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MOHAMMED SIRAJ

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Top leagues swing into action in Europe

KEEPING BAZBALL AT BAY

Shubman Gill and Mohammed Siraj were the chief architects of a spirited Indian show in England

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Cover: Gill & Siraj (Getty Images)

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OFF-SIDE

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BALANCING REFORM AND AUTONOMY

India's **new sports governance law** promises reform — but critics warn it risks breaching Olympic autonomy rules.

The National Sports Governance Bill (NSGB), passed in the Lok Sabha on August 11, aims to overhaul decades of ad hoc sports governance in India. There will be a National Sports Board (NSB) — a regulator much like the SEBI in the financial sector — and a National Sports Tribunal that will settle governance disputes. The Bill mandates gender and athlete representation, caps tenures and age for office-bearers, and applies RTI to all recognised bodies that receive government funding or support.

The Bill is expected to improve transparency, bring uniform governance to federations, and reduce the number of year(s)-long court cases that have often left Indian sports in limbo. Many national sports bodies have faced lengthy legal battles, disrupting athletes' preparations for major events.

The All India Football Federation (AIFF), for instance, has been involved in litigation over its constitution in the Supreme Court since 2022. The protracted court proceedings have led to a delay in finalising the AIFF's agreement with its commercial partner, Football Sports Development Limited (FSDL), which runs the ISL. With the league's schedule yet to be announced for the current season, several clubs have paused operations and withheld players' and staff salaries.

The dedicated tribunal could unclog courts and deliver quicker verdicts.

Another notable addition, under Clause 16, requires the central government, with the NSB's recommendation, to appoint a National Sports Election Panel comprising retired Chief Election Commissioners, Election Commissioners, or State Election Commissioners to ensure free and fair elections for the Executive and Athletes' Committees of all national sports bodies.

This Panel could help deal with election-related irregularities, as seen in the Boxing Federation of India (BFI).

The BFI's election process has been delayed since February and has been marred by controversies. Former sports minister Anurag Thakur's nomination was rejected twice: first, based on an office directive issued by the then BFI president Ajay Singh, and thereafter under a newly adopted Constitution passed by a World Boxing-appointed Interim Committee without the Executive Committee's approval. The electoral college has seen submitted names excluded or added without a clear rationale — initially 60 members, later expanded to 66 — while the Returning Officer, Justice (retd.) RK Gauba, resigned, citing a smear campaign. His replacement, Justice (retd.) Rajesh Tandon, has also faced questions over integrity. The matter will be heard in the Delhi High Court on August 18, three days before the polls.

Critics of the Bill, however, warn that vesting sweeping powers in a government-controlled NSB risks breaching Olympic Charter Rule 27, which mandates National Olympic Committees to "preserve their autonomy and resist all pressures of any kind, including but not limited to political, legal, religious, or economic pressures which may prevent them from complying with the Olympic Charter."

In the USA, the Ted Stevens Act grants the United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee (USOPC) the power "to certify national governing bodies for any sport that is included on the programme of the Olympic Games, the Paralympic Games, the Pan-American Games, or the Parapan American Games." While the US Congress sets the broad legal framework, it does not directly interfere in elections or daily governance.

India's model closely resembles Australia's, where the Australian Sports Commission (ASC) and the National Sports Tribunal (NST), both appointed by the Minister for Sport, respectively recognise National Sporting Organisations and resolve disputes through an independent, transparent alternative to the Courts.

However, ASC and NST, although government-appointed, operate with procedural independence, whereas India's NSGB combines recognition and electoral oversight in a government-appointed body, raising concerns over autonomy. Australia and the USA have shown that accountability and independence can coexist. India's challenge will be to find that balance.

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SUNDAY HO YA MONDAY
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« To all the bettors: I'm a mum before I'm an athlete. The way you talk to women – to mothers – is shameful." – Ukrainian tennis player Elina Svitolina spoke about the deluge of hateful abuse she received online from frustrated gamblers after losing a match at the Canada Open. »

« I believe there will be a woman running under four minutes in the next generation or our generation, and that's why I keep going, keep training. If it does not come my way, it will be someone one day." – Faith Kipyegon »

1st

Miyu Yamashita won the Women's Open by two shots to claim the first major title of her career, holding off Charley Hull and Minami Katsu to become the fourth Japanese player to win a major in the past two years. The 24-year-old carded an overall score of 11-under at Royal Porthcawl, sinking three birdies on the front nine. She stayed steady on the back nine, surviving a late stumble with her first bogey of the day on the par-four 17th.

91

Brazilian javelin thrower Luiz Maurício da Silva surpassed Neeraj Chopra (90.23 m at the Doha Diamond League) to achieve the second-best mark of the year, with an attempt of 91 m at the 2025 Brazilian Athletics Trophy in São Paulo. Luiz turned heads with his first throw — his personal best of 90.68 m surpassing his previous record of 86.62 m — and then improved on it to win the title. In the 2025 season, he is second only to Julian Weber, who won the Doha Diamond League with a throw of 91.06 m.

PROUD POSSESSION

Canadian teenager Victoria Mboko staged a stunning comeback to defeat four-time Grand Slam champion Naomi Osaka 2-6, 6-4, 6-1, claiming her maiden WTA 1000 title at the Canadian Open 2025. In the men's singles, American fourth seed Ben Shelton battled from a set down to clinch his first ATP Masters 1000 title, defeating Karen Khachanov of Russia 6-7(5), 6-4, 7-6(3). REUTERS

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The Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) has produced countless unforgettable contests — and 2025 has been no different. From the explosive showdown between Brandon Royval and Joshua Van to Dustin Poirier's emotional farewell, the Octagon has once again delivered drama in abundance.

As the year enters its final quarter, *Sportstar* looks back at the top UFC fights of 2025 so far.

Muhammad vs Della Maddalena — UFC 315

UFC 315 saw a major upset as Jack Della Maddalena dethroned Belal Muhammad to claim the welterweight title via unanimous decision (48-47, 48-47, 49-46). The Australian delivered a striking clinic, neutralising Muhammad's wrestling-heavy approach with superb takedown defence.

Della Maddalena's precise boxing, damaging leg kicks, and constant forward pressure kept Muhammad on the back foot, ending the former champion's long unbeaten run and establishing the Australian as the division's new top dog.

Royval vs Van — UFC 317

In a high-octane flyweight bout at UFC 317, Joshua Van claimed a career-defining unanimous decision over top contender Brandon Royval. It was a classic clash of styles from the first bell.

Royval, famed for his relentless pressure, used a crisp jab and punishing leg kicks to control the centre of the Octagon. Van, stepping in at short notice, showcased explosive counter-punching, landing punishing hooks from both sides.

The decisive moment came in the final round, when Van's forward pressure and a late knockdown sealed victory. This breakthrough performance underlined his credentials as a future title contender in the flyweight division.

Dvalishvili vs Nurmagomedov — UFC 311

In a gruelling bantamweight title fight at UFC 311, Merab Dvalishvili handed Umar Nurmagomedov the first defeat of his professional career with a unanimous decision (48-47, 48-47, 49-46). Nurmagomedov started brightly, displaying sharp striking and strong takedown defence, even wobbling the champion. But Dvalishvili's relentless pace and pressure told in the later rounds. 'The Machine' broke through in the championship rounds (last two), setting a new UFC record for most takedowns (97) in UFC history, and overwhelming his tiring opponent. It was a masterclass in cardio and persistence, cementing Dvalishvili's place as champion.

Holloway vs Poirier 3 — UFC 318

The trilogy fight between Max Holloway and Dustin Poirier at UFC 318 was everything fans hoped for — and the perfect send-off for Poirier's final walk to the Octagon. Holloway started at a blistering pace, hurting Poirier early, but 'The Diamond', roared on by a home crowd, fought back with sharp counters.

The final three rounds became a battle of volume versus precision — Holloway's endless output against Poirier's power shots. The two traded until the final horn, with Holloway edging a unanimous decision (48-47, 49-46, 49-46) to retain the BMF title, becoming its first successful defender.

Title shake-up: UFC 315 delivered a welterweight shock as Jack Della Maddalena (right) dethroned Belal Muhammad to claim the title. GETTY IMAGES

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BEHIND THE BUMRAH WORKLOAD CONVERSATION

RESILIENCE IN TRANSITION

Shubman Gill's young side **defied doubts,** adapting under pressure to secure a 2-2 series draw in England.

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The sun shone bright that afternoon. The Indian team was yet to arrive at Lord's for its training session. Even before the security personnel could take up their usual positions, a solitary figure walked towards the centre wicket, all alone.

For the next 22-odd minutes, he wandered around the square, touched the grass, bowed down and inspected the surface. There were no support staff around him, no photographers to capture the moment, and by the time the travelling media contingent realised what was happening, he had left.

Nobody knew why Shubman Gill had come alone. The India captain ensured it remained a well-kept secret.

The five-Test series was evenly poised at that stage, with both India and England having won one match each. India, fresh from a one-sided win in Birmingham, had the chance to extend its lead. For Gill, on his maiden tour of England as captain, this was the biggest challenge yet.

India eventually suffered a narrow defeat at Lord's. Still, Gill's quiet reconnaissance — something he repeated throughout the series — paid off as the team came from behind and levelled the series 2–2 at The Oval, a result few had predicted when the squad landed in England in June.

It was a walk into the unknown for Gill and his young Indian side, in transition after the exits of Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma. Doubts persisted over whether there was enough firepower without the two stalwarts, and pundits had written the team off before a ball was bowled. But coach Gautam Gambhir and Gill shut out the noise, focussing solely on their shared goal.

That mindset proved effective.

Back in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the famed Australian team led by Steve Waugh was renowned for playing mind games with opponents. The Indian team seemed to take a leaf out of that book, refusing to acknowledge the success of the Bazball model and keeping England guessing over its team combination.

Even though it was decided that Jasprit Bumrah would play only three matches due to workload management, the Indian camp maintained the suspense over which games he would feature in. In the final Test at The Oval, no one knew until the last minute whether Bumrah would play or be rested.

England, sticking to its tradition of naming the XI a couple of days before a match, had no clear read on India's likely side. That uncertainty unsettled England's planning and, before a ball was bowled, handed India a psychological edge.

While India managed matters shrewdly off the pitch, there were teething troubles.

At Leeds, despite posting a tall total, the team lost as England chased down 371. For much of the final session, Gill looked under pressure, with Bumrah, K. L. Rahul and Rishabh Pant stepping in with suggestions.

With Gill taking a back seat, Bumrah and Pant reshuffled the bowlers and made key calls, raising questions over whether the young captain was ready for the role.

But as the series wore on, Gill

Even-steven: England's Ben Stokes and India's Shubman Gill shake hands as they pose with the Anderson–Tendulkar Trophy after the gripping series ended in a draw on the final day of the fifth Test at The Kia Oval in London. PTI

grew into the job.

At Lord's, his leadership was on full display when he had a heated exchange with Zak Crawley and Ben Duckett. As the angry young captain told the England batters to "grow some ba**s", he was no longer merely reacting — he was making a statement. Gill led from the front, letting his bat speak with 754 runs in 10 innings, and passed that aggression on to his teammates.

No wonder Pant could bat with a broken foot or Mohammed Siraj could ignore workload limits to bowl 185.3 overs — 1,113 deliveries — in the series. Siraj finished as the leading wicket-taker with 23 wickets, bowling with both heart and skill.

Moving away from the Ravi Shastri or Rahul Dravid era, when four or five specialist bowlers were the norm, the team management opted for batters who could bowl. In the absence of Kohli and Rohit, the aim was to add batting depth, which proved effective as Washington Sundar, batting lower down, scored fifties and a century to keep India competitive. While the coach and captain hinted that this could be the future template, bowling coach Morne Morkel admitted the move was primarily to maintain balance. "That was part of the conversation before every selection so far. We just felt leading into the Test match that going with the extra batter was going to be important," Morkel said.

The approach worked.

In the fast bowling department, even though Bumrah played just three matches, he regularly spoke to Siraj, Akash Deep and Prasidh Krishna in training. At Old Trafford, he was seen in animated huddles with the quicks. In Bumrah's absence, Siraj took on that mentoring role. "Whenever he (Bumrah) plays, I support him, and in his absence, I know I have the ability to take the wickets," Siraj said. At The Oval, with England inching closer to the target, Siraj repeatedly walked up to Prasidh and Akash between deliveries, calming nerves with a hand on the shoulder and encouraging words.

Run spree: Shubman Gill's series aggregate of 754 was the second-highest tally of a captain, only behind Don Bradman's 810 in 1936. GETTY IMAGES

Touring England is never easy. India has not won a Test series there since 2007, but from the outset, this team resolved not to dwell on the past. Gambhir was clear: this side would write its own history. Coming off two series defeats — at home to New Zealand and away to Australia — the pressure was mounting, yet the players rose to the occasion.

In the first two matches, openers Yashasvi Jaiswal and Rahul gave India steady starts. Their centuries on flat decks shielded Gill from the new ball, allowing the middle order to play freely. Rahul made full use of his experience, Jaiswal was flamboyant, and Gill avoided facing the first 20 overs in his first five innings. That helped him play naturally on untroubled surfaces. Even though he struggled against the incoming ball in the last three Tests, he spent hours in the nets with batting coach Sitanshu Kotak to address the flaw. The results were immediate as he went on to score a vital hundred in India's second innings in Manchester to help eke out a series-saving draw.

"He is a quality player, and when you start your captaincy stint, that extra responsibility really helps your batting in the early stages. Maybe, towards the back end, it becomes more difficult. But right at the moment, he's in that sweet spot, and I suppose he's just got to ride the wave and enjoy it," former England captain Andrew Strauss told *Sportstar*.

As Gill's confidence grew, he backed his players strongly. Senior campaigners like Ravindra Jadeja and Rahul also stepped in with key inputs. At The Oval, when Joe Root and Harry Brook built a threatening partnership, Jadeja advised Gill, "*Idhar se dalwa, idhar se...*", suggesting a change of ends for Krishna and Akash. The switch worked, with Krishna striking from the Micky Stewart Pavilion end to remove Root. England would eventually slip from 337 for six to be

Pace clincher: India's six-run win at The Oval, its narrowest in Tests, came through Mohammed Siraj, Prasidh Krishna, and Akash Deep, consigning England to its joint-third-narrowest defeat. AFP

bowled out for 367.

Concerns over India's slip cordon emerged in the opener at Leeds, where several chances went down. Fielding coach T. Dilip responded by shuffling the slip arrangement and increasing close-in drills in training. Recognising the importance of sharp fielding against England, players like Rahul, Karun Nair, Jaiswal and B. Sai Sudharsan spent at least an extra hour honing their slip catching by the end of the tour.

There were however question marks at No. 3, with neither Karun nor Sudharsan converting starts into big scores. Yet they built valuable partnerships, easing pressure on the middle order. Some selection calls were questionable. Kuldeep Yadav sat out at Old Trafford and Edgbaston, where wrist-spin could have been an asset, and Abhimanyu Easwaran was not given a chance, spending the tour carrying drinks.

In the end, such issues faded in importance. The Indian team displayed skill, resilience and unity, promising a brighter future. This was not only about the result; it was about how a group of young, relatively inexperienced players came together to make themselves a team to beat.

