing to buy into Dunne's vision found themselves sidelined. Narender Rana, the national men's coach, is currently posted in Assam, while the women's coach, Bhaskar Bhatt, was transferred to work with youth women boxers in Hisar.

A little over a year after that video

**Not clear enough:** While Dunne's reasoning behind skipping trials was sound in principle, players were often left confused about where they stood in terms of selection. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

conference call, Dunne himself is out. Following a dismal performance by the Indian team at the World Olympic boxing qualifiers — the nine Indians in contention not only failed to win an Olympic quota but were eliminated in the very first round (except for one, Nishant Dev) — Dunne tendered his resignation to the Boxing Federation of India. His resignation was accepted, followed by the dismissal of Dmitry Dmitruk, who was working as a foreign coach with the men's team.

As things stand, India has only four boxers who have qualified for the Paris Olympics — all of them women. Although more boxers will be expected to qualify at the second World qualifiers in May, it is uncertain whether they will equal the number who booked their tickets to the Tokyo Games — nine.

According to one line of thinking, India's results, although disappointing, were on expected lines. While Dunne had produced impressive results as High-Performance Director of Ireland — they had won a gold and a bronze in Tokyo after drawing a blank at the previous games in Rio — some argued that the same template might not fit in the Indian context.

A coach from the camp who didn't want to be named said, "It made no sense to limit the number of boxers in the camps. It might make sense when you don't have that many boxers. But India's biggest advantage has always been that we have a [significant] number of boxers. Within the 51kg category [itself], we have a tall boxer, a shorter one, someone who is technical, and someone who is a pressure fighter. That way, every boxer gets to spar with very different kinds of opponents. When you include just a few boxers, those in the camp don't get the same kind of practice."

### Changed training patterns

According to another coach, Dunne had also introduced shorter, sharper training sessions once a day, in contrast to the twice-a-day workouts that boxers had become used to. "This was something that didn't suit a lot of our boxers. Every boxer in the national camp has been boxing for at least a decade or more. You can see the result of the lower physical volume at the Olympic qualifiers," says another coach.

"Your technique will always be strong in the first round of a bout, but in the second and third, it is your physical conditioning that plays a key role. If you have so many Indians losing in the first round itself, it's clear that their physical conditioning wasn't at the level it should have been," says a coach.

Where Dunne found himself at the crossroads of most in Indian boxing though was in his insistence on doing away with selection trials. Dunne had once explained that by conducting trials, the coaches and selection panel were shirking their responsibility. He had added that boxers were focussing on the trials and then finding it hard

> « Instead of trials, Dunne wanted to pick players based on consistency in training, discipline and sparring »

**DUNNE'S METHODOLOGY HAD DELIVERED STRIKING RESULTS IN IRELAND AND GREAT BRITAIN**

**Failed resistance:** Amit Panghal (above right) and Arundhati Choudhary (far right) approached the courts for intervention, but the federation continued to back Dunne.
PTI & A. M. FARUQUI

to recover in time for the tournament that mattered. Dunne instead wanted to pick players based on consistency in training, discipline and sparring.

While it was a decision that was sound in principle, players were often left confused about where they stood in terms of selection. Two players — Amit Panghal (men's 51kg) and Arundhati Choudhary (women's 66kg) kg) — would approach the courts for intervention, but despite that, the federation continued to back Dunne.

However, one of the consequences of Dunne's insistence on eliminating trials was that the buck, in terms of selection, ultimately stopped with him. The decision to pick World bronze medallist Deepak Bhoria in place of the reigning champion Amit for the Asian Games [which was the first Olympic qualification tournament] immediately backfired when he lost before the medal rounds.

Amit's exclusion from the Olympic qualifiers in Italy took on an even worse look considering he had just won the prestigious Strandja Memorial Tournament just a few weeks before. Arundhati, who also reached the final of the Strandja tournament, beat France's Emilie Sonvico en route. The same opponent beat Ankushita Boro — who was picked for the qualifiers in place of Arundhati — in the first round.

"It's not just a matter of not picking one boxer. When you insist on sticking with just one boxer, apart from bringing down the confidence of the others, you are making the one who is selected overconfident. That's why we have trials," a coach says.

**India no exception?**

But for all the criticism of Dunne, there is another line of reasoning: that the decision to accept the Irishman's resignation was made in haste. All boxing programmes need time to settle down.

The methodology Dunne employs has delivered striking results in Ireland and Great Britain. And India under Dunne did pick up its best-ever result at the World Championships — winning three medals in the 2023 edition in Tashkent exactly a year ago.

Indian women's boxing hasn't done too badly either — they picked up four quotas from the Hangzhou Asian Games during Dunne's tenure.

A closer look at the immediate trigger for Dunne's exit is also not as clear-cut as it might seem. All but one (Lakshya Chahar in men's 80kg division) of the Indian men's boxers who were defeated at the Olympic qualifiers lost to the eventual quota winner.

The absence of video footage for any of the early matches also makes it uncertain whether an Indian boxer received a harsh decision. While India might not have won a single quota at the first Olympic qualifier, it's unlikely to be the same case in the second one at the end of May, regardless of whether Dunne's principles are junked or not.

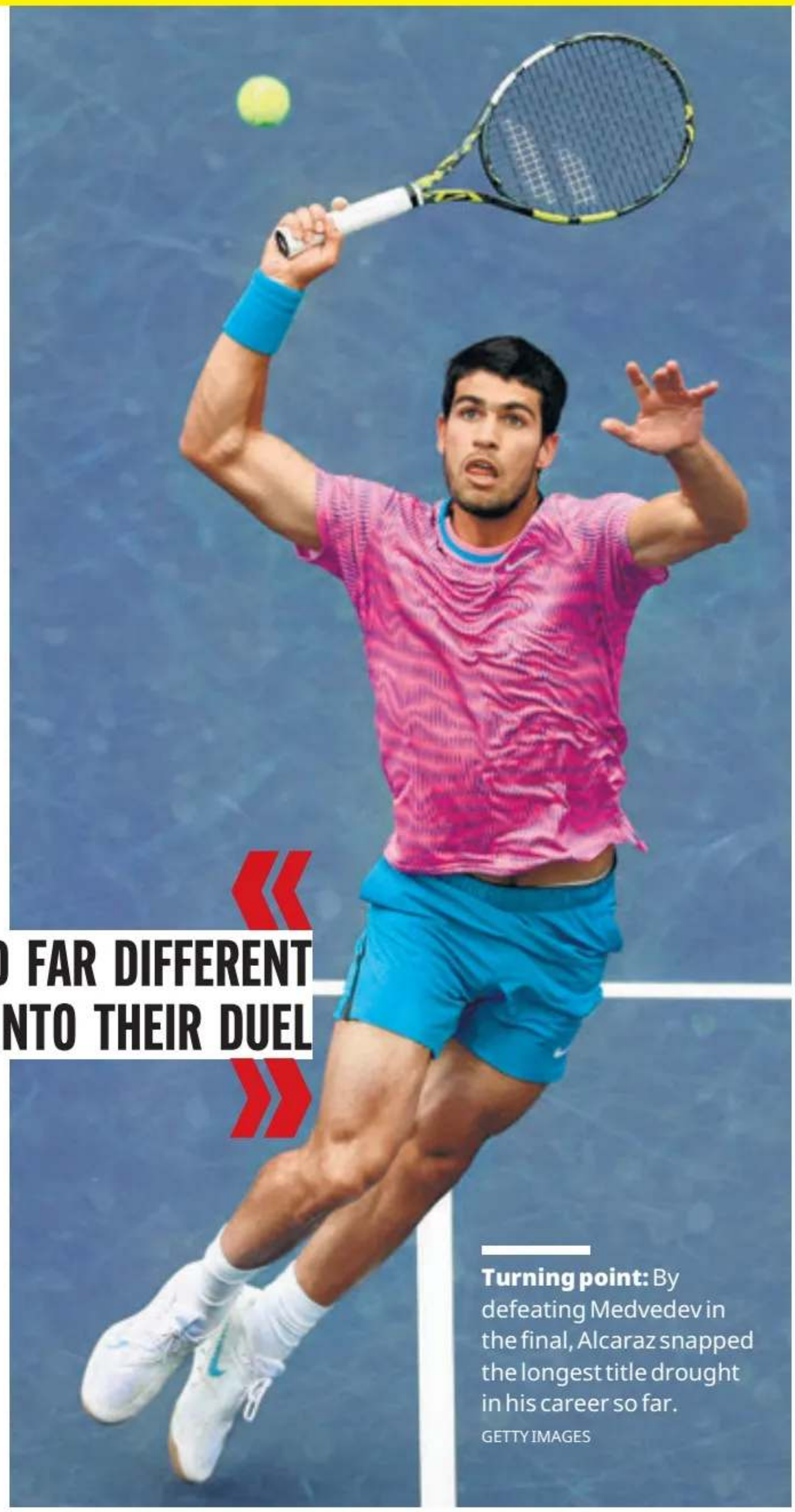
With the world's top boxers having already booked their tickets to Paris either at the Continental Games or the first Olympic qualifier, the field in Bangkok will be a lot easier to navigate.

To add to the diminished field, there are as many quotas as there were in Italy, or in the case of the men's 57kg and 63.5kg categories, an extra one.

In the absence of Dunne, India's boxers and coaches will have to find their own paths. While they might be left in a state of confusion, coaches believe it is still possible to salvage the situation.

# ALCARAZ ON THE REBOUND

The Spanish sensation battled hard to win his latest title at Indian Wells, **delivering incredible performances** against Daniil Medvedev and Jannik Sinner.



**Turning point:** By defeating Medvedev in the final, Alcaraz snapped the longest title drought in his career so far.
GETTY IMAGES

## SINNER AND ALCARAZ HAD FAR DIFFERENT TRAJECTORIES GOING INTO THEIR DUEL

**Paul Fein**

*"It's not a video game, but it's almost like it" — Tennis Channel analyst, Paul Annacone, on the spectacular athleticism and shot-making during Carlos Alcaraz's 1-6, 6-3, 6-2 semifinal victory over Jannik Sinner.*

A dream showdown featuring the sport's most enticing new rivalry appeared inevitable at the tournament that calls itself 'Tennis Paradise.'

With shock and awe victories, Alcaraz and Sinner strutted into the semifinals at the BNP Paribas Open at Indian Wells. The dynamic Spaniard dropped just 22 games and the explosive Italian only 23 against four overmatched foes apiece.

