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A LOOK AT 10 GLORIOUS INDIAN MOMENTS THAT HAVE RIGHTFULLY EARNED A PLACE IN THE ANNALS OF THE ASIAN GAMES' HISTORY

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A blend of eternal wise head and forever young heart, India's premier batter is slipping into mentor-mode.

Cover: Virat Kohli (AFP)

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 mail to: sportstar@thehindu.co.in

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OFF-SIDE

Ayon Sengupta
sportstar@thehindu.co.in



OLYMPICS, CALLING CRICKET

The first eight matches of the cricket World Cup have been an absolute run-fest, and **fans would be further thrilled** as cricket is also set to hit the Hollywood stage at the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics.

The cricket world has much to cheer for despite the men's 50-over World Cup taking off in cavernous, half-empty stadiums with all the grandeur of a deflating party balloon.

The first eight matches of the tournament have been an absolute run-fest, leaving fans to wonder if the grounds have suddenly shrunk to the size of a shoebox. Ahead of the 48-match event, the International Cricket Council had reportedly directed the curators of the Board of Control for Cricket in India to employ longer boundaries — at least 70m — and use wetting agents to nullify the dew factor in the second innings to ensure a level playing field between bat and ball.

The tournament, however, has already witnessed six 300-plus scores, with South Africa recording a mammoth 428 for five in its match against Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka's Kusal Mendis (14) outdid every other batter in the "Who Can Hit the Most Sixes?" competition. In eight matches, batters have hit 98 sixes and 405 fours, taking advantage of shorter square boundaries (61 sixes and 250 fours hit square compared to 37 sixes and 155 fours hit straight down the ground). Ten centuries have been scored, with Aiden Markram taking the honours for the fastest in a World Cup match.

While most of the 10 World Cup grounds have (between) 65-70m straight boundaries, the square boundaries are between 63-69m.

But the boundaries seemed to have stretched only as far as this author's New Year Resolutions. Sri Lanka has been left particularly traumatised as Pakistan's Abdullah Shafique and Muhammad

Rizwan, chasing down 345 in Hyderabad, turned their bowlers into human yo-yos.

The 2019 edition in England had seen 27 300-plus totals in 48 matches, with England's 397 for six against Afghanistan the highest.

The pyrotechnics on the cricket field have kept the fans entertained and, hopefully, will draw them to the grounds as the Cup progresses.

Cricket is also soon to hit the Hollywood stage at the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics. Following the LA Organising Committee's proposal to include the T20 variant of the game, baseball-softball, flag football (limited-contact version of American football), lacrosse and squash, the IOC's executive board is set to table it for voting at the 141st IOC Session in Mumbai.

"With cricket, you're in Americas, you're in Asia, you're in Europe, you're in Africa, you're in Oceania... so, you have a certain representation in all five continents. And this is not necessarily true for every sport that we're taking on the programme. This is a good space then to develop it further within the continents. If we're talking about 2028, there is time to grow," President of the International Olympic Committee, Thomas Bach, who tried his best to learn the sport ahead of the Session in Mumbai, said.

The potential broadcast rights windfall from the Indian market — reported to be upwards of \$150 million — will surely help sway the votes cricket's way.

Of course, with cricket squads the size of a small army, the IOC will have much to juggle to fit them into their 10,500-athlete quota per Games. But surely, cricket's Olympic dreams won't get bowled out by such minor details as logistics.

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» WORLD VIEW OF THE FORTNIGHT



« For sure, this is really big for me. (It) will give me confidence... that there's always a chance to overcome and work on what you do or what you're feeling – Iga Swiatek after winning the China Open »

3rd

Simon Biles claimed a third gold medal at the 2023 Gymnastics World Championships by winning the women's beam with a superb routine on the final day of the competition.

The American superstar oozed confidence throughout. She had no hesitation on her jumps and delivered controlled spins before dismounting in style, with just a small hop when landing. She earned a score of 14.800 points to win ahead of China's Zhou Yaqin by a margin of just 0.1 of a

point. Rebeca Andrade of Brazil took the bronze medal.

In Antwerp, where she started her collection of 22 world titles 10 years ago, Biles has made a stunning return to the international stage.



10th

India's Ayush Shetty secured a bronze medal at the BWF World Junior Championships that concluded at Spokane, USA. This was India's 10th medal at the Junior Worlds with Ayush becoming the eighth male shuttler to bag a medal.

The 18-year-old Indian went down to Indonesia's Ali Farhan in the semifinal 18-21, 15-21 to win the bronze medal. He had defeated Yudai Okimoto of Japan in the quarterfinal to seal his place in the semis.



« I talked to some people about the opportunity and definitely, if all things stay the same, I want to be playing. –

Stephen Curry when asked if he was interested in playing for the United States at the 2024 Paris Olympics. »

ON TOP OF THE WORLD



Kenya's Kelvin Kiptum set a world record to win Chicago Marathon men's title in an unofficial time of two hours and 35 seconds. The 23-year-old shattered the old world record of 2:01:09 set by Kenya's Eliud Kipchoge to win the 2022 Berlin Marathon. It was Kiptum's third victory in as many starts over the 26.2-mile distance. He won on his debut last December at Valencia and then in London Marathon last April. AFP



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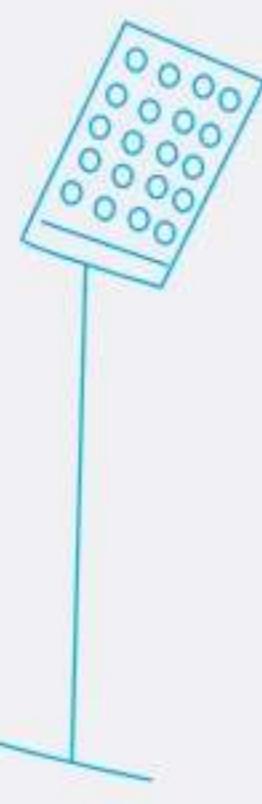
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THE LEGACY AND TRIUMPHS OF TAMIL NADU CRICKET ASSOCIATION (TNCA)



The Tamil Nadu Cricket Association (TNCA) is a historic organisation in Indian cricket. Since its humble origins in the early 1930s, it has evolved to become a powerhouse in cultivating cricket talent, organising tournaments, and greatly contributing to the growth of the sport in the state. This article dives into the TNCA's extensive history, activities, and accomplishments, highlighting major milestones and its role in developing Tamil Nadu cricket.



FORMATION AND EARLY YEARS



The TNCA's foundation began in 1932, when Madras (now Chennai) became the first state to host organised league cricket. The cricketing scene in the area saw a substantial change as a result, drawing cricket fans from all walks of life. The Indian Cricket Federation and the Madras Cricket Club, however, were two opposing organisations that governed the Madras cricket scene. These opposing groups came together in 1935 after setting aside their disagreements to form the Madras Cricket Association (M.C.A.). The region's cricket saw a turning point with this merger. On April 30, 1935, the organisation formally established itself, and the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) quickly became a member of the organisation.

EVOLUTION INTO TNCA

The Madras Cricket Association was renamed The Tamil Nadu Cricket Association (TNCA) during the 1967-68 season. This name change represented the association's dedication to representing the entire state of Tamil Nadu in cricketing endeavours, rather than just a cosmetic change. By 2023, the TNCA had grown even more, with six divisions and a total of 151 teams and 37 districts. The expansion of the association matched the growing popularity and involvement in cricket in the state.

LEAGUE EXPANSION



The M.C.A. had remarkable growth in its early years. The first and second division leagues were established during the 1933-34 cricket season. In the next season, a third tier was added. By 1939-40, the M.C.A. had stretched its cricketing reach even further by establishing a fourth division. The introduction of prominent shields for each division, such as the Raja of Palayampatti Shield for the first division and Bishop Waller Shield for the second division and the Dr. Subbaroyan Shield for the third division, accentuated this expansion. The C.R. Pattabhiraman Shield was created for the fourth division.

AFFILIATION AND GRASSROOTS DEVELOPMENT

One of the key functions of the TNCA is its association with the Board of Control for Cricket in India

(BCCI), the country's governing body for cricket. This affiliation highlights the TNCA's critical position in the cricket ecosystem, from grassroots growth to international representation. TNCA's fundamental mission is to promote and nurture cricket at all age levels, from Under-14 to Under-25, and even senior categories. This is accomplished through a network of 151 member clubs that compete in the City league, as well as 37 District Associations that hold tournaments in their respective areas. The City League is widely regarded as one of the best in the country, particularly in the first division, where matches comply to BCCI Playing Conditions and are played over three days.

EMPOWERING DISTRICT CRICKET

While the City League promotes cricket in Chennai, TNCA works to keep the sport thriving across Tamil Nadu. The organisation provides financial support to all 37 districts that cater to different age groups. Additionally, every two years, the TNCA provides districts with necessary cricket equipment such as kits, balls, ground equipments, nets, and mats. Furthermore, the TNCA honours and celebrates exceptional performers during its Annual Day ceremonies by giving scholarships and awards to worthy people who have performed exceptionally throughout the season.

TOURNAMENTS AND EVENTS



The TNCA schedule is jam-packed with competitions and events geared at promoting cricket and offering opportunities for players to flourish. TNCA Inter-Schools Cricket Tournament for Under 14 and Under 16 boys, TNCA Inter-Districts Cricket Tournament for various age groups, and the coveted VAP Trophy, held in remembrance of Late Shri V A Parthasarathy, are among the important competitions. Another notable event is the All India Buchi Babu Invitational Cricket Tournament, which has included top-tier cricketers. The Venkateswara Cup for government and Qazi-Government organisations, as well as The Hindu Trophy, are among the tournaments that display TNCA's cricketing ability. Performances in these events have frequently served as a springboard for young talents to gain jobs in both public and private sectors, reflecting TNCA's commitment towards holistic development.

THE BIRTH OF TNPL

The Tamil Nadu Premier League (TNPL) was born out of the TNCA's devotion to cricket. It was the dream of Mr. N. Srinivasan to start the Tamil Nadu Premier League. The league was created with several goals in

mind, including finding fresh talent, strengthening infrastructure in districts, functioning as a feeder event to the Indian Premier League (IPL), introducing new audiences to the game, and allowing players to earn additional income. The debut edition of the TNPL was a spectacular event, with franchise bidding generating a lot of interest. Eight franchise teams were picked from a pool of 900 participants to go on a journey that has only grown in popularity over time. The inaugural ceremony of the league, which was graced by the presence of M.S. Dhoni, Captain of the Indian ODI team, was a star-studded affair.

EXPANDING TO NEW VENUES



Beyond Chepauk, TNCA has a wider ambition. Four venues in various Tamil Nadu districts have been actively developed by the organisation. These stadiums can hold broadcast games thanks to their floodlighting, which is up to international standards. This growth makes sure that cricket talent is developed and promoted throughout the state, not only in Chennai.

TNCA ACADEMY



In pursuit of fostering cricket talent in Chennai, the TNCA proudly introduced the TNCA Academy. Its primary goal is to offer top-notch coaching and fitness training facilities. On June 7, 2023, TNCA made waves by launching the Academy Satellite Centre in Theni. This marked the beginning of a new chapter for budding Off Spinners and Left Arm Spinners. Under the keen guidance of our Academy Spin Coaches, their journey towards cricket excellence had begun.

On June 9, 2023, they spread their wings further, launching the Tirupur School of Cricket, another Satellite Centre. This time, it was dedicated to Medium Pacers who showcased their talent through our Talent Scout Program. Exciting times lie ahead as the TNCA

Academy gears up to establish Satellite Centres in Madurai and Trichy. Alongside this expansion, we're focused on constructing Dormitory facilities and Fitness Centres at these locations.

ACTIVITIES AND PLAYER DEVELOPMENT

Beyond league games and competitions, TNCA engages in other events. The association holds coaching camps for boys and girls in the Under-14, Under-16, Under-19, Under-23, Under-25, and seniors categories. Future cricket stars are developed in these camps, which also promote skill improvement and a thorough knowledge of the sport. Additionally, TNCA organises City versus District matches for several age categories, giving regional athletes the chance to compete against players from the city. Particularly noteworthy is the TNCA 1st division league, which establishes high criteria for which other states strive.

TALENT IDENTIFICATION AND WOMEN'S CRICKET

TNCA prioritises identifying and developing new cricketing talent. The organisation runs Talent Scout Programmes for both boys and girls around the state, assisting in the identification and growth of aspiring cricketers. This effort is critical to ensuring a continual infusion of talent into the cricketing environment.

The TNCA also supports women's cricket by hosting Women's T20 and One Day Leagues. These leagues provide avenue for budding female cricketers to demonstrate their abilities while also furthering the cause of women's cricket in Tamil Nadu.

M.A. CHIDAMBARAM STADIUM - THE ICONIC VENUE

The M. A. Chidambaram Stadium, often known as Chepauk, is the crown gem of the TNCA's heritage. This renowned stadium, named after Shri. M. A. Chidambaram, the former President of the BCCI and the TNCA, has witnessed several memorable events in cricket. It was built in 1916 and has the distinction of being India's oldest cricket venue still in operation. Its inaugural match, on

February 10, 1934, marked the start of a long history. For many years, Test cricket in Chennai coincided with the Pongal festival in January, creating an upbeat atmosphere for cricket fans. The fans that go to Chepauk are well-known for their cricket knowledge, frequently receiving praises from visiting teams. In an agonising moment in 1999, an overwhelmed Pakistan squad did a lap of honour after the audience gave them a standing ovation following an enticing victory.



THE FUTURE OF TNCA

Looking ahead, TNCA's focus remains squarely on identifying and developing new talent for the future. The organisation is dedicated to developing great players who can compete at both the state and national levels. Plans are in place to open cutting-edge coaching and training facilities, which will help to improve performance levels and ensure that Tamil Nadu remains a hotbed of cricketing talent.

The TNCA is more than simply an administrative organisation; it is a guardian of Tamil Nadu's cricketing history. Since its establishment in the 1930s, the TNCA has grown, expanded, and enhanced the state's cricketing scene. It has given rise to valued cricketers, developed potential talent, and offered chances for players at all levels. With a strong commitment to excellence, the TNCA serves as a guiding light for cricket fans, demonstrating the strength of enthusiasm and dedication in fostering the game we all love.



24th February 2013: M. S. Dhoni on way to his double hundred against Australia. India won the Test match by eight wickets



MEMORABLE MOMENTS AT CHEPAUK

The M. A. Chidambaram Stadium, also known as Chepauk, is a hallowed field where cricket history is engraved in every encounter. From hosting the first-ever Ranji Trophy tournament in 1934, where M. J. Gopalan bowled the first delivery to N Curtis, to watching India's maiden Test triumph over England in 1952, Chepauk has been a quiet witness to some of cricket's most famous milestones. Sunil Gavaskar's record-breaking 30th Test century in 1983 was played at this legendary stadium, as was Narendra Hirwani's astonishing 8 wickets for 61 runs on his Test debut in 1988. Chepauk also witnessed the awe-inspiring innings of Saeed Anwar, who struck a magnificent 194 against India in 1997, setting a new milestone for ODI batting. Shane Warne was the best wicket-taker here in 2004, while Virender Sehwag lit up the stadium with his blazing 319 against South Africa in 2008.

Rahul Dravid's historic feat of completing 10,000 Test runs which occurred on this legendary stadium. The Little Master, Sachin Tendulkar, scored more runs in Chepauk than at any other venue in India, adding to the stadium's illustrious history. Chepauk witnessed India's most successful run chase in a Test match on Indian soil in 2008. The stadium proceeded to make history when Mahendra Singh Dhoni hit a double century in 2013, and Karun Nair carved his name in cricketing legend with his remarkable 303* not out in 2016. On 22nd September, 1986, M. A. Chidambaram stadium also witnessed the 2nd Tied Test in the history of cricket.





THE NEW REVAMPED STADIUM



The M. A. Chidambaram Stadium experienced a tremendous rejuvenation in recent years, assuring that it will continue to be a top-tier cricket venue. This revamp involved expanding the number of spectators allowed, updating the infrastructure, and adding modern conveniences. While ensuring shade, the translucent fabric roof structures above the stands also permit the sea wind to blow into the stadium from the east. High-quality floodlights have been added to provide great visibility during games.

The stadium currently has two enormous scoreboards and a press box with air conditioning that meets international standards. On March 17, 2023, the Kalaignar M. Karunanidhi Stand was inaugurated by Thiru M. K. Stalin, the Hon'ble Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, which was one of the significant events in the stadium's history. During the third One-Day International (ODI) (D/N) between India and Australia, the M. A. Chidambaram Stadium garnered a capacity crowd of more than 35,000 people, reiterating its standing as one of the top cricket venues in the world.

CHENNAI SUPER KINGS: THE PRIDE OF TAMIL NADU



The Chennai Super Kings (CSK) are the Tamil Nadu representative in the Indian Premier League (IPL). CSK, which was founded in 2008, has been one of the most successful franchises in IPL history. The squad plays its home games at M. A. Chidambaram Stadium, colloquially known as "Fortress Chepauk." CSK has a record five IPL victories (shared with Mumbai Indians), ten finals appearances, and twelve playoff qualifying, making them a T20 cricket powerhouse to be reckoned with. India Cements owns the franchise through its Chennai Super Kings Cricket Limited holding company.





India's moments of glory in Hangzhou

India won 107 medals—28 gold, 38 silver, and 41 bronze—at the 2023 Asian Games, its best showing ever at the continental event. The country's previous best show was at Jakarta-Palembang 2018, where it won 70 medals. The unprecedented three-digit haul also brought about countless memories to cherish. From the exhilarating victories on the athletics track to the skillful manoeuvres in other sporting arenas, Sportstar takes a look at 10 moments that have rightfully earned a place in the annals of the Games' history.

» Clean sweep for the archers



PTI

Aashin Prasad
aashin.p@thehindu.co.in

In the 11 editions of archery competitions at the Asian Games, Japan only topped the charts in 1978 before South Korea displaced it for good. Until now. As the 2023 edition officially came to a close, it was India that beamed proudly on top.

After the successful lead-up to the Asian Games at the World Cups and World Championships, expectations from the compound archers were at an all-time high. However, who would have predicted a clean sweep? India

won all five gold medals on offer in the compound archery events!

In the men's individual final, it was two Indians — Ojas Deotale and Abhishek Verma — who were facing each other. The 21-year-old Ojas called it a 'friendly battle' but he wasn't going to go easy on 'bhaiyya' and went on to score 14 10s and a 9 to claim a maiden gold. In fact, the prospect of an all-women individual final was probably denied because Jyothi Surekha Vennam and Aditi Swami faced each other in the semifinal. The recurve archers, too, medalled silver and bronze.

India bagged nine medals in total, and beat the lot — Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Hong Kong, Kazakhstan, and Saudi Arabia. The whole lot!

The first gold came from the mixed team of Jyothi and Ojas who beat Korea's Jaehoon Joo and So Chaewon. And it was Jyothi and Ojas who finished with a rare triple gold by claiming individual, team and mixed team golds. While compound archery is not part of the Olympic programme yet, rest assured, if it eventually gets included, the Indian archers will be ready.



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» Gold more than a medal for Parul

Aashin Prasad

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In the gruelling 3000m steeplechase, Bahrain's Winfred Mutile Yavi beat Parul Chaudhary of India to the gold. It was Parul's pet event, but she had to put that disappointment behind her, battle fatigue, and recover in time to run a punishing 5000m final inside the next 24 hours.

However, Parul pulled off a stunning heist in the second event, with a little over 50m ahead of the finish line to take the gold medal.

Japan's Ririka Hironaka led comfortably for a major portion of the race, and quite naturally, she thought she had the win when the long strides of Parul kicked in and the Indian whizzed past her. The snapshot of the agony on Hironaka's face and jubilation on Parul's encapsulated the story.

"Since I was not able to win a gold medal in steeplechase, I wanted to get a gold in 5000m. God was kind enough tonight," said the 28-year-old. At the end of the race, Parul fell to her knees and kissed the track before she got up and raised her hands in gratitude.

Parul's gold was India's first in the 5000m discipline at the Asian Games since it was introduced at the 1998 Bangkok edition. She also became the first female athlete to medal in both 3000m steeplechase and 5000m in the same edition.

And the gold was more than just a medal for Parul. When she was running at the finish line, all she could think of was the DSP (Deputy Superintendent of Police) job she could land with the UP Police.

"Hamari UP Police aisi hai ki gold medal lekar aaenge toh DSP bana denge. [In UP Police, if you win a gold medal, they offer such a posting]," said Parul.



Beyond the finish line: Parul Chaudhary hopes she lands a DSP job as a reward for her gold medal at the Asian Games. GETTY IMAGES

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» Jena has arrived

Aashin Prasad
aashin.p@thehindu.co.in

While Kishore Kumar Jena deserves this moment for himself, it's hard not to talk about Neeraj Chopra in the context of Jena's rising popularity. When Arshad Nadeem pulled out on the eve of the final due to injury, Neeraj's path to gold seemed guaranteed.

And when the controversy surrounding Neeraj's first throw overshadowed the competition, Kishore stepped up by recording his personal best throw of 86.77 m, momentarily propelling himself to first place. Above the Olympic and world champion.

Neeraj immediately embraced his countryman to celebrate his achievement. This was good news for Indian javelin, after all. That throw may have even pushed Neeraj into shaking off the disappointment of the unregistered first throw and made him remember that his title defence was on the line.

He promptly responded with a throw of 88.88m to reclaim his position at the top.

Jena had one more level to go, and he did that with another massive throw of 87.54m.

He finished with silver, but, importantly, made it count on the big continental platform. The 28-year-old, who has been making steady strides, has improved on his personal best by nearly 10m.

This year, he had an 81.05m in March, 82.87m in June, then 84.38m in Diyagama, followed by a 84.77m throw in Hungary before his two successive personal best throws in Hangzhou.

This shows that he is not just there to play second fiddle to Neeraj, but can also make the Indian champion sweat for the podium. And if Neeraj ever has an off day, Jena will be ready to grab the opportunity.