Roll of honour

Player Of The Match At The Oval
Mohammed Siraj
4/86 & 5/104

India's Player Of The Series
Shubman Gill
Runs: 754; Innings: 10;
Average: 75.40

England's Player Of The Series
Harry Brook
Runs: 481; Innings: 9;
Average: 53.44

1st

A costly single saved: England, led by Gus Atkinson, restricted India to just 224 in the first innings. However, perhaps the most telling moment came when the experienced Chris Woakes suffered a shoulder injury while diving to save a boundary — an injury that effectively ruled him out for the rest of the match. REUTERS

2nd

One reverse too many: Ben Duckett (43) and Zak Crawley (64) got England off to a flying start, adding 92 runs in just 13 overs. However, Duckett fell attempting to reverse-scoop Akash Deep, earning himself a send-off — part hug, part taunt — from the fast bowler. His dismissal triggered a collapse, with England losing its final eight wickets for just 118 runs and ending with a slender lead of 23. REUTERS

3rd

4th

Nightwatchman who? India moved into a commanding position thanks to a century from Yashasvi Jaiswal (118) and a remarkable innings by Akash Deep (66). Coming in as a nightwatchman late on Day 2, Deep batted through to Lunch the next day to register a maiden international half-century. PICS: PTI

5th

Finishing flourishes: Washington Sundar (53) impressed with his defensive skills in the fourth Test, and in the fifth he showcased his attacking range, adding a quickfire 36 for the final wicket to stretch India's lead to an imposing 373. PTI

FOR MORE IMAGES

6th

A step too far: Having made early inroads, India seemed poised to take control when Harry Brook skied a pull shot — only for Mohammed Siraj to overbalance onto the rope after completing the catch. Brook (111) and Joe Root (105) made the most of the reprieve, adding 195 runs to put England firmly in charge. GETTY IMAGES

7th

Twists and turns: England looked set to wrap up victory inside four days, but a post-tea burst from Prasidh Krishna and Mohammed Siraj kept India in the contest. Prasidh's dismissal of Joe Root reignited the match, and a late rain shower ensured it would spill into a fifth day. PTI

8th

Bravery: Siraj and Prasidh had swung the match back India's way, and with the result in the balance, England was down to its last batter. When Prasidh bowled Josh Tongue, a one-handed Chris Woakes walked out, hoping to drag his side over the line. REUTERS

GETTY IMAGES

9th

BELIEVE: SIRAJ EMERGED AS INDIA'S MATCH HERO, DISMANTLING GUS ATKINSON TO CLAIM 5 FOR 104 AND CLINCH A NAIL-BITING SIX-RUN VICTORY – INDIA'S NARROWEST TEST TRIUMPH YET.

Pitch spat: India head coach Gautam Gambhir was involved in a confrontation with Lee Fortis, Surrey's head of groundstaff, during training ahead of the fifth and final Test at The Oval. REUTERS

CRICKET, CONFLICT AND CATHARSIS: WHAT THE OVAL OFFERED

Tempers, tributes, and Test glory: A packed final week at The Oval ends with India's epic comeback.

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Sitting on the staircase of the Micky Stewart Pavilion, Lee Fortis had a wry smile. The final Test was still two days away, but the Oval curator had already made headlines after a spat with India head coach Gautam Gambhir. As the touring media and English press queued outside his small cabin, Fortis appeared unfazed. Wiping his face with his sweatshirt, he muttered, "You all saw what happened..."

Pressed further, Fortis — often described as a "tough nut" by the English press — called Gambhir a "tetchy guy". But as many struggled with his accent, headlines quickly misquoted him, suggesting he'd called the India coach a "touchy guy".

To clarify, Fortis rang up The Diary and a scribe from a national wire agency — "curious guys", he called them. "T-e-t-c-h-y," he spelt out. "You saw who started it."

While the BCCI and ECB scrambled to downplay the matter, Fortis made it clear he wouldn't forget. "I never forget. I always remember," he said rhythmically, before hurrying off to cover the square as clouds loomed overhead.

Over the next five days, Fortis let his work speak. Named ECB's best curator several times, he produced what many agreed was the finest wicket of the series. A touch of green early on pleased the quicks, while the surface eased out later, aiding

strokeplay. Centuries from Yashasvi Jaiswal, Joe Root and Harry Brook bore testimony to the balance.

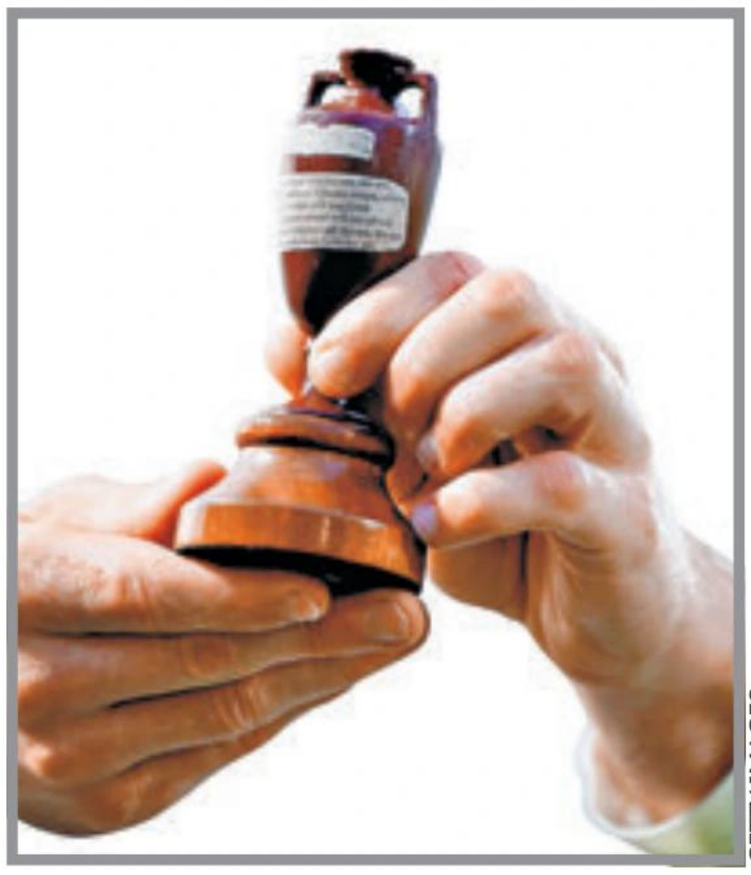
Between sessions, Fortis was the first to assess the pitch, working hands-on with his groundstaff to preserve its lively character. Run-ins with coaches or captains are not new for him; he's fiercely possessive of his turf.

When the match ended, with India pulling off a dramatic six-run win to level the series, Fortis congratulated the bowlers. Later that evening, he was back on his favourite staircase, sipping tea. "We play 60 days of cricket here. It's not easy. But such things happen— part of the game," he said with a grin. "You all enjoyed the game, no? That's my biggest prize."

He posed for selfies with travelling journalists and exchanged pleasantries with Indian players. All's well that ends well.

Slice of history

On August 29, 1882, The Ashes was born at The Oval after England's shock defeat to Australia. The *Sporting Times* mock obituary lamented the "death of English cricket", proclaiming that "the body will be cremated and the Ashes



GETTY IMAGES

taken to Australia".

That history still lingers. A plaque near the Jack Hobbs gate commemorates the moment, while another, near the main pavilion, marks the first-ever FA Cup final,

Emotional tribute: A poignant moment as Graham Thorpe's family leads the bell-ringing ceremony at The Oval, remembering a beloved cricketer and coach.

REUTERS

played at The Oval on March 16, 1872. The Wanderers beat Royal Engineers 1-0. Twenty-one more finals were held here before The Oval became an exclusive cricket ground.

The museum, usually reserved for Surrey members, was opened to the public during the final Test. Fans poured in to catch a glimpse of cricket's deep roots.

A day for Thorpey

Day Two of the Oval Test was dedicated to Graham Thorpe, the former England batter who died last August after being struck by a train in Surrey. The coroner ruled the death a suicide.

It was, fittingly, "A Day for Thorpey". Players wore headbands bearing his silhouette and initials during training. His wife, Amanda, and daughter, Emma, rang the bell before play.

Root looked visibly emotional. Ben Stokes spoke movingly: "Thorpey was influential as a player and a coach. Many of us came through the ranks under his guidance, and he remained involved when we entered the main team."

Surrey, Thorpe's County team, paid tribute with a mural outside the ground. It was a dignified remembrance of a quiet craftsman, 6,744 Test runs at 44.66, whose impact stretched beyond statistics.

(Those who require assistance for overcoming suicidal thoughts may contact Sanjivini, Society for Mental Health suicide prevention helpline 011-4076 9002 (10 a.m. to 7.30 p.m., Monday-Saturday)

***Tu la parat man la re,* Siraj**

In 15 years of travel, The Diary had seen many press boxes, but never one like this.

On day five, as Mohammed Siraj brought India within reach of victory, the press box turned into a fan zone. Grown men were in tears. As Gus Atkinson and Chris Woakes added each run, superstition crept in. Reporters were told not to leave their seats. Those returning from the toilet were rebuked. Nobody wanted to tempt fate. Then, as Siraj cleaned up Atkinson, the press box rose as one. A veteran Marathi journalist captured the mood best: *"Tu la parat man la re, Siraj..."* (You've won my heart again, Siraj.)

It was a tearful, joyous finale to a series that swayed wildly, sometimes fraying nerves, always stirring the soul.

Built for the long haul, born for the big moment

Mohammed Siraj bowled more deliveries than anyone in the series, but **with stamina came skill** — his inch-perfect yorker sealed India's narrowest-ever Test win and cemented his place as more than just a workhorse.

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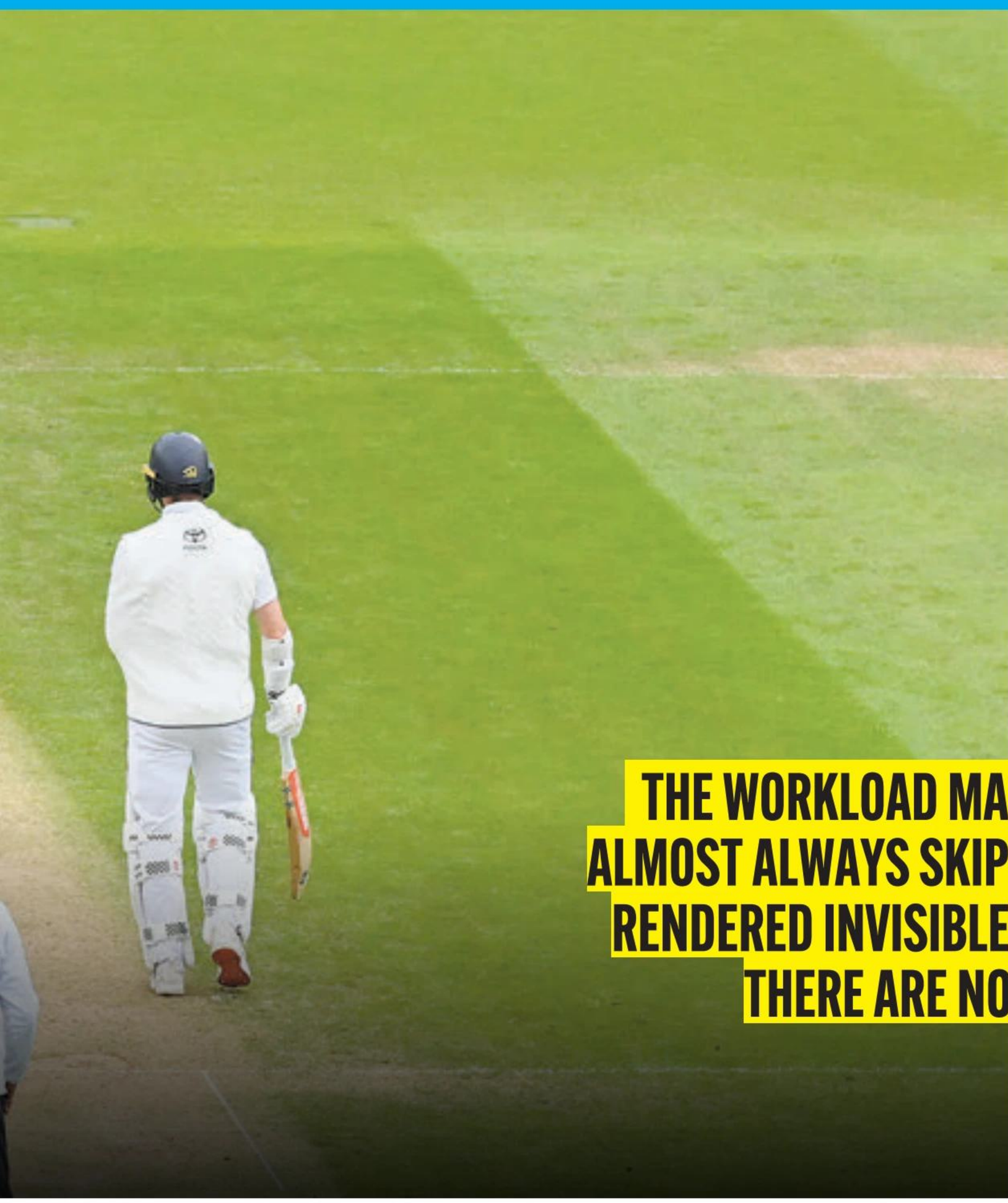
FOR MORE STORIES

Fast bowling is a precise art, and a surfeit of it can blunt the skill and its efficacy. Fast bowling is also a taxing vocation, and overindulgence can break the human will and body.

But then Mohammed Siraj still bounds in, bowling his 1113th delivery on his 25th day of cricket on a tour lasting a month and a half, and conjures his fifth fastest ball of the entire series, clocked at 143 kmph. It is a low full toss, only his second of a match in which he has sent down 279 deliveries, and it flattens the off-stump to give India the narrowest win in its existence as a Test-playing nation.

At a time when the exigencies of multiple formats have made managing workloads a priority for pace bowlers, the ever-present Siraj hasn't been earmarked for that luxury. Since his debut in December 2020, no Indian has featured in as many Tests as Siraj's 41. In the recently concluded drawn Test series, no bowler surpassed his gruelling tally of 185.3 overs, and the only other bowler who sent down more than 1,000 deliveries — Chris Woakes — wasn't half as effective.

His 30.1 overs were the fifth-most by an Indian pacer in the fourth innings of a Test, and Siraj is the only one to have bowled as many since 2013.



Marathon man: Mohammed Siraj delivered 30.1 overs in the fourth innings at The Oval to help India earn a win and draw the five-match series.

PICS: GETTY IMAGES

THE WORKLOAD MANAGEMENT STRICTURES ALMOST ALWAYS SKIP SIRAJ, AS THOUGH HE IS RENDERED INVISIBLE BY HIS OMNIPRESENCE. THERE ARE NO CALLS TO 'WRAP HIM IN COTTON WOOL'

And yet, there was no let-up in intensity from Siraj until all the drama had been squeezed out of the series, all the gods invoked, and all the fingernails chewed. Siraj whips up an easy hostility at the snap of a finger and plays the pantomime villain from time to time, but there is no element of a supernatural aura, one that hovers around his *Jassi bhai* [Jasprit Bumrah] — a transcendental figure in India's bowling attack.

He is the salt of the earth, a 'really nice lad' despite the odd argy-bargy, and in the age of Instagram reels, simply needs a Google search-inspired wallpaper to make him 'believe'. He is a captain's dream who provides maximum output with minimum input, a commodity that often accompanies the 'workhorse' tag that puts quantity over quality.

But Siraj is far from just filling in the overs, holding one end up and buying recovery time for the rest of the attack. He elevates the contest and has the skill, in the absence of Bumrah, to emerge as the face of India's charge. During the Anderson-Tendulkar Trophy series, he picked 16 wickets at 19.81 apiece in the two games Bumrah couldn't play, a significant level up from his seven wickets at an average of 61.28 when the maverick was present.

"When *Jassi bhai* isn't around, then you get that confidence that you need to shoulder extra responsibility, and I enjoy that. I don't take extra pressure and try to keep things simple," Siraj had said after nabbing four wickets in the first innings at The Oval against England.

If Siraj lacks artistry, he makes up for it with tenacity and superhuman endurance. His relentless eight-over spell on the second day at The Oval bears testimony. Making amends for a four-over first spell that went for 32 runs, Siraj pinned Ollie Pope and Joe Root in front with his go-to nip-backer from a good length before trapping Jacob Bethell in front with an in-swinging yorker — the only one he bowled in that spell, which he relished as his favourite scalp.

For the glut of overs he has bowled, Siraj's planning and execution is astonishingly accurate. His third yorker of the match saw the ball scuttle through Zak Crawley's defence off the final delivery of the third day and tipped the scales in India's favour.