Sinner, 22, and Alcaraz, 20, had far different trajectories going into their duel in the desert. Jannik, whose technically perfect game resembles Novak Djokovic's but with more power, had amassed a 19-0 winning streak (16-0 this season) and racked up a terrific 10-1 record against top-5 opponents in the past five months. Against his top rivals, Sinner led Djokovic 3-1, Alcaraz 1-0, and Daniil Medvedev 4-0.

In sharp contrast, Alcaraz hadn't won a tournament since he dethroned seven-time champion Djokovic in the memorable 2023 Wimbledon final. Poor planning and bad luck contributed to Alcaraz's disappointing, four-set quarterfinal loss to Alexander Zverev at the 2024 Australian Open. He didn't play a tune-up

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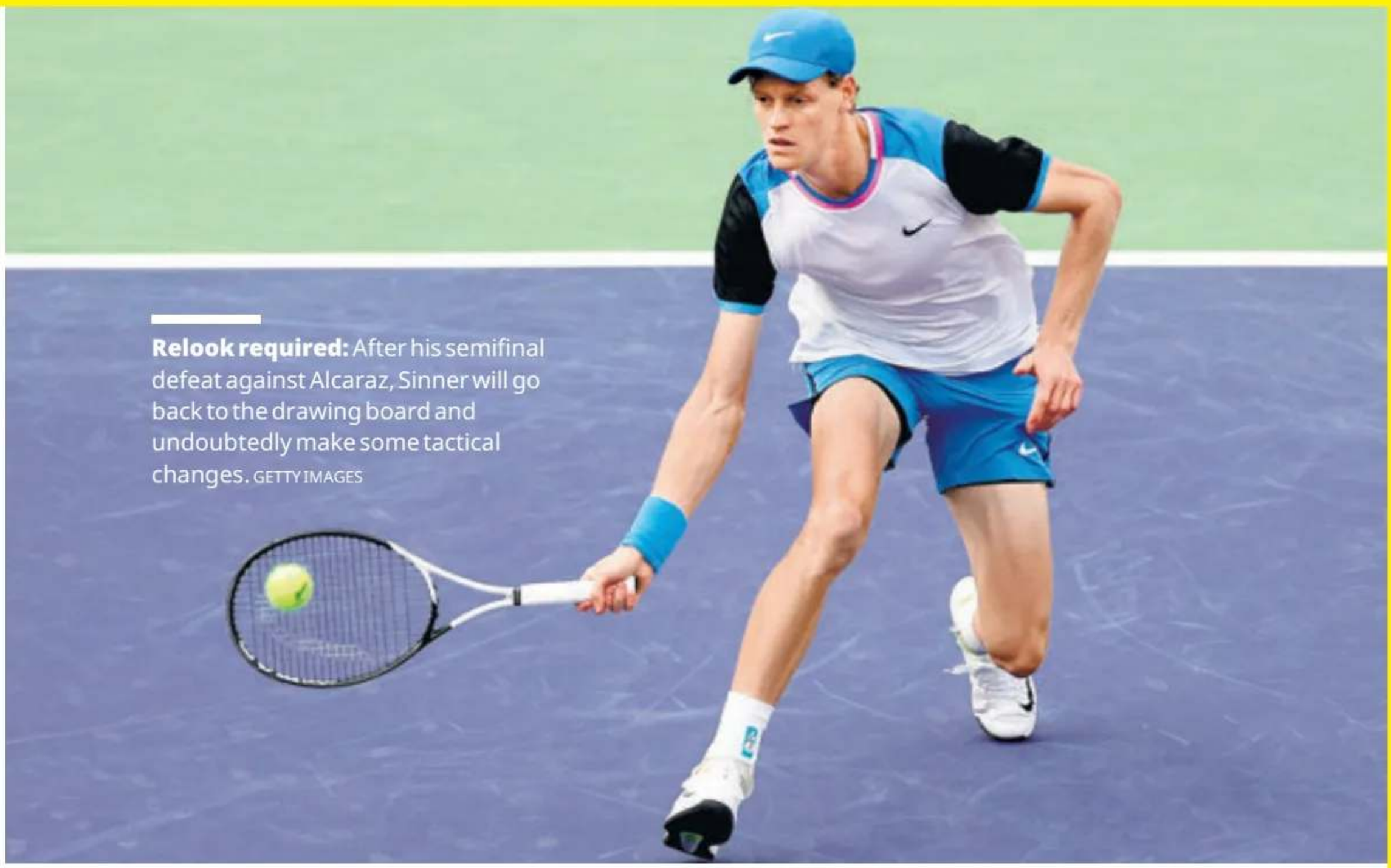

**Relook required:** After his semifinal defeat against Alcaraz, Sinner will go back to the drawing board and undoubtedly make some tactical changes. GETTY IMAGES

tournament Down Under, and his highly regarded coach, Juan Carlos Ferrero, who underwent knee surgery in December, missed the year's opening major while rehabbing in Spain. As a result, Alcaraz's shot selection and confidence suffered.

He didn't fare any better in February when he played two clay events in South America, losing in the Buenos Aires semifinals and spraining his ankle in his first match at Rio de Janeiro. The lingering injury forced him to end his first practice at Indian Wells after 30 minutes. But during the trophy presentation, the youthful Spaniard said, "After every match, I was feeling better."

During the semifinals, Ferrero shouted advice and encouragement from the Player's Box as he matched tactical wits with another superb coach, Darren Cahill — who achieved renown by guiding Lleyton Hewitt, Andre Agassi, and Simona Halep to world No. 1 rankings — in Sinner's camp.

Cahill, nicknamed 'Killer' during his pro career, steadily developed the mild-mannered Sinner into an assassin on the court. Since he joined Sinner's coaching team in July 2022, the lanky 6'3" Italian has added finesse to his previously one-dimensional power game, strengthened his second serve, and, most importantly, improved his athleticism and defence.

With a more complete game and smart tactics to implement it, Jannik captured seven titles and boosted his ranking from No. 10 to a career-high No. 3.

Alcaraz, despite winning two Grand Slam titles and becoming the youngest man at 19 in the Open Era to rank No. 1, is also an unfinished product. To beat Sinner, who won their last two matches and led 4-3 in their budding rivalry, he'd have to improve his tactics and control his emotions.

Slugging it out with Sinner proved to be a losing formula for Alcaraz. So Ferrero, the 2003 French Open champion, devised a new game plan. "Juan Carlos told me they've been doing drills where Carlos has to hit two looping topspin shots," said Tennis Channel analyst and former No. 1 Jim Courier. "Then he's allowed to play an aggressive shot and then go back to it [variety] and throw in a slice. They're trying to program Carlos to be a little less risky because his instincts are all aggression all the time."

Alas, a nervous Alcaraz lost the plot in the first set. Sinner thrived in a baseline slugfest, winning twice as many points (28 to 14) and the set 6-1.

The tide turned in the second set when Alcaraz deployed a variety of smart tactics. The Spaniard retreated farther behind the baseline, a la Medvedev, to return Sinner's booming serve more consistently. He changed pace to disrupt Sinner's rhythm and to recover when he was out of position.

Like a boxer jabbing to set up knockout punches, Alcaraz put more balls in play and, when he saw an opening, attacked with explosive forehands. To keep Sinner off balance, he served and volleyed on occasion, and, of course, hit devilish drop shots.

Carlos broke serve for 3-1 with a volley winner set up by a 97-mph forehand. Serving for the second set, he saved a break point with a bold backhand winner that smacked the sideline and clinched it with a

**In safe hands:** Alcaraz's coach, Juan Carlos Ferrero, played a strong hand in the former's resurgence on court. GETTY IMAGES.

deceptive forehand drop shot winner. 6-3 for Alcaraz.

Sinner had lost the momentum but not his fighting spirit. The critical point in the deciding set came at 1-all with Sinner serving to escape his second break point. Like a high-speed video game, it ended in a spectacular second. Alcaraz sprinted for a net cord as if his life depended on reaching it. He scraped it up only to set up Sinner, who drilled a forehand crosscourt passing shot. Alcaraz dove for it, and seemingly put the ball away with a volley.

But just as desperately, Sinner dove for it and somehow reflexed a low backhand over the net. Alcaraz recovered in time to deliver a backhand volley winner. Athleticism trumped determination.

Sinner landed on his left wrist. He didn't call for the trainer. How much it affected his play, we may never know. Like a true competitor, he soldiered on and didn't make excuses.

But Alcaraz raced to a 5-1 lead. Before Sinner served the next game, Cahill yelled, "Try something different this game. You never know what can happen. Be unpredictable, mate!"

It was too late, though. The irresistible force called Alcaraz prevailed 1-6, 6-3, 6-2. He then went on to defend his Indian Wells title in the final, snapping the longest title drought of his young, but brilliant, career.

"This [match against Sinner] was one of the most intelligent performances we've seen — tactically astute," said Jason Goodall, a *Tennis Channel* analyst, while Juan Carlos Ferrero pointed to his head.

Both a slump and a streak were broken, and both stars benefited from yet another thrilling encounter.

"It's difficult to put it into words, because I had really difficult months," Alcaraz said afterward. "Let's say the last two months it was difficult for me to find myself. I didn't enjoy stepping on the court. I wasn't myself on the court the last two months, three months, so it was difficult for me. It doesn't matter what problems you have. If you believe in yourself, you have a really good team around you, you work hard, everything can turn around. I think that's the biggest lesson that I take from this tournament."

Sinner will go back to the drawing board with coach Cahill and undoubtedly make some tactical changes. "You are always impressed when you play against him," a gracious Sinner said. "He's moving really, really fast, as we know. Especially on this court, where the ball bounces really high, it's not easy to play against him because he can play with a lot of spin. But what I have missed today [is] that I was too predictable at some points. I was doing the same things over and over again, which in my mind let me

**MEDVEDEV LACKED THE ATHLETICISM, VOLLEY, AND STAMINA TO DEFEAT ALCARAZ**

**Big shoes to fill:** Alcaraz outclassed Medvedev to become only the second man since 1990 to win five Masters 1000 titles before turning 21 — the other being Rafael Nadal. GETTY IMAGES

down. I think that's the lesson for today."

It may seem harsh to downplay the final as anticlimactic given that Medvedev ranks No. 4 in the world and that he defeated Alcaraz in the US Open semifinals just six months ago. But even on his best surface, hard courts, and in fine form at Indian Wells — beating No. 29 Sebastian Korda, No. 13 Grigor Dimitrov, No. 7 Holger Rune, and No. 17 Tommy Paul — Medvedev lacks the athleticism, volley, and stamina to defeat Alcaraz, Sinner, and Djokovic... if the GOAT regains his form and motivation.