A bear hug: Neeraj Chopra joins the celebration after Kishore Kumar Jena's mammoth throw. REUTERS



Dancing feat: Satwiksairaj Rankireddy (left) and Chirag Shetty break into a celebratory dance after bagging the Asian Games badminton doubles gold. AFP

Aashin Prasad

aashin.p@thehindu.co.in

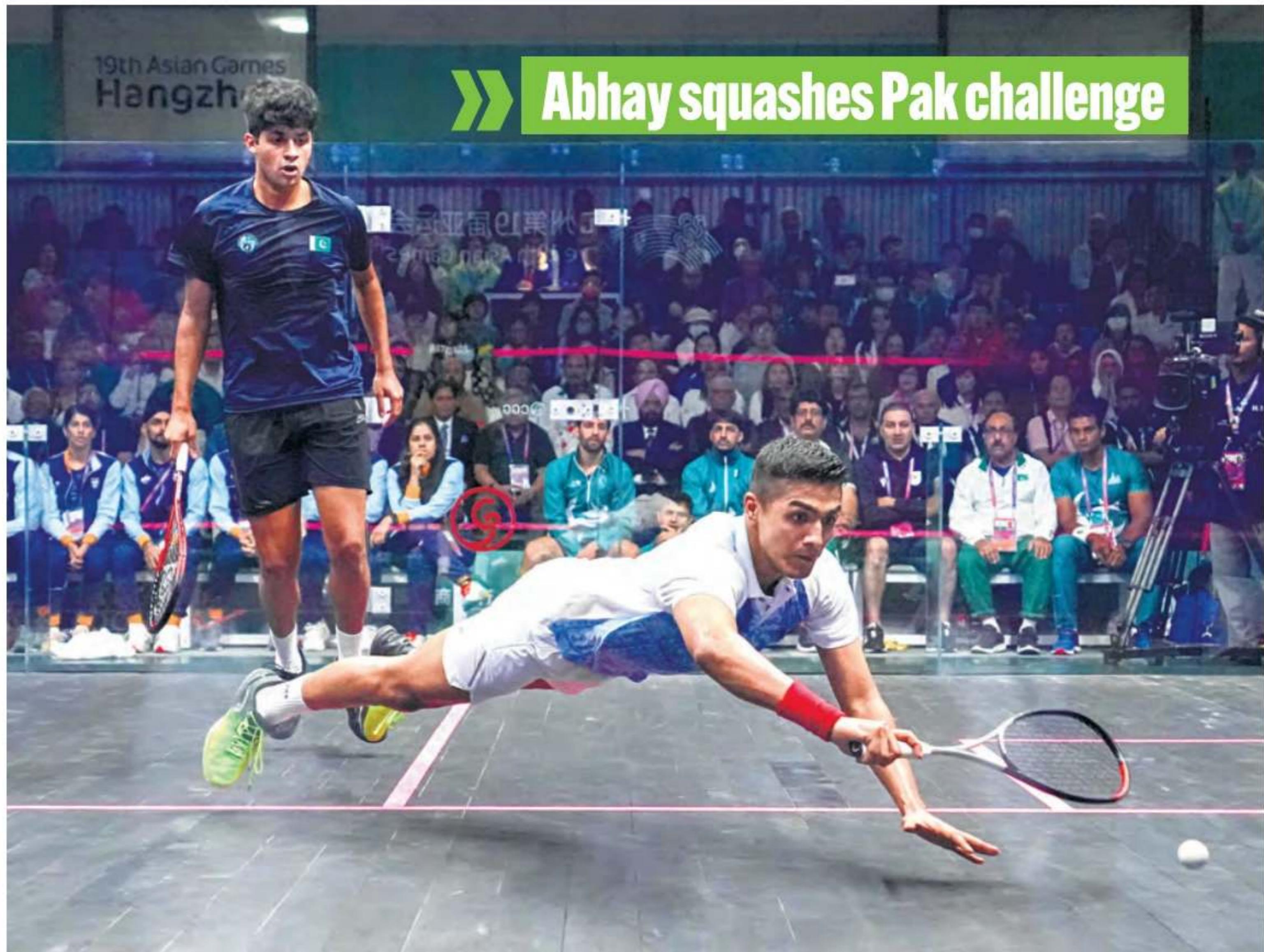
While Neeraj Chopra will inevitably be the headline maker for India at world events with his supreme talent and star quality, two other Indian athletes are getting there too, in a partnership. There is a kind of air about them that puts the pair in the 'world-class' bracket.

Each time Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty step on to the badminton court, Indian fans can expect them to get the 'W' against their names. After wins at the Swiss Open, Indonesia Open, Korea Open, and the Asian Championship, the duo has punctuated its stellar 2023 by winning the Asian Games gold —

India's first in the continental Games. En route to the gold, Chirag and Satwik even beat their archenemies, Aaron Chia and Soh Wooi Yik from Malaysia, who held an 8-1 head-to-head advantage over the Indian pair before the semifinal. It was a close battle until the 10-all mark of the opening game before Chirag and Satwik rolled the Malaysian pair over for a swift 21-17, 21-12 win. The manner of victory seemed so routine that the neutral supporters in the venue became subdued by the one-sided dominance of the Indians. The win also confirmed their status as the world no. 1 doubles pair.

India coach Pullela Gopichand felt the gold at Asian Games is tougher than winning one at the Olympics. "For me, the Asian Games are tougher than the Olympics. I'm very happy they peaked at the right time. If you look at the competition, teams such as Malaysia, Korea, Japan, and Indonesia send two teams. In all, there were nine nations here that sent two teams, which is not the case at the Olympics," said Gopichand.

According to Satwik, he is the ice to Chirag's fire, and the off-court pals are getting set to keep the momentum going as they head into the Olympic year.



Full stretch: India's Abhay Singh in action against Pakistan's Noor Zaman. PTI

Uthra Ganesan

uthra.ganesan@thehindu.co.in

Noor Zaman had Abhay Singh's number. The 19-year old from Pakistan had already bested the Indian once and looked set to do it again — the stakes much higher this time around. India had lost to Pakistan 2-1 in the group stage, Abhay taking off a game but failing to keep Noor from walking away with the match. The Pakistani youngster, with impeccable squash pedigree and imperious talent, was confidence personified in that clash. But it was still only a battle; the war was yet to come. Winning against Malaysia in the semifinals was critical, and Abhay was key to that. And when the final came, the 25-year old was ready to get his revenge.

With India and Pakistan having won a match each, just like in the group tie, the stage was set for an Abhay-Noor decider, and it was expectedly a tense affair. Challenging for every point, trudging the fine, blurred line between legal and ethical, and making it clear this was no friendly rivalry, both went for broke every second. Abhay drew first blood, winning the first game, and Noor hit back immediately to take the second. Third went to Abhay, 4th to Noor, bringing it all down to the last game of the last match of the team's event, between the youngest members of either side. And at 10-8, Noor was firmly in the driver's seat. Unlike earlier, Abhay had other ideas, even as the Indian supporters, in a minority in the stands, more than

made up for it vocally.

He would surely go back and watch the videos at leisure; at that time, flushed with the adrenaline of victory, he would admit he remembered nothing of whatever happened next. From outside, it was madness.

Abhay saved a match point, then another to make it 10-10. Then he reeled off two more points, and as Noor hit down the tin, Abhay let out a roar, threw his racquet into the stands, and leaped into the arms of his teammates before breaking down into tears.

He had bottled up his feelings throughout the match to stay in the moment, never showing emotions, but they came gushing through after it was all over.



High drama: The Indian men and women after their gold medal victories in kabaddi. Official blundering, farcical refereeing, and team protests held up the men's final for more than an hour. PTI

Uthra Ganesan

uthra.ganesan@thehindu.co.in

It was always going to be close, but nobody could have predicted how close. While winning and losing are part of sports, the loss of gold in kabaddi felt personal, and India was determined to reclaim what it believed was always its own. But even the teams would not have expected the dramatic finishes.

The men's team steamrolled every opponent till the final, just like it was expected to.

But then, up against Iran, it was a tight game that saw both sides going ahead alternately. And with 65 seconds left and the scores level, official blundering, farcical refereeing, and team protests held up the game for more than an hour, making it the most dramatic title clash in any sport here.

For referees to get confused on whether to follow international rules or an experimental one introduced in the Pro Kabaddi League — a private, India-specific venture — says a lot about their competence. But all these details came later; at that moment, for those watching from the outside, it was simply bizarre chaos on the mat, protests from either side over scores, and no clarity on who was demanding what and why.

With officials from the international and Asian federations getting involved, administrative politics and power play coming to the fore, and anyone walking up to the jury for a dekko at the replays, it looked nothing like an Asian Games final between two powerhouses.

After all that drama, the final

moments of the match never felt like a nail-biting thriller, despite the closeness of the scoreline. And when the gold was finally won, there was more relief than anything else. The women had their own reality check in the very first game, held to a competitive 34-34 draw by Chinese Taipei.

In hindsight, that was the best thing to happen to the team, as it went about dominating the rest of the field before facing off against Taipei again in the final and edging ahead by a single point.

That the women brought the 100th medal for India at the Games made it extra special, although the players wished it had come against Iran to make the success even sweeter. But it was gold nevertheless.



» Eyes always on the gold

Across the finish line: India's Rajesh Ramesh raises his baton to the crowd after helping India win the men's 4X400 relay final. REUTERS

Uthra Ganesan
uthra.ganesan@thehindu.co.in

Not often do Indian athletes go into a competition as favourites and record holders. Neeraj Chopra is one of them, but that is expected now.

At the Asian Games, there was another group of Indians who entered with the swag of knowing they were the best — the men's 4x400m relay team. Just over a month ago, the quartet of Mohd. Anas Yahiya, Amoj Jacob, Mohd. Ajmal, and Rajesh Ramesh smashed the Asian record with a sub-three-minute race in the heats of the World Championships, forcing even the mighty USA to appreciate the effort. They did it again in the finals, although without a medal, but

it did make a statement ahead of the Games.

It wasn't easy in Hangzhou either, but the Indians knew what they were capable of. While Anas and Amoj turned out for both the heats and the final, Nihal William and Mijo Kurien ran in the heat. The target was clear: gold. Timings were secondary. The four men stuck to the job at hand, one day at a time — qualify in good time, then go for gold in the final. And if they had broken yet another record, that would have been a bonus. The plan worked, and India qualified in first place in 3:03.81. The final got better as the four shaved off more than two seconds together. The gold was home, and in some

style, Ramesh sent out a flying kiss with the baton towards the Indians in the stands after crossing the finish line. Such was the confidence level that even Anas completing the first leg in fifth place was not a worry, with Amoj running ahead into the top spot and the other two ensuring India stayed there. A time of 3:01.58 to finish on top might not seem too far from Qatar's Games record of 3:00.56, but they admitted later that if they had tried to go for the timings and not achieved that, it might have led to even the gold slipping away under pressure.

The motto was 'eyes always on the gold', they declared. They never blinked.



Chinese whispers: India's dynamic duo of Sutirtha Mukherjee (left) and Ayhika Mukherjee, who beat China en route to the semifinal at the Asian Games, scripted one of the country's greatest sporting moments. REUTERS

Jonathan Selvaraj

jonathan.selvaraj@thehindu.co.in

There's more than a touch of irony in the fact that one of India's greatest sporting moments, not just at the Asian Games but arguably in recent years, would ultimately be rewarded with 'just' a bronze medal.

To beat any Chinese player in an international table tennis match is hard. To beat China in a medal match at a major competition is harder. To beat a Chinese pair who have just been crowned world champions in a medal match in China is almost unthinkable.

To say that Ayhika Mukherjee and Sutirtha Mukherjee were underdogs in their doubles quarterfinal match against China's Chen Meng and Wang Yidi would be an understatement. They were massive underdogs. Meng is a two-time

Olympic champion, and partnering Yidi, had just won gold in the World Championships.

As world number 1, the Chinese duo, who already had a gold medal in the women's team event, were expected to brush aside the Indian challenge in the quarterfinal of the Asian Games without much fuss. They were expected to be too fast, too skilled, and eventually too good for the two girls from Naihati, West Bengal.

As it turns out, it was the Chinese, who were left flummoxed by the Indians, who have only been playing together for less than a year. While Sutirtha usually plays with a soft-pimpled rubber, Ayhika relies on her uncanny usage of long-pimpled rubbers. It usually means Ayhika

controls the game and sets up the point, and Sutirtha, with her powerful forehand, finishes the key points off.

The roles were reversed for this one match. While Sutirtha played the waiting game for most of the match, it was Ayhika who executed the aggressor's role. The Chinese had no answers. Even coach Ma Lin, who has three Olympic gold medals of his own, had a wry smile on his face.

The two Indians didn't just creep over the finish line, they bullied the Chinese pair over the course of four games.

While the Indians wouldn't go past the next hurdle, losing to a North Korean pair, they had made a big enough statement on the 9-by-5-foot table that would echo well beyond the Games.



Top of the world: India's Sifat Kaur Samra after winning the women's 50m rifle 3 positions event with a world record to boot. REUTERS

Jonathan Selvaraj

jonathan.selvaraj@thehindu.co.in

India already had two gold medals in shooting and four overall at the Asian Games by the time Sifat Kaur Samra waved to the crowd at the Hangzhou shooting range ahead of the women's 50m rifle 3 positions event. Of these, though, just one — in the team dressage — had come in an Olympic category. While the moment was historic, it came in an event that didn't have the strongest field.

However, the same cannot be said of the women's 50m 3P event. Standing alongside Samra was Zhang Qiongyue, who had just won gold at the 2023 World Championships. She went into the competition as the favourite. Samra, who finished fifth in Baku in the same World

Championships where Qiongyue had won, showed no signs of being fazed, though.

The Indian first finished second in qualifying with 594 points, giving up first place to China's Xia Siyu only on the basis of fewer inner tens. In the final, though, she wouldn't come close to being caught. Samra took the early lead at the end of the kneeling event and held it all the way to the end.

While Qiongyue struggled to stay within range, Samra ruthlessly kept extending her lead. Eventually, she was so far ahead of the rest of the field that she could arguably even afford to have missed one shot. Not that she ever did. In her last three

shots, Samra first scored two near-perfect 10.8s before closing the show with a 10.2. Qiongyue finished a distant second with a final shot of just 9.9.

The 22-year-old, who once wanted to be a doctor, had just put together a clinical display of shooting. She finished with a score of 469.6 — a mammoth 7.3 ahead of the reigning world champion. Samra's score wasn't just incredible at the Asian level. In a sport where medals are often determined by fractions of a point, Samra's total smashed the old world record (467) by 2.6 points.

The performance has set a template that other Indians will hope to match in the days to come.

» Shaking a leg



Making it memorable: H. S. Prannoy became just the second Indian men's singles player to medal at the Asian Games and the first since the legendary Syed Modi in 1982. PTI

Jonathan Selvaraj

jonathan.selvaraj@thehindu.co.in

The DJ at Hangzhou's Binjiang Gymnasium couldn't have chosen a better song for the moment. As HS Prannoy ripped off his T-shirt and threw his arms in the air after finally beating former All England champion Lee Zii Jia in the quarterfinal of the men's singles competition at the Asian Games, the speakers inside the arena belted out the title song from the movie *Dangal*.

The Amir Khan-starrer had been a runaway success in Chinese theatres; at one time, it was the highest-grossing foreign-made film in the country.

There couldn't have been a more appropriate soundtrack to celebrate

another Indian's success in China.

By beating Lee, Prannoy had become just the second Indian men's singles player to medal at the Asian Games and the first since the legendary Syed Modi in 1982. It took a Herculean effort to replicate Modi's accomplishment from 41 years ago. Prannoy had come back from a significant deficit to take the first game, then had two match points in the second, which Lee, a former world number 2, saved to force a decider. From there, it was the Malaysian who had the edge, holding two match points of his own. This time it was the Indian's turn to claw back out of the jaws of defeat. He saved those two

match points before setting up one of his own and converting it to claim the victory and assure himself a bronze medal.

The match was brutal for both players. Prannoy had long been seen as a player who was capable of pulling off upsets but was unable to win the matches that mattered. He had more than enough reason to justify a loss in Hangzhou. He had been battling a niggle in his back, and indeed, once the shirt was off, you could see the heavy strapping all over it.

That wouldn't stop him, though. As he swayed to the beats of *Dangal*, Prannoy proved he is well and truly able to dance in the big leagues.

Taming the dragon: Events where India bettered the Chinese

A look at some Asian Games disciplines where India **got the better** of its neighbour China.

Aashin Prasad

aashin.p@thehindu.co.in

India had its best Asian Games campaign ever in Hangzhou with 107 medals, including a record 28 gold. While several gold medals and podium places may capture the imagination of casual followers, there are several performances—even in losing causes—that deserve special mention.

China and its athletes have often been the yardstick at the continental event, and this year, India got the better of its neighbour on a few occasions.

One of the biggest moments for India, however, was not gold but the bronze medal it earned in women's doubles table tennis after beating China. No one would have even batted an eyelid if the doubles pair of Sutirtha Mukherjee and Ayhika Mukherjee had gone down to the World No. 2 pairing of Yidi Wang and Chen Meng in the women's quarterfinals. But they went into the lion's den and flipped the script.

The Mukherjees played a game of cat-and-mouse while keeping their defence strong. The duo forced the

Chinese to commit errors. Wang and Meng fell for the trap and eventually succumbed 1-3. Sutirtha and Ayhika, though downed in the semifinals, won bronze that was well worth its weight in gold.

All eyes were on the Indian shooters to see how they fared against China, especially in the lead-up to next year's Olympics. India hit the golden target in seven events, but it was Sift Kaur Samra's gold medal in the 50m rifle 3 positions and Palak Gulia's gold in 10m air pistol that stood above the rest.

The 22-year-old Sift scored 7.3 more than China's Zhang Qiongyue, going on to register a world record score of 469.6 in the final. Palak won gold with a Games record score of 242.1 and beat China's Jiang Ranxin, who won bronze in individual and gold in mixed team at the Tokyo Olympics. But at the Fuyang Yinhua Sports Centre, Jiang was well below her best.

Even though it did not win, the Indian men's badminton team gave the Chinese a big scare when it went 2-0 up in the final, thanks to Lakshya Sen, and doubles pair Chirag Shetty





Superb show: India's Sutirtha Mukherjee (right) and Ayhika Mukherjee (L) celebrate after winning the table tennis women's doubles quarterfinals. AFP

IT WAS ONE OF THE BIGGEST MOMENTS FOR INDIA, AS THE DOUBLES PAIR DEFEATED THE WORLD NO. 2 PAIRING OF YIDI WANG AND MENG CHEN



On target: The 22-year-old Sifat Kaur Samra scored 7.3 more than China's Zhang Qiongyue, going on to register a world record score of 469.6 in the final of the 50m rifle 3 positions. PTI

» ALL EYES WERE ON THE INDIAN SHOOTERS TO SEE HOW THEY FARED AGAINST CHINA, ESPECIALLY IN THE LEAD-UP TO NEXT YEAR'S OLYMPICS

and Satwiksairaj Rankireddy's exploits. They beat the Chinese, ranked higher than them in world rankings. India, however, couldn't close out the win to claim gold because of its lack of depth.

India's athletics contingent made it rain medals at the city's Olympic Stadium, even having to overcome poor officiating at times. Annu Rani, who has been well below her best in recent times, won gold in the women's javelin by finishing ahead of Dilhani Lekamge of Sri Lanka and China's Lyu Huihui, who holds the Asian record with 67.98m. Annu,

who has been throwing under 60m this season, came up with the continent's season-best throw of 62.92m to finish top.

Jyothi Yarraj's path to silver in the 100m hurdles was achieved amid much controversy. In the final, Yarraj was wrongly disqualified for a false start but was reinstated upon protest and ran the race to finish third.

China's Yanni Wu, who had also been tagged for a false start, ran under protest to finish second, but was later disqualified, with Yarraj being elevated to a maiden Asiad

silver, while China's Yuwei Lin, quite expectedly, won gold.

Harmilan Bains twice took home silver in 800m and 1500m, but the 800m success would taste sweeter for the Indian, who overtook China's Wang Chunyu in the last stretch of the race.

The likes of Neeraj Chopra, Kishore Kumar Jena (javelin), Tajinderpal Singh Toor (shot put), Avinash Sable (men's 3000m steeplechase), Parul Chaudhary, and Priti Lamba (women's 3000m steeplechase) all achieved podium places by beating China's best. Long

jumper Murali Sreeshankar won silver by beating Shi Yuhao but lost out on gold to the other Chinese Wang Jianan.

Ajay Kumar Saroj and Jinson Johnson in men's 1500m, and Mohammed Afsal Pulikkalakath in men's 800m also medalled in their respective races and did so by overcoming China's best.

Aditi Ashok would be kicking herself for not seeing out her advantage of seven shots heading into the final round and taking gold ahead of China's Xiyu Lin and Thailand's Arpitchaya Yubol. In the end, the Indian stumbled to finish behind Yubol but took the silver ahead of Lin.

Another result that might go under the radar would be the Indian men's bridge team winning silver. The group of Sandeep Thakral, Jaggy Shivedasani, Raju Tolani, Rajeshwar Tiwari, Sumit Mukherjee, and Ajay Prabhakar Khare beat China in the semifinals but fell to Hong Kong in the final.



Controversy: Officials speak to China's Yanni Wu following a false start in the women's 100m hurdles final as India's Jyothi Yarraj looks on. Yanni Wu was later disqualified, with Yarraj being elevated to a maiden Asiad silver, while China's Yuwei Lin won gold. REUTERS



Tough luck: India's Aditi Ashok with Arpitchaya Yubol and Yoo Hyunjo. on the podium. The Indian stumbled to finish behind Yubol but took the silver ahead of Lin. AFP

» ASIAN GAMES
SHOOTING

SHOOTING FOR THE STARS

India's **record-breaking** Asian Games victory ignites Olympic ambitions.

Sharp focus: Divyansh Singh Panwar competes in the 10m air rifle mixed team event. Indian shooters bagged 22 medals in the Asian Games this year. PTI



Santadeep Dey

santadeep.dey@thehindu.co.in

India rang down the curtains on the 19th edition of the Asian Games with 107 medals, its best-ever haul at the quadrennial showpiece. An overwhelming 22 of these hallowed metal discs — seven gold, nine silver, and six bronze — came from shooting.

Although often labelled the most unpredictable sport, Indian shooting's credentials have never come under a shadow of doubt at multi-discipline events like the Asiad (where it now has 80 podium finishes) and the Commonwealth Games. In fact, the sport has given India the most medals at CWG — 135.

The only exception, though, is the Olympics, where the country has bagged only four medals, and what transpires there is a discussion for another day.

China, which won 29 medals in Hangzhou 2022, has topped the AG shooting tally in every edition since Bangkok 1978. However, this is the first time it has found its not-so-favourite neighbour breathing down its neck. Having come second, this is historically India's best

standing in the classic joust for continental supremacy.

Not just that, India has also surpassed its previous best medal count of 14 in shooting (three gold, five silver and six bronze), achieved at Doha 2006. In the previous edition at Jakarta-Palembang, the team had only managed to win nine medals.

The punctilious Chinese will also be aware of the fact that the Indian shooters broke as many as 18 records, including three world records, in their backyard.

Although the momentous achievement does call for celebrations, the Indian shooting contingent would know better than to rest on its laurels. For, of the 22 medals the country bagged, 11 have come from events that aren't a part of the Olympic programme. They weren't on the schedule of the previous Asian Games as well.

These 11 events — described by the International Shooting Sport Federation's (ISSF) general regulation 3.3.2.3 as 'Team' events for "three (3) members of the same gender" — award medals based on the sum total of the scores of each of the participating shooters in the individual qualification round.

The women's and men's team programmes in 10m air rifle and 10m air pistol aren't even mandatory events in all ISSF Championships, according to 'Annex 2' of the rules published on September 22, 2020, by the shooting world body.

The document states that it is binding to include 10m AR and AP team events in ISSF World Cups and Grand Prix meant for "10m rifle/pistol events only". That means if there is a scheduled World Cup for all disciplines, the organisers may choose not to include the men's and women's 10m air rifle and pistol team events in the roster.

Similarly, the men and women's team events in trap and skeet only need to be compulsorily organised if it is a separate World



INDIA'S MEDALS TALLY IN SHOOTING

GOLD

7

SILVER

9

BRONZE

6



Dream team: Aishwary Pratap Singh Tomar (in pic) along with Rudrankksh Patil and Divyansh Panwar won gold with a world record score of 1893.7 in the 10m air rifle team event. AP



Cup meant for these two disciplines.

All World Championships, however, need to have men and women's team events.

So, even though the talented trio of Rudrankksh Balasaheb Patil (**below**), Aishwary Pratap Singh Tomar and Divyansh Singh Panwar helped India win its first gold medal of Asian Games 2023 with a world record 10m air rifle team score of 1893.7, its significance in the build-up to the 2024 Olympics is largely vague.

While one may say these medals are morale-boosting, especially after the horrors of Tokyo, another may refute that these may only pave the way for complacency to creep in.

It may be sagacious to point out that it puts India's bench strength in focus. According to former chief national rifle coach Joydeep Karmakar, the achievement eliminates what has come to be known as the 'star culture', where the media limelight tends to shine on a select few.

He says, "We should rather be proud when the aggregate of three shooters is better than the trio of other countries. It directly shows the strength of that sport rather than depending on a single star-oriented perspective. Let's appreciate the growth of an average shooter in our country and not look for a single dependable star. This achievement is holistic."

This theory may be a tad flawed as well, if we consider how China has historically fielded its athletes in the Olympics.

The East Asian nation is careful not to show its hand to competitors during the Olympic cycle, thereby never sending its complete 'A' team to any event in the lead-up to the Olympics. Take Yang Qian, Tokyo's double Olympic gold medallist in 10m air rifle individual and mixed team events, for example. Ahead of the 2021 Olympics, Qian had only participated in one senior ISSF World Cup in 2019. Then, Zhang Changhong, who

picked up the 50m rifle 3 positions gold in Tokyo with a world record score of 466.0, had participated in only one senior World Cup in 2019. He did, however, feature in the home World Cup Final later that year. Both of these athletes were not part of the squad that featured in the 2018 Asian Games. They were also absent in Hangzhou.