With the ball paying homage to the bat for the last part of the penultimate day, Siraj once again broke England's resistance by darting the ball into Pope's pads from a good length at the stroke of lunch and then unleashing hell across a 12.1-over spell spread over two days.

A misstep of an inch at the fine-leg boundary, which resulted in Siraj handing centurion Harry Brook a six instead of dismissing him on 19, had threatened to sour an otherwise phenomenal series. But ubiquity is a double-edged sword; as much as it allows room for more error, it also

BOWLING MACHINE

* Mohammed Siraj bowled 1,113 deliveries in the series — the only bowler besides Chris Woakes to cross 1,000 balls.
* He played all five Tests in the series.
* Siraj finished as the highest wicket-taker with 23 wickets.
* His strike rate was 48.3 balls per dismissal.
* This is the best bowling strike rate by an Indian pacer in an away Test series (minimum 1,000 balls bowled).

Leading from the front: Mohammed Siraj stepped up in Jasprit Bumrah's absence, picking 16 wickets at 19.81 in the two Tests that the latter missed.
GETTY IMAGES

affords chances to make amends. Siraj gobbled that opportunity.

He induced so many false shots, 18 off 25 deliveries, on the final day that Indian fans wished for a provision that would allow him to steam in from both ends. Jamie Smith and Jamie Overton fell to his unerring ability to generate movement from a good length before he dug deep into his reserves of fortitude to produce that series-levelling low full toss to castle Atkinson.

If elite athletes swear by the adage 'mind over body', it is a curious case of 'body over mind' for Siraj. His bowling has an instinctive feel, and his ability to metronomically hit the good length is as though the routine is steeped in his muscle memory. As many as 16 of his 23 scalps and 251 of the 283 false shots he has induced in this series were the result of homing in around that good length or just short of it.

Siraj seldom strayed full, delivering the second-lowest percentage (11.95) of full-length balls in the series, and second only to Bumrah (11 per cent), who played two matches less and bowled almost 400 balls fewer. Moreover, the eight yorkers he dished out in the whole series yielded four wickets. In the face of a heavy bowling load, Siraj's skills and clarity of thought have remained sharp. He is as much a battering ram as he is a precision strike weapon in India's arsenal, capable of delivering a scene-shifting payload when the pressure mounts.

He plies his trade across formats. In the last four years, Siraj has played 43 One-Day Internationals, while no other full-time Indian pacer has even touched 30 matches in the corresponding period. His workload during this phase also includes 35 Tests, the most by an Indian. In the Indian Premier League, he was a vital cog of Royal Challengers Bengaluru's pace attack from 2021 to 2024, spearheads the battery at Gujarat Titans now, and is increasingly in the frame in India's T20I plans.

Still, the workload management strictures almost always skip Siraj, as though he is rendered invisible by his omnipresence. There are no calls to 'wrap him in cotton wool'. One must jog the memory to remember when he could afford to rest. With Bumrah's fitness a constant worry, he is still, at best, a stop-gap spearhead.

But all of that could, and should, change after the jamboree at The Oval. If his heroics against Australia at The Gabba in 2021 were the face of an emerging Indian pace powerhouse, Oval 2025 was emblematic of that talent announcing itself as a leader unto himself.

Purple patch: Shubman Gill scored a colossal 754 runs — the most by an Indian skipper in a Test series. GETTY IMAGES

Where the seam once sang, silence now reigns

An in-depth look at how England's flat-pitch strategy under Brendon McCullum turned a historic Anderson-Tendulkar Trophy into a batting feast — and why the **silence of the seam** may signal deeper risks for the future of Test cricket at home.

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The first-ever Anderson–Tendulkar Trophy witnessed a dramatic conclusion as India edged out England by six runs in the fifth Test at The Oval to level the series 2–2.

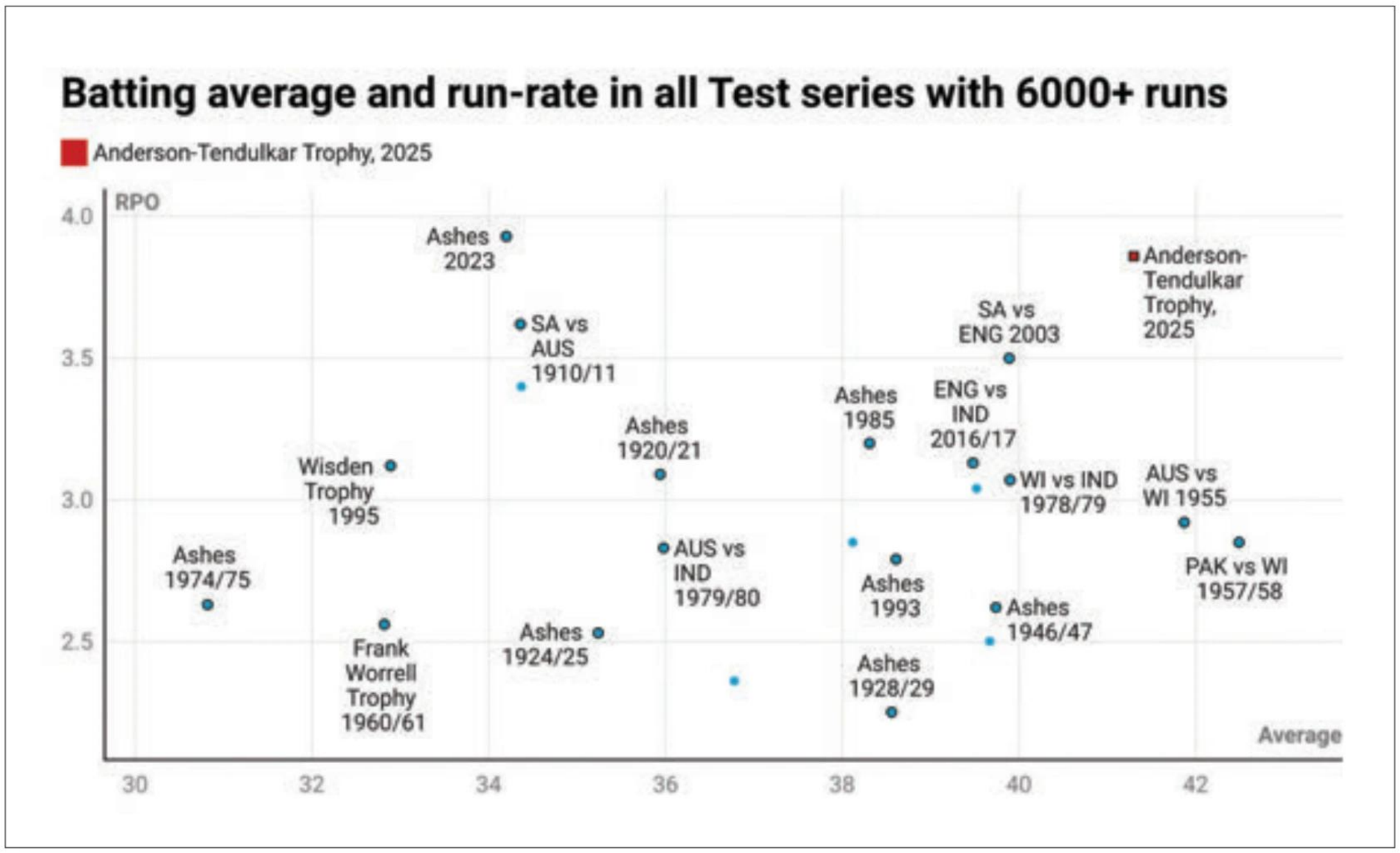
The victory at The Oval — India's narrowest win while bowling last in a Test — was a fitting finale to a see-saw contest that stretched across all 25 allocated days of the series.

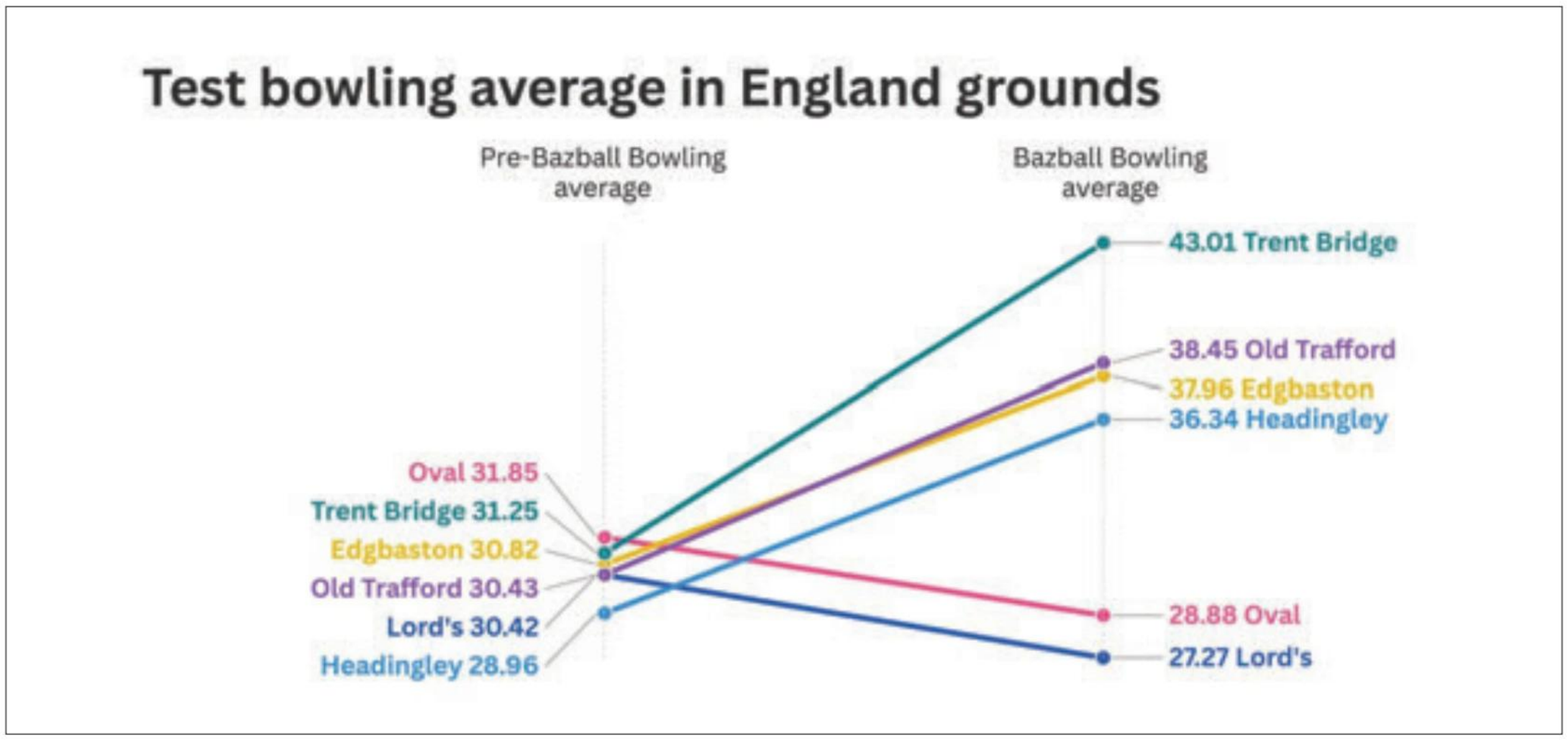
While there was no shortage of drama both on and off the field, one constant across the five matches was the relative ease of run-scoring.

On placid pitches that defied conventional expectations of swing- and seam-friendly English conditions, batters flourished while bowlers laboured for breakthroughs.

The final aggregate run tally stood at 7,187 — the second-highest in a bilateral Test series. Only the 1993 Ashes, in which England and Australia amassed 7,221 runs across six Tests, has seen more.

England and India averaged 41.30 runs per wicket, the highest in any series of five or more Tests in over 16





years. The top-order batters from both sides combined for a remarkable average of 49.37.

"We came into the series knowing we'd encounter flatter tracks and fast scoring. We were mentally prepared for a grind," said India's bowling coach, Morne Morkel.

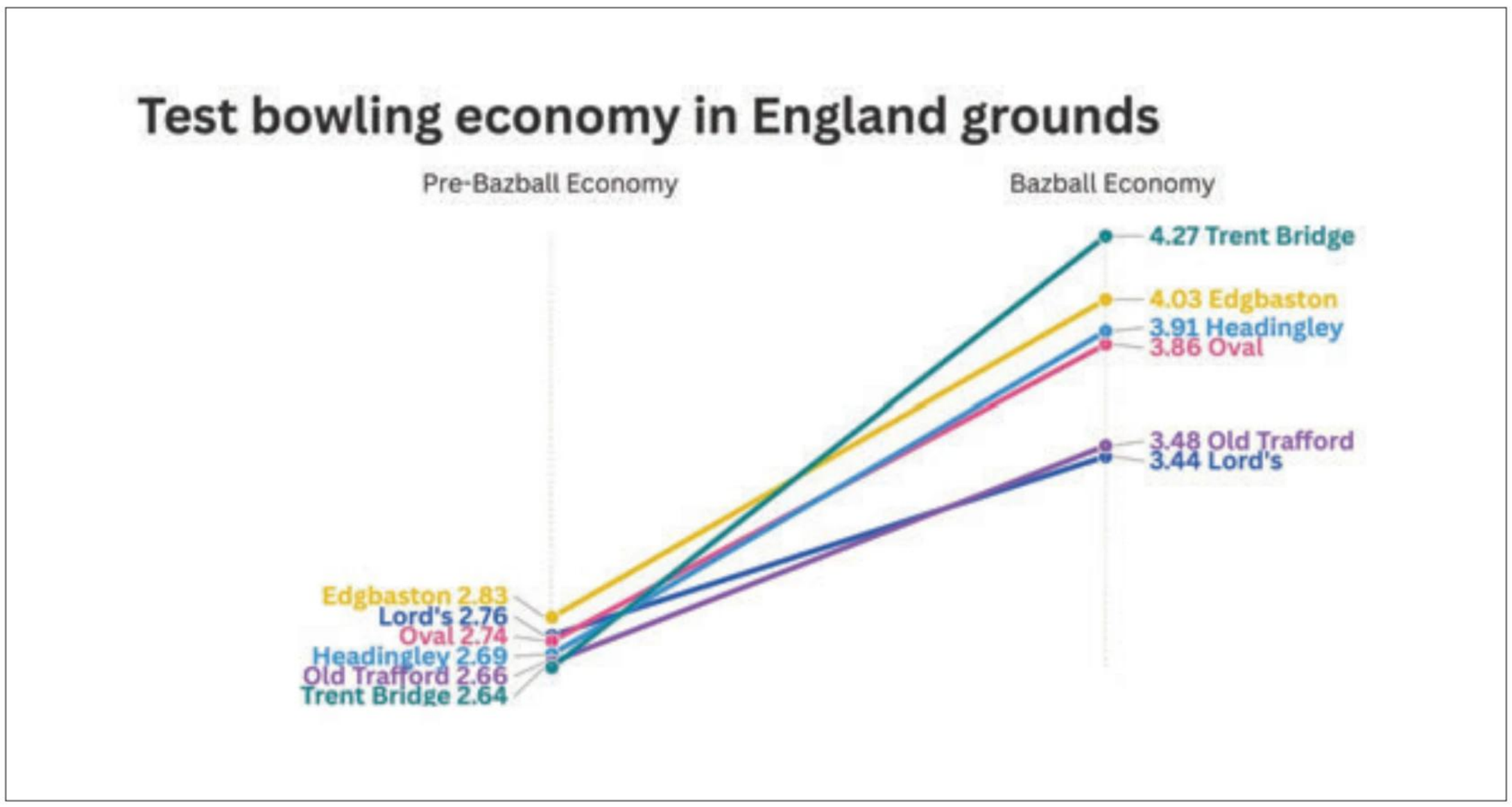
This English summer also produced 21 individual hundreds — the joint-most in a Test series, equalling Australia's tour of the West Indies in 1955.