Motivation may be a larger factor than many considered following Djokovic's surprise announcement on March 16 of his withdrawal from the Miami Open on social media, saying he needs to balance his "private and professional schedule."

Former world No. 12 Paolo Bertolucci revealed the cause of Djokovic's malaise. "I spoke with some Serbian colleagues. Apparently, at the moment, Djokovic's head is not very focused on tennis," Bertolucci told Sky Sports Italia. "He will probably take some days off and then try to reach his best level for the clay season."

Djokovic looked happy and relaxed when he attended the March 16 Warriors-Lakers game in Los Angeles. An NBA fan, especially of fellow Serb superstar Nikola Jokic, Novak swapped a tennis racket for an autographed jersey with Steph Curry.

For the record, Alcaraz outclassed Medvedev 7-6 (5), 6-1 to become only the second man since 1990 to win five Masters 1000 titles before turning 21 — the other being compatriot Rafael Nadal. The triumph was also Alcaraz's fourth in his last five matches against the Russian, without giving up a single set in any of them.

Hitting his forehand harder than ever at 82 mph and returning serve 7-8 feet closer to the baseline than usual, Medvedev surged to a 3-0 lead. From then on, "The Octopus" couldn't contain the Spaniard's aggression.

"Alcaraz has as much power per pound as anyone in men's tennis," said Courier.

Other than lapses in concentration and shot selection, Alcaraz doesn't have any weaknesses, either.

Some experts might pick out the Alcaraz backhand as a relative weakness compared to his many strengths or the backhands of Djokovic and Sinner. Not Medvedev. When asked about the best shots he's ever faced, the Russian surprisingly included Alcaraz's backhand.

"He's back! Watch out, rest of the tour!" said Paul Annacone, a *Tennis Channel* analyst.

# CALICUT HEROES' VICTORY DANCE

The Kerala team secured its **debut title** in the third season of the Prime Volleyball League.

**Saikat Chakraborty**
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The Prime Volleyball League (PVL) crowned its third champion in three seasons. The Calicut Heroes dominated the league, winning both the regular season and the Super 5s before defeating the Delhi Toofans in the final.

For the PVL itself, the Toofans' presence in the final validated the decision to expand the league and highlighted the success of the model.

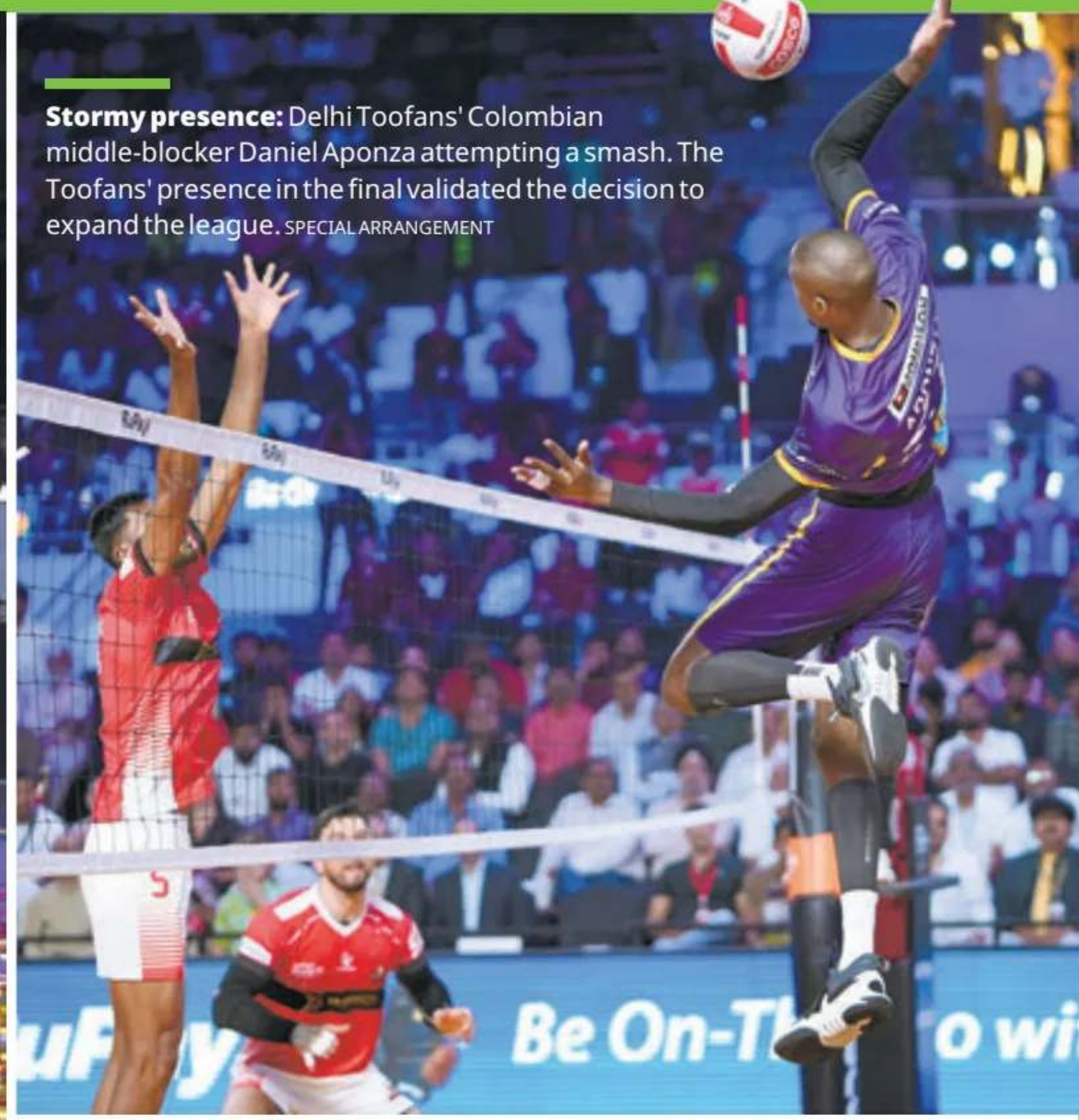
Previously, Baseline Ventures, the promoters of PVL, ran a short-lived Pro Volleyball League under the Volleyball Federation of India (VFI). However, the VFI abruptly terminated the contract, leading to a legal battle.

The Madras High Court ruled in favour of Baseline, awarding it compensation. Then, VFI attempted to launch a competing league that ultimately fizzled out.

Baseline has since established independent communication channels with the international governing body, the Federation Internationale de Volleyball (FIVB), and launched the rebranded PVL, allowing it to host the Club World Championships in India last year. This sequence of events clearly demonstrates PVL's dominance in Indian volleyball.

The players have emerged as the biggest winners at the end of this power struggle between PVL and VFI. Previously caught in the crossfire, they were even pressured to choose

**Final flourish:** Calicut Heroes dominated the league, winning both the regular season and the Super 5s before defeating Delhi Toofans in the final. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT




**Stormy presence:** Delhi Toofans' Colombian middle-blocker Daniel Aponza attempting a smash. The Toofans' presence in the final validated the decision to expand the league. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

between playing in the league and representing India. Thankfully, those days are over.

**Lifeline for Indian volleyball**

The significance of the PVL is amplified by the current dysfunctional state of the VFI. With elections stalled and an ad hoc committee appointed by the Indian Olympic Committee at the helm, it became a lifeline for keeping volleyball alive in the country.

PVL's 48-match, 36-day third season culminated in a thrilling victory for the Calicut Heroes. The team, hailing from Kerala — India's volleyball hub — finally clinched the championship after two previous semifinal heartbreaks. Its success can be attributed to a formula: combining raw Indian talent with the strategic finesse of European technique.

The coaching duo of Kishore Kumar and Shailen Ramdoo was instrumental in crafting a championship team. Kumar, seeking to elevate his players' skills, brought on Ramdoo, his former FIVB coaching instructor. The results were undeniable — the Heroes dominated, winning nine out of 13 matches.

Leading the charge was Jerome Vinith, the team's captain and star player. Overlooked for the 2023 Asian Games despite consistent performances, Vinith delivered a match-winning performance in the final, earning both Player of the Match and Most Valuable Player of the Season awards. This victory was redemption for the 31-year-old.

"We (Indian players) are just turning professional with PVL, and we need to capitalise on this. The league is playing a crucial role in

## Top players

**Jerome Vinith — Calicut Heroes**
Most Valuable Player, Top Scorer (161 points) & Top Attacker (150 points)

**Daniel Aponza — Delhi Toofans**
Top Blocker (26 blocks, 37 rebounds)

**TR Sethu — Bengaluru Torpedoes**
Top Server (23 points)

**K. Anand — Delhi Toofans**
Top Digger (77 digs)

**Mohan Ukkrapandian — Calicut Heroes**
Top Setter (123)

**TR Sethu — Bengaluru Torpedoes**
Top Receiver (89)

**Leading from the front:** Calicut Heroes' captain Jerome Vinith delivered a match-winning performance in the final, earning both Player of the Match and Most Valuable Player of the Season awards.
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

increasing the talent pool for the national setup," Vinith tells *Sportstar*.

### Super 5 heats up the competition

The addition of a ninth team necessitated a format change. Previously, a simple round-robin determined the semifinalists.

This season, a new Super 5 stage saw the top five teams battle it out. The winner secured a direct spot in the finals, while the others fought for the remaining slot.

This format intensified the competition, as evident in the final Super 5 standings.

All five teams had the same number of wins, separated only by set differences.

The increased number of matches also allowed players to build team chemistry.

The Super 5 added excitement, offering teams second chances and keeping fans on the edge of their seats.

International players and coaches brought fresh perspectives, noticeably improving the overall gameplay.

Luiz Felippe Perotto, the Heroes' Brazilian hitter, highlighted the difference in styles.

"Indian players are very aggressive; they tend to attack more and are very strong on serves and spikes.

On the other hand, European style leans more towards technical skills like receiving and blocking," he explains to *Sportstar*.

### Challenges and looking ahead

Despite the season's success, challenges remain. Compared to international leagues, the PVL's shorter season limits player development. Additionally, the tight schedule increases injury risks, as seen towards the business end of the tournament.

Perotto also pointed out challenges for foreign players: "Top leagues in Europe run for 10 months, allowing time for development and team chemistry. In the PVL, it's a two-month sprint. We have to hit the ground running from day one."