On the other hand, India is known to fly its first team to most World Cups, something it is trying to work on now since it all came crashing down at the last Summer Games.

Also, does a team medal hold a candle to an individual medal for an athlete? "Not even close. I was not even concentrating on the team medal. I was only focused on my individual achievements. Yes, it is a great thing that we won the team medal as well, but at the end of the day, it is an individual sport. The team event here isn't like other team events where you brainstorm and work together. But again, I always believed that the team medal would be easy to get because we have an exceptional bunch of shooters," says a shooter, who has had the good fortune of winning both the individual and team medals at the recently concluded Asian Games.

When the frenzied cheers finally fade out, it would bode well for the shooters to lounge for a while before getting their work mode back on. The Paris 2024 quota-bearing Asian Championship, after all, begins later this month.

« When the frenzied cheers finally fade out, it would bode well for the shooters to lounge for a while before getting their work mode back on »



A.M.FARUQUI

A dynamic photograph showing the lower legs and feet of several Indian athletes in motion. They are wearing white and yellow athletic shoes with red swooshes, black socks, and dark leggings. The background is blurred, suggesting speed and competition.

» ASIAN GAMES
ATHLETICS

A FIELD DAY IN OFFICE

With 29 medals, Indian athletes delivered a **stellar performance** this Asian Games.

Jonathan Selvaraj

jonathan.selvaraj@thehindu.co.in

Afew days before the start of the track and field competition at the Asian Games, Adille Sumariwala, the president of the Athletics Federation of India, had indicated just how confident the team was. "Asian Games has been a happy hunting ground for Indian athletes, and will continue to be," Sumariwala, himself a former sprinter, had said in an interview.

This has generally been true, with athletics historically being one of the top two contributors of medals to

India's overall tally. This continued in Hangzhou, too, with Indian athletes winning 29 medals — of the 107 overall won by India. As a sport, athletics was the biggest individual contributor to India's total.

This was also the second most medals ever won by India in track and field competition at the Asian Games — just behind the 34 won by India in the inaugural games in 1951 when there were just 11 countries competing.

There was enough reason for Sumariwala's optimism. Over the last few years, India has steadily been performing across competitions. "We've slowly moved up. You saw the results at the 2022 Commonwealth Games (Indians won eight medals in athletics, up from

Record breaker: Tejaswin Shankar, who won silver in the men's decathlon with a total of 7666 points, also broke the nearly 12-year-old national record of 7658 points set by Bharatinder Singh. REUTERS

» WHILE THE RESULT OF INDIAN ATHLETES IN HANGZHOU WAS ON EXPECTED LINES, THERE WERE PERFORMANCES THAT STOOD OUT EVEN AMONG THE SHOWER OF MEDALS WITH ATHLETES BREAKING FRESH GROUND

the three in 2018). At this Asian Championships, we had 27 medals. At this Worlds, we had a gold (Neeraj Chopra in the men's javelin), people breaking Asian records (men's 4x400m team) and running (Parul Chaudhary in the women's 3000m steeplechase) and jumping (Jeswin Aldrin in the men's long jump) in the finals," Sumariwala had said.

While the result in Hangzhou was on expected lines, there were performances that stood out even

Charging ahead: Parul Chaudhary ran a stunning race to claim gold in the women's 5000m. AP

among the shower of medals with athletes breaking fresh ground. A couple of national records were broken.

Vithya Ramraj won a bronze in the women's 400m hurdles but what was even more impressive was the fact that she had clocked a 55.42 second time in the heats. That time





Slice of history: Vithya Ramraj, who won a bronze in the women's 400m hurdles clocked an impressive 55.42 in the heats, equaling the national record set by PT Usha at the 1984 Olympics. PTI

equalled the national record set by PT Usha back at the 1984 Olympics. Tejaswin Shankar, who won silver in the men's decathlon with a total of 7666 points, also broke the nearly 12-year-old national record of 7658 points set by Bharatinder Singh.

Fresh ground was broken by Parul Choudhary who claimed a gold in the women's 5000m race.

Although Choudhary, who holds the national record in the 3000m steeplechase didn't come close to the national record in the 5000m, her win was the first for an Indian at that event, ever since its introduction to the Asian Games program in 1998.

Despite India's overall performance, the results

weren't an absolute improvement from previous years. Although India finished with their best ever medal haul, they only won six gold medals, down from the eight they had won in 2018.

Furthermore, with athletics being a measurable sport, just a handful of results were what could be

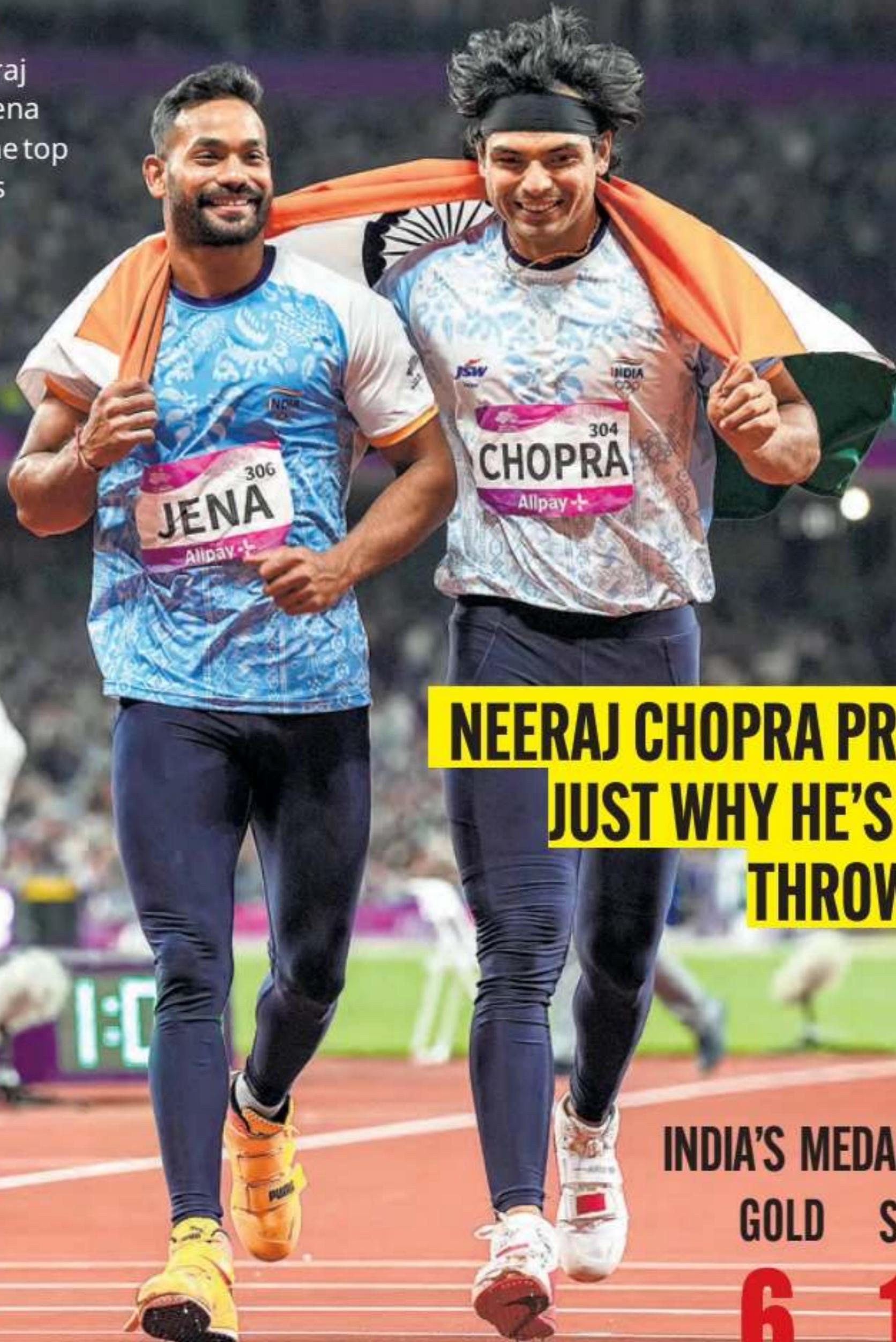
Never give up: Annu Rani turned around what had been a dismal year so far for her with a season's best of 62.92m that won India its first ever Asian Games gold in the women's javelin throw. REUTERS

considered world class or good enough to make the top six of a world-level competition. Although Avinash Sable's time of 8.19.50 in the men's 3000m steeplechase was a new games record, it was nowhere near the 8.10.00 he had set as a target at the start of the year.

Parul Choudhary's gold medal timing of 15.14.75, would be nearly 10 seconds slower than the time that clocked by the last qualifier to make the final of the women's 5000m at



Double the joy: Neeraj Chopra and Kishore Jena deservedly bagged the top two spots in the men's javelin throw. PTI



NEERAJ CHOPRA PROVED ONCE AGAIN JUST WHY HE'S THE BEST JAVELIN THROWER IN THE WORLD

INDIA'S MEDALS TALLY IN ATHLETICS

GOLD SILVER BRONZE

6 14 9

the 2023 World Championships (15.05.24). Tajinder Toor's 20.36m throw in the men's shot put was nearly 40 cm short of the last qualification mark (20.74m) to make the final at the World Championships.

The India relay team's time of 3.01.58 in the men's 4x400m was a couple of seconds short of the time the same team had clocked in Budapest just a month before.

Apart from these blemishes, there is much to praise about India's overall results. Neeraj Chopra proved once again just why he's the best javelin thrower in the world. Having already won all the major competitions — Commonwealth Games, Asian Games, World Championships and Olympics — the

25-year-old is now well underway to repeating that conquest, if his 88.88m throw to claim his second Asian Games title is any evidence.

Annu Rani turned around what had been a dismal year so far for her with a season's best of 62.92m that won India its first ever Asian Games gold in the women's javelin throw. Annu not only beat the Chinese Olympic champion — Liu Shiying — to the Asian gold but also registered a throw that would have placed her in the top 5 at the World Championships earlier this year.

While much of the attention of course went to India's gold medallists, there were a couple of performances that 'only' won silver but which will be equally significant going into an Olympic year.

Murali Sreeshankar finished just 3 cm behind 2022 World champion Wang Jianan and while a gold might have been ideal, his jump of 8.19m was the best ever registered by an Indian at the continental games.

After a disappointing result at the World Championships, Sreeshankar's jump was just what he needs to get his confidence up while going into the Olympic year.

The athlete who perhaps announced himself in the biggest way possible was Kishore Jena.

In what is only his first international year, the 28-year-old's new personal best of 87.54m in the javelin saw him finish behind Neeraj but it is a throw that would keep him in the mix for a medal at any world level event.



TIME TO PUNCH ABOVE THEIR WEIGHT

Indian boxers may have fallen short of a gold in the Hangzhou Asian Games but there is room for improvement ahead of the upcoming qualifiers for Paris 2024.

CHIEF COACH C.A. KUTTAPPA STRESSES THE NEED FOR MORE FOCUSED WORK APART FROM A BIT OF TALENT-HUNTING IN THE RUN-UP TO THE NEXT OLYMPIC QUALIFIER IN FEBRUARY

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

Earning four quota places and five medals in boxing, including a silver and four bronze, may appear a decent performance in the Hangzhou Asian Games but keen followers of the sport would have liked to see the 13-member team fare better in the continental event.

After a thorough preparation — which included two multi-nation camps and customised training for individual boxers keeping in mind the challenges they might face — five medals, including one from the seven male boxers, is perhaps a little short of the satisfactory mark. Even though it was more than double of that of the two medals the country's boxers bagged in 2018. The fact that the Indians returned without a gold medal in 13 years would hurt the boxing lovers as well.

It was a fine show from the country's women boxers, who achieved their best-ever haul of

four medals (including a silver and three bronze) and as many quota places for Paris 2024. After failing to open their account in Bangkok in the previous edition, it was a welcome relief for the women, whose previous best showing in the Asiad was three medals in 2014, when the iconic multiple World champion and Olympic bronze medallist M.C. Mary Kom had led the pack with a spectacular gold. Considering the talent pool and experience, the medal haul in Hangzhou was on expected lines.

World champions Nikhat Zareen (50kg, left) and Lovlina Borgohain (75kg, top right in red) claimed a bronze and a silver, respectively, to

INDIA'S MEDALS TALLY IN BOXING

SILVER	BRONZE
1	4

Among the medals: World champions Nikhat Zareen (50kg, facing page) and Lovlina Borgohain (75kg, right in red) claimed a bronze and a silver, respectively. PICS: PTI

underline their class at another high-level competition. They would have liked to finish atop the podium, though.

Nikhat, who got past Vietnam's Nguyen Thi Tam and Korea's Bak Chorong with an identical 5-0 scoreline and outclassed Jordan's Hanan Nassar through a RSC decision, would have liked to have a little bit of luck against Thai boxer Chuthamat Raksat in the semifinals (where she lost 3-2) to land a medal of better colour.

Lovlina, who recorded fine 5-0 wins over Korea's Seong Suyeon and Thailand's Baison Manikon in the last-four before being beaten by Chinese Li Qian in the title clash, would do well to step up aggression inside the ring in order to live up to her 'animal' tag and achieve greater glory. **The inexperienced Preeti Pawar (54kg) secured her maiden major medal, while Parveen Hooda (57kg) justified her decision to come down from 63kg by earning a podium finish.**

Young Arundhati Choudhary (66kg), who shifted to a lower weight division, and the experienced Jaismine Lamboria (60kg) returned empty-handed and must fix their shortcomings to shine brighter in future events.

Commonwealth Games and Asian championships medallist Jaismine, who lost to North Korean Won Ungyong via RSC after winning the first round in a roller-coaster quarterfinal match, must do some introspection and improve her strength to tackle tougher opponents.

Super heavyweight boxer Narendar Berwal (+92kg) was the lone medallist among the seven male boxers in the fray. The soft-spoken Berwal utilized his immense power as he knocked out Kyrgyzstan's Oomatbek Elchoro-Uulu and beat Iran's Iman Ramezanpour 5-0 before



suffering a 5-0 defeat at the hands of Kazakhstan's Tokyo Olympic bronze medallist Kamshybek Kunkabayev in the semifinals. But he can still do better by boxing more confidently and executing his blows more freely.

Narendar sprung a surprise even as reputed names such as Worlds medallists Deepak Bhoria (51kg), Nishant Dev (71kg) and Shiva Thapa (63.5kg) could not achieve the desired result.

Bhoria would do well to learn from his pre-quarterfinal loss to Japanese Tomoya Tsuboi and display more dominating performances to leave nothing to chance. Nishant's old issue of procrastination in landing his powerful punches pulled him down.

Thapa again had a tough draw and faced an early roadblock. Similar was the case with former Asian champion Sanjeet (92kg).

Sachin Siwach (57kg) showed promise but was unlucky, while Lakshya Chahar (80kg) perished due to his inexperience.

Chief coach C.A. Kuttappa stresses the need for more focused work apart from a bit of talent-hunting in the run-up to the next Olympic qualifier in February.

"Some of the boxers need to listen to the coaches' advice from the ringside. We may have to change a few things in our training with emphasis on technique and tactics. **Also, we may look for talented boxers during the National championships. If needed, we may do some talent hunt ahead of the next qualifier," said Kuttappa. India's coaching staff,**

Right strategy: Parveen Hooda (57kg, below in red) justified her decision to come down from 63kg by earning a podium finish. PICS: PTI



under the leadership of high performance director Bernard Dunne, would be keen to make the most of the next Olympic qualifier — the first World Qualification Tournament in Busto Arsizio, Italy (February 29 to March 12, 2024), which offers four quota places each for all the men's weight divisions. It will also offer three slots for women's 60kg and four for 66kg, where India is yet to secure its Olympic representation.

One can expect the country's boxing team to reorganise itself in order to win an impressive number of quota places for the Paris Games.



Man for the future:

Yashasvi Jaiswal smashed a century in the men's quarterfinal between India and Nepal. AFP

IN FAMILIAR TERRITORY

Cricket's success in the Asian Games has **paved the way** for its inclusion in the Los Angeles 2028 programme.

Aashin Prasad

aashin.p@thehindu.co.in

Apicturesque venue, 'points' instead of runs, a tutorial, rains, world records getting broken and the winner decided on seeding — cricket's return to the Asian Games was received warmly (albeit not by the weather) in Hangzhou. What was probably missing was an outrage following a run-out at the non-striker's end to find out what China's take on the 'Spirit of Cricket' is.

The cricket tournament at the Asiad received a shot in the arm when the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) sent both its men's and women's teams to China. And it was the Indians, who boasted strong squads,

despite the men not sending their first team, who walked away with both gold medals in their maiden appearances.

While it was the native Chinese who had snapped up the majority of tickets for the games, it was the Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Sri Lankan crowd who came in from around the country to add colour to the contests. While the Chinese were busy using paper fans to help beat the heat, the expats were making all the noise. Before the start of each match, the giant screen at the ground would run a 10-minute long explainer, where runs were referred to as points, for the locals to get a quick 101 as they settled in for the day. The organisers would have loved an India v Pakistan contest in both tournaments but both teams were separated from each other until a possible final meeting, which never came.

The event began with the women's tournament with



India's path to gold being fairly straightforward. Smriti Mandhana, Shafali Verma and Jemimah Rodrigues all came good but India would be pleased with how teenager Titas Sadhu, the next fast bowling hope, rose to the occasion. Her spells in the semifinals and the final paved the victories for Harmanpreet Kaur's team to win the top prize. The win also would have helped ease the pain of the loss in the final of the Commonwealth Games last year.

In Hangzhou, cricket's quirks and rules were summed up by the bronze and gold medal matches on

the final day. In the first match, Bangladesh chased down 65 runs in five overs (DLS method), including a last-ball boundary, to edge Pakistan to the bronze medal. In the gold medal match, just one team batted, but the team which didn't end up winning the final.

The short boundaries, which were just 42 metres from the square, led to a flurry of fours and sixes, but the two surfaces being used over 28 matches meant the bowlers' skills came into play in the latter stages of the tournament. The Nepal men's team made the most of the dimensions when it pulverised

Mongolia to rewrite record books. They now hold the highest men's T20I score, the fastest hundred and the fastest fifty, and the biggest win in terms of run margin in the format.

The disparity in quality between the established teams and the newly-included teams like the

Matter of pride: The victorious Indian men's and women's cricket teams post their victories in the finals. Both teams boasted strong squads and walked away with gold medals in their maiden appearances. PTI



THE EVENT BEGAN WITH THE WOMEN'S TOURNAMENT WITH INDIA'S PATH TO GOLD BEING FAIRLY STRAIGHTFORWARD

On the fast track: Fast bowler Titas Sadhu (far right) delivered crucial spells in the semifinals and the final to help India team win the top prize. AFP

Mongolian men's team — which was playing its first-ever international match — was stark at the Asian Games. While teams from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan all had their second-string teams, they were years ahead of the first-choice players from Japan, Hong Kong China, Mongolia and Maldives.

Japan, with half its squad made up of Australian players, who have Japanese parents, doesn't even have a professional set-up for cricket. One of its brightest young talents, Lachlan Yamamoto-Lake, works as a chef.

Japan, Cambodia, Mongolia, Thailand, Singapore, and Maldives were eliminated at the end of the group

Sensational: Tilak Varma scored a T20I half-century before turning 21. AFP

Hong Kong China and Malaysia progressing to the knockouts to face the seeded teams.

Afghanistan was the one team to watch out for after its wins over Sri Lanka and Pakistan in the semifinals. Its bowling came to the fore by stifling both Sri Lanka and Pakistan, but it didn't have the chance to do so in the

final against India. After a rocky start, Afghanistan had recovered to look good for a 130-plus score, which would have allowed its bowlers to have a real go at the Indian batters.

But when rain washed out the game, India was awarded the win and the gold medal because of its higher seeding, based on the International Cricket Committee (ICC) T20I rankings. "This silver means everything to us," said Afghanistan skipper Gulbadin Naib.

At nightfall, the Indian players celebrated in the rain. "We are not used to winning medals. We are all very emotional," said India skipper Ruturaj Gaikwad.

With the International Olympic Committee (IOC) session set to take place later this week, which will determine the inclusion of the sport in the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics, the Asian Games tournament, with limited resources at its disposal, came at the right time to help make a case.

Munich theme

By C.G.S.Narayanan

Munich, is a three-move theme, involving mechanisms like white prevention and provision of mate. In this theme, after the key, white has more than one possible continuation, all with the same or similar mate-threat. Black's first move determines which of the several second move defences to the threat white needs to provide for. In the miniature example on the theme below 1.Ne6 with immediate threat Nc7 is defeated by Nd5. The tries by the WK aiming at the same final mate are defeated by specific BN moves Nxg8 and Nc6 to check the WK on its second move.

W.Speckmann
2 HM, Skakbladet 1958



Mate in three moves

Try: 1.Ne6? ~ 2. Nc7# 1...Nd5!
Try: 1.Kf3? 1...Nxg8 2.Ne6 ~ 3.Nc7
1...Nc6! 2.Bd5 stalemate 2.Ne6
Ne5+! (Nd4+!)
Try: 1.Kh5? 1...Nc6 2.Ne6 ~ 3.Nc7#
1...Nxg8! 2.Ne6 Nf6+!
Key: 1.Kh3! zugzwang
1...d5 2.Ne6 ~ 3.Nc7# 1...Nc6 2.Ne6
~ 3.Nc7# 1...Nxg8 2.Ne6 ~ 3.Nc7
mate.
All with seven men in an aristocratic
setting.

R.C.O.Matthews
1 HM, Arbejder-Skak 1952

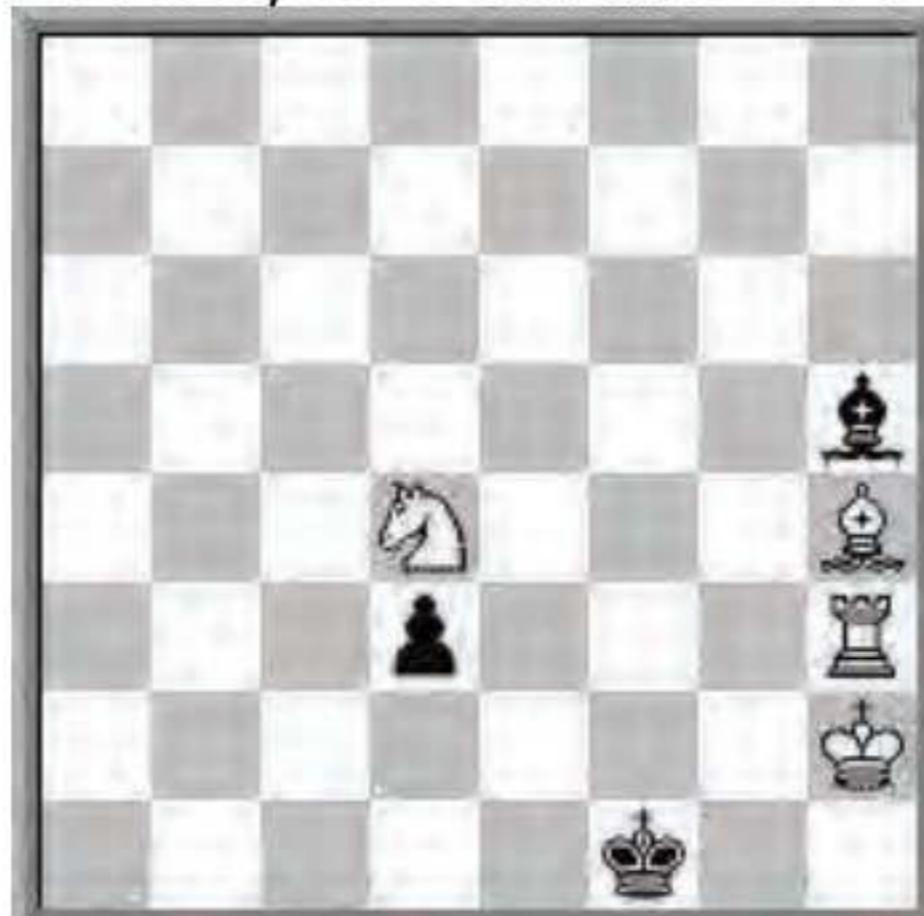


Mate in three moves

In the above illustrative example on the theme both the thematic continuations have the same mate threat. Partial incarceration of the black knight by the black rook permit the white bishop to prevent by interference the WQ mates on e5 and h1. **Key 1.Qa1!** (2.Rxg5 any 3.Qxe5)
1...Rf5 2.Bb2, any /Nh5/Nc7
3.Qa8/Qxh1/Nd6(2....Nf5??)
1....Rgh5 2.Bc1 any/Nf5 3.Qa8/Qxe5
(2...Nh5??)