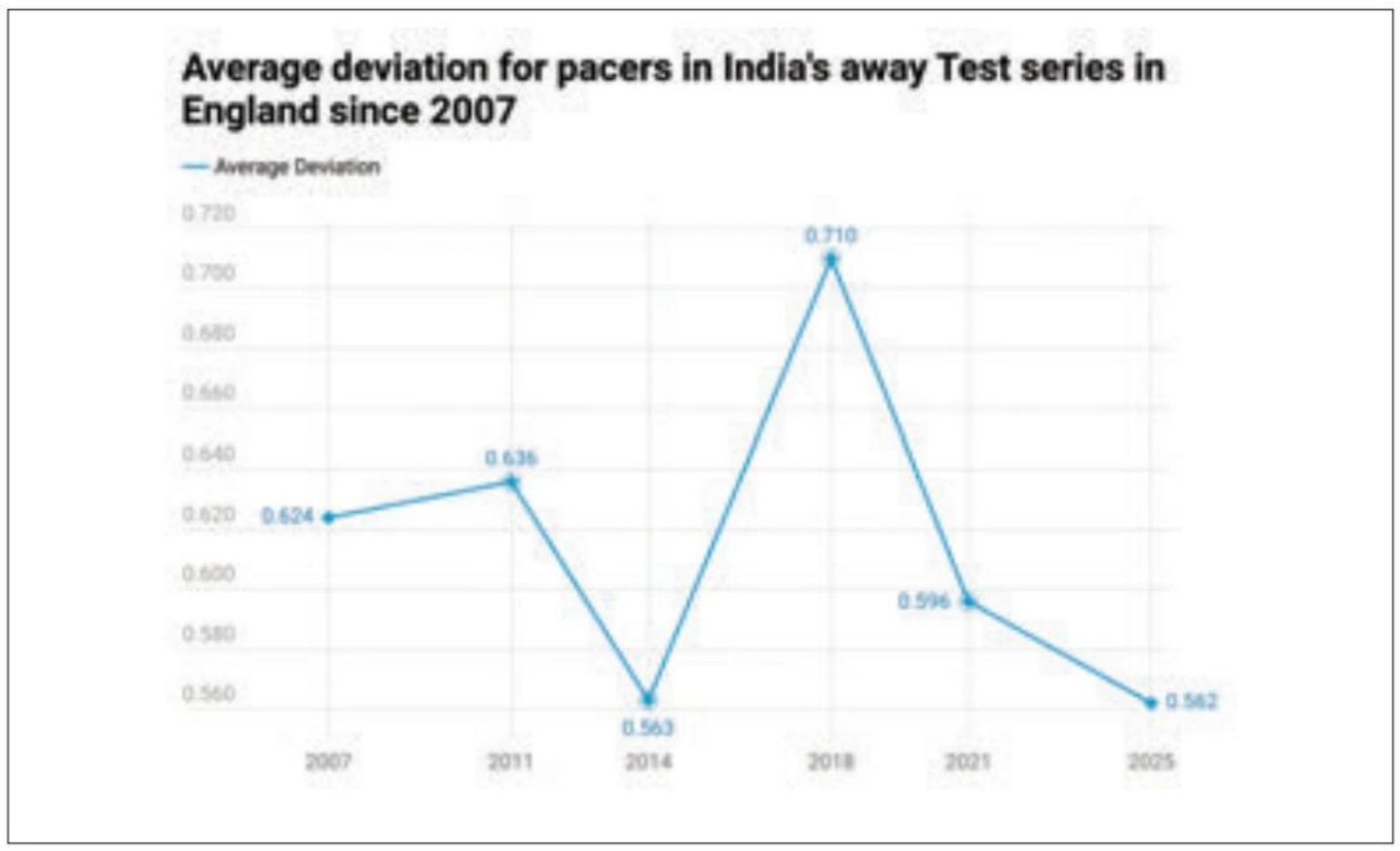
Four of those centuries came from Indian captain Shubman Gill, who scored a colossal 754 runs — the most by an Indian skipper in a Test series and second only to Sunil Gavaskar's 774 against the West Indies in 1971 for the most by any Indian in a long-format series.

The run glut was not just about volume. The series run rate of 3.86 was the second-highest for a five-plus-Test series, behind only the 2023 Ashes (3.93).

The freedom with which batters scored was also reflected in the number of sixes struck. England and India combined for 81 maximums — bettered only once, in the 2024 England–India series, which saw 102.

While batters from both sides deserve credit for their execution, their feats were undoubtedly aided by increasingly docile English pitches,





which have become integral to England's home Test strategy.

Since Brendon McCullum's appointment as head coach in 2022, England has played at six home venues — Lord's, Headingley, The Oval, Old Trafford, Trent Bridge and Edgbaston.

Four of these have undergone a marked transformation. Once offering an even contest between bat and ball, they have become heavily tilted towards batting.

This aligns with McCullum's philosophy of hyper-aggressive batting, reflected in the rising scoring rates at every English Test ground.

Trent Bridge has experienced the most dramatic shift. Before the advent of 'Bazball', bowlers there averaged 31.25 while conceding 2.64 runs per over. Since then, the average has ballooned to 43.01, with the run rate soaring to 4.27.

Ironically, Trent Bridge was the only major ground not to host a match during the Anderson–Tendulkar Trophy.

Nevertheless, the series was played on lifeless surfaces, unlike anything Indian batters have encountered in England in recent memory.

According to Cricviz, the average deviation for pace bowlers was just 0.562 degrees — the lowest for a Test series involving India in England since ball-tracking data began in 2005.

The average swing for pacers was 0.899 degrees, the sixth-lowest for any Test series in England of at least three matches.

Notably, three of the six lowest figures in that list have come during the Bazball era.

By prioritising maximum batting returns, England has enjoyed strong results at home under McCullum and Ben Stokes, not having lost a home series during this period, with 17 wins and only six defeats.

However, the tactic has not yielded series victories in the two marquee contests it has hosted in the last three years — the 2023 Ashes and the Anderson–Tendulkar Trophy.

While the batting-friendly conditions ensured relentless entertainment, they took a visible toll on the bowlers.

By the time the series reached The Oval, both teams were without their frontline pace spearheads — Jofra Archer and Jasprit Bumrah were rested for workload management, while Stokes was sidelined with an injury sustained from long, taxing spells earlier in the series.

Whether England's policy of 'dead-pitching' opponents is sustainable remains an open question.

THE LAST BASTION OF WILL

This India-England series offered no shortcuts — **only tests of the body and mind.** Here, grit isn't a trait; it's the price of entry.

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Sport doesn't build character; it reveals it — but only in Test cricket does it leave it bruised, stitched, and interrogated over five days of ordeal.

Across five matches between India and England this summer, character was exposed in ways that T20 scarcely permits and one-dayers barely accommodate. The collisions were not just between bat and ball but between sinew and will, frailty and fight. If this series is remembered for its moments of high skill, it will endure for the sight of broken bodies refusing to bow.

Rishabh Pant came out on the second morning at Old Trafford with a broken foot. The previous day, a full toss from Chris Woakes had cannoned into his right boot mid–reverse sweep. He peeled off his sock to reveal a lump that would've made a physio wince. Carted off in a buggy and sent for scans, Pant's participation in the match seemed over. Yet the next morning, he limped out, launched Jofra Archer for six, completed his half-century, and carried India beyond 350. Pain wasn't ignored; it was absorbed.

At Lord's, it was Shoaib Bashir who played through a broken finger on his left hand, clobbered by a return drive from Ravindra Jadeja. He held on for the final day, then delivered the decisive blow, dismissing Mohammed Siraj to give England a 2-1 lead. He did not bowl again in the series.

But if Lord's was England's, it was only just

Warrior clan: Mohammed Siraj and Chris Woakes greet each other after the match.

— Ben Stokes **(facing page, below)**, part Spartan, part sorcerer, dragging his team over the line. That match turned on a moment of mad genius: Stokes, fielding at point, hurled down the stumps to run out Rishabh Pant in full flow, tilting the axis of a match that took England to a 2-1 lead.

Yet that will came at a cost. Stokes bowed out of the final Test with a grade-three tear in a shoulder already frayed by years of attrition. Across the series, he had bowled 140 overs — 23 more than his previous heaviest workload, during his debut series in Australia in 2013-14 — and taken 17 wickets, more than even Jasprit Bumrah. From shattered fingers to a twice-surgeried knee, torn hamstrings and now a shoulder wrecked again, Stokes' injury catalogue reads like a soldier's medical file. But until his body gave out at Old Trafford, he was England's engine room — the difference between parity and dominance.

And then there was Chris Woakes, padding up with one working shoulder and barely the use of his left arm. He couldn't swing the bat. But he showed up. When England needed to survive the last session at The Oval, Woakes hung in at the non-striker's end for three overs with the look of a man not trying to win or even draw — just not to yield.

Even Bumrah, indefatigable in spirit, began to show strain. The Manchester pitch was slow, the surface unresponsive, and the toll of a long series began to tell. He bowled 33 overs — his heaviest single-innings workload — for just two wickets, and, for the first time, his analysis crossed the three-figure mark. The numbers told their own story: at Headingley, 42.7 per cent of his first-innings deliveries breached 140 kph; by Lord's, that dropped to 22.3 per cent; at Old Trafford, it was just 0.5 per cent. He endured the third Test, but only just. The zip may have gone, but not the fight.

Not all pain in Test cricket is physical. Some of it festers in silence — in selection meetings and forgotten nets, where years pass and careers unravel without ever truly being lost.

Karun Nair returned to the Indian dressing room for the first time since the summer of 2018, when he spent an entire five-match series in England on the bench. Back then, he was six Tests old and already the owner of a triple-century — a career that had flared early and then vanished. In this series, he came back not in triumph but in transit, still waiting for the game to give back. The 57 he made at The Oval was his first fifty-plus Test score since that unbeaten 303 in Chennai — 3,149 days ago. No redemption arc. No resurrection. Just a man still trying, still there. Much like spinner Liam Dawson, whose time out of the England team felt less like a dead end and more like a long pause in a sentence still being written.

All of 2,929 days separated Dawson's seventh and eighth Test wickets. The last time he struck, Hashim Amla was at the crease and Alastair Cook was still opening the batting for England. That was July 2017, Trent Bridge. Eight years on, Dawson returned in Manchester — not as a headline act, but as a quiet reminder of what the format demands: not just excellence, but patience — and the willingness to wait.

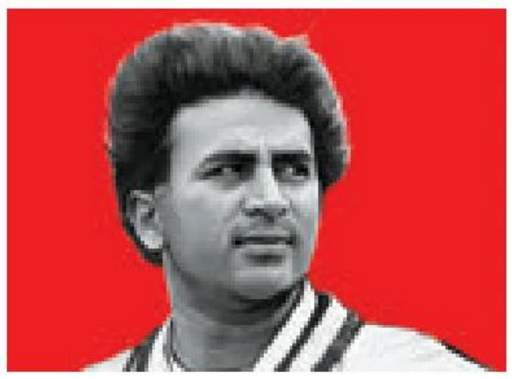
The five-day game has long been romanticised for its slow-burning thrillers and narrative arcs. But that's just the scaffolding. What gives it soul is what modern cricket so often edits out: time enough for the body to break — and the mind to respond.

There's no glamour in playing hurt, no endorsement for torn rotator cuffs. Only a pact — with teammates, with the shirt, with something older. You go out not for stats, but because it matters. Because you may not get another shot. In a world ruled by ad slots and algorithms, where shelf life often trumps form, the Test remains cricket's final arena of truth. Pain here isn't content — it's context.

This series didn't chase spectacle. It gave us something rarer: honesty. Players pushing past logic, teams learning to live with their flaws. Test cricket doesn't shout. It lingers — in bruises, in memory, in meaning.

RISHABH PANT CAME OUT ON THE SECOND MORNING AT OLD TRAFFORD WITH A BROKEN FOOT AFTER COPPING ONE ON HIS RIGHT BOOT MID-REVERSE SWEEP

PICS: GETTY IMAGES



ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar

FOR MORE STORIES

SHUBMAN GILL CAPTAINING NORTH ZONE TEAM IS A MASSIVE SHOT IN THE ARM FOR DULEEP TROPHY

The fast bowlers not playing is good thinking, as it has been an unusually hot summer in England, thanks to global warming, and their energies must have been expended after the **untiring spells** they bowled throughout the series.

Now that one of the most exciting Test series has ended, and unbelievably there is no commitment for the men's team till next month's Asia Cup, there will be time for Indian cricket to breathe and take stock of what needs to be done to make this current team even better than what it is today.

For far too long, Indian cricket has tried to live up to its eminent position in the game by ensuring that it sends a team to some of the fellow full member countries so that those countries can benefit from broadcast and gate revenue. While most of the senior and established players take a breather from these tours, those who are trying to concretise their places in the team go through another tour when their minds and bodies could do with a bit of a break.

It was good, therefore, to see that after the tour to Bangladesh was postponed to next year, the BCCI resisted the pressure to send a team for a white-ball series to Sri Lanka this month. By doing that, the BCCI have prioritised domestic cricket, as it means that now most, if not all, of the top players will be available to play in the Duleep Trophy tournament starting shortly. Shubman Gill captaining the North Zone team is a massive shot in the arm for this tournament. By being available for the tournament, the Indian skipper is sending the right signal to the other members of the team. It would have been understandable if, after a gruelling tour where five Test matches were crammed in a little over six weeks, he had opted to rest. The fast bowlers not playing is good thinking, as it has been an unusually hot summer in England, thanks to global warming, and their energies must have been expended after the untiring spells they bowled throughout the series.

Hopefully, next time around there will be a few more days' gap between Test matches, as suggested by England skipper Ben Stokes. Modern tours are made for senior established players who do not want to spend a day more than is necessary. That leaves the fringe players, as well as those who are out of form, no opportunity to get some form back and make a meaningful contribution to the team. The established players know that come what may, they will not be dropped on form and so want to play the Tests and get back home. This is true for all the teams and is also what home boards seem to like, as it means fewer days looking after the visiting teams.

This was the first-ever series named after

Domestic boost: India's Test captain Shubman Gill is set to lead North Zone in the 2025-26 Duleep Trophy, which will kick off the domestic season in Bengaluru later this month. GETTY IMAGES

Sachin Tendulkar and Jimmy Anderson, two of cricket's greatest legends. One would have expected both to be present to give the trophy to the two captains, especially since the series ended in a draw. To the best of one's knowledge, both were in England at the time. So, were they simply not invited? Or was this similar to what happened in Australia earlier this year, when only Allan Border was asked to present the Border-Gavaskar Trophy because Australia had won the series? Since this England series was drawn, perhaps neither was asked to attend the presentation. Mostly around the world, administrators are brought in to ensure profits and are quite good at it, but they may not have much knowledge about the history of the sport they are presiding over. So, these little gestures are not in their scheme of things. Nobody from the Pataudi family was there either, for the Pataudi medal, which was to be presented to the winning team's captain. The drawn series showed how silly this idea was of trying to make up to the Pataudis by retiring the trophy named after them. Every time the series is drawn, the medal can't be presented, can it? Wouldn't it be better, therefore, to have the medal for the Man of the Series than give it to the winning team's captain? And what if the captain himself has had an ordinary series and had little impact on the result?

If there had been a result and the Pataudi medal had to be given to the Man of the Series, it would have been a tough choice, for both skippers were simply outstanding.

There will be several moments to cherish from the series: Gill's batting — very rarely do you get to see batting as pure as this — and his captaincy, Stokes' superhuman efforts with both bat and ball, the Indian fast bowlers' marathon spells, Joe Root's classy centuries, Rishabh Pant batting as only he can, as also Harry Brook, and both also chirping as only they can.

But the enduring memory will always be Mohammed Siraj's yorker that flattened the off-stump of Gus Atkinson to give India a win to level the series. After the disappointing last season in Test cricket, this would no doubt be the happiest moment in recent times for Indian cricket lovers.