**« THE SUPER 5 ADDED EXCITEMENT, OFFERING TEAMS SECOND CHANCES AND KEEPING FANS ON THE EDGE OF THEIR SEATS »**

However, Saqlain Tariq, captain of the Delhi Toofans, emphasised the importance of youth development. "The league allows youngsters to shine in a professional environment, something that was missing from Indian volleyball before," he tells *Sportstar*.

This season saw Indian talents like S. Santhosh, K. Anand, Chirag Yadav, Shikhar Singh, and Mukesh Kumar flourish alongside seasoned players like Vinith. Notably, seven of the top 10 scorers this season were Indians.

### On the world stage

The Heroes' victory grants them direct entry into the Volleyball Club World Championship, representing India, the host nation. Bengaluru had hosted the 2023 edition, in which the Ahmedabad Defenders made history by becoming the first Indian team to compete in the tournament. Following suit, Chennai will stage this year's edition.

With PVL surpassing its 100-match milestone and crowning a new champion in its third season, the Indian volleyball scene is progressing towards a brighter future.

**Ice cool:** Amad Diallo (L) maintained his calm despite being under pressure from Conor Bradley, took the ball past the latter and found the far-corner. GETTY IMAGES

# Battle royale

**MANCHESTER UNITED**

**4**

Scott McTominay 10′
Antony 87′
Marcus Rashford 112′
Amad 120+1′

**LIVERPOOL**

**3**

Alexis Mac Allister 44′
Mohamed Salah 45+2′
Harvey Elliott 105′

Old Trafford was **treated to a classic** FA Cup quarterfinal as the hosts beat Klopp's men in dramatic fashion.

Manchester United's latest win against arch-rival Liverpool will etch itself in the competition's history as one of the most thrilling encounters.

United opened the scoring, with Scott McTominay tapping the ball home from point-blank range from a rebound after Liverpool keeper Caoimhin Kelleher had saved Alejandro Garnacho's shot from the left.

A roaring Old Trafford did not deter Liverpool's game plan. The Reds' possessional dominance seemed to have paid off when Wataru Endo stroked the ball inside the net in the 39th minute after receiving a pass from Salah. However, VAR cancelled the goal after it found that the Egyptian was offside.

It wasn't long before the crowd was silenced again, after Alexis Mac Allister's shot, aided by a slight deflection off Kobbie Mainoo, rattled the back of the net in the 44th minute.

With United coping with the disappointment of conceding the equaliser just before halftime, it was dealt another blow in added time. Darwin Nunez forced a good save from Andre Onana, only for Salah to find the net from the rebound.

United had conceded twice within three minutes.

The second-half was turning out to be favourable for Liverpool as Erik Ten Hag's men found it hard to create any substantial chances. With victory on the horizon, substitute Antony found the bottom corner with a left-footed shot in the 87th minute.

Klopp's men regained the lead in extra-time, with Harvey Elliott finding the net from distance, after a heavy deflection off Christian Eriksen.

But Marcus Rashford, who missed the chance to win the match for United with possibly the last kick of regulation time, found the net with a low and confident finish to make it 3-3 in the 112th minute.

With a penalty-shootout almost a certainty, the match finally got its defining moment.

Liverpool lost possession in a bid to push for a late winner, as Amad Diallo nicked the ball from Elliott and sent Garnacho on a counter-attack. The Argentine raced through the middle before releasing the ball for Diallo.

The Ivorian maintained his calm despite being under pressure from Conor Bradley, took the ball past the latter and found the far-corner, as the ball hit the inside of the post and rattled the net.

**Barcelona climbs to second spot in La Liga**

The Blaugrana cruised to a 3-0 win against Atletico Madrid with goals from Joao Felix, Robert Lewandowski and Fermin Lopez, moving up to second place in the La Liga standings. Barcelona grabbed the lead in the 38th minute and Lewandowski extended the advantage two minutes into the second half. Lopez sealed the rout in the 65th minute with a towering header. Atletico, which was reduced to 10 men in stoppage time, suffered its first home loss of the season.

1

AFP

2

AP

**Fireworks on the cards**

The quarterfinal draw of this year's Champions League sets up heavyweights against each other early on. The past two winners and the only two teams to win all six group games, Real Madrid and Manchester City, will meet at Santiago Bernabeu for the first leg on April 10. Kylian Mbappe's path to a first UCL title with Paris Saint-Germain faces the Barcelona challenge while Arsenal will play the first leg at home against Bayern Munich. Lastly, Atletico Madrid is paired against Borussia Dortmund.

3

REUTERS

**Sarri steps down as Lazio manager**

Maurizio Sarri resigns as Lazio coach after a disappointing run of games, losing five out of its last six matches. Sarri steered Lazio to second place in the Serie A last year but it found itself ninth on the points table.

Lazio has brought in Igor Tudor as manager who last coached Olympique de Marseille, leaving in June last year. He has also managed Serie A teams — Udinese and Verona.

4

GETTY IMAGES

**Nottingham Forest in forbidden territory**

Nottingham Forest was handed a four-point deduction on Monday for overspending, dropping the team into the Premier League's relegation zone with two months left in the season.

The team was found to have breached the league's profitability and sustainability regulations, which typically allow clubs to lose a maximum of 105 million pounds ($133 million) over three years or face sanctions.

5

**Alphonso Davies heading to Madrid?**
Bayern Munich sports director Max Eberl said that the club has made its final offer to Canada left-back Alphonso Davies to extend his contract amid reported interest from Real Madrid.
Davies' contract with Bayern expires at the end of next season, meaning the Bavarian powerhouse could lose the 23-year-old player in 2025 without receiving a fee if he decides not to extend.

REUTERS

6

AFP

**Kylian Mbappe keen to represent France in the Olympics**
The star player, who is set to leave PSG in the summer, said his focus was on representing his national team in the Euros as well as the Olympics in Paris. "I always wanted to play at the Olympics and my desire has not changed... but if I'm not allowed to, then I will do as I'm told," he said. Mbappe revealed that he will know which club he will join next season before the Euros kicks off in June.

7

REUTERS

**Baumgartner scores fastest international goal**
Austria's Christoph Baumgartner needed just six seconds after kickoff to score in Saturday's 2-0 friendly win over Slovakia, making it the fastest-recorded goal in international football.
The 24-year-old sprinted from the centre circle and skipped past three challenges before firing a low shot from outside the box into the bottom corner.
The goal came earlier than Lukas Podolski's for Germany against Ecuador in 2013 when he scored seven seconds into the match.

***Aneesh Dey & Karthik Mudaliar***

**All smiles:** A jubilant Services side celebrates after winning the 77th Santosh Trophy final against Goa. RITU RAJ KONWAR

# Santosh Trophy grapples with the changing state of Indian football

In the 21st century, the Santosh Trophy remains popular in West Bengal, Kerala, and the Northeast, but the players' **calibre doesn't match** its storied legacy.

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In the post-independence era, the National Football Championship for Santosh Trophy, started in 1941 by Sir Manmatha Nath Roy Chowdhary, the then-president of the Indian Football Association, was the closest the country had to a national tournament.

Though competitions such as the Rovers Cup (started in 1890) and Durand Cup (started in 1888) continued, the Santosh Trophy created a place for itself, with coaches and players from the national team taking part.

Balai Das Chatterjee, the first coach of the Indian football team, won the Santosh Trophy six times with Bengal between 1959 and 1969.

Almost half of India's gold medal-winning squad at the 1962 Asian Games comprised Santosh Trophy champions Peter Thangaraj, Chuni Goswami, P. K. Banerjee, D. Ethiraj, Tulsidas Balaram, and Pradyut Barman.

O. Chandrasekhar also got added to the list when he lifted the trophy in 1963 with Maharashtra.

In the 21st century, the Santosh Trophy continues to draw considerable attention from football enthusiasts in West Bengal, Kerala, and the Northeast. Nonetheless, the calibre of players participating in the tournament falls short of the standards set by their predecessors.

When a packed stadium at the Malappuram District Sports Complex Stadium cheered every move by the local team, Kerala, against Bengal in the 2022 Santosh Trophy final, neither team featured a national team regular.

Instead, youngsters such as Jesin TK, Noufal PN, and Dilip Oraon took centre stage, helping Kerala win the

**From the vault:** Former India captain Bhaichung Bhutia won the Santosh Trophy twice with Bengal in 1995 and 1999. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

title in alternate years for the first time since 2005.

In the latest edition, almost all the players were amateur footballers. Phijam Sanathoi Meetei, the highest goal-scorer in the tournament, had changed clubs four times in three years after being released by the reserve side of the Kerala Blasters.

S. Rajesh, who became the fifth-highest goal-scorer in the Santosh Trophy, was once a dependable attacking option for Gokulam Kerala.

The COVID-infused break and Railways' continued absence from the National Championships saw him struggle for a spot in the GKFC squad. The 31-year-old, a record-holder in the Santosh Trophy, now plays for Rail Wheel Factory FC Bangalore, a club outside the top three divisions of Indian football: the Indian Super League (ISL), I-League, and I-League 2.

Once considered a prestigious crown in domestic football, the Santosh Trophy has transformed into a showcase for amateur and struggling players.

**Fall from grace**

Santosh Trophy's biggest challenge arrived late in the 20th century when the National Football League (NFL) was started by the All India Football Federation (AIFF) in 1996, the first organised nationwide league football system in the country.

India's national team players continued to play in both tournaments as part of state federations and clubs.

Former India captain Bhaichung Bhutia won the Santosh Trophy with Bengal in 1995 and 1999.

I. M. Vijayan, another former national skipper, won consecutive Santosh Trophy titles in 1993 and 1994 with Kerala and Bengal, respectively. He played for Kerala Police and Mohun Bagan, both of whom eventually played in the NFL.

Vijayan and Bhaichung continued to represent Kerala and Bengal, respectively, with the former reaching the final five more times with his home state (1987–88, 1988–89, 1989–90, 1990–91, 1999–2000).

However, the NFL, which was later rebranded as the I-League in 2007, eventually gained preference for national team players and administrators of Indian football.

"I wouldn't personally play in the Santosh Trophy. It should be converted into an age-group event. It should also be mandatory for national players to participate in the NFL and Fed Cup, which has now been replaced by the Kalinga Super Cup," Bhaichung said in an interview in 2007.

The death knell arrived in 2010 when it became a subject of disdain for the then-national team coach Bob Houghton.

The Englishman who had previously taken Malmo to the Champions League final (1979) was apoplectic when Delhi's captain Sunil Chhetri, then a young quick forward attracting offers from clubs in England and the USA, was injured (right ankle) in a clash against Indian Railways (in May 2009), ruling him out of the Nehru Cup.