Finally a miniature Munich to solve

Breuer Josef Johann
2 Prize, Die Schwalbe 1957



Mate in three moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article: 'Duels galore':
Key 1.e4! 1...Bxe4+/Be2+/Bxg4+Bd1
2.Kxe4/Kxe2/Bxg4/Kc2/Kc4

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



India hits the bullseye

The 2023 archery contingent **ended up doing the unthinkable:** pushing South Korea, which gathered 11 medals, including four gold, to the second position. The East Asian country has been ruling competitions since 1982.

Y. B. Sarangi

sarangi.y@thehindu.co.in

The Indian archers' best-ever collection of nine medals, including five gold, enabled the country to top the Hangzhou Asian Games chart in the sport and establish itself as a superpower alongside South Korea. Archery fetched the most podium finishes after athletics and shooting, contributing significantly to India's 100-plus medal milestone.

The archers, especially from the non-Olympic compound division, had

Crowning moment: Indian medallists V. Jyothi Surekha (left, gold) and Aditi Gopichand Swami (bronze) during the medal ceremony for the compound archery individual event.
AFP

done exceedingly well in major competitions like World Cups and World Championships over the past year, which helped them carry a positive momentum into the Asiad.

Their superlative performance, which eclipsed the previous best showing of four medals in 2014, was also way better than the two silver medals in Bangkok, five years ago.

The 2023 contingent ended up doing the unthinkable: pushing South Korea, which gathered 11 medals, including four gold, to the



second position. The East Asian country has been ruling archery competitions since 1982.

The success story of Indian archery is an outcome of a multi-pronged approach that involves a sound domestic circuit (featuring National Ranking Tournaments and Khelo India events), international exposure and training, state-of-the-art facilities, rigorous and continuous assessment (including non-performance trials), and the hiring of foreign experts and scientific support staff (such as sports performance and neuroscience experts, psychologists, physiotherapists, physiologists, anthropometrics, nutritionists, strength and conditioning experts, and video analysts) for the archers.

"You can't find a second sport where they conduct trials for non-performers. The message is clear—perform or perish. Some archers cribbed about the regular trials, but ultimately it helped.

Historic one-two: Ojas Deotale clinched the title in an all-Indian final of individual compound archery. Abhishek Verma took silver. AFP

Experienced archers such as Atanu Das and Abhishek Verma came back strongly after performing below par in the trials," said high-performance director Sanjeeva Singh.

"Earlier, the junior archers never got any exposure. Their international exposure has improved the bench strength, and they are challenging and upstaging the seniors. Now, there is no scope for complacency."

In compound, India got seven medals, with the seasoned V. Jyothi Surekha and young world champion Ojas Deotale claiming triple crowns

INDIA'S MEDALS TALLY IN ARCHERY

GOLD

5

SILVER

2

BRONZE

2



apiece, including individual titles, their respective teams, and mixed team gold medals. It contributed to a never-before moment of India sweeping all five gold medals!

While Jyothi and teenage World champion Aditi Swami, who took an individual bronze, claimed two spots on the women's podium, Deotale and silver medallist Verma secured the top two places in the men's individual competition.

The established trio, including the decorated Jyothi, and the promising duo of Aditi and Parneet Kaur repeated their feats from the Berlin World Championships and Paris World Cup Stage-4 in Hangzhou, while the set combination of Deotale, Verma, and Prathamesh Jawkar recreated their Paris World Cup moment. According to Sanjeeva, foreign compound coach Sergio Pagni, who trained the athletes to go for the kill, had a significant role to play. "Sergio worked on the technical side as well as team bonding.

All smiles:
Compound archers Abhishek Verma, Prathamesh Jawkar and Ojas Deotale celebrate with coach after winning the men's team gold medal match. PTI

"The compound archers came into the event full of confidence. The star of the show was Ojas, who kept the environment lighter with his jovial and happy-go-lucky nature. The compound team is enjoying their archery. We encouraged everyone to talk to each other to help them relax and come and go in a group. Now the recurve archers are trying to enjoy their game."

The extraordinary showing of the Indian compound archers will hold them in good stead in case the event makes its Olympic debut in future.

The recurve archers of the country also improved their performance, bagging men's and women's team bronze medals. Medals in the Olympic discipline broke a 13-year-long barren phase for India at the Asiad and provided some encouragement for the country in the run-up to the Paris Olympics next year.

Atanu Das, B. Dhiraj, and Tushar Shelke pocketed the men's team



bronze, while the combination of Bhajan Kaur, Simranjeet Kaur, and Ankita Bhakat took the women's bronze medal. Even though Korean coach Baek Woongki would be happy with the two recurve medals, he would also be eager to check the archers' inconsistency.

"Our individual performance in recurve was not up to par. We have to learn to score more 10s to win at the highest level. There are two important factors, the technical side and the mindset, that need to improve," said Sanjeeva.

Sanjeeva, an Arjuna and Dronacharya award winner, also underlined that India has a dearth of archers with ideal body structure, which affects the technique a lot for recurve competitions. "It affects the angles, and scores go down."

"In compound, some of the technical shortcomings get compensated because of the mechanical nature of the bow," said Sanjeeva, giving a reason for the

Picture perfect:

The Indian compound archery team with coaches Sergio Pagni (standing, fourth from left) and Sanjeeva Singh (standing, fifth from left). PTI

wide gulf between the performances of the compound and recurve archers.

Nevertheless, this is the time to bask in the unprecedented glory of the Indian archers at the Asiad. And it would be unfair not to mention the well-rounded support provided by the Sports Authority of India and the financial backing of the National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC) in lifting the overall standards of Indian archery.

THIS IS THE TIME TO BASK IN THE UNPRECEDENTED GLORY OF THE INDIAN ARCHERS AT THE ASIAN GAMES

Silver medal for Deepak Punia, the silver lining for Indian wrestling

In the midst of a record campaign in other sports, Hangzhou **largely proved to be a disappointment** on the wrestling front, with just Deepak's silver to go alongside five bronze medals.

Jonathan Selvaraj

jonathan.selvaraj@thehindu.co.in

About two-and-a-half minutes into the second round of the men's 86kg freestyle wrestling final at the Asian Games, Deepak Punia was taken down for what would be the final time by Hassan Yazdani of Iran. With that, the match would end with a 10-0 technical superiority win for the Iranian who is an Olympic and world champion. It also brought India's wrestling campaign at the Asiad to a close on a sombre note.

In the midst of a record campaign in other sports, Hangzhou largely proved to be a disappointment on the wrestling front, with just Deepak's silver to go alongside five bronze medals. India's grapplers had won two gold medals out of the 17 overall in the 2018 Asian

Games.

Hangzhou was the first time in 13 years that an Indian wrestler didn't make the top of the podium at the Asiad.

The 18 athletes who travelled to Hangzhou probably had one of the poorest preparations for a major event in recent history. Trouble started earlier this year following an unprecedented protest in New Delhi's Jantar Mantar spearheaded by Bajrang Punia and Vinesh Phogat – the two Asian gold medallists from 2018, incidentally.

As the Government took over control of the federation, ultimately leading to its suspension, athletes suffered. International exposure came to a halt, as did domestic competitions. Players were reduced to training at their home academies instead of being part of a national

A portrait of Indian wrestler Deepak Punia. He is wearing a blue and white tracksuit with orange accents on the cuffs and collar. A silver medal hangs around his neck, attached to a pink ribbon with 'JSW 2022' printed on it. He is holding a bouquet of red roses and pink orchids in his left hand. His right hand is raised, holding up the silver medal towards the camera. He has a beard and short dark hair. The background is a solid purple.

Silver of hope: India's Deepak Punia emerged second-best in the men's 86kg freestyle field at Hangzhou. AFP

HANGZHOU WAS THE FIRST TIME IN 13 YEARS THAT AN INDIAN WRESTLER DIDN'T MAKE THE TOP OF THE PODIUM AT THE ASIAD

camp, as had been the case previously. Training at home meant not being able to spar with top quality opponents in the way that is possible in a national camp.

Not being able to compete in overseas competitions this year — the Indian team has only taken part in two ranking series outside the major competitions, such as the Asian Championships and World Championships, prior to the Asian Games — meant that athletes couldn't really assess where they stood at the world level.

The sport remained mired in controversy outside the mat as well. After Bajrang Punia and Vinesh Phogat were granted automatic qualification for the Asian Games, two players went to court. While Vinesh eventually opted out of the Games, Bajrang chose to go to Hangzhou. However, any hopes of a podium finish from Bajrang were based on past performances since the Olympic bronze medallist and



THE RESULTS AT HANGZHOU COULD HAVE BEEN PREDICTED GOING BY HOW INDIA'S PERFORMANCE DIPPED OVER THE COURSE OF THE YEAR



four-time Worlds medallist hadn't wrestled since the 2022 World Championships.

But Bajrang wasn't the only wrestler short on practice. Out of the 18 wrestlers shortlisted for competing at the 19th Asian Games in China — after trials in June — camps were held only for six wrestlers under the Greco-Roman category. No national or international camps were organised to train the 12 freestyle wrestlers.

The results at Hangzhou could have been predicted going by how India's performances dipped

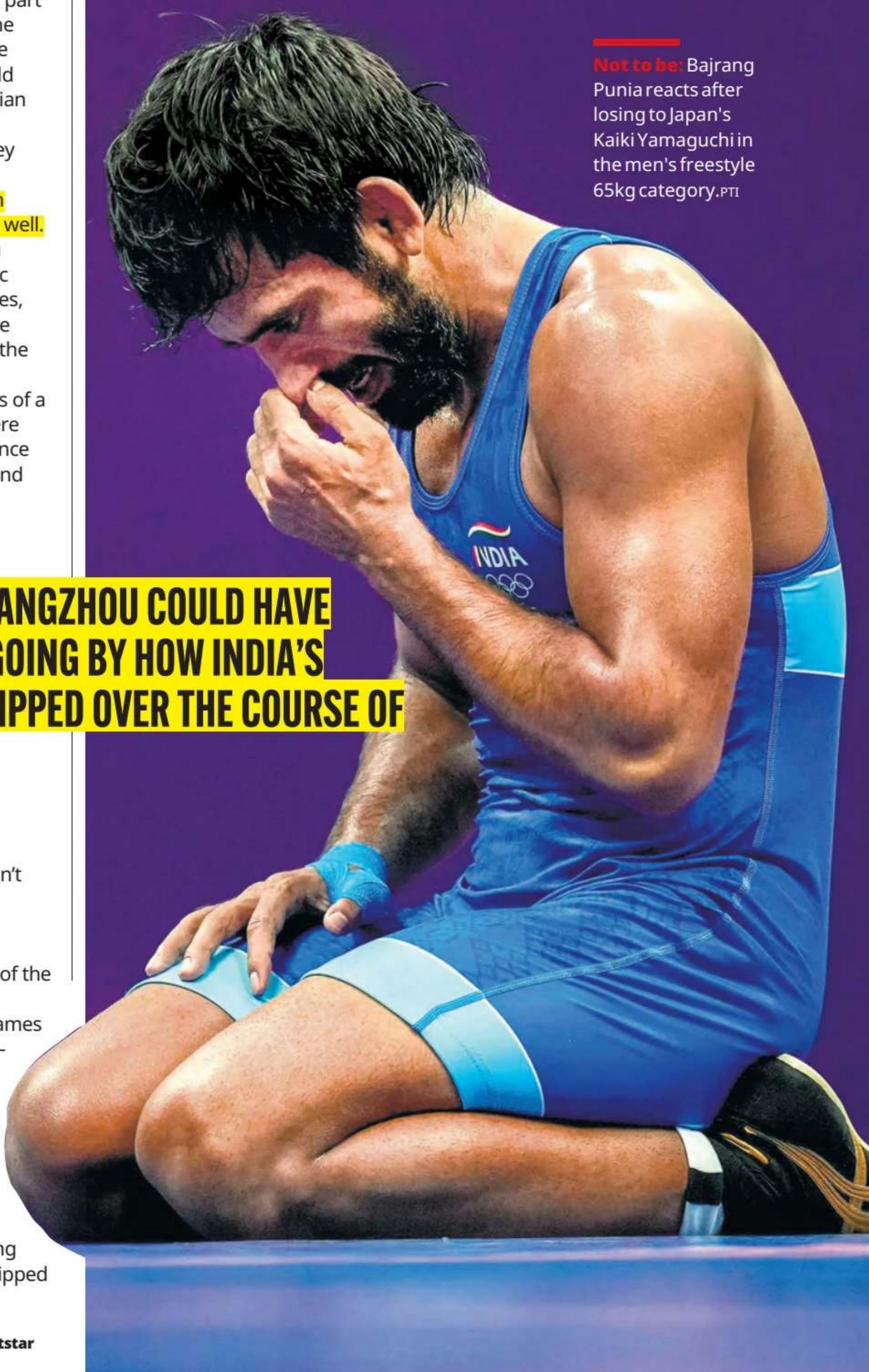
INDIA'S MEDALS TALLY IN WRESTLING

SILVER

1

BRONZE

5



Not to be: Bajrang Punia reacts after losing to Japan's Kaiki Yamaguchi in the men's freestyle 65kg category. PTI

Primed for the podium: Kiran after winning the bronze medal in the women's freestyle 76kg category. PTI



over the course of the year. At the Asian Wrestling Championships in April, India won one gold, one silver, and four bronze medals in the 18 Olympic weight categories. By the World Championships, the number came down to a solitary bronze, won by Antim. Even India's gold medallist from the Asian Championships, Aman Sehrawat, lost out early in Belgrade in September.

At the Asian Games, the outcome of an attritional year was for all to see. Asian champion Aman was beaten in the semifinal of the men's 57kg category by former U-23 World champion Toshihiro Hasegawa of Japan. The margin of victory was narrow, with Hasegawa winning 12-10 despite being up 6-1 at the break.

Aman routinely pulls back big leads but was left with too much to do in the final round. With Olympic silver medallist Ravi Dahiya injured, a gold at the Asian Games would have done a lot for Aman's self-belief, but he has to be satisfied with a bronze.

Bajrang wouldn't even get that. Going into the tournament on the back of a year-long layoff and facing criticism for getting a direct entry to the Indian team was hard enough. The fact that the Olympic bronze medallist was going to go against one of the strongest Asian fields in recent years, with world champion Rahman Amouzad Khalili in the Indian's bracket only made it worse. The gap in form showed as Bajrang was beaten comprehensively 8-1 in the semifinals. In the bronze medal match, it would get even worse as the Indian went down 10-0 to Japan's Kaiki Yamaguchi. As Bajrang finished outside the podium at an international tournament for the first time since the 2017 Worlds, the work is cut out for him to bounce back.

It wasn't all disappointment, though. Sunil Kumar became the first Indian Greco-Roman wrestler to medal since 2010, when he won bronze in the 87kg category.

Antim had the unfortunate luck of facing Japanese star Akari Fujinami in

the quarterfinals of the women's 53kg category. And although Antim would be pinned—having already lost by superiority to the same wrestler at the Asian Championships earlier this year—the Indian would recover with a win over Tokyo Olympic bronze medallist Bat-Ochiryn Bolortuyaa in the Asian Games bronze medal playoff.

With Vinesh still in the early stages of her recovery from knee surgery, Antim looks very much like securing her grasp on the Indian team slot in the women's 53kg category.

Deepak also gave something to cheer about. Although outplayed in the final by a true great of the sport, Deepak showed plenty of promise in his performance. Having dealt with a thigh injury earlier this season, Deepak picked up a win against Uzbekistan's Javrail Shapiev, a Tokyo Olympic and 2023 Worlds fifth-place finisher. In an overall dispiriting result, Deepak's medal was the silver lining, giving hope that 2024 will bring better results.

Bronze era: Ayhika Mukherjee (right) and Sutirtha Mukherjee in action during their victory over the celebrated Chinese pair of Chen Meng and Wang Yidi in the women's doubles quarterfinal. PTI

»
SUTIRTHA HAD TO OVERCOME SOCIAL STEREOTYPES AND PREJUDICES AMONG PEOPLE IN THE MOFUSSIL TOWN WHEN SHE STARTED TAKING TABLE TENNIS LESSONS
«



With identical surnames, similar backstories, Sutirtha-Ayhika put Naihati on TT world map

As Sutirtha and Ayhika look back at their respective journeys, one realises that the duo, with identical surnames, have **similar stories of pain and struggle** to relate.



Amitabha Das Sharma

amitabhadas.sharma@thehindu.co.in

The name Madral would have remained tucked in obscurity had it not been for the extraordinary feat of two girls from this little township in West Bengal's Naihati. Childhood friends Sutirtha Mukherjee and Ayhika Mukherjee, who came together to win the first Asian Games table tennis medal in women's doubles, have made the world sit up and take notice.

As Sutirtha and Ayhika look back at their respective journeys, one realises that the duo, with identical surnames, have similar stories of pain and struggle to relate.

Sutirtha, the older of the two, had

to overcome social stereotypes and prejudices among people in the mofussil town, situated around 50 km from Kolkata, when she started taking table tennis lessons as a seven-year-old. "We had to hear taunts from a lot of people here when my mother took me to Mihir kaku's (uncle's) academy. People here could not accept that I would be wearing shorts and playing with boys. My mother and father were very supportive and brushed away the spiteful remarks to see me prosper in the game," Sutirtha reflected on the difficult initiation process.

Sutirtha's mother, Neeta says, "I had to cycle up and down many times a day to take her to the academy. Later on, when she started training at SAI (Eastern Centre,

Kolkata) our routine was set based on the timings of local trains, as we travelled 50 km each way, almost every day throughout the year. When she started playing tournaments, the cost factor went up even further. There was no financial assistance of any kind, and we had to manage everything from the limited income of her father."

Sutirtha and Ayhika owe their rise to the efforts of Mihir Ghosh, who, as a former player, started a coaching school in one of the clubs in Naihati to tap into the local talents. "Mihir sir was impressed with my game and told me that you have the talent to reach the professional level," Sutirtha said, recalling the encouragement she received from her coach after her mother decided to enrol her.

"Since the early days, I have been winning tournaments regularly at the state level. I became the sub-junior (2009) and later the junior national champion (2012) while training under Mihir sir. After that, I was picked up by Soumyadeep Roy and Poulomi Ghatak to train at an advanced level when they launched their academy (Dhanuka Dhunseri Soumyadeep Poulomi TT Academy)," Sutirtha, who became the senior national champion in 2017 and 2019, says.

"Poulami di (the Bengali way of addressing an elder sister) is my idol, and when she and Soumyadeep da (Bengali for elder brother) asked me to train at their academy, I agreed. They are helping me get enough sponsorship to fund my trips abroad," says Sutirtha about the former national champion couple, who are now running one of the best-equipped academies in the country.

"Though Ayhika started a bit late, being a little junior in age, we developed a good friendship at the junior level as trainees of the same academy. We also played the doubles for fun but did not continue at the senior stage. Then, in 2022, we thought of pairing up again when the two of us started training together at the DDSP Academy. The decision worked as we became the National Games champion (for



TT revolution: Sutirtha Mukherjee poses with her Hangzhou 2022 women's doubles bronze medal outside her residence. DEBASISH BHADURI

Bengal) in doubles. We are really bonding well as partners, and our communication seems just right. We next went on to win a World Tour title (WTT Contender in Tunis) earlier this year, and now we have the Asian Games bronze," Sutirtha said.

"The Asian Games medal was like a dream come true. Table tennis at the Asian Games is of the standard of the Olympics, as all the top players in the world play here. Beating the world champion Chinese team, and that too in China, was unimaginable. The support of the new Table Tennis Federation of India secretary general, Kamlesh Mehta, is really appreciable. As players, we are

getting a lot of support from the Federation and Mehta sir, who is extra careful about the needs of the players," Sutirtha says, while hoping to make their partnership shine in the coming WTT Contender event in Muscat.

Ayhika credits her parents for handholding her table tennis journey. "My parents sacrificed a lot to see me prosper in table tennis. My father left his job with the BSF to devote time to my training and travelling during the tournaments. I have reached this place because they sought to dedicate their best for my betterment as a player," she says.

"Mihir sir is one of the most

hardworking and dedicated coaches I have ever seen. I owe a lot to him for my growth as a player. And the DDSP academy helped in fine-tuning my game both technically and tactically. The way Soumyadeep da and Poulomi di plan out the training programme is great, as it really helps in getting the best out of us," says Ayhika.

The belief system

"We never thought of beating players from China, Japan, and Korea, but once I joined the DDSP academy, our coaches Soumyadeep and Poulomi inspired us to dream anew and elevated our self-belief. As we started believing in our abilities, the level of our game rose significantly," Sutirtha says, analysing

THOUGH AYHIKA IS YOUNGER, SUTIRTHA SAYS THEY DEVELOPED A GOOD FRIENDSHIP AT THE JUNIOR LEVEL AS TRAINEES OF THE SAME ACADEMY

the transformation in their game.

"Even our fancied opponents are now wary of us. And we could prove that in Hangzhou when we beat the world champions — Chen Meng and Wang Yidi — in their backyard. A big partisan crowd of around 15,000 was constantly rooting for the home players, and we just blocked out the noise to turn the tables on them," she says.

Their coach Soumyadeep shares his insights into the pair. "Table tennis is a sport that is evolving every six months. One has to be alert to know those developments and pass them on to the players. Sutirtha has been training for eight years under me, and her progress is remarkable. I saw the potential in them as a pair after they resumed their doubles partnership. I made them believe they could beat anyone in the world. That happened in the WTT



Winning combo: Sutirtha Mukherjee poses with her medals, with coach Soumyadeep Roy by her side, from the 81st senior national and interstate championship in Hyderabad on February 2, 2020. G. RAMAKRISHNA

Contenders in Tunis (June 2023), where they beat some of the best women's teams to win the title," he says.

"Their game is a fine mixture of aggression and trickery, and I have put them through different game situations in a multi-ball training system. But above all, it was to impart that belief system that I can beat anyone on a given day, which is something that I have been focusing on as a coach.

"This is to get their combination working, as the two have differing playing styles and use different rubbers on their bats. The proper execution of the game plan comes from a lot of training and a strong belief system that helps them raise their game at the right time," Soumyadeep, who is an ardent admirer of badminton legend Pullela Gopichand's training methods, says

about his trainees.

Talking about their partnership, Ayhika says, "We are doing well, but I believe our best is yet to come. Maybe we could have gone further (in the Asian Games) after we had won against the Chinese pair (Meng and Wang), who are the world champions. Chen Meng is also the Olympic champion. The North Korean pair in the semifinals was definitely beatable, but on that day, they played really well.