Thank you, Shubman, and your boys.

Jaiswal's feat against England

16 } The number of innings Yashasvi Jaiswal took to reach 1000 Test runs against England — in the first innings in Manchester on 23 July 2025, equalling the record held by Australian Arthur Morris in July 1948 in Leeds. This effort by him is the quickest by any opening batter against England and joint-second fastest by an Indian against the same opponent. Meanwhile, Jaiswal, at 23 years and 207 days, is now the youngest opener to reach 1,000 Test runs against England. Former Australian opener Michael Slater was 24 years, 349 days when he reached his milestone on 5 February 1995 at the WACA, Perth. Overall, Jaiswal is the second youngest batter after Don Bradman (21 years, 318 days) to cross 1000 runs against England in Tests.

Opening batters to reach 1000 Test runs in fewest innings against England

Inns	M	Batter	Achieved on	Venue	Runs	Ave.	HS	100-50
16	9	Arthur Morris (Aus)	27 Jul 1948	Leeds	1003	71.64	182	5-4
16	9	Yashasvi Jaiswal (Ind)	23 Jul 2025	Manchester	1003	66.87	214*	3-5
17	9	Mark Taylor (Aus)	7 Jan 1991	Sydney	1012	67.47	219	2-7
18	11	Graeme Smith (SA)	13 Jul 2008	Lord's	1003	55.72	277	3-3
19	14	Bill Woodfull (Aus)	25 Jul 1930	Manchester	1040	61.18	155	6-3

Indian batters to reach 1000 Test runs in fewest innings against England

Inns	M	Batter	Achieved on	Venue	Runs	Ave.	HS	100-50
15	10	Sachin Tendulkar	4 Dec 2001	Mohali	1063	81.77	177	4-5
15	10	Rahul Dravid	5 Mar 2006	Nagpur	1022	73.00	217	3-5
16	9	Mohd Azharuddin	23 Aug 1990	The Oval	1022	73.00	179	5-3
16	9	Yashasvi Jaiswal	23 Jul 2025	Manchester	1003	66.87	214*	3-5
21	12	Shubman Gill	3 Jul 2025	Birmingham	1016	53.47	269	4-3

Note: The figures above (Runs/Ave./HS/ 100-50) are updated at the end of the innings, and not when the 1000-run milestone was achieved.

India's Yashasvi Jaiswal. PTI

38 } The number of sixes hit by Rishabh Pant against England in Tests is just one short of the record number of sixes hit by Ben Stokes against Australia. Only four batters in Tests have hit 30 or more sixes against a particular opponent, with Stokes doing so against two opponents — Australia and South Africa.

Batters with most Test sixes against an opponent side

6s	Batter (for)	Opponent	Tests	Inn	Runs	Ave.
39	Ben Stokes (Eng)	Australia	24	45	1562	36.32
38	Rishabh Pant (Ind)	England	16	28	1260	46.66
34	Viv Richards (WI)	England	36	50	2869	62.36
30	Tim Southee (NZ)	England	22	36	644	18.94
30	Ben Stokes (NZ)	South Africa	15	26	1177	45.26

1035 } The number of Test runs for Rishabh Pant on English soil. This makes him the first wicket-keeper to aggregate 1000 runs in a foreign country. Pant also has the maximum runs (879) by a visiting keeper in Australia.

Most Test runs by a visiting wicket-keeper in a country

Runs	Wicket-keeper (for)	In country	M	Inns	Ave.	HS	Period
1035	Rishabh Pant (Ind)	England+	13	24	43.13	146	2018-2025
879	Rishabh Pant (Aus)	Australia	12	21	46.26	159*	2018-2025
778	MS Dhoni (Ind)	England	12	23	37.05	92	2007-2014
773	Rodney Marsh (Aus)	England	21	35	24.94	91	1972-1981
717	Andy Flower (Zim)	India	3	6	239.00	232*	1993-2000

+ Pant's runs tally includes one neutral Test (4, 41) against New Zealand in 2021 in England

India's Rishabh Pant. GETTY IMAGES

3 The number of instances in Test cricket where 100+ runs partnerships were recorded for the third wicket after the first two wickets fell without a run on the board. The 188-run stand between K. L. Rahul and Shubman Gill in the second innings in Manchester is the latest such instance and is also the highest stand under these circumstances (see Table 1). The second table below lists the three occasions (India has done it twice) when Test sides managed to reach totals of 400 or more after losing their first two wickets for zero.

100-plus partnerships for the third wicket after the fall of two wickets without a run on the scoreboard

Runs	Opener (Batg#, runs)	Batter #4 (runs)	For (Total)	Opp	Venue	Month, year	Result	Inns
188	K. L. Rahul (#2, 90)	Shubman Gill (103)	Ind (425/4d)	Eng	Manchester	Jul 2025	Drawn	3
105	Mohinder Amarnath (#3, 72)	Gundappa Viswanath (59)	Ind (256)	Aus	Melbourne	Dec 1977	Won	1
102*	Archie MacLaren (#1, 47*)	Stanley Jackson (55*)	Eng (102/2)	Aus	Lord's	Jun 1902	Drawn	1

Note: at Lord's, only on the first day, some play was possible!

Highest totals after the first-two wickets fell without a run on the board

Total	For	Against	Venue	Month, year	Result	Inns
451/8d	India	West Indies	Chennai	Dec 1983	Drawn	2
443/7	West Indies	India	Kanpur	Dec 1958	Won	3
425/4d	India	England	Manchester	Jul 2025	Drawn	3

5 The number of occasions when a Test captain achieved the rare feat of registering a three-figure score and claiming a five-wicket haul in a Test match. Ben Stokes, in the Manchester Test, became the latest to join this small group of captains in Test cricket history. As a player, Stokes also became the fourth Englishman after Tony Greig, Ian Botham (who did it four times) and Gus Atkinson. Meanwhile, Stokes has become the seventh player to achieve this all-rounder's double against India after West Indians Collie Smith and Garry Sobers, New Zealander Bruce Taylor (on his Test debut), Englishman Ian Botham, Pakistani Imran Khan and West Indian Roston Chase.

Captains with a three-figure score and a five-wicket haul in the same Test match

Runs1	Runs2	Bowl1	Bowl2	Captain	For	Opp	Venue	Month, year	Result
219	20*	2/108	5/56	Denis Atkinson	WI	Aus	Bridgetown	May 1955	Drawn
174	–	5/41	3/39	Garry Sobers	WI	Eng	Leeds	Aug 1966	Won
121	56	5/28	3/69	Mushtaq Mohd	Pak	WI	Port of Spain	Apr 1977	Won
117	–	6/98	5/82	Imran Khan	Pak	Ind	Faisalabad	Jan 1983	Won
141	–	5/72	1/33	Ben Stokes	Eng	Ind	Manchester	Jul 2025	Drawn

3 The number of players with 7000-plus runs and 200-plus wickets in their Test career. Ben Stokes, during his knock of 141 against India in Manchester, when he crossed 7000 Test runs, emulated West Indian Garry Sobers and South African Jacques Kallis. For the record, Sobers (in 80 Tests) reached this double in the fewest number of matches, while Kallis, at 30 years, 201 days, is the youngest.

Players with 7000-plus runs and 200-plus wickets in a Test career

	TEST CAREER						DOUBLE ACHIEVED				
Player (for)	M	Runs	Bat Ave.	Wkts	Bowl Ave.	Ct	Tests	Agst	Venue	Date achieved	Result
Garry Sobers (WI)	93	8032	57.78	235	34.04	109	80	Ind	Bridgetown	3 Apr 1971	Drawn
Jacques Kallis (SAf)	166	13289	55.37	292	32.65	200	102	NZ	Johannesburg	6 May 2006	Won
Ben Stokes (Eng)	115	7032	35.70	230	31.64	113	115	Ind	Manchester	26 Jul 2025	Drawn

4 The number of instances in Test cricket where India, after conceding a first innings lead of 300-plus, polished off the deficit to draw the match, which was its second such fightback — at Manchester. In 1936, 89 years ago, India, under almost similar circumstances, managed to save the Test.

Instances of India knocking off a 300-plus first-innings deficit to draw a Test match

Lead	Ind 1st	Ind 2nd	Opponent (Total)	Venue	Date of last day
368	203	390/5	England (571/8d)	Manchester	28 Jul 1936
334	426	412/4	Sri Lanka (760/7d)	Ahmedabad	20 Nov 2009
314	305	476/4d+	New Zealand (619/9d)	Napier	30 Mar 2009
311	358	425/4	England (669)	Manchester	27 Jul 2025

All records are correct and updated until 30 July 2025.

The keeper of lost art

Former England wicketkeeper Jack Russell on painting, Rishabh Pant, and why cricket is **losing the craft** of glovework.

Shayan Acharya
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Jack Russell is a busy man. In one of the posh lanes of central London, he pursues his passion — painting portraits — a profession he's embraced for more than three decades. The former England wicketkeeper is now an acclaimed artist and runs a premier art gallery. When in London, he makes it a point to be at the Chris Beetles Gallery, where his cricket-themed artworks evoke nostalgia.

At 61, Russell travels around the country, capturing landscapes on canvas. He avoids mobile phones, preferring email for communication. Yet, even amid brushes and canvases, cricket remains close to his heart. Whenever the topic comes up, you can see the glint in his eyes.

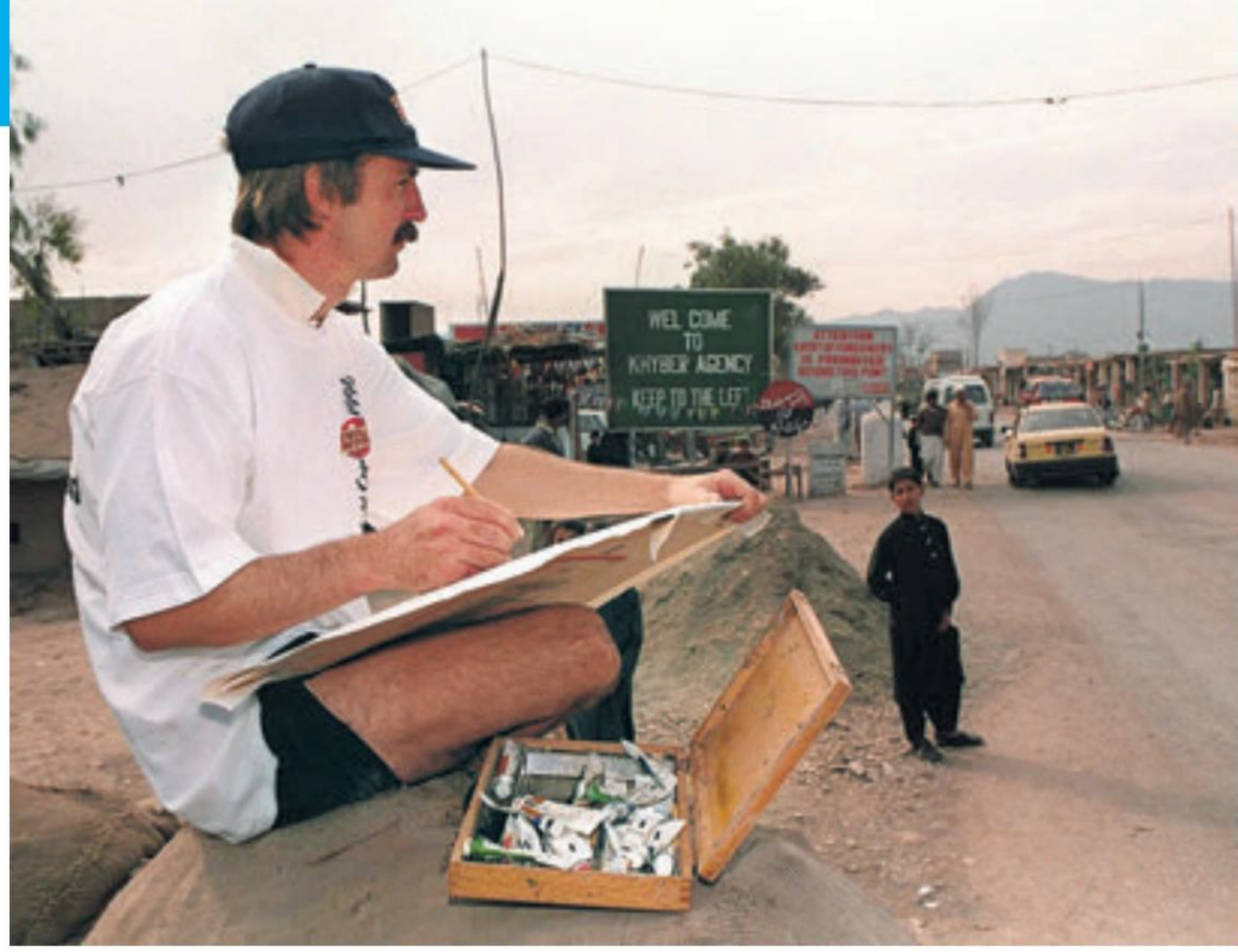
"I still love cricket. But it's just that painting is the only skill I can do now because I can't play anymore. I've been a professional artist longer than I was a cricketer. So, that's how I've ended up earning more money because I've done it for a longer period of time," he tells *Sportstar* with a smile.

Russell is impressed with Rishabh Pant's grit, batting through a broken foot in Manchester. Yet, such batting heroics cannot hide a wider concern — that the art of wicketkeeping is on the decline, with players focusing more on run-scoring than refining their glovework.

"It has been like this for a while. It's just the norm now. They look at batters first, and wicketkeeping is secondary. So, that's just what all the teams are doing now. That's just the way it is," he says.

During his playing days, Russell was replaced by Alec Stewart, as selectors preferred a stronger batter who could also keep wickets. Despite featuring in 54 Tests and 40 ODIs, Russell eventually faded from the international scene.

He believes this tradition continues. "But that's fraught with danger because mistakes are often made. They think it's a shortcut, but as a wicketkeeper, you have got to be so careful. If you miss skill, then



Artful passage: Russell pauses with brush in hand, capturing the rugged beauty of the historic Khyber Pass on canvas. GETTY IMAGES

you're going to pay the price," he says.

"The thing about the wicketkeeper now is that he doesn't just have to score runs, but it's the way he scores the runs. He has to be a bit like (Adam) Gilchrist, who would attack right from the start. So, you have to be powerful, and you really have to be like an aggressive top-order batter."

He admits Pant is hard to look away from at the crease but says the Indian 'keeper-batter has flaws that could cost him over time. "He is a great talent because it's interesting to watch Pant. You have to watch him play. So, that's good for the spectator. But then, if you look closely, he will make mistakes because of the way he keeps wickets. You have to accept that," he says, adding, "But the fact that he can be so devastating with the bat makes him one of the most entertaining players in the world to watch..."

Russell recalls carrying a canvas and paint box on overseas tours, never imagining painting would become his profession. Cricket, however, remains his first love. When the conversation turns to wicketkeeping, the mood shifts.

He admits the craft has "been in danger for a long time," and that pains him. "Probably, I wouldn't have played now, as they would not have picked me because I don't hit enough sixes. The art of wicketkeeping is lost because there's actually a lack of understanding about the importance of wicketkeeping," he says.

"It has been going on for a long time. It has been like 30 years or maybe longer. They (the selectors and the team management) think they've been clever in taking shortcuts. But it comes back to haunt you at some point. Pant missed a couple of chances, and in normal situations, those catches should have been taken.

"In our times, we were always taught that a wicketkeeper cannot afford to drop catches of Vivian Richards, Brian Lara, Sachin Tendulkar, Ricky Ponting, or even a Matthew Hayden. The list is endless. You must make sure that you don't make mistakes, because if you do so, those batters will make you pay the price," Russell says with a wry smile.

With the game evolving, the selection criteria for 'keeper-batters have changed, and Russell blames this on a lack of understanding of the craft. "I don't think there's an understanding of the importance of wicketkeeping anymore. You look at Ben Foakes, who played a year or two back and kept wickets brilliantly and scored runs as well. But he didn't play thereafter because he did not bat aggressively enough. So, now the priority is that a wicketkeeper can't just score runs. He has to score runs aggressively," he says.