"If you are serious about qualifying for the World Cup, then you should forget playing nonsensical and stupid tournaments like the Santosh Trophy, Durand Cup, and the IFA Shield," Houghton said in a press conference.

"Professionals playing the Santosh Trophy against a bunch of amateurs at the end of the season doesn't make any sense. Do you believe Steven Gerrard will play for some hotchpotch trophy at the end of the season?"

On January 29, 2010, the AIFF ruled that the national team players were barred from the tournament.

Talking to *Sportstar*, Satheevan Balan, a former scout for the Indian national team, elaborated on the events that further deteriorated the status of the Santosh Trophy.

"Whenever the I-league players were available, Goa and Bengal had an advantage over other teams in the Santosh Trophy," said Balan, the coach of Kerala in the last edition of the tournament.

"Following complaints, the AIFF decided to turn the Santosh Trophy

**Santosh Trophy champions in the 1962 Asian Games squad**

| No | Name | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Peter Thangaraj | 1960-61 (Services), 1962-63 (Bengal), 1964-65 (Railways) |
| 2 | Chuni Goswami | 1955-56, 1958-59 (Bengal) |
| 3 | P. K. Banerjee | 1958-59 (Bengal), 1961-62, 1966-67 (Railways) |
| 4 | D. Ethiraj | 1960-61 (Services) |
| 5 | Tulsidas Balaram | 1956-57 (Hyderabad), 1958-59, 1959-60, 1962-63 (Bengal) |
| 6 | Pradyut Barman | 1958-59, 1959-60 (Bengal), 1961-62 (Railways) |

**One for keeps:** The Kerala footballers, including I.M. Vijayan (standing, extreme right), pose for a team picture before a match in 1967.

THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

into a tournament mostly for young players (in 2015), who didn't have other platforms to excel," he added.

The AIFF made it mandatory for teams to have five Under-21 players in the squad and three in the playing 11. It also decided not to allow the I-league, ISL (which had begun by then), and second-division players to take part in the Santosh Trophy.

Balan added that during Shaji Prabhakaran's tenure, the Federation decided to scrap the U-21 rule and allowed the reserve players from the I League, ISL, and 2nd division squads to play in the Santosh Trophy.

**An underrated assembly line**

As a national tournament for state federations, it has become an underrated assembly line for young players to find a footing in professional football.

Manvir Singh and Liston Colaco, two Indian Super League — winners with ATK Mohun Bagan (now called Mohun Bagan Super Giant), were both part of their respective sides — West Bengal and Goa — in the Santosh Trophy in the 2016–17 season.

Manvir scored the winner against Colaco's Goa in the final to win the title.

"A lot of developmental work over the years has yielded results in the states, and we see a lot of improvement in the standard of Indian football," Charles Dias, the current coach of Goa, told Sportstar.

"That is a good sign, which you can already see happening in the Santosh Trophy."

M. Satyanarayanan, the acting General Secretary of the AIFF, further added that while the ecosystem of club football has shifted towards corporate ownership, the co-existence of the same with legacy tournaments will ensure the success of football in India.

"In our country, club football and inter-state football are different. Club football is more individual efforts of private entrepreneurs or corporates with deep pockets, which cannot be compared with an inter-state event where the initiative lies with the state associations," he said.

"Club football and inter-state football will have to coexist. For example, we have U-13 and U-15 events for clubs in Khelo India games, whereas the AIFF has also started the U-13, U-15, and U-17 leagues for the states."

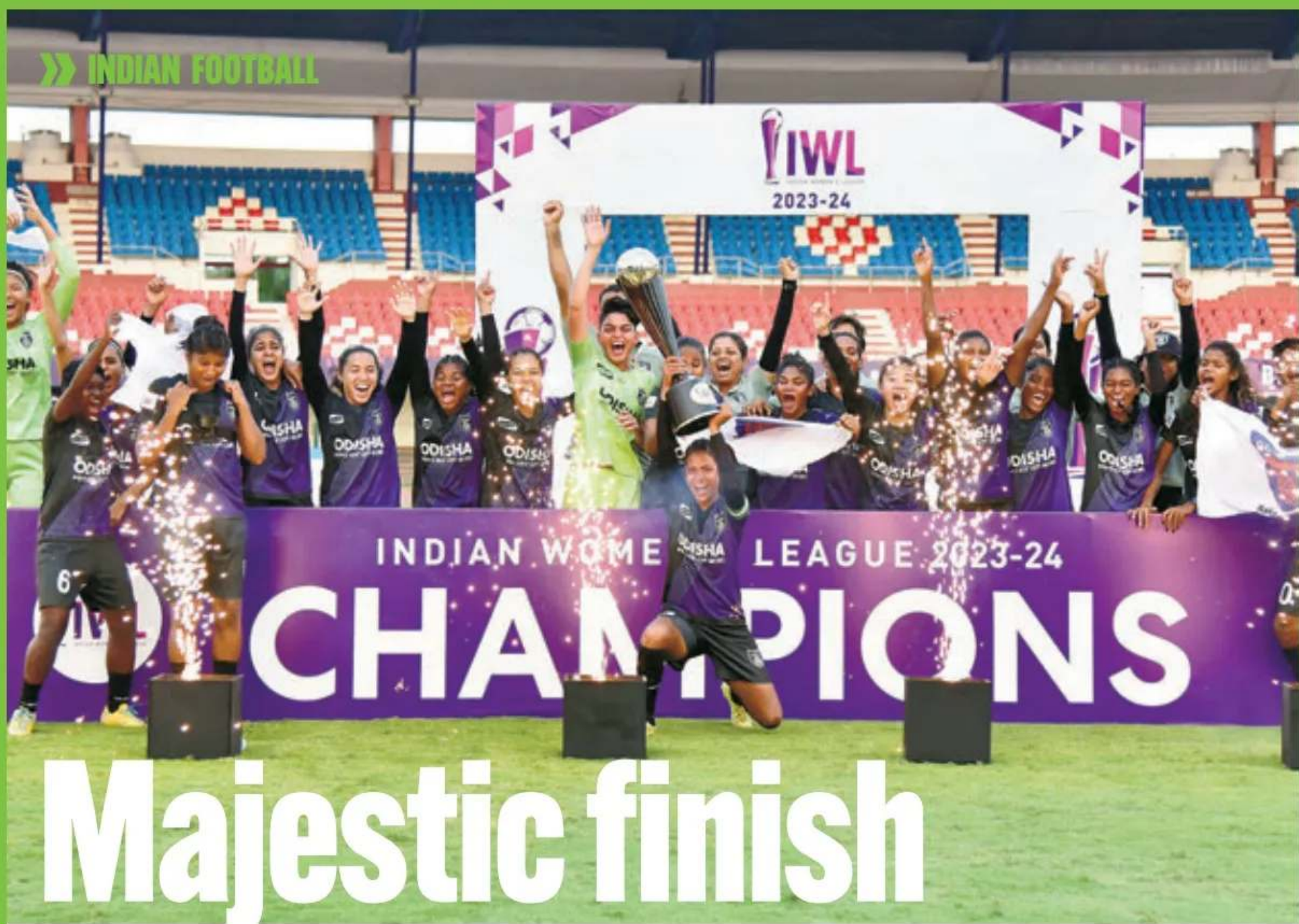
The Santosh Trophy, adapting to modern football demands in its 83-year-long history, remains a vital platform for nurturing talent.

Phijam's recent selection among the potential players for India's under-23 team underscores its significance in grooming promising players alongside established leagues like ISL and I-League.

"The Santosh Trophy used to be the pinnacle of Indian football in our playing days. I feel today, the tournament is all the more important," former Indian forward and manager Shabbir Ali told the AIFF website.

"Because it gives representation to more states than the Hero ISL or the Hero I-League. They all need to be on the football map. You can't leave out so many places in such a big country."

> « The Santosh Trophy has become an underrated platform for youngsters to find a footing in professional football »




# Majestic finish

Odisha secured its first IWL title with a **commanding 6-0 victory** over Kickstart, while Mohammedan edges closer to clinching its maiden I-League championship.

**Aashin Prasad**
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FOR MORE STORIES

Odisha FC (above) made history by winning its maiden Indian Women's League title and will go on to represent India in the AFC Women's Champions League next season.

On the final day of the season, Odisha clinched the championship in style by dispatching Kickstart FC 6-0 in front of a sparse home crowd at the Kalinga Stadium in Bhubaneswar.

Lynda Kom scored a hat-trick, while Pyari Xaxa's brace and Karthika Angamuthu's goal provided Odisha with a fitting end to the season, where it wrestled the title away from Gokulam Kerala's tight grasp after a gap of four years.

Gokukam Kerala pushed Odisha till the end but ultimately finished two points behind after its 5-1 victory over East Bengal on the last day.

Gokulam, which finished with a better goal difference, could have made it four successive titles in a row if it had won its opening match of the season, which ended in a 0-0 draw at home against Sethu FC.

## I-League

Mohammedan SC is just a win away from claiming the I-League for the first time and earning promotion to the Indian Super League.

Second-placed Sreenidi Deccan had the opportunity to keep the pressure on Mohemmedan but it slipped up in a 2-2 draw at home to Churchill Brothers, where it shipped two goals in the final 10 minutes of the match.

With a game in hand, Sreenidi is now eight points behind Mohemmadan, which can secure the title on March 30 in front of its home supporters when it takes on Inter Kashi.

Inter has put together an impressive nine-game unbeaten run and moved to third in the table ahead of Real Kashmir and Gokulam Kerala, whose form has tailed in recent weeks.

AP

# SAINZSATIONAL

Carlos Sainz clinched an impressive win at the Australian Grand Prix, defying challenges including a **health scare and career uncertainty.**

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Just a month before the start of the season, Carlos Sainz was left jobless for next year after Ferrari chose to replace him with Lewis Hamilton from 2025. Then, after outperforming his much-fancied teammate in the season opener in Bahrain to finish third behind the Red Bulls, the Spaniard found himself in a hospital bed in Saudi Arabia for an emergency appendicitis surgery that forced him to miss the second race of the season in Jeddah.

One couldn't have asked for a more challenging start to the year where he is driving for his career. But the 29-year-old produced a sublime drive to win the Australian Grand Prix.

On a day when Max Verstappen retired from the race due to a rare technical failure in his Red Bull Racing machinery, the out-of-work Ferrari driver hogged the limelight.

Despite racing against time to get fit for the weekend, Sainz was on the pace immediately and out-qualified teammate Charles Leclerc, widely considered the best over a single lap, to put his car second on the grid for the race.