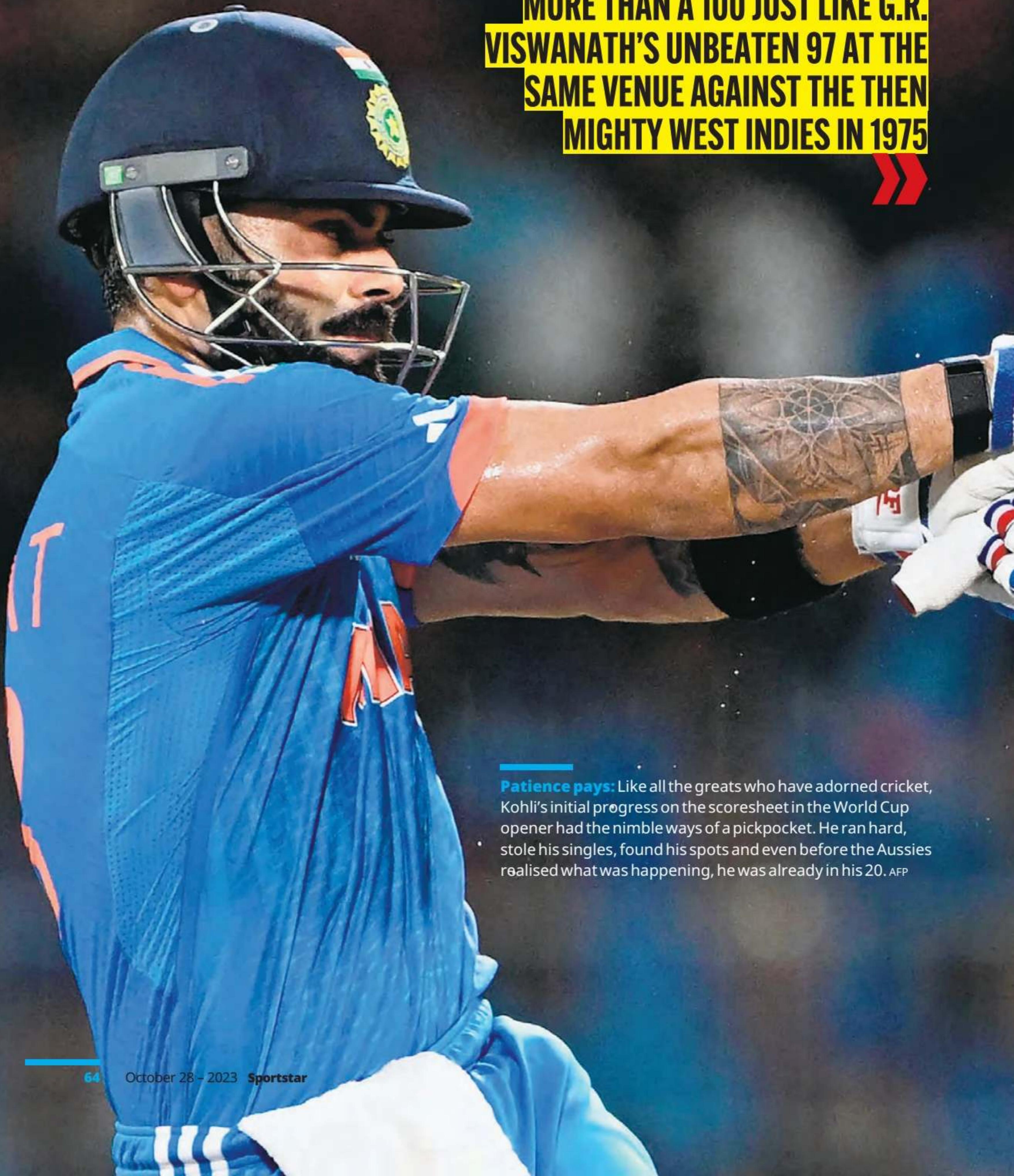
"We are happy with our progress, as we have really worked hard for it. Despite having completely different game styles, we complement each other very well as a team. We can read our minds well, and that translates to a proper understanding during a match. When we play as a team, I try to create the favourite ball (preferable returns to hit the winner) for her, and she does the same for

me. That makes things easier for us. We played many tournaments as a team at the junior stage but were playing with different partners as seniors before our personal coach, Soumyadeep sir, asked us to team up and practice with a proper plan." Ayhika and Sutirtha improved a place to 15th in world rankings with their Asian Games performance.

Sutirtha and Ayhika's 'Mihir kaku' hopes their achievements are acknowledged. "I can say that they have reached this level of excellence because they are dedicated and hardworking. They hardly missed any training sessions as kids, and they continue to remain committed to training the same way despite all the success. I hope their achievements are recognised with Arjuna Awards," says Mihir, in a way summing up the success story of two of his best cadets.



KOHLI'S 85 WAS A KNOCK WORTH MORE THAN A 100 JUST LIKE G.R. VISWANATH'S UNBEATEN 97 AT THE SAME VENUE AGAINST THE THEN MIGHTY WEST INDIES IN 1975



Patience pays: Like all the greats who have adorned cricket, Kohli's initial progress on the scoresheet in the World Cup opener had the nimble ways of a pickpocket. He ran hard, stole his singles, found his spots and even before the Aussies realised what was happening, he was already in his 20. AFP

THE VENERATION OF VIRAT KOHLI

A blend of eternal wise head and forever young heart, India's premier batter is slipping into mentor-mode, as his 85 in the WC opener against Australia proved.

K.C. Vijaya Kumar
vijayakumar.kc@thehindu.co.in

An afternoon ebbed away at Bengaluru's National Cricket Academy and this was the year 2008. With the Under-19 World Cup in Malaysia just round the corner, the Indian junior squad was busy training. As evening seeped in while traffic piled up on roads around the M.

Chinnaswamy Stadium and birds roosted inside the adjacent Cubbon Park, a young lad strode out. He was the team's skipper and answered to the name Virat Kohli.

"Virat," a call went and he immediately said: "Yes." The youngster was asked about the team's prospects, the mind space, his form and he had a precise answer to all the queries. This was an old head on young shoulders. India went on to win that tournament and the Kohli saga had got its 'Act 1, Scene 1' opening. A few years later, after he transitioned to the senior Indian squad with mixed results before

finding his mojo, a few cricket writers ran into him at the Royal Challengers Bangalore's (RCB) team hotel.

The conversation was revealing. This was a cricketer, still in his early days at the highest level and here he was holding a mirror to himself. Kohli spoke about losing his way, taking things for granted, presuming that the step up from Under-19 to State and National cricket would be smooth and how one day he understood that the only way to stay afloat was to work hard. He watched his diet, exercised hard, trained at the nets with maniacal obsession and the turnaround was done. The candour was remarkable. Again, an old head on young shoulders.

Cut to the present, he now has an old head on old shoulders though he is only 34 but for athletes, their sporting age hastens towards retirement once the 30-mark is crossed. This is King Kohli, the master of pursuits with the broad bat essaying glorious drives and rapier pulls. He is again an athletic fielder, full of energy and one who draws television cameras like a magnet. He is also a former captain, be it India or RCB, with terrific results from the former and middling outcomes from the latter.

Kohli has seen much ever since he first turned up for India in 2008. He could be Moses parting the seas in the manner he caned Lasith Malinga once in Australia. He could be James Anderson's bunny in 2014 and then turn it around in 2018 and dominate the seamer. This is a blue-chip cricketer, ever willing to learn, but with the stardust of celebrityhood lighting him up, the sunglasses and fat earphones were on and an invisible mask slipped across his visage. But out on the field, he was always sunshine and sweat, the



Deadly duo: Kohli and Rahul recorded India's highest fourth wicket partnership in ODI World Cup history.

B.JOTHI RAMALINGAM

jive and the dive, the anger and the joy, the crazy laughter and the odd Punjabi expletive.

Kohli, the blend of eternal wise head and forever young heart, is slipping into mentor mode within the changeroom. His 85 in India's ODI World Cup opener against Australia at Chennai's M.A. Chidambaram Stadium was a masterpiece. **It was a knock worth more than a 100 just like G.R. Viswanath's unbeaten 97 at the same venue against the then mighty West Indies in 1975.**

India was down to two for three in two overs and Kohli, elder brother and a naughty one at that, whispered to K.L. Rahul: "Play it like a Test match." The target wasn't extreme, just 200, but the pressure was immense.

Yet Kohli found a way. Like all the greats who have adorned cricket, Kohli's initial progress on the scoresheet had the nimble ways of a pickpocket. He ran hard, stole his singles, found his spots, and even before the Aussies realised what

was happening, he was already in his 20s.

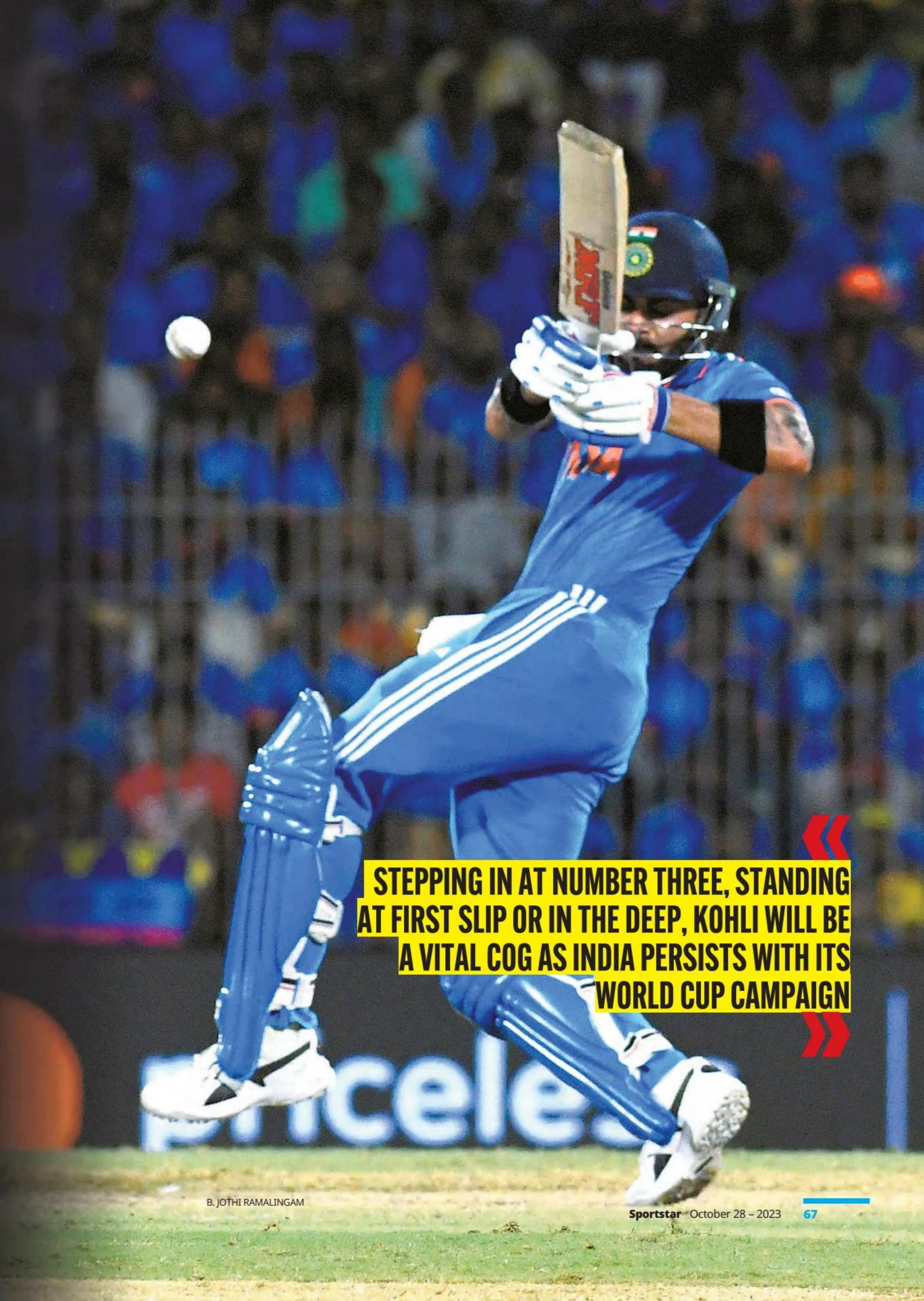
His calmness seeped into a twitchy Rahul too. The two shared a glorious 165-run fourth-wicket partnership that eventually sealed India's six-wicket victory. Rahul remained unbeaten on 97 much like his Karnataka senior Viswanath in the past. His knock was stellar but its genesis lay in the 'Kohli Effect'. What Kohli is doing now is what the great Sachin Tendulkar did during his career's second-half. At one point in time, Tendulkar was either the one-man army or the lone boy on a burning deck but once new allies cropped up ranging from Sourav Ganguly to M.S. Dhoni, he seamlessly did the patriarch act.

Kohli is in that zone. Perhaps he is at peace now after moving on from his captaincy angst and the three seasons when the runs proved to be a mirage and his Test average dipped below 50, before he exploded with a stunning knock against Pakistan in the 2022 ICC T20 World Cup game at Melbourne. A

53-ball 82 was a distillation of Kohli at his best. It had shades of Tendulkar, Viv Richards, Dhoni and Javed Miandad, but most importantly it had the Kohli touch as its defining signature.

It is a fact that he is stretched thin, playing across formats, and also featuring in the IPL. **But his fitness is still top-drawer and he has found a second-wind that should bolster the Men in Blue or India in whites.** And just like how the Indian team rallied around Tendulkar in the 2011 World Cup which culminated in Dhoni's winning six in the final in Mumbai, perhaps the current lot have found their common spark within the intensity that Kohli always exudes.

Stepping in at number three, standing at first slip or in the deep, Kohli will be a vital cog as India persists with its World Cup campaign. Great athletes always bequeath hope; Kohli has that special ability. In the days ahead, his legacy will take further shape and within that rests a nation's billion dreams.



**STEPPING IN AT NUMBER THREE, STANDING
AT FIRST SLIP OR IN THE DEEP, KOHLI WILL BE
A VITAL COG AS INDIA PERSISTS WITH ITS
WORLD CUP CAMPAIGN**

OF ADULATION, CAMARADERIE AND TEAM BONDING

V. S. Aravind
aravind.vs@thehindu.co.in

Biryani, kheer, and kebabs. Pakistan all-rounder Agha Salman has been in love with these delicacies ever since he landed in India. The Pakistan team arrived in India after almost seven years and has been enjoying its stay in Hyderabad, with fans pouring in numbers, attempting to catch a glimpse of their favourite stars.

A few nights ago, the road leading to the famous Jewel of Nizam was thronged by fans when the word was out that the Pakistan team was at the Golkonda Hotel in Saifabad for dinner. Signing autographs and obliging selfies, Salman and his team members had a great time, all the while enjoying the local cuisine. "I am yet to get over it, and the reception has been outstanding, and we are loving our stay in India. *Khana to lajawaab hai aur logon ka pyaar bhi* (The food is really tasty, and so is the love of the people)," Salman told Sportstar in an exclusive interaction at a city hotel where the Pakistan team was staying.

Among the current Pakistani squad, only Mohammad Nawaz and Salman have previously toured India. While Nawaz was part of the 2016 ICC World Twenty20 squad, Salman was a member of the Lahore Lions team that participated in the 2014 Champions League. Salman further credited his captain for binding the team together and that they back each other.

"Babar leads by example. He is the captain only on the ground. Outside, he is our friend and whether a player is junior or senior, he will spend time with them and have food with them. He treats people really well. He



Confident: "We have got the international exposure and our performance will be good," says Pakistan all-rounder Agha Salman. AFP



Good friends: "Look at how Babar and Kohli respect each other and it is wonderful. The same is true with other players," says Salman. AFP

represents around 25 crore people and on the ground he backs all players. His leadership skills are really good but more than a captain, he is a friend."

In a high-pressure tournament like the World Cup, team bonding exercises are a common practice and although the team missed one that was scheduled in Dubai due to a delay in visas, the all-rounder insisted that it hasn't cause the team too much worry.

"We have spent so much time as a unit that we don't need any bonding sessions. All of us are very good friends and back each other. World Cup is special as you play against the best players in the world against the

best teams and if you have to beat the best, you have to be the best. The tournament gives us a chance to become national heroes and we want to make our nation proud. Our preparation is good and we are doing everything that is required to perform at this big stage," he said.

Pakistan openers have been struggling to give their team a blazing start and have sometimes been over-dependent on Muhammad Rizwan and Babar. The responsibility of manning the middle-order lies on Salman's shoulders, along with the likes of Iftikhar Ahmed, Nawaz, and Saud Shakeel. With Babar and Rizwan keeping their bats fully charged, the middle-order has largely remained untested. However, Salman is confident in delivering the goods when it matters.

"Our middle-order is young and has players like Saud and Ifthikar and we have been performing well since last year. We have got the international exposure and our performance will be good," he said.

Speaking about Pakistan's pace bowlers, Salman said, "Pakistan is

blessed to have produced such quality fast bowlers and it still keeps producing them. Even now we have some very good bowlers like Shaheen, Haris and unfortunately, Naseem Shah got injured and we will definitely miss him but his replacement Hasan Ali is a proven match winner and his performances in the past have been brilliant. Even Mohammad Wasim is a very good bowler and just because his last two matches didn't go well doesn't mean that he is a bad bowler. We have probably the best bowling attack in the tournament." The all-rounder who represents Pakistan in all three formats, further opined that both India and Pakistan players share a good relationship, with Virat Kohli and Babar setting an example.

"The mutual respect between both the teams is great and we meet in a very friendly way. Yes, there is a healthy rivalry but off the field we are good friends and we share a good bond. The friendship is great and just look at how Babar and Kohli respect each other and it is wonderful. The same is true with other players.

» WORLD CUP – MATCH 1 ENGLAND vs NEW ZEALAND

Ayan Acharya
ayan.acharya@thehindu.co.in

Revenge is often served cold, but if that doesn't work, you can always turn up the heat and serve it piping hot later. Rachin Ravindra, who watched the final of the 2019 World Cup when he was 19 in a bar in Bengaluru, took his sweet revenge four years later, scoring an 82-ball century in the opening game of the 2023 World Cup.

However, becoming the Player of the Match in a World Cup game also has its downsides, as Ravindra discovered during a slightly chaotic press conference. While he was answering questions from the media, England pacer Mark Wood walked past the journalists' entourage after finishing his byte. The Q&A session was paused momentarily, and only resumed when Wood had left the scene. Ravindra answered questions

patiently for almost eight minutes, cheered on by his batting partner and 'best mate' Devon Conway and Matt Henry, who were also present in the room.

During the press conference, Ravindra was asked about his Indian heritage (for the umpteenth time), Conway's South African roots, and if it was special to win a match for their 'adopted country'. "I guess we're both completely Kiwis now," Ravindra replied, with Conway applauding. All in all, it was a great day to be a Kiwi fan. And while England's defence of its World Cup could not have made a worse start, there is still a silver lining. Jos Buttler wasn't too keen on the 'defending champions' tag. "I probably don't like the word defend. I want us to attack as a side and attack this World Cup," Buttler had said on match eve. Jonny Bairstow promptly put his captain's words into action when he hit the second ball of the match from Trent Boult for six. Boom or bust, England's here to entertain.



FOR MORE
STORIES

ENGLAND
282/9
(Joe Root 77,
Matt Henry 3/48)

NEW ZEALAND
283/1
(Devon Conway 152*,
Rachin Ravindra 123*)

DAY OF THE CENTURIONS

England faced an unstoppable force in the form of **Conway** and **Ravindra** who smashed hundreds to help New Zealand win the opener.

VIJAY SONEJI



NAGARA GOPAL

WORLD CUP – MATCH 2
PAKISTAN vs NETHERLANDS

SAUD SUPREMACY

Saud Shakeel and **Mohammad Rizwan** helped Pakistan survive a top-order collapse to deny Netherlands a major upset.

PAKISTAN
286

(Saud Shakeel 68, Mohammad Rizwan 68, Bas de Leede 4/62)

beat

NETHERLANDS
205

(Bas de Leede 67, Vikramjit Singh 52, Haris Rauf 3/43)

V. S. Aravind
aravind.vs@thehindu.co.in

The scripts written on a cricket field are for real, and the ones directing them tend to become national heroes. On the biggest stage—the World Cup—Saud Shakeel took a lionhearted step to spark early celebrations in Karachi. Pakistan began its campaign with a dominating win over the Netherlands, with Saud's half-century eclipsing Bas de Leede's all-round heroics.

Walking in with his side struggling at 38/3, Shakeel and Mohammad Rizwan (above) resurrected the innings with the former rising to the occasion, this time cracking the ODI code. A Test specialist donned a new avatar. Pakistan posted 286, with de Leede picking up a four-wicket haul. The 23-year-old then counter-punched with the bat and found a partner in Vikram Singh, who

scored a half-century. The Dutch did give a scare but fizzled out as the night progressed, with Haris Rauf zipping through to the chants of 'Kohli, Kohli'. Amidst all the hullabaloo, Pakistan skipper Babar Azam quietly made a statement, expressing his displeasure at not having the support of their fans in India during the captains' meet. The vast stands in Hyderabad lay empty, with scattered spectators donning imitation India jerseys.

At the first tier, a lone die-hard Pakistani fan, Bashir Chacha and to his far right, a 14-year-old Babar fan, were the only cheerleaders for the men in green.

Having registered an 81-run win, Saud arrived for the media interaction a little early, with de Leede still in the middle of his narration.

Saud waited, and this time there was no restlessness as he batted questions with ease, knowing he could whack anything thrown at him.

» WORLD CUP – MATCH 3
AFGHANISTAN VS BANGLADESH

AFGHANISTAN

156

(Mehidy Hasan 3/25, Shakib Al Hasan 3/30)

lost to

BANGLADESH

158/4

(Najmul Shanto 59, Mehidy Hasan 57)



OFF TO A STEADY START

Bangladesh overcame a **slow pitch and poor outfield conditions** to defeat a dismal Afghanistan.

Strong show: Najmul Shanto (above) and Mehidy Hasan (below) struck fine half-centuries to guide Bangladesh to a convincing victory. EMMANUEL YOGINI

Ayan Shankar Acharya

ayan.acharya@thehindu.co.in

Hashmatullah Shahidi, the captain of Afghanistan, was determined to break the stereotype of being underperformers in big tournaments before their ODI World Cup opener against Bangladesh in Dharamsala. Afghanistan failed to win any games in the 2019 World Cup and choked against Sri Lanka in the recent Asia Cup.

Shahidi remained confident that his team was better prepared and more well-rounded to take on Bangladesh. However, its batting collapsed from 83 for 1 to 156 all out, indicating otherwise.

Bangladesh won the match by six wickets, and Afghanistan suffered its 13th consecutive World Cup defeat, dating back to 2015.

The conditions in Dharamshala



are generally considered favorable for seam bowling, but the pitch used in the match between Bangladesh and Afghanistan was slow.

However, it was not the pitch that caused controversy, but the outfield in Dharamsala.

Afghanistan coach Jonathan Trott expressed concern that spinner Mujeeb ur Rahman was lucky to avoid serious injury after his knee got stuck into the ground while sliding during the match.

Despite the complaint, ICC officials inspected the surface and found no cause for concern. However, it received an 'average' rating.

This isn't the first time Dharamsala has been in the news for issues related to the outfield. A Test match between Australia and India, due to be played at the same venue, in March was moved last minute because of the outfield.

» WORLD CUP – MATCH 4
SOUTH AFRICA VS SRI LANKA



Vijay Lokapally
vijay.l@thehindu.co.in

The first of the 31 sixes of the match came in the ninth over when Quinton de Kock played a perfect pull off Dasun Shanaka. The execution of the shot was a confirmation of the runs that lay in store on a pitch as perfect as any for batting. The bounce and pace off the pitch set up a massive platform for the South Africans to exploit and they did it in a most charming manner. The strokeplay stirred the imagination of the spectators who had turned up with high expectations.

It was a warm afternoon at the resplendent Arun Jaitley Stadium which filled up with close to 12,000 fans as the lights came on. The centurions — de Kock and Rassie van der Dussen (**above**) and Aiden Markram (**left**) — toyed with the bowlers who bowled too short to be repeatedly cut and pulled. When they overpitched, the South Africans promptly drove in front and square too.

For the Sri Lankas, as pointed out by Sadeera Samarawickrama, the turning point was the dismissal of Kusal Mendis. "I think the turning point was that we lost Kusal Mendis and myself in two overs." Mendis, actually, was the best batsman on view. His eight sixes left a stamp of authority on the game where Sri Lanka was mostly reduced trying to catch up. A pity that Mendis finished on the losing side.

SOUTH AFRICA
428/5

(Rassie van der Dussen 108, Aiden Markram 106, Quinton de Kock 100)

beat

SRI LANKA
326

(Charith Asalanka 79, Kusal Mendis 76, Dasun Shanaka 68, Gerald Coetze 3/68)

» WORLD CUP – MATCH 5
AUSTRALIA VS INDIA

THRILL OF THE CHASE

AUSTRALIA

199

(Ravindra Jadeja 3/28)

lost to

INDIA

201/4

(KL Rahul 97*, Virat Kohli 85,
Josh Hazlewood 3/38)

Kohli and **Rahul** blunted an aggressive Australian attack that ran out of steam defending a below-par total.