However, Russell is not willing to blame T20s. "In T20s, you can play your best keeper. There is such a fine line, where every run, every save matters. So, in such a situation, you should play your best 'keeper, as he can make the difference. It's just a case of selectors being greedy," he says.

"There's no way a wicketkeeper is going to bat down at No. 9 or No. 10 now. That's never going to happen again. The selectors now pick 'keepers based on how good his batting is. So, even if he is a good wicketkeeper, the number one big question is how good is his batting going to be before they actually stick with a wicketkeeper?"

This approach, Russell believes, has been in the system long before T20s came into existence. "It was happening when I was playing. There was no T20 back then. The selectors don't appreciate the importance of the wicketkeeper's skill. And they're trying to cut corners and trying to get extra runs," he says.

Being someone who loves speaking his mind, Russell has a word of caution for budding wicketkeepers: "I would say, 'Lad, just concentrate on your batting, otherwise they are not going to pick you. Because some aggressive innings is what would get you noticed. So, you have to find a way of making sure that you bat well and you're a top batter.' It's a bit like being an all-rounder," he says.

"Ian Botham told me once, 'When I'm bowling, I think I'm a frontline bowler. And when I'm batting, I think like a frontline batter.' It's a similar story for keepers now. You need to make sure both of your skills are as good as they can be. But if you want to get in the team, runs are the key."

More than two decades after hanging up his gloves, Russell still feels the sting as wicketkeeping's craft loses its sheen. Then, with a smile, he says, "That's how the time is..." before turning back to his unfinished portrait.

KIIT POWERS INDIA'S BEST-EVER SHOW AT WORLD UNIVERSITY GAMES WITH HISTORIC MEDAL HAUL

KIIT EXCELS AT WORLD GAMES

Manikanta Hoblidhar, Animesh Kujur, Lalu Prasad Bhoi & Mrutyam Jayaram Dondapati
Men's 4x100m Relay, Bronze Medal

Bhubaneswar: In a show of athletic prowess and institutional commitment to sports, KIIT-DU scripted history at the just-concluded World University Games (WUG) 2025 in Rhine-Ruhr, Germany. Not only did KIIT contribute significantly to India's record-breaking medal tally, but it also set a new benchmark for university sports in the country. With six medals—three silver and three bronze—KIIT emerged as the highest-medalling university from India, accounting for half of the nation's total of 12 medals.

Three KIIT students — Ankita in the 3000m Steeplechase, Praveen Chithrawal in the Triple Jump, and Seeman in the 5000m Final — each won silver medals. Additionally, the Men's 4x100m Relay Team, the Women's 20km Race Walk Team, and Avinash Mohanty in Badminton secured bronze medals.

KIIT University showcased its sporting excellence across various events. In the Men's 4x100m Relay, Sahkanth Hoblidhar, Animesh Kujur, Lalu Prasad Bhoi, and Matyam Jayaram Dandapati won bronze medals. In the Women's 20km Race Walk Team event, Munitap Rajpathi, Mansi Negi, and Sejal Anilsingh walked in unison to clinch bronze. Avinash Mohanty also contributed with a bronze medal in Badminton, bringing KIIT's total medal tally to six.

Munitap Rajapati, Mansi Negi & Sejal Anilsingh
Women's 20km Race Walk, Bronze Medal

KIIT had the highest representation by a single Indian university in any edition of the Games, held from July 16 to 27 across the Rhine-Ruhr region and Berlin. It had 40 athletes competing across seven sporting disciplines. The athletes were felicitated by KIIT and its sister concern, Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences (KISS), by the Founder of the institutes, Dr Achyuta Samanta, on their return. The Silver medallists were awarded Rs 3 lakh each, while the bronze medallists received Rs 1 lakh each.

"This is not just a celebration of medals but a celebration of what focused support, scientific training, and belief in youth can achieve," Dr. Samanta said, expressing his immense pride. "We are proud that 40 of the 42 athletes from Odisha in the Indian contingent came from KIIT."

The Founder also offered gratitude to the Odisha Sports Department, the Sports Authority of India (SAI), the Association of Indian Universities (AIU), and the Ministry of Youth

Medal Winners from KIIT with **Dr. Achyuta Samanta-** Founder, KIIT, KISS & KIMS

Affairs and Sports. He made special mention of Prime Minister Narendra Modi for his consistent encouragement of youth and sports.

Setting a National Benchmark

KIIT has now become the first Indian university in 65 years to win the highest number of medals in a single edition of the World University Games—no small feat for an institution that has quietly built its sporting infra-structure over the years.

"This day is more than a medal count," remarked Dr. Samanta. "It is proof that when talent is nurtured with care, faith, and hard work, our young minds can shine on the world stage."

Known as the Olympics for university athletes aged 17 to 25, the WUG saw participation from over 300 Indian student-athletes, selected through trials that drew entries from more than 400 universities nationwide.

KIIT was entrusted once again as a Nodal University by AIU, continuing a leadership role it has played in previous editions such as Napoli 2019 and Chengdu, 2023. In the Chengdu games, KIIT had clinched two medals. It had sent 14 participants, one of the largest contingents from any university.

Milestones

- **40 out of 42 athletes** from Odisha in the Indian contingent were from KIIT, highlighting the institution's role as a national sports powerhouse.
- **Cash rewards of Rs 3 lakh (silver) and Rs 1 lakh (bronze)** were awarded to medal winners in a grand felicitation ceremony attended by Olympians and dignitaries.
- KIIT contributed **6 out of India's 12 medals** at the World University Games 2025, the highest ever by any Indian university in the event's 65-year history.
- **Three silver and three bronze medals** were secured by KIIT athletes across athletics, race walking, badminton, and relay events.
- This is not just a celebration of medals but a celebration of what focused **support, scientific training, and belief in youth can achieve,** said KIIT & KISS Founder Dr Achyuta Samanta

Seema-Silver Medal (Grueling 5000m)

Ankita- Second place in the 3000m Steeplechase

Praveen Chithravel Silver Medal in Triple Jump

Abinash Mohaty-Bronze Medal Badminton Team

REUTERS

New Zealand defeats Zimbabwe 2-0

1 The second match victory — by an innings and 359 runs — is the **third-largest** in Test history

New Zealand wrapped up a resounding 2-0 Test series win over Zimbabwe by taking the second Test by an innings and 359 runs — the third-largest victory in Test history. The Black Caps' imposing total was underpinned by centuries from Devon Conway (**in pic,** 153), Henry Nicholls (150 not out), and Rachin Ravindra (165 not out), before debutant Zachary Foulkes returned the best figures by a New Zealand debutant with five wickets for 37 runs to complete the rout.

X/@CRICKETSCOTLAND

2

Scotland qualified for the ICC Under-19 Men's World Cup with a 20-run win over the Netherlands in the final Europe Qualifier. Defending 238, Finlay Jones (4 for 41) struck early before the Dutch rallied to 108 for 3. Manu Saraswat (3 for 43) stemmed the scoring, and Ollie Jones removed danger man Tom de Leede for 67. The Netherlands was bowled out for 217, confirming Scotland's unbeaten run and place at next year's tournament in Zimbabwe and Namibia.

GETTY IMAGES

3

Mo Bobat has been named Director of Cricket at London Spirit in The Hundred, with his tenure beginning on October 1, 2025. The former England Men's Performance Director and current Royal Challengers Bengaluru cricket chief in the IPL becomes the franchise's first major signing as it gears up for the 2026 season. Speaking about his new role, Bobat said: "It's an honour to join London Spirit at such an exciting time. The opportunity to shape the cricketing future of this franchise, working with MCC and our new partners, the Tech Titans, is incredibly exciting. I'm looking forward to building something special - on and off the field."

GETTY IMAGES

4

The men's and women's editions of The Hundred, English cricket's 100-ball tournament, got underway with a host of big names in action, including David Warner, Steve Smith, Rashid Khan, Meg Lanning, Ellyse Perry, and Hayley Matthews. This season marks the final edition before clubs are taken over by a new group of investors, which includes IPL franchise owners such as the Reliance Group, Sun Group, and GMR.

5

According to a *BBC* report, England's domestic white-ball calendar will see major changes in 2026, with the Vitality Blast trimmed and played in a single block ahead of The Hundred. The review, led by counties in consultation with the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) and Professional Cricketers' Association (PCA), aims to improve player welfare and competition flow. From next summer, each team will play 12 group matches instead of 14, with quarterfinals and Finals Day staged immediately after to wrap up the tournament in one stretch.

AFP

6

Australia's T20I captain Mitchell Marsh has confirmed he and Travis Head will open the batting through to next year's ICC Men's T20 World Cup. Marsh, who led Australia at the 2024 T20 World Cup, has embraced the role since David Warner's retirement, opening in all five matches against West Indies last month. Australia has trialled Matt Short, Glenn Maxwell and Jake Fraser-McGurk as openers, but Marsh says his partnership with Head will be the starting point going forward.

SHOOT TO THRILL

The top football leagues return with blockbuster transfers, fierce rivalries, and **high-stakes** chases for glory.

FOR MORE STORIES

£100m

Florian Wirtz's move from Bayer Leverkusen to Liverpool

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The Premier League has risen to the precipice of fame and popularity for reasons beyond marketing gimmicks — it has, over the years, been an odyssey of triumph and despair, where mortals became immortals and giants fell by the slingshots of destiny.

From the blue storm in Goodison Park in 2023 when the Toffees survived relegation by the skin of their teeth on the final matchday to the iconic 'Agueroooooo' moment as Manchester City snatched the throne from Sir Alex Ferguson's Red Devils — the Premier League has always delivered box-office drama. The 2025–26 season promises to add another chapter to that legacy.

Defending champion Liverpool has broken the bank with record

Banking on talent: Defending champion Liverpool has broken the bank with record transfers for Florian Wirtz (in pic) and Hugo Ekitike. GETTY IMAGES

transfers for Florian Wirtz and Hugo Ekitike, and will hope to begin a new era, moving on from mainstay Trent Alexander-Arnold and forward Luis Diaz, who left for Real Madrid and Bayern Munich, respectively.

However, there will be underlying grief over the loss of forward Diogo Jota, who passed away in an accident last month.

"With everything that happened, it has been strange having to now try to carry on with work, with football. We will never forget Diogo, of course, but we just have to try to honour his memory," Liverpool's captain Virgil van Dijk wrote in his matchday programme column.

Meanwhile, Manchester United will look for light at the other end of the tunnel after a season to forget last time around. With no trophies, an agonising Europa League final defeat and a 15th-place finish, manager Ruben Amorim had promised that "good days are coming".

Signings like Bryan Mbeumo (20 goals, seven assists), Matheus Cunha (17 goals, six assists) and Benjamin Sesko (21 goals, five assists) indicate a strong arsenal for the Red Devils. With forwards having often fizzled out in a United shirt in the past, *a la* Antony and Angel Di Maria, the club will hope history doesn't repeat this time. Meanwhile, Viktor Gyokeres, who became a sensation at Sporting CP under Amorim, will now play for Arsenal.

At the other end of the table, Sunderland returned to the Premier League after eight years, along with Leeds United, ensuring two of the

Newly promoted teams

Premier League
Sunderland, Burnley, Leeds United

La Liga
Levante, Elche, Real Oviedo

Bundesliga
FC Cologne, Hamburger SV

Serie A
Sassuolo, Pisa, Cremonese

Ligue 1
Lorient, Paris FC

Rest in peace: A mural in tribute to Diogo Jota who passed away in an accident last month. REUTERS

fiercest derbies in English football — the Tyne–Wear and the Roses — happen together in the Premier Division for the first time in 22 years.

End of an era, beginning of another

For nearly three decades, club football was enriched by the presence of Carlo Ancelotti.

His dynamism with formations (an aggressive 4-3-3 from his preferred 4-4-2 variant led to Champions League glory with Real Madrid in 2022), the art of sculpting legends like Gianluigi Buffon and Kaka, and chalking out the role of a modern regista in Andrea Pirlo made him one of the greatest managers of all time.

The Italian is now Brazil's coach, as his former ward, Xabi Alonso, looks to fill his big boots at the Spanish capital. However, he won't enjoy the services of midfield talisman Luka Modric, who has moved to AC Milan.

Alonso, a 2010 FIFA World Cup winner, led Bayer Leverkusen to an invincible streak of 51 unbeaten games (42 wins, nine draws) in the 2023–24 season, winning the Bundesliga, DFB-Pokal and DFL-Supercup.

La Liga champion Barcelona, on the other hand, will hope for more magic from its new No. 10 — another feather in the cap of youth sensation Lamine Yamal, who took over Lionel Messi's legendary jersey shortly after his 18th birthday.

The youngster has already won the European Championship with Spain and four major titles with Barcelona before turning 18, but only time will tell if the jersey's reputation weighs too heavily on him.

Among the newly promoted sides, Real Oviedo returned to La Liga after 24 years — a tale of pure dedication and love from two-time Euro winner with Spain, Santi Cazorla. The 40-year-old returned to his boyhood club in 2023, played for minimum salary, and helped it win the playoff final 3–1.

All eyes on the Bavarians

A year after the norm was broken in German top-flight football — Bayer Leverkusen dominated the league and won it without losing a match — the usual script played out last season as Bayern Munich clinched the Bundesliga for the 33rd time in its fabled history.

Heading into the new season, Vincent Kompany's men will again be the team to beat, especially with the addition of explosive winger Diaz in the frontline, whom the Bavarians signed from Premier League champion Liverpool.

While Bayern has an exciting player to look forward to, it will miss the magic of Jamal Musiala, after the player broke his leg in a FIFA Club

A new avatar for the maestro: Napoli will be bolstered by the exciting midfield duo of Kevin De Bruyne (in pic) — who joined from Manchester City on a free transfer — and Scott McTominay. AP

World Cup quarterfinal clash against Paris Saint-Germain following a collision with goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma. The team must also cope without Alphonso Davies, who suffered a severe knee ligament injury while on national duty in March.

"Jamal still has crutches, but the process is very, very positive. So far, there have been no complications with either of them. We need to knock on wood so that it stays that way, and then obviously hope they will be available by the end of this year," said Bayern board member for sport Max Eberl when asked about a possible timeline for their return.

Leverkusen has a lot of changes to navigate this new season. Former Manchester United and Ajax manager Erik ten Hag takes charge of the Black and Reds and, like Leverkusen, will have a point to prove — especially after the circumstances of his departure from United. Ten Hag's biggest challenge will be coping without several star players, as the club has seen an exodus of key names. Wirtz, Jeremie Frimpong, Granit Xhaka and Jonathan Tah — all crucial to the club's dominance — have left, leaving massive gaps in the squad.

To fill them, it has kept itself busy in the transfer market, bringing in centre-back Jarell Quansah from Liverpool and midfielder Malik Tillman from RB Leipzig.

Borussia Dortmund, always expected by its passionate fanbase to challenge for the title, have often fallen short. Jobe Bellingham followed in his brother Jude's footsteps by signing with the Ruhr club this summer, but a serious title push still looks unlikely for the Black and Yellows.

A new-look Italian top flight

In recent years, fans in Italy have grown used to the dominance of Juventus and, before that, the Milan giants — Inter and AC. But over the past few seasons, Napoli, historically looked down upon by the Italian elite, has made waves in Serie A, bringing back the glory years of Diego Maradona.

Legend on the move: Real Madrid won't enjoy the services of its midfield talisman Luka Modric, who has moved to AC Milan. GETTY IMAGES

In the 2022–23 season, Napoli clinched the Serie A title for the first time since 1989–90 — its third overall — and got a fourth Scudetto last season after a neck-and-neck title battle with Inter, which saw Antonio Conte's men win the league by just one point. Needless to say, Inter will be hungry for revenge. Managed by Cristian Chivu, it will face a strong challenge from Napoli, which is bolstered by the exciting midfield duo of Kevin De Bruyne — who joined from Manchester City on a free transfer — and Scott McTominay, reborn since his move

Big brother shows the way: Jobe Bellingham followed in his brother Jude's footsteps by signing with Borussia Dortmund. GETTY IMAGES

Back in play: Paul Pogba returns to mainstream action for Monaco after having served a doping ban since 2023. AFP

to Naples. Last season, his dynamic presence in midfield along with his 12 goals earned him the Serie A MVP award. As for Chivu, it will be a trial by fire. Stepping up to manage the club he once played for, he will constantly be in the radar of critics, many of whom feel he is not ready for such a high-profile job.