As Verstappen hit trouble immediately after the race started, Sainz was ready to pounce on his former teammate and take the lead. From there, the Spaniard controlled the race beautifully and never came under any threat from the pursuing pack. Ferrari celebrated a 1-2, and Leclerc came home second ahead of the McLarens of Lando Norris and Oscar Piastri.

There are legitimate reasons to call Formula One boring, as the sport has been in the era of Verstappen domination since 2022, and there is no doubt it is easy for the Dutchman as he has the best car in the paddock. However, the Australian GP also showed how good a job Verstappen has been doing to have the success he has had.

For the first time since 2022, Verstappen retired from the race due to a technical issue, and his absence showed how much he brings to Red Bull Racing as his teammate Sergio Perez, starting sixth, could only finish fifth and was nearly a minute behind the winner.

**Well-deserved:** Sainz (in pic) and Charles Leclerc made it a 1-2 for Ferrari. AP

At a time when there are rumours about whether Verstappen will stay at Red Bull next year, the team got a reality check on what its star driver brings to the table, even in a car that is by far the fastest by more than three-tenths.

### Has Hamilton made the right choice?

Even as Ferrari celebrated a 1-2, Mercedes had a horror of a race in which both drivers failed to score points. Lewis Hamilton got knocked out in the second round of qualifying and had to start 11th. His race was eventually cut short by an engine failure.

In the other car, George Russell was doing slightly better, running seventh before he crashed out on the last lap of the race as he battled Fernando Alonso's Aston Martin. With Mercedes in no shape or form in the first three rounds, has Hamilton timed his exit from the team that fetched him six world titles from 2014 to 2020 to perfection?

### Alonso's clever move

Two-time world champion Alonso, even at 42, is one of the fastest drivers on the current grid, capable of going toe-to-toe with anyone. While he is not the absolute fastest in qualifying, his relentless ability to be quick over a race distance and his tremendous racecraft allow him to maximise results on a Sunday.

In Melbourne, while trying to keep Russell at bay on the last lap, the Spaniard slowed early into the corner to get a better exit. However, Alonso's actions went a bit too far this time as he slowed drastically before increasing his speed and then slowed again before the corner.

Russell lost a lot of downforce as he got too close to Alonso and spun out into the barriers. The stewards felt that irrespective of Russell's crash, Alonso made an unusual manoeuvre and handed him a 20-second penalty that demoted him to eighth.

AP

REUTERS

## Moto GP

### Portuguese Grand Prix

Meanwhile, on two wheels, the reigning champion Francesco Bagnaia had a weekend to forget in the second round at the Portuguese Grand Prix in Portimao. On Saturday, the Italian squandered a race-winning position in the Sprint Race as he ran wide and slipped to fourth. It got worse on Sunday during the main race, when he and Marc Marquez came together and crashed out of the race even as his title-rival Jorge Martin (left) won comfortably ahead of pole-sitter Enea Bastianini. The win ensured Martin took an 18-point lead over KTM rider Brad Binder, with Bagnaia five points further behind in fourth. The race also saw reigning Moto2 champion Pedro Acosta get his maiden podium, finishing third in only his second race in the premier class.

# Target locked and loaded as Mission Paris looms

Indian shooters are world-class, no doubt, but they would need **strategic preparation** for success at the Paris Olympics.

**Kamesh Srinivasan**
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Indian shooting is on the verge of making a big impact on the world stage. The country has a large and talented pool of athletes who have received training and support from the government. In addition, each squad is backed by a team of experts who work tirelessly to ensure that the athletes perform their best when it matters most.

Two points give a fair indication of things to follow in Paris. The first is the number of Olympic quota places Indian shooters have been able to bag so far, with one more qualification event yet to be done. India has won 19 Olympic quota places out of a maximum possible 24.

**Booking a spot:** Sift Kaur Samra secured a Paris 2024 Olympics quota for India at the ISSF World Championship 2023 after finishing fifth in the women's 50m rifle 3 positions in Baku, Azerbaijan.
A. M. FARUQUI

It's important to keep in mind that only 340 athletes will be participating in shooting events at the Olympics. These consist of 15 competitions, including three mixed events. Shooters who qualify for individual events can compete in mixed events.

China leads the table of Olympic quota winners so far, with 22, while India is No.2. The USA has 18, followed by Korea (15), Australia (12), France (12), Egypt (11), and Germany (10) out of the 63 countries (as of March 7) that have managed to win the quota places. There will be 45 medals up for grabs.

The bitter experience of big squads of Indian shooters returning empty-handed from the last two Olympics in Rio and Tokyo may be fresh in memory. It may rankle a lot more than the joy derived from the brilliant performances of Rajyavardhan Rathore (Silver, double trap, Athens 2004), Abhinav Bindra (Gold, 10m air rifle, Beijing 2008), Vijay Kumar (Silver, 25m rapid fire pistol, London 2012), and Gagan Narang (Bronze, 10m air rifle, London 2012).

If anything, the experience has taught Indian shooters to approach the Olympics with more care and diligence. Indian shooters are world-class, no doubt, as they have shown over the years in global competitions. What is required is a nice passage to help them peak at the right time to strike the medals that matter in world sports, from July 27 to August 5, when the shooting events are staged at the Olympics in France.

"It is one grinder leading up to the Games. The team management must ensure that the athletes are not burned out. The Olympics is much more demanding, especially psychologically," said Beijing Games gold medallist and air rifle ace Abhinav Bindra.

**IF ANYTHING, THE EXPERIENCE OF PAST EDITIONS HAS TAUGHT INDIAN SHOOTERS TO APPROACH THE OLYMPICS WITH MORE CARE AND DILIGENCE**

Abhinav tried to put things in perspective by considering the healthy scenario of Indian shooters performing well while reflecting on the earlier struggles of world-class Indian shooting teams during the Games.

"Last time, before the Tokyo Olympics, Indian shooters were away from home for a long time. The athletes were quite jaded. One size is not going to fit all. Young athletes, young minds. A 17-year-old's mind works differently. Maybe they want to be at home. Maybe they miss their family. As athletes, we are human beings first. The softer elements matter. The battery must be full when our shooters line up for their events in Paris," said Abhinav.

The shooters, if they are well prepared physically, technically, mentally, and emotionally, will have enhanced chances to strike medals this time in the Games.

All events except for the mixed pairs events of air pistol, air rifle, and

**Hitting the bulls eye:** Rhythm Sangwan secured a16th shooter quota for India at the 2024 Paris Olympics by winning a bronze medal in 25m sports pistol at the Asia Olympic Qualifiers in January. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

skeet have qualification and finals on two different days. Originally, only rapid-fire pistol, sports pistol, trap and skeet events were spread over two days. The air pistol and air rifle individual events had qualification and finals on the same day in the past. The shooters have time to channel their energy and be at their best in their bid to win medals this time. Equally, it may be that much more difficult to grab medals.

Realigning our focus on the quota places, it has to be noted that the Indian rifle shooters swept all eight possible Olympic quota places before the pistol and shotgun shooters. The pistol shooters have grabbed seven of the eight possible quota places, with only the women's second air pistol quota left to be won.

As we know, a country can win only a maximum of two Olympic quota places in an event. The ISSF made it harder for the shooters by introducing a new rule that a country can win only one quota per event in a qualification championship in the current Olympic cycle.

In trap and skeet, India has one Olympic quota each in the four events for men and women and can aspire to win one more in each of the four events.

It's ironic that the Olympic trials for shotgun shooting, meant to determine the athletes representing the country, concluded before the announcement of selected shooters. This situation is akin to putting the cart before the horse!

If India fails to secure all available Olympic quota places in shotgun, this could be a contributing factor, despite the absence of official announcements regarding selected shooters. Some experienced shooters have expressed concerns about competitors not giving their best to secure Olympic quotas if they know they won't be considered for the Paris Games.

From a general perspective, the quota winner rightfully deserves the opportunity to compete in the Games unless their performance drastically declines or another shooter consistently outperforms them on the international stage.

There was consideration for deciding the rifle squad for the Games in advance to alleviate suspense and allow shooters to prepare adequately. However, the national federation opted to conduct the rifle and pistol Olympic trials concurrently.

Abhinav spoke with the High-Performance Director (HPD), Dr. Pierre Beauchamp, who has put a system in place.

"My only advice to the HPD was that the trials could be very tiring and quite draining. The athletes need enough time to recover from it, recharge, and go into the Games fresh. It is an important element," Abhinav said.

The world and Olympic champion, Abhinav, was also clear that the rifle shooters may not benefit from an early set of trials exclusively for them.

"The only guarantee in sports is that there is no guarantee! Give everyone a fair chance to gain their spots through the trials and have enough time to prepare and be at their best in the Games", said Abhinav.

Is it fair to only consider the best three scores out of four from domestic trials to select the team for the Olympics? Why can't we have a special status for a world champion like Rudrankksh Patil, or for that matter, Mehuli Ghosh, who won the quota with a World Championship silver medal?

Even when Abhinav was the reigning World Champion in the run-up to the 2008 Olympics, the federation authorities were considering the idea of putting the Asian champion for the Games based on current form. Luckily, they didn't do this, and Abhinav went on to win the Olympic gold in Beijing. As the World Champion, Abhinav kept a low profile in the international arena, sharpening his skills and mastery of air rifle so he could peak at the right time and succeed in Beijing.

"The parameters keep changing. It is impossible to build a perfect plan. Despite the talent of Indian shooting, it is impossible to build a plan. In the past, it was ideal, as the difference between the first and the rest was massive. Or, after 1 and 2, the difference was huge. Fewer people had the chance to win a medal. It is impossible to follow the same method now as in the past," opined Abhinav.

Apart from being a shooter who

**Top of the world:** Rudrankksh Patil became the 10m air rifle world champion in 2022 and secured an Olympic Games Paris 2024 quota.
A. M. FARUQUI

competed in five Olympics, Abhinav has also been closely studying the sport and the methods used by leading countries over the years.

"The NRAI (National Rifle Association of India) has changed its approach. They are trying to do something different. It is all that they can do. Stick to a policy announced in advance. There is no clear pathway or strategy. Collectively, we must back it. Going forward, it is a journey. Hopefully, it will get the results," said Abhinav.

Yes, it is easy to find holes in the policy and criticise it. But as Abhinav pointed out, the dynamics of the shooting sport do not allow for a perfect plan and pathway.