Sahil Mathur

sahil.mathur@thehindu.co.in

It is often said that sometimes you just need to let your natural instincts take over. That's what happened when Virat Kohli and KL Rahul (above) came into bat chasing 200 against Australia.

Despite having trained to follow the trend



B.JOTHI RAMALINGAM



of attacking cricket, the situation on Sunday was such that the two batters had to do what naturally comes to them — taking their time and prioritising rotating the strike.

The match was not only about the nightmarish start to the run chase but also what the bowlers did on a hot Chennai afternoon — especially the Indian spin trio of Ravindra Jadeja (**below**), R Ashwin, and Kuldeep Yadav — triggering an Australian collapse.

For the Pat Cummins-led side, it wasn't something Australia had experienced in recent times — losing the first game of a World Cup (first time since 1992).

But as he said ahead of the game — "You're there with 14 other guys and you're on a journey to try and make the next couple of months special."

And nothing's more special than rising after a fall.

Dream start: Josh Hazlewood (left) was on fire against the Indian top order, and was ably supported by Mitchell Starc. AP



» WORLD CUP – MATCH 6
NEW ZEALAND VS NETHERLANDS



AP

New Zealand continued its sterling form to beat Netherlands comprehensively thanks to a **fiver by Santner.**

V. S. Aravind
aravind.vs@thehindu.co.in

NEW ZEALAND
322/7
(Will Young 70, Tom Latham 53, Rachin Ravindra 51)

beat
NETHERLANDS
223
(Colin Ackermann 69, Mitchell Santner 5/59, Matt Henry 3/40)

New Zealand floored the Netherlands to begin its World Cup on a perfect note by registering its second win on the trot. The chief architect, Mitchell Santner (**in pic**) stood out by picking up his maiden five-wicket haul in the World Cup, his second overall in his ODI career as the Black Caps left for Chennai riding high on confidence.

Numbers sometimes don't narrate the entire story, as although Santner won the player of the match award, the all-rounder thought he bowled well in Ahmedabad against England when compared against the Dutch. That was some honest confession.

"I don't think I bowled as well as I

did in Ahmedabad. Probably missed a little bit more, but it was nice to keep trying to be aggressive and get wickets." Well, although the all-rounder might not rate his performance highly, adapting to the slow surface and spinning a web around the batters was truly impressive.

It won't be surprising if the left-arm spinner once again stands tall in Chennai against Bangladesh. Thanks to the IPL, Santner knows the track in Chepauk like the back of his hand, having spent time with the Chennai Super Kings. Information is key in modern-day cricket, and the spinner's knowledge of the 22 yards will come in handy as the Kiwis aim for a hat-trick of wins.

» WORLD CUP – MATCH 7
ENGLAND VS BANGLADESH



ENGLAND

364/9

(Dawid Malan 140, Joe Root 82, Jonny Bairstow 52, Mahedi Hasan 4/71, Shoriful Islam 3/75)

beat

BANGLADESH

221

(Litton Das 76, Mushfiqur Rahim 51, Reece Topley 4/43)

Clinical: While Malan (in pic) struck a fine century, Reece Topley (below) put up a clinical show with four wickets.

PICS: EMMANUEL YOGINI

MAVERICK MALAN

England **returned to winning ways** with a ruthless performance against Bangladesh.

Ayan Acharya

ayan.acharya@thehindu.co.in

Dawid Malan's 140 catalysed England's vital 137-run victory against Bangladesh at the HPCA Stadium in Dharamsala. This was his fourth one-day international century of 2023 and his sixth ODI hundred in 23 innings, and the groundwork for it was laid on match eve during the training session with the mighty snow-capped Dhauladhar mountains in the backdrop.

Malan (above) was one of the three English batters — Harry Brook and Moeen Ali being the others — to hit the nets early on a pleasant Monday morning.

Bowling at England's batters who are trying to smack the leather off the ball wouldn't be on top of people's check list, but

for the net bowlers in Dharamsala, it was an unforgettable experience.

Given the threat posed by Bangladesh captain and left-arm spinner, Shakib Al Hasan, it was no surprise that Malan and Brook summoned left-arm finger spinners first up.

Both batters spent close to half-an-hour shoring up their defence, with Malan driving, flicking and cutting — shots that would feature in his knock merely 24 hours later.

Malan even offered some encouragement when he was beaten on a couple of occasions at the nets. "Well bowled, mate," said Malan to a young left-arm spinner. "That would be out in a match."

He would go on to add 115 for the first wicket with Jonny Bairstow and set the tone for England's first win in the tournament.



WORLD CUP – MATCH 8 SRI LANKA VS PAKISTAN

Solid partnership: Rizwan, along with Abdullah Shafique, forged a 176-run stand. K.V.S. GIRI



AN ABSOLUTE RUN-FEST

V. S. Aravind
aravind.vs@thehindu.co.in

SRI LANKA

344/9

(Kusal Mendis 122, Sadeera Samarawickrama 108, Pathum Nissanka 51, Hasan Ali 4/71)

lost to

PAKISTAN

345/4

(Mohammad Rizwan 131*, Abdullah Shafique 113)

Both teams smashed **four centuries in total**, as Pakistan stunned Sri Lanka in a stellar chase.

batter to score a century on his World Cup debut.

The crowd was in for a run-fest as the match saw four centurions: Kusal Mendis smashing his way to record the fastest century for Sri Lanka in a World Cup followed by Sadeera Samarawickrama's maiden century. Although the crowd cheered for the Sri Lankans, it was a frenzied atmosphere when Rizwan came out, all guns blazing.

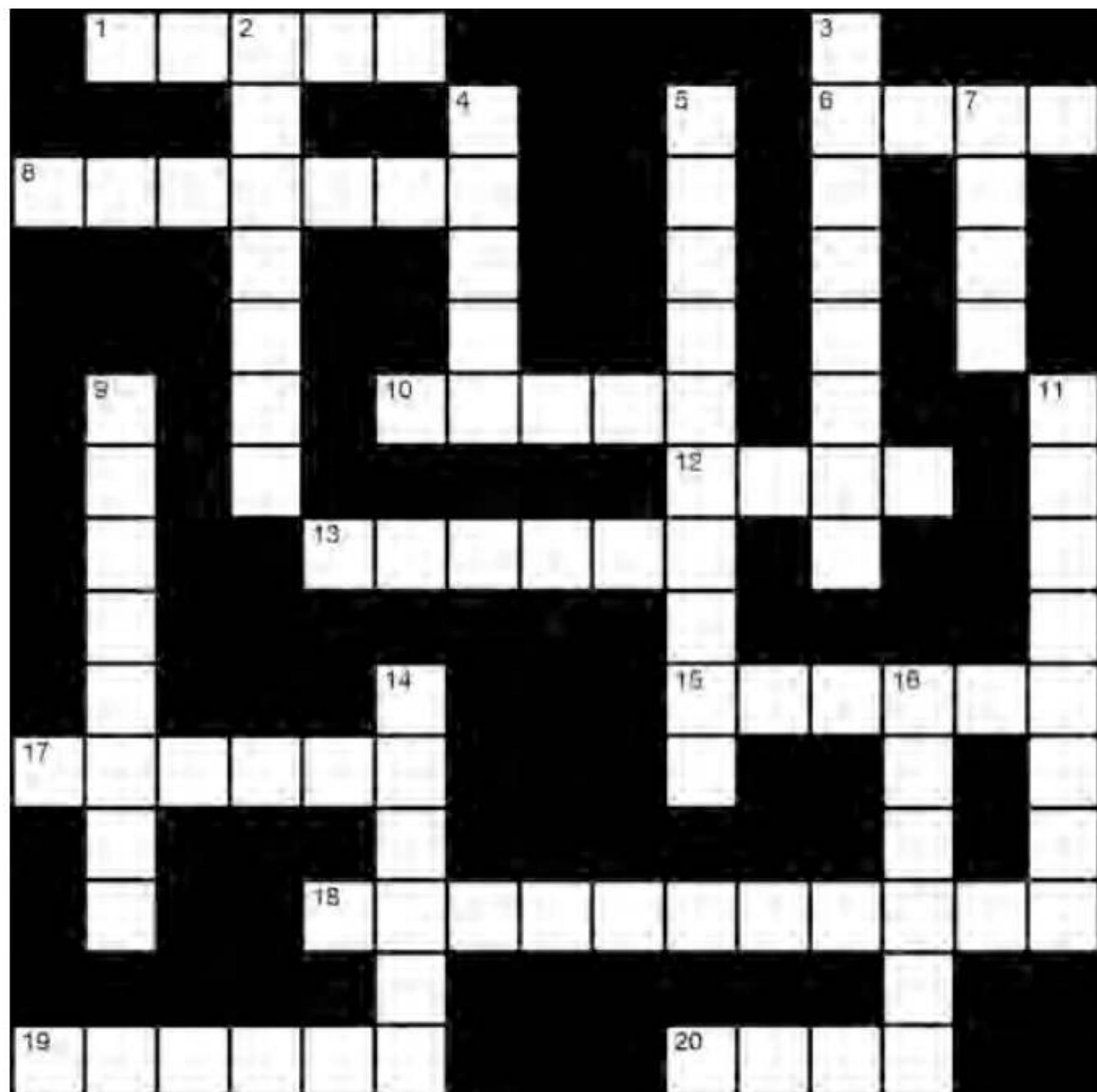
Pakistan gunned down a total of 345 with 10 balls to spare, and a relatively pleased Rizwan sprinted to hug the chief curator Y.L. Chandrasekhar. Hyderabad proved to be a happy hunting ground for the neighbours, and the Pakistan team was showered with warmth and great hospitality. The team will now pack bags and head to Ahmedabad for the highly-anticipated India-Pakistan clash and Rizwan will take with him fond memories at a venue where he felt 'playing like in Rawalpindi'.

Mohammad Rizwan has developed a special bond with Hyderabad and its people. The popularity of David Warner in the city is well documented, but the love and craze for Rizwan seems to be a notch higher. During Pakistan's dominating six-wicket win over Sri Lanka, the wicketkeeper-batter hammered a brilliant unbeaten century to help his side register its second consecutive win in the tournament.

Such was the adulation that fans kept cheering every shot that Rizwan played, with the premier batsman smashing the Sri Lanka bowlers despite battling cramps. Rizwan, along with Abdullah Shafique forged a 176-run stand, with the opener becoming the first Pakistani

CROSSWORD

SRIRAM SRINIVASAN



SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

ACROSS

- 1 First Indian man to win 3000m steeplechase gold at the Asian Games. (5)
- 6 India's 4x400 men's relay team: Anas, ..., Ajmal, and Ramesh. (4)
- 8 Major League Soccer's ... Fire FC. (7)
- 10 The 18-year-old Indian woman pacer, ... Sadhu. (5)
- 12 Tajinderpal Singh ..., who defended his shot put crown at the Asian Games. (4)
- 13 Italian tennis player Jannik ... (6)
- 15 Vadodara bowler Mahesh Pithiya has an action similar to that of ... (6)
- 17 Saul '...' Alvarez, who recently

defended his super-middleweight title. (6)

- 18 No one has played more international cricket without playing in a Test match than (South Africa's) ... (5,6)
- 19 Bopanna's mixed doubles partner at the Asian Games. (6)
- 20 Indian ... Sojan, silver winner at the Asian Games long jump event. (4)

DOWN

- 2 Indian cyclist David ... Elkatochoongo. (7)
- 3 One half of India's 35km race walk mixed team, the other one being Manju Rani. (3,5)
- 4 Cricketer who is a co-owner of The Blue Rising Team, which will

participate in electric boat races. (5)

- 5 Sudipti, Divyakriti, Hriday, and Anush got India a gold in ... at the Asian Games after 41 years. (10)
- 7 India's champion compound archer ... Pravin Deotale. (4)
- 9 First Indian woman to win Asian Games gold in javelin. (4,4)
- 11 The mixed doubles team that won an Asian Games squash gold: Deepika and ... (8)
- 14 Alvaro ..., captain of the Spanish football team. (6)
- 16 The Netherlands' ... Barresi, at 39 years and 153 days, is the oldest player in this edition of the ODI World Cup. (6)

« I think it's about selling the game. As long as the best players are playing the ODI format, that's great »

KAGISO RABADA

Shayan Acharya

shayan.acharya@thehindu.co.in

Kagiso Rabada, the pace spearhead of South Africa, is often called the 'Smiling Assassin' for how he likes to go about his business. With a sharp action and the ability to clock 140kmph-plus frequently, the 28-year-old is back in India to feature in his second ODI World Cup.

While the next month-and-a-half will be challenging, adapting to different conditions across the country, Rabada will be banking on his experience of having played here in the past to lead the Proteas' fast bowling department.

In conversation with *Sportstar*, Rabada talks about why ODIs are still entertaining and what it takes to be a successful fast bowler in these evolving times.

There is a belief that the 2023 World Cup will be the one that will decide the future of the 50-over

format and the fate of the ODI World Cups. Keeping that in mind, how crucial is this edition for the players and the game in particular?

Over the years, we have seen how T20s and franchise cricket are making their mark in the world. And now, because of the lucrative deals they bring to the players and the management as well, it is putting the 50-over format in a vulnerable position in the entertainment aspect. I am not too sure how much one-day cricket we are going to play in the coming years. There are conversations going around that we won't really have any more ODI World Cups and not as many one-dayers any more.

With the rise of T20 and franchise cricket, the 50-over format and all other international formats are facing a little bit of threat. But it will be sad to see it disappear, having a look at where it has come from and

the great players who have played the game. They have shown over the years that cricket is more than just a T20 game. There is a 50-over format, Test format, so hopefully, it can be preserved over the years. I think ODI is an entertaining format. It is not as dull as people make it out to be, even though sometimes T20 cricket may make it look dull.

Since you feature in all three formats, could you suggest a few areas that need attention in a bid to make ODI cricket more interesting and relevant in these changing times?

It's a tough question. I think it's about selling the game. As long as the best players are playing the format, that's great. For instance, in the past, you had players like Sachin Tendulkar, AB de Villiers, Ricky Ponting, Glenn McGrath, and Shane Warne who were all playing the 50-over format, which made it

Need for speed: Rabada, often called the Smiling Assassin, will play in his second ODI World Cup.

REUTERS



attractive because people wanted to see the cream of the crop.

They also wanted to see competitiveness. If the standard remains high and there's competitiveness, then you will always have good cricket to watch. I think it's still quite healthy because you have the world's best cricketers playing in this competition and as much as we play for the love of the game, another aspect to it is the money.

I think the success of T20 cricket is because of its lucrative deals. It is quicker for sure, but money is a big thing. If you look back, when Kerry Packer commercialised cricket, it was a thing and money was introduced to the game. With the broadcast rights, you are creating a business and the business of T20 cricket has just gone through the roof. A lot of players think of retiring from international cricket and taking up these lucrative deals. If you look at the IPL, it's only getting longer and the ICC almost have to bend over to that. So, as long as the players get looked after and the business of ODI cricket can remain intact, the game will proceed. If you encourage the best players to stay on board and play this format, then I think that's the way to preserve it.

South Africa has produced quality fast bowlers in Allan Donald, Fanie de Villiers, and Dale Steyn. Over the last few years, you have been carrying the legacy forward. How challenging is it to shoulder such a great responsibility?

I am very honoured to be mentioned in that list of names (*laughs*). In any cricketing culture, there is some sort of inspiration and that comes from those people who we look up to. One of the reasons why the youngsters play the game is because they look up to their heroes who inspire them. So, there's a rich history of South African cricket that goes way back to the times of Graeme Pollock and Barry Richards. When I was watching cricket, Makhaya Ntini and Donald were the people who inspired us to play the game. It's a dream for me that came

'FAST BOWLING IS NOT EASY, AND TO PROVE YOURSELF, YOU HAVE TO PERFORM FOR MANY, MANY YEARS. I BELIEVE, AS A FAST BOWLER, YOU HAVE TO PLAY CONSTANTLY AND CONSISTENTLY TO PROVE YOURSELF'

true. So glad that it did.

Right now, it's about carrying on that legacy and passing that on to those that are to come. We have a team saying: 'To those before us to those to come'. That's how it is. The pressure is there, but it's a good one and not a bad pressure. It's an honour to keep the legacy going.

In this edition of the World Cup, scores of 300 and 350 could be the norm. At a time when pitches have become challenging for the quicks, especially in the sub-continent, how do you get going?

Now you have two new balls, and the wickets are usually good, so there is very little margin for error for a fast bowler, or for a bowler in general. I am not complaining because that's just the way the game has evolved — putting up high-scores are much more common these days. You got the small boundaries, bigger bats, two new balls, so the reverse swing doesn't almost play a part any more.

So, the bowlers are being tested a lot more now. I am not too sure how the pitches will play, you can never be sure, but we have an idea that in India, certain grounds are known for good batting conditions, other venues are spin-friendly. But

you do get an odd occurrence where you find a pitch that suits fast bowling. I have played in India and got some experience of how conditions might play out. So, I know how to adapt to these situations.

Over the next month-and-a-half, South Africa will be playing across eight venues. How much will the experience of playing in the IPL help?

We have been coming to India for a large part of my career. We do have an experience of playing in the IPL, so do many other players featuring in the competition. We have an idea because we come here frequently. It's about who can play the conditions best.

Over the last few years, world cricket has seen the rise of several young fast bowlers — you, Jasprit Bumrah, and Shaheen Shah Afridi, to name a few. Do you think the art of fast bowling is improving by the day?

There have been some fast bowlers that have come up, most definitely. But I don't think it's like what it was before. Now, the game has shifted more



AFP



AFP

towards the batters — you see a lot more batters come up.

But I think fast bowling is still very healthy — you've got great fast bowlers around the world, guys like Pat Cummins, Josh Hazlewood and Bumrah — who have been doing it for a long time.

Fast bowling is not easy, and to prove yourself, you have to perform for many, many years. I believe, as a fast bowler, you have to play constantly and consistently to prove

yourself. It has an impact on your body as well and it can be quite tough to maintain great intensity over the years.

Bowling well in different conditions, and doing that year in and year out is really a challenge, and I feel that's the art of fast bowling. It's not about doing it for one or two years, but competing at a world stage for about eight or nine years. That's what makes a great fast bowler. So far, the people who have

done that are there, and if you could think of them, then you can immediately understand who they are — (Mitchell) Starc, Cummins and a lot of Australian bowlers, who play every format.

If you look back to the times of Steyn or McGrath, those guys really proved it. The list goes on — there's Shaun Pollock and Zaheer Khan. That's the art of bowling, it's about coming back to your game and competing for a long span of time.



B.JOTHIRAMALINGAM

THE BLUE TINGE IN

The World Cup returned to CSK's den, where fans were treated to a **Dhoni-esque masterclass** by Kohli and Rahul.

The ICC World Cup, cricket's showpiece event, rolls into India like the faint mist that rises from a steaming cup of tea up in the hills. The lack of hype is real, unlike the championship's previous trysts in India during 1987, 1996 and 2011. The Asian Games in China may have drawn attention and rightly so, thanks to India's plus-100 performance but the cold shoulder to the World Cup does grate until the caravan rolls into Chennai for a Sunday face-off between the Men in Blue and Australia.

The tussle on October 8 gets the prelude right as the roads around the M.A. Chidambaram Stadium (**above**) is gridlocked. Fans tumble out of vehicles, metro and suburban trains. Clad in blue, there is a spring

in their step despite Chennai's heat and humidity. Placards are held up and most are patriotic, expressing wishes for Rohit Sharma's men. But one catches the eye: "Missing Captain Cool M.S. Dhoni in hot Chennai!" The former India captain and Chennai Super Kings (CSK) legend is a favourite son of this southern metro.

His sense of assuredness is exuded by the national team once the match starts. India nearly repeats the CSK template, using spin as a strangling mechanism and middle-order maestros as the shepherds of the chase. It helps that there is a local connect as Ravindra Jadeja with his CSK loyalty, prises out three wickets and Australia is bundled out for 199. The Indian pursuit commences with the



PLACARDS ARE HELD UP AND MOST ARE PATRIOTIC, EXPRESSING WISHES FOR ROHIT SHARMA'S MEN. BUT ONE CATCHES THE EYE: "MISSING CAPTAIN COOL M.S. DHONI IN HOT CHENNAI!"



aired in Hindi, Jadeja replies in Hindi too and says: "I am not answering this question at all. You will write this in English and the other chaps sitting here will read that and pass those secrets to their teams, no way would I want that." The packed media hall, with the exception of those not clued into Hindi, bursts out laughing. The journalist, who raised the question gets teased, and he takes it in good humour.

Flying into the City of Djinns

The easy-going tribe of cricket writers featuring the veterans and the rookies soar into the skies. It is time to fly into Delhi as India is scheduled to play Afghanistan (on October 11). In the flight, the

Mammoth task: Afghanistan face a tough test against India after having lost their opening match. PTI

YELLOW LAND

death-rattle as Rohit, Ishan Kishan and Shreyas Iyer depart without opening their accounts. The silence in the stands is deafening, you could actually hear the waves of the nearby Bay of Bengal and the mooing of a cow in Triplicane!

But like CSK doing the Houdini, India does a stirring comeback as Virat Kohli (85) and K.L. Rahul (97 n.o.) stitch a 165-run fourth-wicket partnership. The Men in Blue win by six wickets, the World Cup gains its much-needed booster shot and the fans find their voice. And when the night wanes, it is time to sing that old Tamil film song: "*Madras nalla Madras* (Chennai, the good old Chennai)."

The Jaddu humour

In the post-match press conference, a technical question is



conversations linger around cricket, primarily among the travelling press pack. Delhi, with its history, vast expanse, tainted air and ability to inspire good writing be it Khushwant Singh's *Delhi* or William Dalrymple's *City of Djinns*, is a welcoming presence. The Arun Jaitley Stadium, Kotla for the old faithful, is buzzing



AT AN ELEVATION OF 4,110 FEET, IT IS THE HIGHEST INTERNATIONAL GROUND IN THE WORLD. THE AIR IS CRISPER, AND VULTURES ARE SOARING IN THE BACKDROP OF THIS MESMERISING VENUE



with activity. Media personnel, a posse of security-men checking bags and offering that cold stare and the stern word, and fans eager to catch a glimpse of the Indian team, all add to the rush.

Afghanistan captain Hashmatullah Shahidi remains optimistic about his team throwing up a surprise punch, India's batting coach Vikram Rathour lapses into the old jargon of 'following the process', and out on the field, players limber up under lights while a haze lingers and a few in the press box feel that their throats are getting clammy. The stubble-burning in the northern States does leave its dark after-effects in the capital while the cricket bandwagon rolls on with miles to go before the final closure at Ahmedabad on November 19.

K. C. Vijaya Kumar

The diary at Dharamsala

The taxi driver at the Kangra airport, just outside Dharamsala, introduces himself in such a heavy accent that the diary does not quite make out his name at first. "World Cup, World Cup," he offers by way of clarification as he spots the diary's accred card, perhaps assuming the diary doesn't speak the local vernacular.

The diary is already late for the



Bangladesh press conference, having flown in from Ahmedabad via Delhi, mainly because there are no direct commercial flights between the capital city of Gujarat and Dharamsala.

Kangra airport is too small to handle large aircraft and can only be served by smaller turboprops. IndiGo deploys its ATR aircraft to this airport, which is compact yet noisy, and, well, very cramped. The diary, at 5 ft 10 inch, sure wishes he had more space to stretch his tired limbs. Alas, it wasn't to be. Back to the cab ride, and we are hurtling towards Dharamsala at breakneck speed. The driver is a tall, bald guy, about 40, with big hands that grip the steering wheel. He drives into oncoming traffic with the discipline and control of a man who could navigate these serpentine bends in his sleep.

The diary reaches his hotel in 25 minutes after surviving a lurching and thumping car ride, a journey that should've taken 40 minutes, according to Google Maps. But what does Google know, eh?