Italian clubs have been fairly quiet in the transfer market so far, with no truly headline-grabbing deals. Inter's signing of Brazilian forward Luis Henrique from Marseille remains the league's most expensive move.

AC Milan, which last won the Scudetto in the 2021–22 season to break an 11-year drought, has struggled to keep pace with its top-tier counterparts.

Last season it finished eighth, and although the Rossoneri will enjoy a touch of midfield magic from Modric, who joined on a free transfer, the chances of toppling Napoli and Inter appear far-fetched.

It's all about Paris

Since the financial injection from the Qataris, Paris Saint-Germain has almost made the Ligue 1 trophy its own. Since the 2012-13 season, the Paris club has won the league 11 times in 13 seasons.

Heading into the new campaign, it is hard to see the narrative changing — PSG remains the clear favourites.

Under Luis Enrique, it finally lifted its Champions League curse, winning the title for the first time in its history after beating Inter in the final, though it lost to Chelsea in the FIFA Club World Cup final.

PSG will have a new neighbour in the French top flight after Paris FC's promotion this season, setting up a derby between two clubs whose stadiums are separated by nothing more than a single street — the Rue Claude Farrere.

Meanwhile, Monaco fans are caught between excitement and uncertainty after the club signed Paul Pogba on a free transfer.

Having last played professional football in 2023, after which he served a doping ban, there are doubts about the player's ability to readjust to the top level.

However, given Pogba's flair and natural ability, Monaco will have an excellent midfielder if he clicks.

The club will also have an experienced defender in Eric Dier, who also arrived on a free transfer.

Top buys

Premier League

Florian Wirtz (£100m) — Bayern Leverkusen to Liverpool
Hugo Ekitike (£69m) – Eintracht Frankfurt to Liverpool
Benjamin Sesko (£66.3m) — RB Leipzig to Manchester United
Bryan Mbeumo (£65m) — Brentford to Manchester United
Matheus Cunha (£62.5m) — Wolverhampton Wanderers to Manchester United

La Liga

Dean Huijsen (£50m) — AFC Bournemouth to Real Madrid
Alex Baena (£43.4m) — Villarreal to Alex Baena
Alvaro Carreras (£42m) — Benfica to Real Madrid
Franco Mastantuono (£38.5m) — River Plate to Real Madrid
Dávid Hancko (£26m) – Feyenoord to Atletico Madrid

Bundesliga

Luis Diaz (£65.5m) — Liverpool to Bayern Munich
Jobe Bellingham (£32m) — Sunderland to Borussia Dortmund
Jarell Quansah (£30m) – Liverpool to Bayer Leverkusen

Serie A

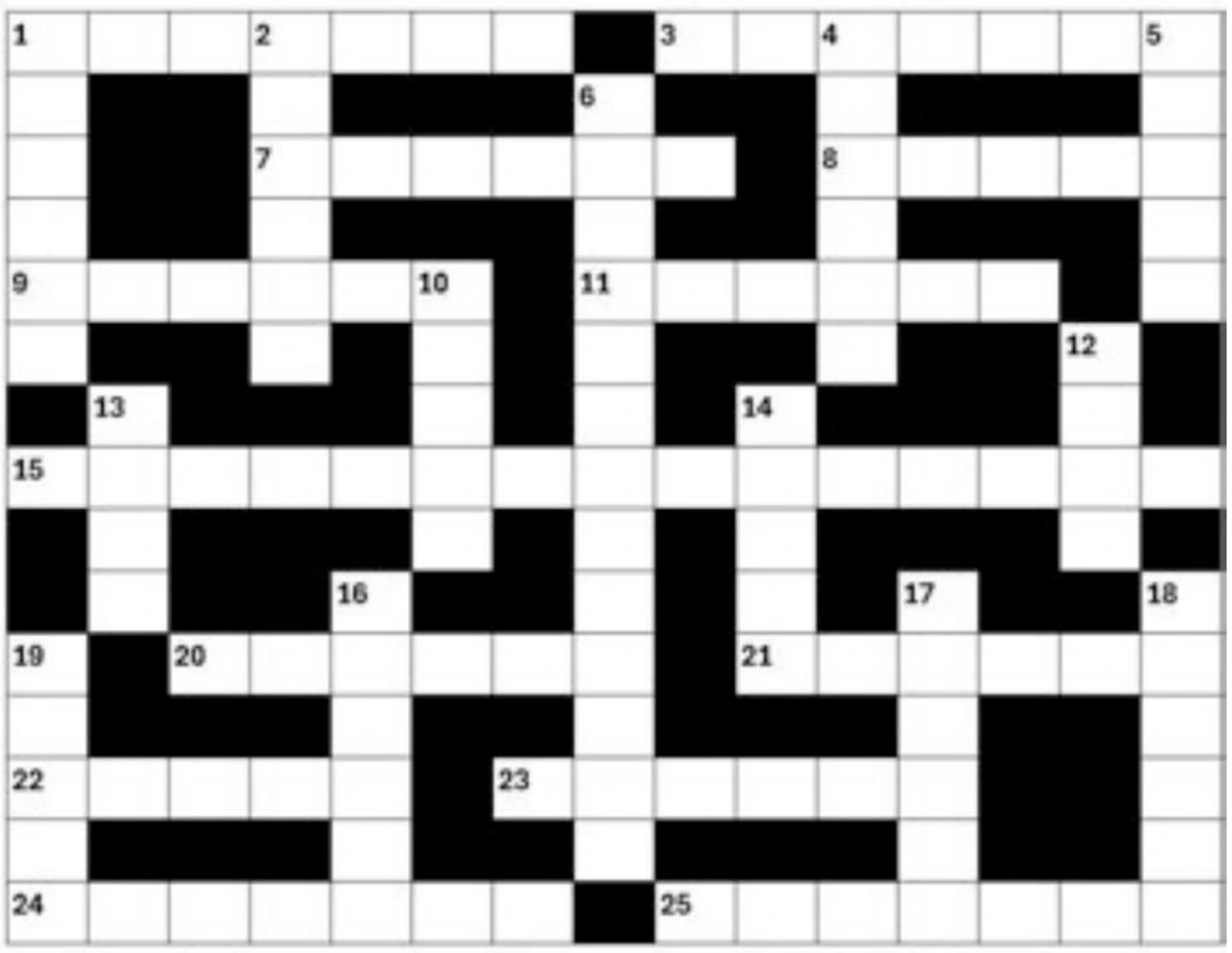
Luis Henrique (£31.5m) — Marseille to Inter Milan
Francisco Conceicao (£27.3m) — Porto to Juventus
Wesley França (£25m) — Flamengo to Roma
Jesus Rodriguez (£19.2m) — Real Betis to Como

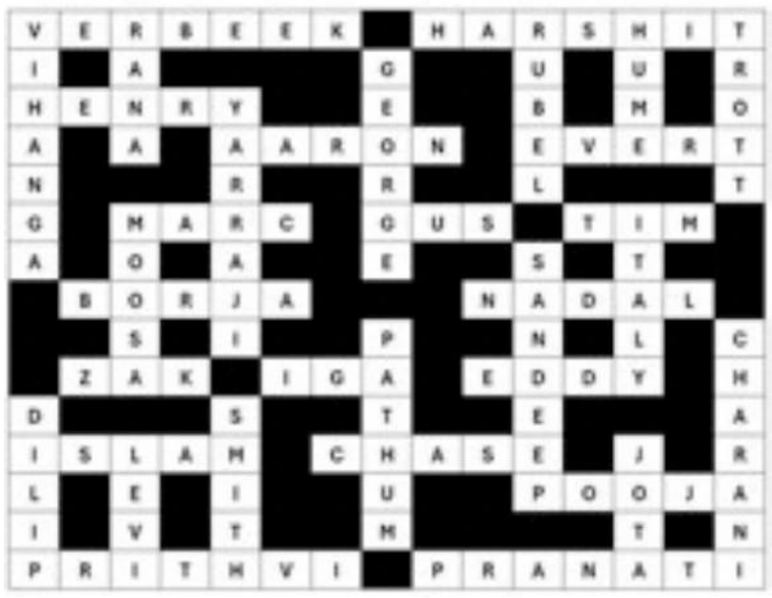
Ligue 1

Igor Paixao (£34.2m) — Feyenoord to Marseille
Lucas Chevalier (£33.8m) — Lille to Paris Saint-Germain

(All figures are initial amounts; Data updated as of August 9)

CROSSWORD
N. SOORYA PRAKASH





SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

ACROSS

1 Who made the highest score in an innings in the recently contested three-Test series between West Indies and Australia? (7)

3 Which Brazilian drives for Kick-Sauber Ferrari F1 Team? (7)

7 Who was chosen as the best player of the FIFA Club World Cup which concluded in July 2025? (6)

8 & 24 Which American GM won the freestyle chess Grand Slam held recently in Las Vegas? (5,7)

9 Identify this World No. 1 ranked doubles tennis player who won the Australian Open women's doubles event in January 2025. (6)

11 Red Bull racing F1 team recently sacked its long-standing CEO. Name him. (6)

15 Who was declared as the Most Valuable Player (MVP) of IPL 2025? (10,5)

20 Which country qualified for next year's T20 World Cup from Americas regional qualifying finals? (6)

21 Who has taken most wickets for a single franchise in IPL history till the 2025 season? (6)

22 This well-known Spanish goalkeeper, who turned out successfully for Liverpool and later played for various European clubs, retired at Como in May 2025 in an unpleasant manner after being sent off in his final match for a professional foul. (5)

23 Identify this British southpaw who won the men's doubles tennis event at the Australian Open 2025? (6)

25 Which Indian fencer lost in the second round in the sabre event at the World Fencing Championships held recently in Georgia? (7)

DOWN

2 Which team won the Italian Serie A title for the 2024-25 season? (6)

4 Who took a hat-trick in the third Test match held between the West Indies and Australia in Kingston, Jamaica? (6)

5 Which spinner became the first in cricket history to pick up 300 wickets in Tests? (5)

6 Recently he became the first South African spinner to pick 200 wickets in Tests. (6,7)

10 Who is the only player in the world to have scored a century in each innings in his 100th Test? (5)

12 Which former multiple Grand Slam winner was given a wild card in the men's singles tennis event at the French Open 2025? (4)

13 What is the surname of the World No. 1 ranked player in badminton men's singles? (4)

14 & 1 Which Indian won gold at the mixed event and silver in the men's individual event in the 10m air rifle of the 2025 ISSF World Cup held in Munich in June? (5,6)

16 Which Indian woman shuttler upset the legendary P. V. Sindhu in the recently held China Open? (6)

17 Which India GM won the World Junior Chess Championship held in Petrovac, Montenegro in March 2025? (6)

18 Which Indian all-rounder withdrew from The Hundred that had a lucrative contract, in order to prepare herself for the forthcoming World Cup? (6)

19 Identify this Russian woman tennis player, ranked No. 5 in the world in singles, who won a silver medal in the doubles representing Individual Neutral Athletes at the Paris Olympics 2024. (5)

VANTAGE POINT

Paul Fein

UNDER THE STARS AT FLUSHING MEADOWS

Can Djokovic flourish one last time? Or will Sinner and Sabalenka seal the deal yet again? **New York is ready** for its annual tennis carnival.

FOR MORE STORIES

REUTERS

Is there really a Big Two in men's tennis? Or is it more a monopoly than a duopoly? After all, if Jannik Sinner had converted any of his three championship points against Carlos Alcaraz in the epic French Open final, he would now hold all four Majors. Alcaraz had defeated his arch-rival five straight times before Sinner dethroned him in the Wimbledon final, but the Italian is the undisputed King of Hard Courts. Another burning question at this U.S. Open is whether anyone else in the 128-player field can upset either of the putative Big Two, who've snarfed up the last seven Grand Slam titles. Let's survey the field and size up the favourites, contenders, and dark horses.

Ben Shelton — Ben Shelton's confidence is soaring after capturing the National Bank Open in Toronto with a come-from-behind 6-7(5), 6-4, 7-6(3) victory over No. 12 Karen Khachanov. For the third time, he triumphed in a clutch third-set tiebreak, the others over Flavio Cobolli and Brandon Nakashima. The 22-year-old Shelton thus became the youngest American man to claim a Masters 1000 title since 21-year-old Andy Roddick took the 2004 Miami Open.

Shelton's best result at the last seven Majors came at the Australian Open in January, when he reached the semis, where Sinner outclassed him 7-6(2), 6-2, 6-2. Despite a career-high No. 6 ranking, Shelton has beaten only two top-10 opponents, Taylor Fritz and Alex De Minaur (twice), this year. The weakest backhand in the top 10, along with an erratic volley and forehand, hampers the 6'4", 195-pound American. Until his technique improves on these three strokes, Shelton will not have a shot at winning a Major — even on hard courts, his best surface.

Novak Djokovic — The GOAT's quest for a record 25th Grand Slam title — which would break his tie with Margaret Court — became more uncertain when he withdrew from the Cincinnati Open. That left the No. 7 with no tournament matches between Wimbledon and the year's final Major. Is Djokovic **(right)** injured? Does he lack motivation? Does he believe it's mission impossible? "They're definitely several levels above everyone right now," said 38-year-old Djokovic about Sinner and Alcaraz after Sinner outclassed him, slowed by a hip injury, 6-3, 6-3, 6-4 in the Big W semifinals.

If any champion can overcome the lack of match play for nearly two months, it is the man renowned for his superb technique and fitness. A decisive loss to Sinner or Alcaraz — or even worse, a lesser foe — could persuade the last of the legendary Big Three to hang up his tennis shoes and end his unparalleled 22-year career. Alas, that is more than likely not to happen at Flushing Meadows. The Djoker has surprised us before, most recently when he captured a gold medal at the Paris Olympics. So, who knows what he can accomplish in the late twilight of his career?

Taylor Fritz — A year ago at Flushing Meadows, Fritz made his first Grand Slam semifinal thanks to excellent wins over 2022 finalist Casper Ruud and Alexander Zverev. When he overcame Frances Tiafoe in a five-set semifinal, it marked the first time two American men reached the U.S. Open semis since Andre Agassi and Robby Ginepri in 2006. Hopes soared for Fritz to become the first American man to capture a singles Major since Roddick won the U.S. Open way back in 2003.

But his hopes were dashed when Sinner, far superior from the baseline, won a resounding 6-3, 6-4, 7-5. Although his ranking has climbed to a career-high No. 4 this year, Fritz has notched only two top-10 wins — over No. 3 Zverev in Stuttgart on grass and No. 8 Rublev in Toronto on hard court. However the 6'5" mega-server fell short in the Wimbledon semis, losing 6-4, 5-7, 6-3, 7-6(6) to No. 2 Alcaraz.

Winning tiebreaks is critical, especially against 'the top guys', and he will have to improve on his mediocre 16-19 record this

AFP

Big shots: If he meets Jannik Sinner in the final, Carlos Alcaraz must focus on how to both absorb and counteract the Italian's ferocious power. GETTY IMAGES

REUTERS

season at the U.S. Open. "The good news for Taylor Fritz," said *Tennis Channel* analyst Paul Annacone, "is that his average level is unbelievably high now." That should be good enough to propel him again to the Open semis.

Jack Draper — Before overpowering De Minaur in the 2024 U.S. Open quarterfinals, Draper confided he considered quitting the sport because the former junior star did not think he could compete with the big boys on the ATP Tour. That all changed last year when he whipped the likes of Alcaraz, Sinner, Fritz, Holger Rune, and Stefanos Tsitsipas, and captured his first title at Stuttgart. In sports parlance, Draper has 'a high ceiling' and proved it again this season with wins over Alcaraz, Fritz, Rune, Shelton, and Joao Fonseca to capture his most prestigious crown at Indian Wells.