"The USA has gone through many formulae for Olympic selection. They had their own selection to choose the best. Then, they changed, giving one of the two quota winners the chance for automatic selection based on consistent performances. World Championship certain score, reach a certain level to gain automatic selection. The US has now changed. The situation is dynamic and pragmatic in the current environment. The current policy gives hope that the results will be positive. They are working on the dynamics," said Abhinav.

Looking closely at the selection policy, Olympian and coach of the cream of Indian rifle shooting, Deepali Deshpande, felt that "deemed quota winner" getting the same status as quota winners was weird.

To understand the deemed quota, it may be recalled that Tilottama Sen finished fourth in the World Championship but could not win the Olympic quota as Mehuli had won the quota with a silver. Luckily, Tilottama went on to win the quota later and thus did not need the advantage of a "deemed quota".

"Winning quota is a different mindset. There is also a difference in winning the quota in the World Championship, Asian Championship, or much later in the qualifiers. It is not fair to treat all of them alike or give the same advantage to deemed quota winners as quota winners," observed Deepali, who trains Sift Kaur Samra, Shriyanka Sadangi, Swapnil Kusale, and Akhil Sheoran apart from Olympian Anjum Moudgil.

Deepali did agree that the World Champion, Rudrankksh, deserved something special for the achievement.

"Rudrankksh is perhaps a little chilled. I really hope that he peaks at the right time and gets back to his level. The advantage of winning the Olympic quota is only 0.33 points. You are not giving them the right advantage for winning the quota," said Deepali.

The advantage of winning the finals in trials is also negligible, and the bonus points for the first four places starting from 0.75 to 0.10 are kept separately to be considered only for breaking the tie after the tabulation of trial scores.

Now, compare that with the bonus points of 6, 4, 2, and 1 for the first four placed shooters in shotgun trials. Moreover, the shotgun shooters also get bonus points of 10, 8, 6, and 5 for the first four places in the World Championships. There are also high bonuses for similar spots in Asian championships, World Cups, and the final Olympic qualification event.

It is pertinent to note that the

> « Abhinav Bindra won the 10m air rifle gold at the Olympic Games in Beijing in 2008. »

**Making the cut:** Tokyo Olympian Manu Bhaker finished fifth in the women's 25m pistol event at the Asian Shooting Championships 2023 in Changwon, the Republic of Korea and in the process, secured a Paris 2024 Olympic quota for India. GETTY IMAGES

shotgun selection system was designed by coach Russell Mark before the Aussie quit in disgust. The process has stayed intact.

However, rifle coach Deepali is not worried about the selection of the rifle team, owing to a bunch of equally competent shooters.

"The rifle shooters are good, and so I am not worried about who gets selected. Air rifle women—they are all strong. In 3P women, Sift Kaur, Anjum, and Ashi Chouksey are very good," said Deepali.

Deepali, who works quietly with her shooters, tuning them and their equipment for the best performances with careful planning, stressed that the Olympics was a different environment and different situation. And everyone needed to keep an open mind. She pointed out that the shortened current Olympic cycle of three years demanded a different approach in terms of the selection of shooters for the Games, apart from their preparation.

Quite smartly, the NRAI has put a line at the end of all its detailed Olympic selection criteria that the decision of the selection committee will be final and binding.

It will be interesting to see how well the selection of shooters for the Paris Games is done.

As always, Abhinav hit the nail on the head when he said, "The worst selection policy will become the best selection policy if the athletes win medals."

Apart from the number of Olympic quota places, the second point that gives a clear indication of the prowess of the Indian shooters is their performance in the last Asian Games in Hangzhou, China.

The Indian team won a record 22 medals in shooting at the last Asian Games, seven less than the leader, China. India had seven gold, nine silver, and six bronze medals.

For those who are generally quick to point a finger at the team medals won in such a context and state the obvious that the Olympics does not have such team medals, it would be interesting to have a look at the individual medals won in the Asian Games shooting.

India won 10 individual medals, including two gold through Sift Kaur and Palak Gulia, apart from four silver medals, of which Esha Singh won a silver each in air pistol and sports pistol. In comparison, China won 14 individual medals in the Asian Games, and of course, eight of them were gold.

No matter how many World Cups India tops the medal table for, China is always in a different class at the Olympics and Asian Games.

As in many other disciplines, China is a giant in shooting. In the Asian Games, India won only one mixed event medal, the air pistol silver, through TS Divya and Sarabjot Singh. Indian shooters can win more mixed medals in the Olympics if they are tuned nicely for Paris.

Fortunately, there's ample time remaining for Paris, allowing for careful selection and preparation of shooters, potentially resulting in a memorable Olympic experience.

## List of Olympic quota winners

**Air rifle**
**Men:** Rudrankksh Patil, Arjun Babuta.
**Women:** Mehuli Ghosh, Tilottama Sen.
**Rifle 3-position**
**Men:** Swapnil Kusale, Akhil Sheoran.
**Women:** Shriyanka Sadangi, Sift Kaur Samra.
**Air pistol**
**Men:** Sarabjot Singh, Varun Tomar.
**Women:** Esha Singh.
**Rapid fire pistol**
**Men:** Anish Bhanwala, Vijayveer Sidhu.
**Sports pistol**
**Women:** Manu Bhaker, Rhythm Sangwan.
**Trap**
**Men:** Bhowneesh Mendiratta.
**Women:** Rajeshwari Kumari.
**Skeet**
**Men:** Anantjeet Singh Naruka.
**Women:** Raiza Dhillon.

## Critical play

By C.G.S.Narayanan

A move by, white or black, is called critical move when it passes over a square (known as critical square) with the result that any other piece moving subsequently to that square will produce an interference. The two mover below is a typical example in critical and anti-critical play.

M.Barulin,G.Golubev,A.P.Gu liaev,Lev Loshinsky,E.Umnov and V.I.Schiff
'64'1932 (in memorium L.Isaev)

Mate in two moves

The **key 1.Rb5!** threatens 2.Ne4 which simultaneously shuts off the BQ and BRe2 from the line b5-h5.Black defends by playing these two pieces on to or beyond that line, so that Ne4 becomes ineffective as a shut off. Such defences are anti-critical with respect to e4.1…Qd5 allows 2.Bg4.1…Qa8 however prevents by pinning the Bc8 and by playing to a8 BQ crosses not only e4 but also a second critical square b7.White is able to play 2.Nb7 again shutting off BQ but this time on the other side of the fifth rank.Note that BR is pinned.An analogous pair of defences is made by this rook.1…Re5 2.Nxf4;1….Rxe7 crosses the second critical square, this time e6 met by shut off 2.Ne6.

The second problem below shows critical play by white piece as tries with black gaining advantage from crossing over the critical square. Try 1.Rg2? 1..Rxf4! because (2.Ng4? cannot played). 1.Rxd5? 1…Bxf4! (2. Be5?);1.Rg4?1…Rh5!(2.Ng4?);1.Re5 ?1…Bb6! (2.Be5?)**Key 1.Rh5!** (2.Qxh4)

E.Visserman
3 prize,Schach1959

Mate in two moves

White plays his rook to a square where it neither crosses nor blocks a square needed for mating.

Two-mover Below is a Meredith showing critical tries by a single white bishop crossing critical squares in all directions.

WWH.Ahues &A.Volkmann
I prize,Dorrmund Hombruch
Barop 1951

Mate in two moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article 'Goethart unpin':**1.Kb3!** waiting 1…d5 2.Nc3;1…Ne2 2.Nc1 1…N any 2.Rxf1

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

# CROSSWORD
## KARAN PILLAI

**SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD**

**ACROSS**

**1** Anthony .... is a famous boxer and a former heavyweight champion. (6)

**4** What is it called when an athlete begins before the starting gun has fired? (5,5)

**5** What term is used in athletics to refer to races preceding the finals? (5)

**7** Who scored a hat-trick in the final of the 2022 FIFA World Cup? (6)

**8** What is the colour of billiards and snooker tables? (5)

**10** This ancient Greek sport is considered to be the precursor to modern-day tennis. (12)

**14** The Australian football team is also known as the ..... (9)

**15** Which Formula One team will Lewis Hamilton be joining in 2025? (7)

**17** The ceremonial cross-country journey of the Olympic flame is called .... Relay. (5)

**19** A between-the-legs shot in tennis. (7)

**DOWN**

**2** Yuvraj Singh hit this player for six sixes in an over in the 2007 T20 World Cup. (6,5)

**3** Old Trafford is also known as the Theatre of ..... (6)

**6** Who became the youngest heavyweight boxing champion at the age of 20 in 1986? (4,5)

**9** Foil, epee, and sabre are terms related to which sport? (7)

**11** In which country were British Army officers serving when they invented badminton? (5)

**12** The captains of India's women's cricket team and the men's hockey team share the same name. What is it? (11)

**13** Brad Pitt-starrer *Moneyball* is centred on which sport? (8)

**16** A competitive equestrian sport. (5)

**18** Stephen .... is credited to have popularised the three-pointer in basketball. (5)

K. BHAGYA PRAKASH

# Pankaj Advani inducted into Hall of Fame

**Indian cueist Pankaj Advani achieved yet another milestone** in his glorious career as he was inducted into the Hall of Fame at the World Billiards Museum in Shangrao City, China.

Last November, the 38-year-old Indian star won his 26th IBSF (International Billiards and Snooker Federation) title after beating compatriot Sourav Kothari, who had threatened his chances early on in the billiards' long-format contest.

"I am deeply honoured to join the Hall of Fame at the World Billiards Museum. The love and support I've received throughout this incredible journey have been overwhelming, and I'm extremely grateful for it," Advani said.

Advani's unparalleled skill, unwavering dedication, and remarkable achievements have strengthened his status as one of the greatest champions in the history of billiards.

"I am grateful to represent our country and the entire billiards community. I'll continue working hard, dedicate myself to the sport, and do my best to make everyone proud," he added.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

## INDIAN PLAYGROUND

### SPORTOON

Y.B. SARANGI

**1** **Rasmus Neergaard-Petersen held his nerve on the final day** to win the Kolkata Challenge at the Royal Calcutta Golf Club course.

The Dane scored one-under 71 in the final round to total 272 and win his maiden Challenge Tour title by two shots. Home challenger Rahil Gangjee and David Horsey were joint second.

"I told myself that I'd been playing well the last couple of holes and over the last few days, and just to trust my game. From there, I bounced back after the double bogey with two straight birdies. I'm delighted," Rasmus said.

**2** **Hockey Haryana defeated host Hockey Maharashtra 1-0 (3-0 shoot-out)** in a nail-biting final to win the 14th Hockey India Senior Women National Championship at the Major Dhyanchand Hockey Stadium Pimpri, Pune.