The diary thanks the driver, then his stars and checks into his room. It's

a quaint one with a cosiness that complements the soothing climes of Dharamsala. The balcony door opens to the snow-capped Dhauladhar mountains that rise out of the verdant Kangra valley.

The view is captivating enough for the diary to quickly freshen up and head for the HPCA Stadium (above), the venue for five ODI World Cup games in India this year. The ground is around three kilometres away from where the diary is put up, so he hitches a ride on an old bike that's apparently headed towards the ground. We drive downhill, zooming past old buses while labouring up the Himalayan foothills.

During the short but refreshing ride, Jeetender advises the diary to visit McLeod Ganj—once a popular summer retreat for British colonists working in Delhi. The hill station, otherwise known as Upper Dharamsala, is apparently half an hour by cab and a lot "livelier" than Dharamsala.

As the diary wonders if he'll have time to go there given his tight schedule, he gets the first sighting of the HPCA Stadium. At an elevation of



REUTERS

4,110 feet, it is the highest international ground in the world. The air is crisper, and vultures are soaring in the backdrop of this mesmerising venue.

The diary spends an hour, surveying the beautiful ground, uploads a customary 'In Dharamsala for cricket' post on *Instagram* and then heads back to the hotel.

By now the diary is starving and spots a street-side stall that sells momos. "That's what the doctor ordered (cue Ravi Shastri)", the diary thinks to himself as he speedily walks towards the outlet.

But much to the disappointment, the stall only sells veg momos. The diary curbs his non-veg cravings for the time being and devours them, all the while hoping that their chicken variants had magically shown up on his plate!

By now the sun has started setting behind the gargantuan mountains, and the diary's full as well. Never mind the absence of chicken momos — the veg momos and a spellbinding sunset were enough to end the day on a contented note.

Ayan Acharya

Alaysha — the super fan

Teenage obsession is knit tightly with emotional attachments, stitched with innumerable memories. The passion runs deep, and the inexplicable love for contemporary heroes stands the test of time.

For 14-year-old Alaysha (**below**), her love for Babar Azam has brought her to Hyderabad from Bhopal to watch the Pakistan captain in the flesh. The obsession is such that she claims to be Babar's 'biggest fan' and has come with her family to watch Pakistan play against the Netherlands in its World Cup opener.

"I just love Babar Azam, and whether he scores a century or zero, it doesn't matter to me. It's just that I am a huge fan of cricket, and Babar is my favourite player," Alaysha tells *Sportstar*. Her father, Arif Beig, is also a cricket enthusiast, and Alaysha is in town with her family.

"My abba (father) used to watch cricket a lot and still does, and it was in 2020 that I started watching Babar when he was playing in the Pakistan Super League (PSL). He played very well in the whole PSL, and I just got hooked," she says.

Alaysha's phone sports a picture of the Pakistan captain on the back cover, and such is the adulation that she has cut-outs of him and a dedicated *Instagram* fan page.

"It is the first time that Babar is coming to India, and we have planned this trip since the ICC announced the schedule. We wanted to stay at the hotel where the

Pakistan team is staying, but the prices were very high, ranging close to Rs 1.5 lakhs, so we decided to stay at another hotel. I have an *Instagram* fan page where I keep tagging the Pakistan team," the 14-year-old said.

Her idol worship did bear fruit as she managed to draw the attention of Pakistan opener Imam-ul-Haq.

"Imam-ul-Haq and Hasan Ali have seen and liked my stories, and Imam usually sees my stories, and he is very kind-hearted. I have skipped my exams to watch Babar play, and I am looking forward to meeting him," Alaysha said.

To sustain a passion requires support, and Alaysha thanked her parents for supporting her dream of watching Babar live in action.

"My parents have sacrificed a lot, and it means a lot for me to watch Babar and the Pakistan team play live. It's a dream come true," she says.

Meanwhile, the lens of the host broadcaster zooms in towards Alaysha and her sister, with her elder brother forming a protective ring and her little sister waving the Pakistan flag. "I love the Indian team, and Shubman Gill is my favourite. *Abba ko Rahul Dravid bohot pasand hai* (My father likes Rahul Dravid a lot), but I like Kohli... I want to be an entrepreneur and be involved in the game. That's my ambition. For now, my dream of watching Babar live has come true, but it will be great if I can just meet him once," Alaysha says.

V. S. Aravind





ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar



FOR MORE
STORIES

WELL BEGUN IS HALF DONE

So far the pitches have been **batsmen-friendly** in the ongoing World Cup and we have seen some tremendous batting from the teams.

India's come-from-behind win in their opening game against Australia indicates that they are well prepared to absorb pressure and then move forward as and when the opportunity presents itself. Yes, a bigger test of their temperament awaits in the game against Pakistan in front of perhaps the largest ever crowd at a cricket game in Ahmedabad. To some in India, winning that game is more important than winning the World Cup. The same, of course, will be the feeling across the border and perhaps a lot more than in India.

India and Pakistan usually clash against each other first before they play other teams in the Asia Cup or the ICC World Cup. This is after what happened in the 2007 World Cup where both India and Pakistan, who were in different groups, were knocked out before they reached the knockout round. Thereafter, no matter what the rankings, if there are two groups then India and Pakistan will be in the same group to ensure at least one game between the rivals that gets the entire sub-continent hooked up and the zillion plus eyeballs is what the broadcasters pay trillions for.

A lot of teams have injuries to their star players and so are a bit handicapped. They have included these players in the squad and it will be interesting to see if the ICC Technical Committee will allow replacements in case

some of these players with injuries prior to the tournament started, are ruled out for the rest of the event. Replacements are allowed only for an injury during the tournament but if it's players from the Old Powers then, of course, the committee may look the other way and allow a replacement.

So far the pitches have been batsmen-friendly and we have seen some tremendous batting from the teams. South Africa, who are under the radar this time around, look like the team to watch out for. They have a top-class batting line-up and a very good bowling attack, too, and their fielding is always of a high standard. Their skipper, Temba Bavuma was frank enough to admit that till they win a tournament they will always be called chokers. That tag could well be shrugged off in this tournament seeing the way they have begun their campaign.

England, the defending champions were given a rude awakening by the runners-up of the last World Cup, New Zealand. The thumping win will give the Kiwis a bit of relief from the trauma of losing the Cup on the basis of the boundary count rule. They will know that it's the first game of the tournament and with another eight matches to go, anything can happen. They will also be praying that their skipper Kane Williamson gets fit for the rest of the tournament.



Perfect start: Indian team members celebrate the fall of a wicket in the match against Australia. AFP

India, too, after their splendid recovery against Australia will be sweating on the recovery of the in-form Shubman Gill. If they can get him on the ground for the game against Pakistan, then they will breathe a lot easier. The young man has been in splendid form and before the tournament started there was speculation if he could keep the form going and get past the record of Sachin Tendulkar for the most runs in ODIs in a calendar year. Missing any games will not help, of course, but then Gill has the ability and more importantly the hunger for centuries and runs that can get him close if not to overhaul Sachin's mark.

In the last tournament in 2019, Rohit Sharma, the Indian skipper, hit five centuries

and a few half-centuries too. This time around, which could well be his last World Cup, he has begun with a zero in the first game. The footwork is palpably slow to start with and that makes him vulnerable to the incoming delivery. If he can re-discover the 2019 form then India will be assured of a very good start to their campaign.

The so-called minnows, Afghanistan and the Netherlands, have started with defeats as also Sri Lanka who had to qualify for the tournament.

It's going to be a long haul for all the teams and no one can be termed as favourites after they have played their first match and that's why this tournament could well be the most exciting of them all.



India, after the splendid recovery against Australia, will be sweating on the recovery of the in-form Shubman Gill, who missed the opening encounter due to fever.

Keepers in charge

4 } The number of occasions when wicket-keepers from both sides were also the captains in a World Cup match. The opening match of World Cup 2023 in Ahmedabad provided the latest instance in CWC.

Both wicket-keepers leading the side in a World Cup match

Captain-keeper1	Captain-keeper2	Venue	Date	Result
Ashish Bagai (Canada)	Kumar Sangakkara (SL)	Hambantota	20 Feb 2011	SL won by 210 runs
Kumar Sangakkara (SL)	M. S. Dhoni (Ind)	Mumbai WS	+2 Apr 2011	Ind won by 6 wkts
Brendan Taylor (Zim)	M. S. Dhoni (Ind)	Auckland	14 Mar 2015	Ind won by 6 wkts
Jos Buttler (Eng)	Tom Latham (NZ)	Ahmedabad	5 Oct 2023	NZ won by 9 wkts

+ World Cup final 2011

Note: * Brendan Taylor (Zim) was the stand-in captain for the injured Elton Chigumbura in Auckland

* Tom Latham (NZ) was the stand-in captain for the injured Kane Williamson in Ahmedabad



England's Jos Buttler and New Zealand's Tom Latham. AFP

7 } The number of instances when a father and son appeared in Cricket World Cup tournaments. This edition will see four players whose fathers have earlier appeared in previous World Cup editions.

Father & son(s) appearing the World Cup tournaments

#	Father	Son(s)
1.	Don Pringle (East Africa, 1975)	Derek Pringle (England, 1987-1992)
2.	Lance Cairns (New Zealand, 1975-1983)	Chris Cairns (New Zealand, 1992-2003)
3.	Chris Broad (England, 1987)	Stuart Broad (England, 2007-2015)
4.	Geoff Marsh (Australia, 1987-1992)	Shaun Marsh (Australia, 2015) & Mitchell Marsh (Australia, 2019-2023*)
5.	Rod Latham (New Zealand, 1992)	Tom Latham (New Zealand, 2019-2023*)
6.	Kevin Curran (Zimbabwe, 1983-1987)	Sam Curran (England, 2023*)
7.	Tim de Leede (Netherlands, 1996-2007)	Bas de Leede (Netherlands, 2023*)



The Netherlands' Bas De Leede is the son of Tim de Leede. AP

Note: ** The Pringles and Currans appeared in the CWC but for different sides.

** The Marsh family has three members in the World Cup (father and two sons)

1 } The number of occasions in ODI cricket when all 11 players in the playing XI reached double figures. The opening CWC match provided the first-ever instance of 11 batters scoring 10 or more runs for a team in an ODI game (this feat is yet to occur in a women's ODI game, too). For England, Joe Root (at #3) top-scored with 77, while Moeen Ali (#5) and Chris Woakes (#9), with 11 each, made the lowest scores of the innings. Interestingly, of the 14 who came out to bat in this match, 13 completed 10 or more runs, while one (Will Young) registered a golden duck.

All 11 players making double-figures in an ODI match

Batters with 10+ scores	For	(HS, LS)	Total (ov)	Against	Venue	Date	Result
11	England	(77, 11)	282/9 (50)	New Zealand	Ahmedabad	5 Oct 2023	Lost
10	West Indies	(39, 4)	246/10 (47)	Australia	Bridgetown	13 Mar 1991	Lost
10	Pakistan	(51, 4)	259/9 (50)	West Indies	Dhaka	29 Oct 1998	Lost
10	Zimbabwe	(71, 1)	262/10 (47.4)	India	Rajkot MG	14 Dec 2000	Lost
10	India	(52, 1)	275/10 (49.5)	Pakistan	Jaipur	18 Nov 2007	Lost
10	Australia	(47, 0)	269/10 (49)	India	Chennai	22 Mar 2023	Won

HS - highest score, LS - lowest score in the innings

22} The number of innings Devon Conway needed to aggregate 1000 runs in his ODI career. He achieved this milestone during his century in Ahmedabad against England. He bettered the previous record of 24 innings jointly held by Glenn Turner (in 1983) and Daryl Mitchell (in September 2023). Conway, meanwhile, also became the fifth quickest among left-handed batters to achieve this landmark of 1000 ODI runs. The tables below have all the details.

Quickest to 1000 ODI career runs (in fewest innings) for New Zealand

Inns	Mts	Batter	Achieved on	Runs	Ave.	HS	100/50
22	23	Devon Conway	5 Oct 2023	1026	54.00	152*	5/3
24	25	Glenn Turner	31 Jan 1983	1061	58.94	171*	2/6
24	27	Daryl Mitchell	10 Sep 2023	1004	50.20	129	4/3
25	25	Andrew Jones	4 Mar 1989	1014	46.09	90	0/12

4} The number of batters who made 150+ scores in their CWC debut match. New Zealand's Devon Conway's with an unbeaten 152 against England on 5 October 2023 is the latest to join this elite list. With team-mate Rachin Ravindra also making 123 not out, this provided the first instance of two batters registering centuries in their CWC debuts.

Highest scores by batters on CWC debut

Runs	Batter	Bat#	For	Against	Venue	Date	Result
188*	Gary Kirsten	2	SA	UAE	Rawalpindi	16 Feb 1996	Won
172*	Craig Wishart	1	Zim	Namibia	Harare	10 Feb 2003	Won
171*	Glenn Turner	1	NZ	East Africa	Birmingham	7 Jun 1975	Won
152*	Devon Conway	1	NZ	Eng	Ahmedabad	5 Oct 2023	Won
143*	Andrew Symonds	6	Aus	Pak	Johannesburg	11 Feb 2003	Won

Note: Conway is the only one in the above list to do it while batting second in the match.



New Zealand's Devon Conway. AFP

23} Rachin Ravindra's age when he scored his maiden ODI and CWC century against England in Ahmedabad on 5 October 2023. He also became the youngest batter to register a century against England in the CWC. The previous youngest was another Kiwi, Nathan Astle, then aged 24y-152d when he made 101 in the 1996 edition of the CWC at the very same ground. Incidentally, that game, too, was the opening match — of the 1996 CWC edition. Ravindra also became the youngest New Zealander to register a century in the CWC. The second table has the details.

Youngest to register a three-figure score against England in the World Cup

Age	Batter	Runs	Bat#	For	Venue	Date	Result
23y-321d	Rachin Ravindra	123*	3	New Zealand	Ahmedabad	5 Oct 2023	Won
24y-152d	Nathan Astle	101	2	New Zealand	Ahmedabad	14 Feb 1996	Won
25y-67d	Rameez Raja	113	1	Pakistan	Karachi	20 Oct 1987	Won
25y-174d	Lahiru Thirimanne	139*	1	Sri Lanka	Wellington	1 Mar 2015	Won
26y-52d	Upul Tharanga	102*	1	Sri Lanka	Colombo RPS	26 Mar 2011	Won

Youngest to register a three-figure scores for New Zealand in the World Cup

Age	Batter	Runs	Bat#	Against	Venue	Date	Result
23y-321d	Rachin Ravindra	123*	3	England	Ahmedabad	5 Oct 2023	Won
24y-152d	Nathan Astle	101	2	England	Ahmedabad	14 Feb 1996	Won
26y-112d	Chris Harris	130	5	Australia	Chennai	11 Mar 1996	Lost
27y-0d	Ross Taylor	131*	4	Pakistan	Pallekelle	8 Mar 2011	Won
27y-215d	Scott Styris	141	4	Sri Lanka	Bloemfontein	10 Feb 2023	Lost



Kiwi sensation Rachin Ravindra. AFP

Note: Ravindra's team-mate in Ahmedabad, Devon Conway (152*), at 32y-89d, was the second oldest Kiwi to register a three-figure score in the CWC. Only Stephen Fleming at 34y-1d was older (102* v Bangladesh in North Sound in 2007)

All records are correct and updated until 6 October 2023

» SYED MUSHTAQ ALI TROPHY 2023

IN SHORT ORDER

RITU RAJ KONWAR

The Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy has turned into India's T20 cricket lab with the latest edition being a **talent showcase** ahead of the 2024 T20 World Cup.

Amol Karhadkar

amol.k@thehindu.co.in

Ranchi, despite being the hometown of India's last World Cup-winning captain, was nowhere close to being in contention to host the World Cup. So were Dehradun and Jaipur. Mohali was unfairly dumped as a World Cup venue.

Despite the World Cup fever having gripped India — albeit not reflecting in the stands as much as it should have — all these centres, and Mumbai beyond the Wankhede Stadium, will attract attention over the next three weeks.

The inter-state men's domestic season will commence with the league stage of the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy on October 16. Despite the clash with the showpiece event, the SMAT — as it is referred to in the hashtag-dominated parallel universe — will definitely not go unnoticed. After all, the tournament, over the last decade, has resulted in a hunting ground for

dozens of Indian Premier League franchises' talent scouts and is also closely followed by the new-age loyal T20 supporters in India.

Add to that the fact that the tournament will also mark the bugle for India's build-up for the 2024 T20 World Cup and the importance of the tournament increases manifold, beyond the testing ground for the IPL Auction.

No wonder then that the national selection committee, chaired by Ajit Agarkar, will divide their duties and will mostly be at the SMAT venues rather than watching the Men in Blue in action.

Considering the BCCI having moved on from Rohit Sharma and



BISWARANJAN ROUT

Skipper select: While Ajinkya Rahane (left) will lead the defending champions Mumbai, Mayank Agarwal (bottom left) and Washington Sundar (below) will captain the Karnataka and Tamil Nadu sides, respectively.



Virat Kohli for T20Is even before Agarkar took over as chief selector, it will be a critical phase for his selection panel to zero down on the talent pool to create a successful combination for Hardik's Hurricanes in the West Indies and the USA next June. As a result, all the promising stars on India's T20I anvil — including the Asian Games gold medallist squad — will be in action to make a bid for a place in India's squad.

In fact, a look at the 38 teams tells you that many state associations seem to have taken a cue from the national selection panel's policy to ride on the raw power of youth when it comes to T20 cricket. Washington Sundar (Tamil Nadu), Yash Dhull (Delhi) and Tilak Varma (Hyderabad) have been appointed captain by their

respective sides.

Whether the young captains will lead from the front and manage to gel their respective units together will be interesting to see.

Not all the teams have adopted the youngster mantra, though. Besides leading Kerala, Sanju Samson will get yet another opportunity to showcase to the national selectors that he still has it in him when it comes to wearing India's blues consistently.

Karnataka has reposed its faith in Mayank Agarwal, so has Mumbai when it comes to Ajinkya Rahane. Interestingly, Maharashtra has gone a step further.

Not only have Kedar Jadhav and Ankeet Bawane been recalled to the T20 side but Jadhav has also been

appointed as the captain of the team. It will mean that Ruturaj Gaikwad — India's gold medallist at the Asian Games — will not lead his side this time around.

Gaikwad's Asian Games teammate and Maharashtra senior, Rahul Tripathi, has switched allegiance to Goa after being omitted from the Ranji Trophy probables' list. Tripathi is not the only big-ticket transfer.

Kuldeep Sen, who has been sidelined by injuries for almost a year, will hope to reinvigorate Tamil Nadu's pace pack along with T20 specialist T. Natarajan. Sen's Madhya Pradesh teammate Gourav Yadav will turn out for Pondicherry this time around.

It's not just the pacers who have decided to play as guest players. The

« Kedhar Jadhav being appointed captain of Maharashtra means that Ruturaj Gaikwad, India's gold medallist in the Asian Games, won't be leading the side »



First of many: Mumbai won their first title in the tournament last year.

Below: Sanju Samson, who will lead Kerala, will get another opportunity to prove that he still has it in him.

DEBASISH BHADURI & THULASI KAKKAT

leg-spin duo of Ravi Bishnoi (Gujarat) and Prashant Solanki (Maharashtra) have decided to switch to neighbouring teams from their home teams of Rajasthan and Mumbai, respectively.

Bishnoi's move may have a hidden objective of deriving indirect advantage by moving to the den of the echelons of India's cricket administration. Solanki, on the other hand, has decided to move on from Mumbai due to lack of opportunities despite being a regular with Chennai Super Kings set-up.

The tournament will also see the trend of experimentation with rules continue this time around. While the Impact Player rule has been amended to be in sync with that in the IPL, the BCCI has allowed two

THE TOURNAMENT WILL ALSO SEE THE TREND OF EXPERIMENTATION WITH RULES CONTINUE THIS TIME AROUND



bouncers to be bowled per over, in a bid to make the game more bowler-friendly.

After trying out the Impact Player rule in the 2022-23 SMAT, it was introduced in IPL 2023, albeit with an amended version. In SMAT, an impact player could be introduced only after the 14th over while IPL modified the introduction of a super-sub at any point in a game.

It will be interesting to see if the two-bouncer experiment will also be adopted in the IPL, come March.

After all, despite its importance for the national set-up, SMAT has primarily emerged as a testing lab not just for the franchises but also for the IPL!

» MATCH
OF THE FORTNIGHT

Rise of the apprentice

Arsenal finally breaks the shackles to steal a win against Manchester City after eight years.



The Premier League title race saw a gauntlet thrown down by Arsenal after it secured a late winner to condemn defending champion Manchester City to its second consecutive loss. In the battle of the master and the apprentice, the mentee Mikel Arteta got one over his mentor Pep Guardiola for the first time since taking charge of the Gunners.

This was Arsenal's first Premier League win in 15 meetings over Manchester City, the last success coming in January 2015, where goals from Santi Cazorla and Olivier Giroud sealed a 2-0 win.

Manchester City's fluidity, cohesion and intricate football lit up the first half

Mission accomplished: Mikel Arteta got one over his mentor Pep Guardiola for the first time since taking charge of the Gunners. REUTERS

Late flourish: Brazilian winger Gabriel Martinelli turned the game on its head with his direct attacking play and scored the only goal of the match. REUTERS

at the Emirates Stadium, with Arsenal struggling to create any chance of note. Defender Nathan Ake missed the opportunity of the half by blazing his shot over the crossbar from 10 yards out.

City's only blip in the first period was Mateo Kovacic's possible sending-off after the midfielder attempted a rash sliding tackle on Declan Rice after being booked earlier for a similar challenge. Referee Michael Oliver took a lenient view, handing the Croatian a lifeline.

At half-time, a hamstring issue for Leandro Trossard saw him get replaced by the returning Gabriel Martinelli for Arsenal. The Brazilian winger turned the game on its head with his direct attacking play.

The Gunners wrested back control of the game, as City struggled to get a shot on target after the 54th minute. Pep shuffled his cards by bringing on Matheus Nunes and Jeremy Doku, but the barren run in front of goal continued.

Martinelli then sealed the three points late in the second half after his shot deflected off Ake's face and into the City goal to send the Emirates into delirium.

Arsenal was the closest challenger to Manchester City's treble-winning machine last season and with some smart additions in the summer transfer market, a similar script can be expected this year as well. Points dropped against City was a significant roadblock in the Gunners' title push last year, but with the course correction this time around, the North London team looks set to mount a stronger challenge.



1

McTominay saves United's blushes

Manchester United midfielder Scott McTominay saved his side from yet another embarrassing defeat, as he scored two injury-time goals, after coming in only in the 87th minute of the game, to help the Red Devils to a 2-1 win over Brentford.

United has endured a torrid start to the season, with the side losing six of its 11 games so far this season.



2

Stimac to continue
Igor Stimac is set to continue as the head coach of India's men's national football team, until 2026. Stimac, a member of the Croatia side, which finished third at the FIFA World Cup 1998, took charge of the Blue Tigers in 2019 and has won four major titles with the side, including two SAFF Championships.



3

No stopping Bellingham
Real Madrid's Jude Bellingham continued his magical goal-scoring form to start off the season. The English midfielder found the net in La Liga against Girona, before scoring against Napoli in the Champions League. Bellingham did one better in his side's league game against Osasuna, clinching a brace to make it 10 goals in 10 games for the Los Blancos.



4

MLS playoff hopes end for Messi's Inter Miami
Lionel Messi's Inter Miami's slim hopes of making it to the Major League Soccer playoffs were finally extinguished after it crashed to a 0-1 home defeat to FC Cincinnati. The David Beckham-co-owned Miami side was held back in recent weeks by an injury to Messi, who missed five games on the trot before coming in as a second-half substitute against Cincinnati.



5

VAR drama overshadows Tottenham's win over Liverpool

Tottenham Hotspur beat Liverpool 2-1 in the Premier League, in a game overshadowed by questionable officiating. Liverpool was shown two disputable red cards, but was considerably more miffed by a goal that was wrongfully ruled out. A visibly on-side Luis Diaz was adjudged offside after he slotted the ball in from a counterattack. The Professional Game Match Officials Limited (PGMOL) later called the decision a human error, coming out of a miscommunication between the VAR and the on-field referees.



6

Newcastle bests PSG in UCL

Spurred on by an electrifying home crowd, Newcastle United thrashed European heavyweight PSG 4-1 in the UEFA Champions League.

Miguel Almiron, Dan Burn, Sean Longstaff and Fabian Schär found the net for Newcastle, which secured its first win in the UCL since 2003. The Magpies also succeeded in keeping French superstar Kylian Mbappe at bay throughout the night as they added another chapter to their revival.

7

Hosts announced for 2030 World Cup

Morocco, Spain and Portugal were named hosts of the 2030 Football World Cup, while Uruguay, Argentina and Paraguay will host the opening matches to mark the tournament's centenary. The joint bid from Morocco, Portugal and Spain was the sole candidate to host the tournament. FIFA was due to announce the hosts next year.

Anish Pathiyil & Pranay Rajiv

» ISL DIARY

A JOY AND A HEADACHE

Kochi's Nehru Stadium, the home of the ISL's most popular team, has left the AFC worried.



THULASI KAKKAT

The Adrian Luna jersey, the No. 10, is the most popular one in Kochi. Almost half the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium appears to be wearing the Luna number whenever the Kerala Blasters plays its Indian Super League (ISL) match in Kochi. And on the roads and lanes leading to the stadium, the Luna tees sell like hot cakes.

Luna (left), Blasters' midfield magician from Uruguay, has not disappointed fans that pack the stadium to cheer him and the team. And though the crowds inspire the home boys and often give jitters to the visitors, it has made the Asian Football Confederation sweat nervously too.

"When I saw the match the other day, there were so many families there...children and women, which is very good for football but (the stadium) is a recipe for disaster," said Datuk Seri Windsor John, the AFC general secretary who was in Kochi for the ISL opener between Blasters and Bengaluru FC, in a recent chat with *Sportstar*.

"These things have happened before — in Indonesia one year ago — so we cannot let our guard down and repeat the problem. Then it's disaster for everyone. That, I think, is the biggest concern for the AIFF and I have conveyed my concerns as well."

In October 2022, over 125 people, including many children, were killed after thousands of fans rushed on to the ground after their home team lost a match at Malang in Indonesia. Police responded by firing tear gas and in a bid to escape, people were trampled and crushed at the exits.

The Nehru Stadium, ISL's favourite football ground and often the venue for the league's season-opener, is virtually in the heart of the city at Kaloor and that is an issue, felt the AFC official.

"The lack of infrastructure, which includes the security infrastructure, segregation of fans, officials, players — unfortunately the position and location of the stadium does not allow these to happen," said John.

"You're just getting out of the Metro (rail) and into the stadium. When everybody is coming, what is the safety plan?

"Of course, the stadium itself is a little bit old and needs refurbishment — in the dressing rooms, VIP area and others — because when we play internationals, top teams expect a standard in the facilities provided."

The Kochi stadium was being considered for hosting a FIFA World Cup qualifier but that chance has vanished.

It is time for all the stakeholders of the Nehru Stadium, the Kerala Blasters and the ISL to go for a full audit to ensure that the stadium and its surroundings are safe and the safety and security arrangements are all in order.

Lowering the guard could be dangerous.



M. VEDHAN

» Mohun Bagan beat Chennaiyin FC in its own den

It was not a perfect homecoming for Chennaiyin FC. Despite an audience of over 8000 at the Nehru Stadium in Chennai (above), to watch the home team take on Mohun Bagan Super Giant, CFC went down 1-3 tamely to the reigning champion for its third successive defeat in as many matches in ISL, this season.

Win or defeat, coach Owen Coyle

remains calm and composed. The 57-year-old Scot said the team will fight back. He knows what he is talking about for he had, in 2019-20, took Chennaiyin to the final after being almost out of the play-off contention. He implored the players to cut down on their individual errors.

"We have to cut out individual mistakes and look to pick up. I've not come in here and inherited a team of champions. I've come in here and inherited a team that has just been

once in the playoffs for one season and that was the season when they were at the bottom and I came in and we changed that. And that's what we're doing. We're working hard, it's a young group, and they will get better," said Coyle, at the post-match press conference.

Coyle said he is ready to take the hard punches and return stronger. "We'll continue to take the punches in the nose. It's not a nice feeling. But that's football," he said.



M. VEDHAN

» Mohun Bagan fans celebrate Samad's Messi moment

Sahal Abdul Samad (left) is drawing a lot of analogies for his fine skills, especially of his dribbling ability that is often putting the rival defences under distress. Chennaiyin FC was the latest team to discover it as Sahal's sorcery around the Marina Machans' box spelt a doom for the former ISL champion. **Many fans of Mohun Bagan are ecstatic about Samad's 'footwork' and went on to compare his skills with that of the Argentine superstar, Lionel Messi.**

Samad, who made his move from his native side, Kerala Blasters, this season, has made three assists in as many appearances for Mohun Bagan. The holder, as a result, has won all its three matches so far in ISL-10 to maintain an early lead in the country's top league.

Samad, who wears the No. 10 jersey for the national team, seems to be truly coming of age. Although he wears the No. 18 for Mohun Bagan, the way he performed against Chennaiyin in the latter's home in Mohun Bagan's last outing compelled the fans to compare him with the Argentine captain.

Samad turned out brilliantly as the 'play-maker' and kept the Mohun Bagan raids alive in the attacking third. His best came in the final goal of the match when Mohun Bagan looked to seal the match with a 2-1 scoreline keeping it perilously close to a drawn result. Samad outwitted four Chennaiyin defenders with his exceptional dribbling ability to clear the ground for upfront colleague Manvir Singh, who had no problem in finding the goal and thereby insuring Mohun Bagan's win (3-1).

Stan Rayan, K. Keerthivasan, Amitabha Das Sharma

Stuff of legends: Max became the fifth driver to win three consecutive titles, joining Juan Manuel Fangio, Michael Schumacher, Sebastian Vettel and Lewis Hamilton. GETTY IMAGES



» CHEQUERED FLAG

MAXIMUM CHAMPION

During the Qatar Grand Prix weekend, Verstappen bagged his **third consecutive title.**

S. Dipak Ragav
dipak.ragav@thehindu.co.in



Winning one world championship is challenging in itself. To do it three times on the bounce is one of the rarest feats in Formula One, considering only four drivers have done this until 2022.

On Saturday evening, during the Qatar Grand Prix Sprint race, Max Verstappen entered the elite club of three-time champions and completed a hat-trick of titles.

However, the manner in which he clinched it was anti-climatic and, at the same time, almost perfectly encapsulated how the 2023 Formula One season has unfolded.

Verstappen did not have to break a sweat this season to walk

REUTERS



away with the crown. Ever since it became evident that Red Bull Racing had enough of a cushion over its rivals in the pre-season test, the 26-year-old was odds-on favourite to win the title. It was also clear that the opposition to Red Bull was splintered with teams like Aston Martin, Mercedes, Ferrari and off-late McLaren being competitive on one weekend and off-the-pace in another. This meant that only Perez in the second Red Bull could have infused some excitement into this year's title race.

Unfortunately for F1 fans, when the moment came, the Mexican driver crumbled under pressure and underperformed the machinery big time despite having the fastest car on the grid by a mile.

Coming into the weekend, Verstappen led his teammate Sergio Perez by 177 points with just 180 points left on the table over the six weekends, including Qatar and needed to score three points to seal his third driver's title.

On Saturday, Perez — as has been the case this season — made a mess by qualifying eighth while his teammate started third in the Sprint Shootout and was trundling along in the mid-field during the race.

Then, on lap 11, he became collateral damage when he got taken out by Esteban Ocon. Ocon was battling Nico Hulkenberg when Perez tried to pass the duo, only to see the Alpine of Ocon veer into him, forcing all three drivers to retire.

With Perez once again coming up with an insipid performance, Verstappen was crowned champion midway through a Sprint Race on a Saturday and became the fifth driver to win three consecutive titles, joining Juan Manuel Fangio, Michael Schumacher, Sebastian Vettel and Lewis Hamilton.

Ever since his F1 debut at 17, Verstappen was destined to be the next big thing and was seen as a once-in-a-generation driver with his pure raw pace. Though it took some time to sharpen the rough edges, with the exuberance of youth often making him go over the edge of what is acceptable in racing, the Dutchman has mellowed and matured to become one of the most consistent drivers on the grid.

Since 2021, when Red Bull first had a car to challenge for the title after a long time, Verstappen has always maximised the opportunity and been relentless. The consistency he has displayed recently has very few parallels in F1 history, the closest being Michael

Schumacher's dream run in the early 2000s with Ferrari.

Over the last three years, the number of times he finished out of the podium will be few and far between. On a few occasions when he was not in the top three, more often than not, it was because of gremlins with the cars and not for lack of performance from his end.

Apart from his sheer natural speed and talent, Verstappen's tyre management skill often goes under the radar, which allows him to produce some searing pace over a stint consistently on race day. **The fact that he often produces the fastest lap of the race late into a stint underscores how well he can keep the tyres alive.**

Also, with a car underneath him that is the fastest, even if he is starting from the middle or the lower end of the grid, Verstappen has come through the field quite easily, showing brilliant car positioning and race craft like he did in Miami when he won the race despite starting ninth.

In contrast, his teammate started from pole position, finished second, and never recovered from the beating. From then on, Verstappen just marched on to his third world title, with his crowning moment coming at the Losail International Circuit on Saturday, during which he won ten consecutive races, a record.

While he finished second in the Sprint, he restored regular order on Sunday by winning the main Grand Prix — his 14th this year — to celebrate the triumph in style.



S. PRASANNA VENKATESAN

REST IS BEST

1

Rest of India (RoI) beat Saurashtra by 175 runs to win the Irani Cup at the Saurashtra Cricket Association (SCA) stadium in Rajkot on Oct. 3.

The match was over in three days (Oct. 1-3), courtesy left-arm spinners Parth Bhut (Saurashtra) and Saurabh Kumar (RoI). Parth (match haul of 12/147) had a seven-wicket haul in the second session (7/53) as RoI lost nine wickets for 64 runs in the session to be bowled out for 160 in its second innings on day three. Chasing 255, Saurashtra was bowled out for the lowest Irani Cup total (79) as Saurabh claimed six for 43 in the third session. Saurabh was adjudged the player-of-the-match for his match haul of 10/108 and scoring 39 in RoI's first innings (308). RoI batter Sai Sudharsan (72 & 43) and pacer Vidwath Kaverappa (three for 28 in Saurashtra's 214-run first innings) were impressive on a pitch that was difficult to bat and had no help for the pacers.

2

Arjun Adireddy of Telangana and Shubhi Gupta of Uttar Pradesh

emerged as the champions, in the open and girls' sections, respectively at the National Under-19 chess championship in Ahmedabad. The standings (11 rounds): Boys: 1. Arjun Adireddy 10; 2. Manish Cristiano 9; 3-6. Yash Bharadia, Manas Gaikwad, L. Srihari and Apoorva Kamble 8.5. Girls: 1. Shubhi Gupta 9.5; 2. Dhanashree Khairmode (Mah) 9; 3-5. Sneha Halder, S. Kanishka and Sachi Jain 8.5.

S. PRASANNA VENKATESAN

TEAM SPORTSTAR



Aman Raj wins Telangana Golconda Masters 2023



Aman Raj of Patna clinched his **second title of the season** when he scored a two-under- 68 in the final round in the Telangana Golconda Masters 2023 at the Hyderabad Golf Association course. He totalled 18-under 262 in the final standings.

Aman (66-65-63-68) took home a winner's cheque of Rs. 15 lakhs to consolidate himself in second position on the TATA Steel PGTI Rankings.

Mysuru's Yashas Chandra (63-67-68-65) returned a 65 to finish runner-up at 17-under 263.

"I just wanted to play my game today and not think about anything else. I had the ideal start with a birdie on the first. But the momentum just slowed down for me thereafter," Aman, who bagged his third career title, said, "I then knew that things were not going as per my plan so I had to just hang in there."

"The birdies on the 13th and 14th gave me a much-needed boost. Finally, when I was looking at the tricky four-feet putt to win on the last hole, I told myself just to follow the process and not think about the result," Aman said.

V. V. SUBRAHMANYAM

SPORTOON



3

Mohamed Ali amassed 197 (143b, 17x4, 7x6) as Tamil

Nadu Cricket Association (TNCA) beat Mumbai Cricket Association (MCA) by two wickets with two balls to spare in the final to become the champion of the SGCA-SKCA u-19 invitational one-day cricket tournament at the SSGMCE ground in Shegaon. The scores (final): Mumbai CA 389/6 in 50 overs (Musheer Khan 131, Ayush Mhatre 128, Nutan Goel 32) lost to Tamil Nadu CA 390/8 in 49.4 overs (Madhava Prasad 76, Mohamed Ali 197, R.K. Jayant 56, Umar Khan 4/73).

4

Aansh Nandan Nerurkar of Maharashtra and Pratitee Bordoloi of

Karnataka emerged champions in the boys' and girls' sections respectively of the National under-11 chess championship in Visakhapatnam. The winners took home Rs. 70,000 each while the second and third-placed won ₹60,000 and Rs. 50,000 each. Final placings (top three): Boys: 1. Aansh Nandan Nerurkar (Maha) 10 pts, 2. Siddhanth Poonja (Kar) 9 pts, 3. Aadik Theophane Lenin (Ker) 9 pts. Girls: 1. Pratitee Bordoloi (Kar) 9.5 pts, 2. Siddhi Rao (Kar) 9 pts, 3. P.V. Pavithra (TN) 8.5 pts.

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ADAPTING COACHING FOR MODERN ATHLETES

In this **age of technology** and shifting athlete dynamics, emphasising genuine connections, adaptive communication, and a values-driven approach are required to nurture the evolving breed of athletes.

It is interesting to observe that athletes nowadays are different from when I was their age. The current level of athletes are faster, stronger, quicker and mentally tuned differently. There are many reasons for it — from social and psychological to monetary and many more.

Cutting-edge technology plays a very important and defining role in the lifestyle of athletes. Whether it would get better or worse, only time will tell. Today we walk through some pointers that will help us understand the present generation of athletes and look at tips to train them to get the best out of them.

Any sport has always been and will always be an interpersonal activity that requires uninterrupted human connection and communication.

Coaching is all about building quality relationships with the athletes and the support staff. Currently, in the social media domain, where everyone is a winner and a specialist, the frame of mind has changed. Athletes are not the same as they were 20 years ago.

We can't stop the waves but we can all learn to surf and sail!

Here are few basic tips in understanding today's players:

1. True connection with players is one of the key factors. Finding out what ticks for them and motivates them is their catalyst in front of peers and staff behind closed doors.

2. It is important for players to embrace social media and technology in a prudent manner. The key is to not go berserk with it, but to use it intelligently.

3. Speaking their language does not mean using abusive language or profanity, but communicating using tools and platforms like X or Instagram. Again, it is important to use it for the benefit of the players than currying favours through that for one's own branding.

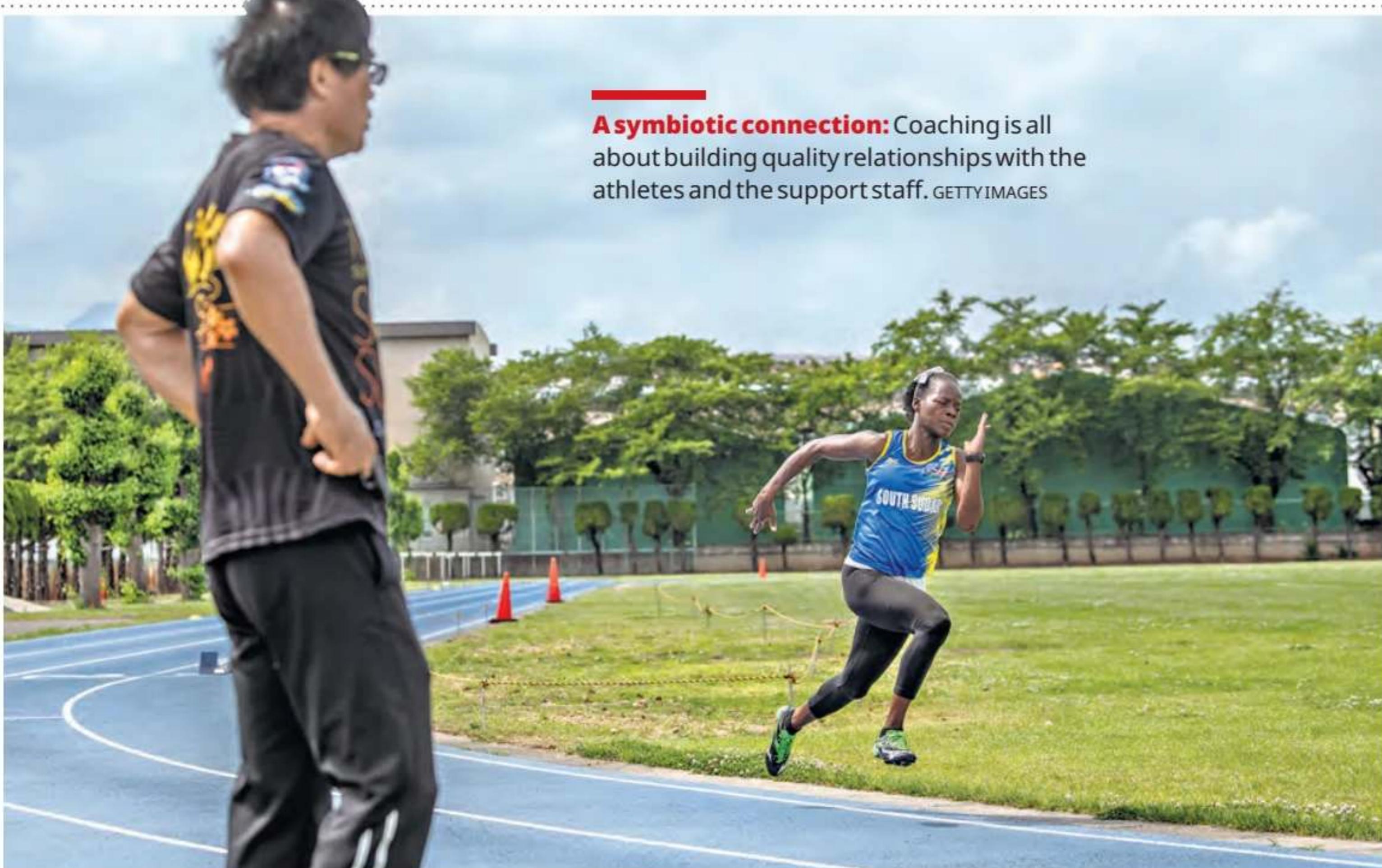
4. Consistency breeds excellence, excellence breeds trust, trust breeds loyalty and loyalty builds a strong programme. One needs to be consistent with everything they do, otherwise players won't respect them.

5. Admit it. Fix it. Don't repeat it! — this is a three-step policy when dealing with mistakes by players. The first time is a mistake. The second time, it is a decision. But, the third time, it is a blunder. No one is perfect and many try to act and fail miserably. Implementing this policy can strengthen trust and openness.

6. Articulating your core values and principles and each player's role play should be non-negotiable as they make up the programme's philosophy, work ethics and culture.

7. Players want to know the why, what, when, how and where behind everything. It's the duty to explain why you do what you do; why you believe what you believe, and what and why you expect from them. The higher the perceived relevance, the higher the chance of them buying into the philosophy. At the end of the day, a coach's number one job is to get a buy-in from every member of the programme.

8. Social media offers access to an abundance of friends and fans, making sure your players know you truly care about them (on and off the field).



A symbiotic connection: Coaching is all about building quality relationships with the athletes and the support staff. GETTYIMAGES

9. Don't try to be a buddy with your players and expect them to support you always. If you are too close to them personally you can't hold them accountable and help them progress. You should be a role model, a teacher and a mentor rather than a buddy.

10. All players learn differently and do not have the same ability to grasp things, points and perspectives. Make sure you can effectively communicate to each player using various methods.

11. Players want to show their individuality by wearing fancy shoes, sporting different haircuts and attire, and indulging in various antics and routines during pre-game warm-ups. Don't fight it. Maintain some leniency in your programme rules. Today's idols and role models are a lot different from those in the earlier days, and the future would be different too.

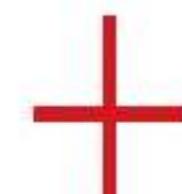
12. It is important to create a climate and culture that values people over productivity. Your players must know that you care about them but as a human being first and then a

player — be it an icon or an amateur. Also, ask non-performing players if they want to know how good a professional you think they are.

13. The point to ponder is that you either coach or you are allowing things to happen by taking them for granted. You either accept it or correct it.

14. Using the right language to create an impact and strengthen the trust would play a major role in the development of a player's skill or fitness — be it physical or mental. For example: by replacing 'but' with 'now' when instructing a player — "I like your lunge position, now try to get your knee behind your toe." This minor change can make a huge impact.

15. Science shows that most people have a pretty firm definition of what is right and wrong by the age of 13. Hold them accountable. Ignorance is not an excuse. However, learn to choose your battles. Kids will be kids. If a player posts something stupid on social media, don't condemn them for life. Use it to teach a life lesson. Hold them accountable.



It is important to create a climate and culture that values people over productivity. Players must know that their coach cares about them, but as a human being first and then a player

Unusual words, unusual cricketers

Not so common words were used to describe **two cricketing greats** of the past – Lala Amarnath and Trevor Bailey.

Suresh Menon

Cricket lovers of a certain vintage had their vocabularies stretched by words seldom used in casual conversation. ‘Petrel’ was one such, applied to Lala Amarnath, described as the ‘stormy petrel’ of Indian cricket. I looked it up when I first read that. A petrel was “a bird with a curved beak that spends most of its life flying over the sea.”

I was old enough to know that India’s first Test century maker didn’t have a curved beak, nor did he spend most of his life flying over the sea. But a stormy petrel was, I read, a person who portends trouble, and that Mr Amarnath certainly was, as a man who spoke his mind and wasn’t enamoured of authority. In 1936, he was sent back from a tour of England — unfairly, by all accounts — for arguing with his incompetent captain. Just over a decade later Amarnath became Independent India’s first captain.

As a reporter just starting out, I met Lala a few times, but seldom went beyond a careful greeting. I can remember a withering look he gave a senior journalist at a Test match in Chepauk when the latter offered him an ice cream stick. It would have been incongruous to see Lala Amarnath watching cricket ice cream in hand.

The Lala — like Don Bradman, his first name was often preceded by the definite article — was hugely popular in Pakistan when India played there. There was much hugging, bowing and scraping when he walked into a room. He took it all as merely his due.



Rock solid: Trevor Bailey was the man who used to break the Australian bowlers hearts. Bailey was a real barnacle and could not be moved. December will see the birth centenary of Bailey. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

First-Class career opening both batting and bowling for Essex.

“His forward defence, head over the ball, the blade immaculately straight became, like Churchill’s victory sign, a symbol of defiance. From this one stroke could be told the character of the man. It was resolute and impenitent,” wrote John Woodcock.

December will see the birth centenary of Trevor Bailey, Test all-rounder, a Test Match Special summariser and author of fine books on cricket, including a biography of Garry Sobers.

He had a reputation as a great talent-spotter, and was the first to see in a very young Richard Hadlee the bowler he became. In Chennai when he was broadcasting a Test series, he shared this nugget with me: “If Tiger Pataudi had not lost an eye, he would have been a batter in the Bradman class.”

Two unusual words, two unusual cricketers.

The second word I learnt from cricket as a child was ‘barnacle’. It was used for the England all-rounder Trevor Bailey, the player’s sticky batting evoking the creature which attached itself to the hull of ships.

In an era of white ball cricket and mis-hit sixes, it might be difficult to appreciate, or even imagine a batsman of Bailey’s defensive skills. He was a fine analyst of the game, and probably the best player never to have led England, although his mind was at the service of skippers Len Hutton and Peter May. Bailey played 61 Tests, after beginning his

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