While Deepika (26') scored for Hockey Haryana in regulation time, Navneet Kaur, Usha, and Sonika scored in the shootout, with Captain Savita making three successive saves to claim the victory.

Hockey Jharkhand finishes in third place with win over Hockey Madhya Pradesh:

TEAM SPORTSTAR

FITNESSWISE

Ramji Srinivasan

FOR MORE STORIES

# What is athlete readiness and how to monitor it

An athlete's potential can be **truly unlocked** by understanding the science of readiness assessment for optimal performance.

*"Set realistic goals, keep re-evaluating, and be consistent" — Venus Williams.*

Assessing athlete readiness is a widespread practice in most sports, for both team and individual disciplines, and can be defined in many ways. Simply put, it indicates how prepared an athlete is for competition and training sessions.

Fitness and fatigue are two key factors to be considered after an individual athlete completes a physical session. Each session comprises a chronic load, to which athletes respond differently. Here is where the assessment of athlete readiness mainly comes into play.

Training load can be categorised into two factors: internal and external. Internal load pertains to how an athlete responds to the workload, while external load refers to what the athlete actually ends up doing on the field. Both internal and external loads help determine when the athlete is prepared to engage in training or skill sessions, incorporating specific testing protocols.

**Methods of readiness assessment**

There are numerous methods available to assess athlete readiness, which can be categorised as follows:

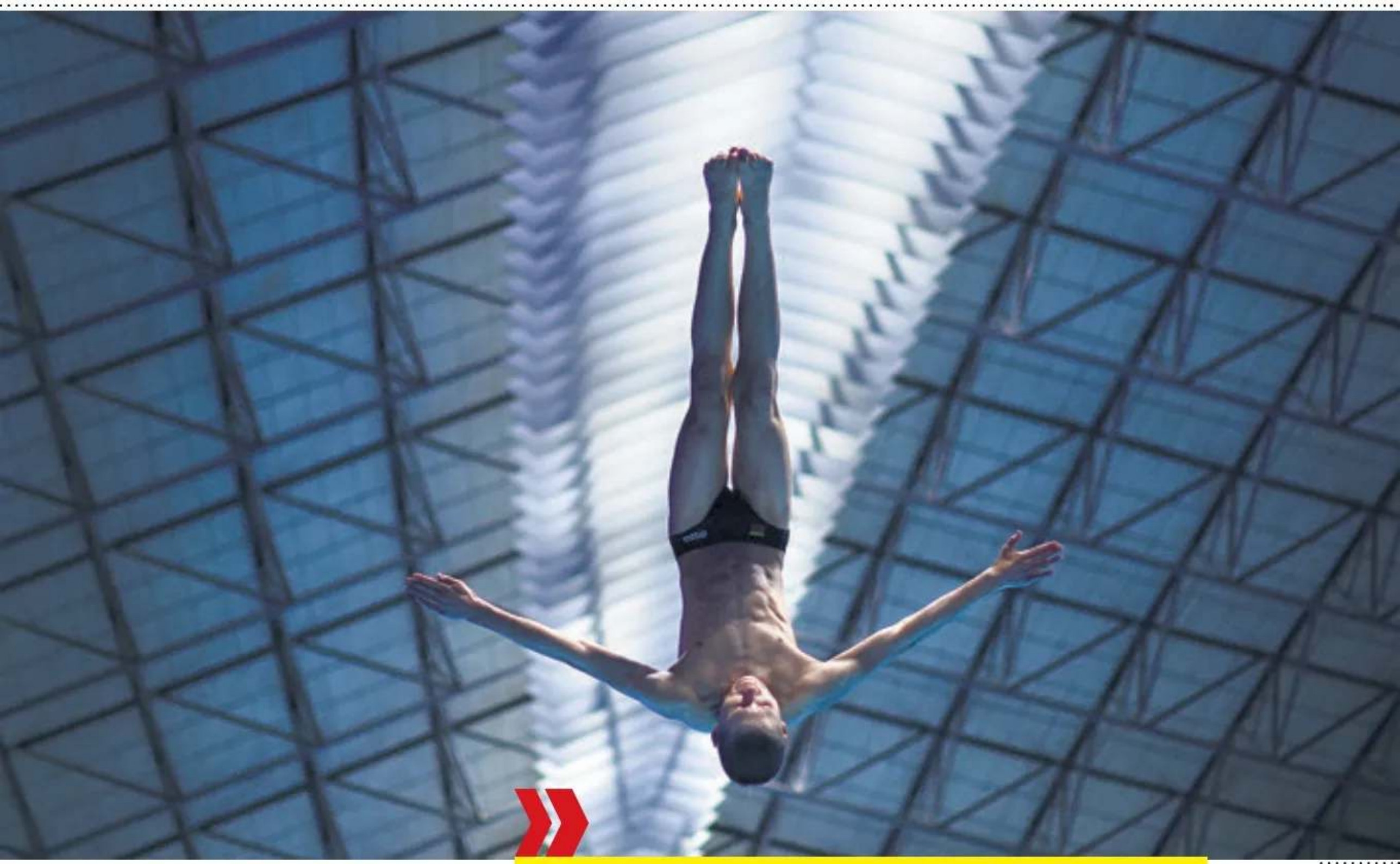
- Overall fitness or wellness questionnaires
- Heart rate indices and variability protocols
- Salivary markers (e.g. testosterone to cortisol ratio)
- Blood markers (e.g. blood creatine kinase)
- Neuromuscular fatigue (e.g. Countermovement jump)
- Cortisol content in the sweat can be an effective marker

Concentrating solely on a single specific variable data will not give an accurate picture and can have a serious impact on the performance domain of athletes.

Let's examine the pros and cons of each method of collecting variable data and zero in on collective inferences to understand an athlete's readiness:

— Fitness or wellness data can be very useful due to its swift processing and affordability. However, it relies on the POV of athletes, which can lead to inaccuracies if they provide inaccurate information.

— It's important to establish individual profiling for each athlete. This establishes a genuine baseline for comparison based on their unique parameters. Relying on team averages or generic cutoff values



**This is the way:** It's important to establish individual profiling for each athlete. This establishes a genuine baseline for comparison based on their unique parameters. GETTY IMAGES

**RELYING ON TEAM AVERAGES OR GENERIC CUTOFF VALUES OVERLOOKS INDIVIDUAL VARIABILITY, FAILING TO PROVIDE ACCURATE ASSESSMENT OF AN ATHLETE'S READINESS**

overlooks individual variability, failing to provide an accurate assessment.

— Utilising creatine kinase (CK) as a readiness measure is a good example of this concept. CK levels can be collected after matches from players who participated in most games. Additionally, variability assessment of individual athletes can be done based on their day-to-day physical activity, offering a reliable method for evaluation.

— The more data you collect, the easier it is to establish 'normal' values for individuals within the monitoring system.

## Pragmatic applications

No single measure can tell you everything you want to know about an athlete; it's crucial to recognise this as a significant indicator. Many products on the market may claim to offer a one-stop solution with utmost accuracy for assessing an athlete's readiness, but it's all business spiel.

The best bet is to consider three to four variables and infer data from psychological and physiological parameters over a period of time to ensure accuracy. Combining subjective measures such as questionnaires with objective measures like HRV and strength index can provide correct knowledge of an athlete's readiness.

If two or more red flags appear in the variables, they should be studied further. Assessing an athlete's readiness requires considering both subjective and objective factors, to obtain the most reliable data for taking calls about their next session.

The session can be modified according to the requirements of that particular training day, with the coach playing an important role in making the decisions. Be it the coach, physiotherapist, or strength and conditioning coach, debriefing with the player and support staff is essential. This ensures clarity and helps the athlete from being not confused and overwhelmed by complex data-crunching.

In the end, the coach has the final say in it!

# Enhanced Games: glimpse of the future or unworkable idea?

There are **moral, ethical, medical, financial, and philosophical** reasons for keeping drugs out of sports.

**Suresh Menon**

Have you ever wondered how fast a 100m race could be run or how quickly a marathon could be completed without the usual restrictions? Wind-assisted sprints and jumps are not recognised for world records. Nor are, obviously, drug-assisted ones.

The world record in the long jump is Mike Powell's 8.95m, but Powell himself has leapt to a wind-assisted 8.99m.

As for drug-enhanced performances, the fastest 100m that was known to be drug-assisted was Ben Johnson's 9.79 at the 1988 Seoul Olympics. When the report arrived at the newspaper I was then working in, I gave the heading 'Fastest junkie on earth', and was pulled up for it.

**Attractive proposition:** Former world champion swimmer James Magnussen has agreed to come out of retirement to compete in the Enhanced Games. GETTY IMAGES

There are moral, ethical, medical, financial, and philosophical reasons for keeping drugs out of sports. But for those who believe that drugs are a matter of choice and take them despite everything, here come the so-called Enhanced Games. Slated for 2025 (if it gathers enough momentum), there will be no drug testing there. Prosthetic limbs and banned shoes will be allowed, too. It is the brainchild of an Australian businessman Aron D'Souza.

D'Souza sees the International Olympic Committee (IOC) as corrupt and greedy and wants to eradicate the World Anti-Doping Agency, which he calls an "anti-science police force for the IOC."

The promised prize money, by all accounts, appears attractive. Former world champion swimmer James Magnussen, 32, says he will come out of retirement. The Australian says, "I'll juice to the gills, and I'll break the world record." If he does, he expects to be paid a million dollars.

Some officials have said the Enhanced Games could lead to deaths, with the Australian Olympic Committee calling it "dangerous and irresponsible." World Athletics president Sebastian Coe has said, "No one within athletics takes the Enhanced Games seriously."

And yet.

There may be enough curiosity in sports and business circles to see if someone on drugs can beat Usain Bolt's 9.58 in the 100m. After all, according to one argument, we are looking for the fastest man on earth, not the most ethical or morally upright, and if that speed comes with some help, it is the athlete's lookout. Olympians who support the Enhanced Games have pointed out that the IOC does not pay the athletes.

The so-called 'Olympics on Steroids' is seen by its founder as the future of sports. As to its health drawbacks, here's what he told a television channel: "For the people who say this is unsafe or unhealthy, I'd tell them that the two longest-serving sponsors of the Olympics are Coca-Cola and McDonald's, the two organisations that have done the most damage to health in human history."

In a few months, the idea might have either fizzled out or gained enough impetus to carry sports backwards at great speed. Some years ago, an IOC official suggested that drugs ought to be allowed at the Olympics. Is this an idea whose time has come? Are we on the verge of destroying what sports stand for and what they have meant for generations?

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