Draper, 23, has plenty of weapons, starting with a wicked lefty serve that he blasts, slices, and kicks superbly. His aggressive topspin forehand and rock-solid two-handed backhand allow him to hang in there with baseline blasters. And his strong volleys and smashes decisively finish off rallies. Do not be surprised if the handsome Brit makes the U.S. Open semis again.

Andrey Rublev — The 27-year-old Russian **(left)** falls into the 'best of the rest' category, as his inability to beat the best and advance past the quarters at the Majors attests. A baseline basher with a monster forehand and an improved first serve, Rublev has three weaknesses: an attackable second serve, a mediocre net game, and a Vesuvian temper that can explode at any time.

After he was disqualified for screaming at a line judge in the 2024 Dubai semis, he shared his mental health problems with *The National* newspaper in a candid interview. "I was in a loop, lost with myself for a couple of years of, I don't know, not

Men's Draw

Dark Horses
Holger Rune, Alexander Bublik, Tommy Paul, Alejandro Davidovich Fokina, and Frances Tiafoe.

Long Shots
Giovanni Mpetshi Perricard, J iri Lehecka, Joao Fonseca, Alexei Popyrin, Flavio Cobolli.

Chasing history: Sinner will look to become the first man since Roger Federer in 2008 to defend a U. S. Open title. GETTY IMAGES

finding the way, not understanding what to do, what for. It sounds a bit maybe dramatic or whatever, like what's the reason or purpose to live or stuff like that."

Marat Safin, a compatriot and two-time Major champion, along with a psychologist, has helped Rublev relieve "that crazy anxiety and stress." With most of his inner demons exorcised, the popular member of the ATP Player Council should finally reach his on-court potential and record some big wins.

Jannik Sinner — Hard courts accentuate Sinner's high-speed game, and he has grabbed the last three Majors on that surface. For the 23-year-old Italian, 'serve plus one' means a massive serve followed not just by a concussive forehand but the same on his backhand wing. Not surprisingly, the World No. 1 ranks No. 1 on the ATP Leaderboard in all three categories: Serve, Return of Serve, and Under Pressure. Especially impressive and relevant is his winning 88.2 per cent of tiebreaks on all surfaces and saving 74.0 per cent of break points on hard courts.

The last time a man defended a U.S. Open singles title was in 2008, when Roger Federer won his fifth straight title. The Mighty Fed boasted more athleticism and versatility, but he faced much weaker opposition that decade than Sinner does now.

The ultimate test for Sinner once again will come in the potential final against Alcaraz. A clash of these titans almost guarantees another blockbuster.

Carlos Alcaraz — In his recently published book, *Changeover: A Young Rivalry and a New Era of Men's Tennis*, Giri Nathan captured the essence of Carlitos during the 2024 Laver Cup: "Anytime he wasn't playing tennis, he was partaking in horseplay. As much as he intimidated other players with his talent, he still remained chummy with them — hugging them, backslapping them, whispering stupid things in their ears... He was the star pupil conjoined with the class clown."

In his evolving rivalry with Sinner — where Alcaraz leads 8-5 — the star pupil will focus on how to both absorb and counteract the Italian's ferocious power. To get more weight on his shots, Carlitos added five grams of weight to the throat of his racket. A critical career stat gives him a decided edge: he is a terrific 14-1 in five-set matches compared to 6-10 for Sinner.

Now the ball is in Alcaraz's tactical court. What will he add to his vast bag of tricks to defuse and disrupt Sinner's ruthless, methodical power game? If they do meet in a 14th 'Sincaraz' duel, Alcaraz should dethrone the King of Hard Courts in another highlight-reel, five-set classic.

Change of setting: Naomi Osaka split with coach Wim Fissette and hired Tomas Wiktorowski, Iga Swiatek's former coach. REUTERS

Aryna Sabalenka, a relentless power hitter like Sinner, won the two hard-court majors in 2024 and finished the year ranked No. 1. But unlike Sinner, who consolidated his reign this season, Sabalenka faltered at the Slams. The Belarusian Basher lost three-set heartbreakers to red-hot American opponents — Madison Keys at the Australian Open, Coco Gauff at Roland Garros, and Amanda Anisimova at Wimbledon.

Keys and Gauff prevailed in the finals. Anisimova's ecstasy after her stunning semifinal upset of Sabalenka turned into agony two days later when the resurgent Iga Swiatek double-bageled her in the Wimbledon final. Oh, how cruel tennis can be!

Whether you call it parity or depth in women's tennis, this Grand Slam trend will likely continue at the U.S. Open, which has produced six different champions since Naomi Osaka shocked Serena Williams in the tempestuous 2018 final. The most mind-blowing of them was 18-year-old Emma Raducanu, who in 2021 made history as the first qualifier to win a Grand Slam singles title. *Tennis Channel* analyst Paul Annacone said, "It has to be a top-five improbability story in any sport."

My crystal ball predicts another long shot will rock the sporting world with a series of stunning upsets. Let's find out who this year's Cinderella champion will be.

Naomi Osaka — "She needs momentum more than anything else. I'm a huge fan of Naomi Osaka. It's less about the tennis, it's more about what's between the ears," said *Tennis Channel* analyst Prakash Amritraj. Her comeback since returning from maternity leave in 2023 never gained traction during seven Grand Slam appearances. The most recent disappointment: a Wimbledon third-round loss to Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova. During the prolonged slump, the four-time Major champion, dispirited, contemplated retirement.

Too talented to fail any longer, Osaka — who split with coach Wim Fissette and hired Tomasz Wiktorowski, Swiatek's former coach — finally regained her elite form in Montreal. Slapping her thighs before returning serve to pump herself up, the rejuvenated Japanese surged to the final. The unseeded Osaka outslugged heavy hitters 13th seed Liudmila Samsonova and 22nd seed Jelena Ostapenko, combined power with consistency to trounce 10th seed Elina Svitolina, and outhit 16th seed Clara Tauson to reach her first WTA 1000 final since 2021. There, it took a sensational performance by teenager Victoria Mboko to stop her, 2-6, 6-4, 6-1.

On the 27-year-old's resurgence, *Tennis Channel* analyst Andrea Petkovic noted, "She has an improved serve and a shorter take-back on the backhand, which helps her on the hard courts." With better technique, much-needed momentum, and renewed confidence, Osaka will go deep into the second week at a Major for the first time since she won the 2021 Australian Open.

Clara Tauson — In 2019, Tauson became the first Dane to top the junior world rankings after winning nine ITF singles titles, including the Australian Open. Unlike former No. 1 Caroline Wozniacki, who became the greatest female player in her country's history as a heady and steady baseliner, Tauson epitomises 'Big Babe' tennis. A back injury derailed her promising professional career in 2022, but the low-key, 22-year-old Tauson is finally emerging as a formidable force.

After the 5'11" Tauson stunned Swiatek 7-6(1), 6-3 at the National Bank Open in Montreal, Petkovic said, "Such an impressive performance. Not only the firepower, [but also] the tactics, the slices, the anticipation, the variety." That was no

fluke, as she followed it up with a decisive 6-1, 6-4 victory over Australian Open champion Keys.

Currently No. 15 in the live (2025) rankings, Tauson plays intimidating first-strike tennis on both serve and when returning second serves. In her case, the best defence is an excellent offence because her biggest weakness is her below-average movement.

"She can rocket-fire her forehand, but it can go off for her when she's rushed," said Petkovic. As women's tennis gets faster and faster, how fast Tauson runs will determine her success both offensively and defensively. With a decent draw, she'll make the quarterfinals.

Coco Gauff — Gauff was tabbed for future stardom ever since she became the youngest girls' finalist in U.S. Open history as a 13-year-old prodigy in 2017. She credits her girlhood idols, Serena and Venus Williams — whose fearlessness and tenacity she admired — for taking up the sport. Ironically, in her Grand Slam debut, Gauff upset Venus in the 2019 Wimbledon first round. Amazingly, the veteran returned to the pro tour this summer at age 45 after a 16-month absence, and they could conceivably meet again.

Gauff's road towards the top has been more uneven than her current No. 2 ranking suggests. Although she upset Sabalenka in come-from-behind, three-set finals to capture the 2023 U.S. Open and 2025 French Open, all too often she has self-destructed, committing a rash of confidence-sapping double faults and wild unforced forehand errors. During her latest slump following Roland Garros, Gauff lost in the first round at Berlin and Wimbledon, and in the third round at Montreal to rookie Mboko, an 18-year-old Canadian wild card, 6-1, 6-4. Her double fault woes continued as she made 23 against Danielle Collins, 14 against Veronika Kudermetova in three-set wins, and five more among her 24 unforced errors against Mboko.

Looking at the bright side of her rollercoaster season, *Tennis Channel* analyst Nicolas Pereira pointed to her 9-1 record in three-set matches, saying, "She does it with her wheels, and she does it with her heart." But her splendid backhand, strong first serve, exceptional mobility, and fighting spirit can only take her so far if she keeps beating herself.

Which Gauff will show up at Flushing Meadows? Only the best version of herself stands a chance of making the semis this year.

Mirra Andreeva — When the self-confident, 18-year-old Russian is good, she's really, really good. Mirra whipped Swiatek, former Wimbledon champions Rybakina and Marketa Vondrousova, and Tauson to win Dubai in February. That made Andreeva, then 17, the youngest 1000 champion since Caroline Wozniacki in 2009.

Andreeva's litany of distinguished victims only grew at Indian Wells, where she claimed her second WTA 1000 title. She swept past Tauson, Rybakina, and Svitolina in straight sets to reach the semis. Then the 5'10" athlete showcased her all-court game — serves up to 120 mph and baseline versatility — to edge No. 2 Swiatek 7-6(1), 1-6, 6-3 and No. 1 Sabalenka 2-6, 6-4, 6-3. Fun to watch on court, the multilingual prodigy is even funnier during interviews, with a clever repartee that belies her age.

Strength and grace: Currently No. 15 in the live rankings, Clara Tauson plays intimidating first-strike tennis on both serve and when returning second serves. REUTERS

Tracy Austin, a teen queen who captured two U.S. Opens before injuries derailed her brilliant career, said, "Her forehand is so much improved. Her incredible shot is a forehand slice on the run. To have Conchita Martinez [as her coach] is an absolute genius. She watched a motivational video from LeBron James, who advised, 'If you can't be 100 per cent physically, you have a choice to be 100 per cent mentally.' She'll win Grand Slams for sure."

The ambitious Andreeva, ranked

Women's Draw

Dark Horses
Amanda Anisimova, Karolina Muchova, Xinyu Wang, Linda Noskova, and Dayana Yastremska.

Long Shots
Diana Shnaider, Jessica Bouzas Maneiro, Taylor Townsend, Katerina Siniakova, and Alycia Parks.

GETTY IMAGES

A worrying trend: World No. 1 and defending champion Aryna Sabalenka, despite her many strengths, has developed a habit of losing matches she should win.

GETTY IMAGES

No. 5, brings notes to the court and gets instructions from Martinez during matches. However, she occasionally lapses into teenage moodiness and passive play when the going gets tough. Andreeva **(left)** will doubtless win Majors, but a quarterfinal showing is more likely this fortnight.

Iga Swiatek — Swiatek became the first Polish player to win the Wimbledon title during the Open Era and the third woman in the Open Era to win all of their first six Grand Slam singles finals, after Margaret Court and Monica Seles. Although she never faced a top-10 opponent at the Big W, she dropped only 19 games in her last five matches, overwhelming 2021 Olympic gold medallist Belinda Bencic 6-2, 6-0 in the semis and surprise finalist Anisimova 6-0, 6-0.

Her resume includes the 2022 US Open title, but she has often been beaten on hard courts by heavy hitters such as Sabalenka (three times), Keys (twice), Rybakina (twice), Tauson, Collins, and Linda Noskova.

With the 24-year-old's brilliant career back on track, this intense perfectionist can relax a bit and resume winning Majors. Though that is unlikely to happen in New York, where she will advance to the semis or possibly the final, depending on her draw.

Aryna Sabalenka — How can the No. 1 player in the world, with a huge 4,341-point lead over No. 2 Gauff (as of August 11) and the holder of three hard-court Grand Slam titles, not be a solid favourite to win her fourth at the U.S. Open? The short answer is that Sabalenka, despite her many assets — most notably, her flawless technique, potent shots, and increasingly versatile game — has a habit of losing matches she should

win. Experience is said to be the best teacher, and Sabalenka has adopted a sensible perspective. After her third straight, three-set Grand Slam loss to an American — Anisimova 6-4, 4-6, 6-4 in the Wimbledon semifinal — Sabalenka said, "Losing sucks, you know? You always feel like you want to die, you don't want to exist anymore, and this is the end of your life. But then you sit there a little bit, and you think about what you could have done differently in the match. I mean, you see stuff where you weren't at your best in the match. You see that the other player performs much better. You kind of, like, can see things better."

Easy to say, but not so easy to do, given the scar tissue this extremely emotional Belarusian has accumulated. Sabalenka relaxes on social media, where she has a huge following. In an *Instagram* video with Gauff, Sabalenka posted, "TikTok dances always had a way of bringing people together."

It's hard not to predict she will make the U.S. Open final — but once there, Sabalenka may falter yet again.

Victoria Mboko — This Cinderella from Canada said all the right things just as she hit the right shots during her breakthrough tournament at the National Bank Open in Montreal. After the wild card Victoria Vanessa Mboko staved off a match point to upset former Wimbledon champion Rybakina 1-6, 7-5, 7-6(4) in the semifinals, she was asked if she could win the title. She told the enchanted spectators, "Anything can happen."

Indeed, it can — and it has. Energised by cheering fans waving 'ALLEZ VICKY!' signs and wearing oversized face masks of her, Mboko, at 18 years and 336 days, made history as the second-youngest woman in the Open Era to vanquish four Grand Slam champions at the same WTA event. (Serena, the women's GOAT, was 17 when she won the 1999 U.S. Open.)

Besides Rybakina, Mboko knocked out 2020 Australian Open winner Sofia Kenin 6-2, 6-3, Gauff 6-1, 6-4, and Osaka, her childhood idol, 2-6, 6-4, 6-1. After she outclassed No. 2 Gauff for the biggest win of her budding career, *Tennis Channel* analyst Paul Annacone said, "What amazed me most is it looked like Mboko felt she didn't have to play outside of her game, her comfort zone. Coco was off, but a lot of that was due to Mboko's power and consistency."

A strongly built 5'10", Mboko can whack aces and pummel groundstrokes like Serena, but she can also change pace and tactics. Against Osaka, she conjured a disguised drop-shot winner to break serve for 3-1 in the deciding set. "Her willingness to run and trade groundstrokes and allow opponents to beat themselves, that's the most impressive thing," said *Tennis Channel's* Mark Petchey.

Her Serena-like competitiveness repeatedly drew loud cheers from the crowd. She sustained a right wrist injury from a fall against Rybakina but received a favourable MRI result on the morning of the final.

When Osaka tapped a seemingly unreachable drop shot, Mboko fearlessly lunged and struck a forehand winner before landing on her stomach.

Mboko, the daughter of emigrants from the Democratic Republic of the Congo who first came to the U.S. and then moved to Canada, has skyrocketed from No. 333 to No. 24 this year. The U.S. Open will again showcase Mboko Magic when the latest teen queen captures her first Grand Slam title.

On the rise: Victoria Mboko has skyrocketed from No. 333 to No. 24 this year. GETTY IMAGES

CREST OF CHANGE

With Asian Games quotas secured, the Olympic dream **edges closer** for Indian surfing.

Kavita Menon
kavita.menon@thehindu.co.in

Indian surfing has stopped waiting for the perfect wave and has started forming its own. Once a niche pastime known only in small coastal pockets, the sport now boasts Asian Games quotas, a historic international podium, and a team unafraid to paddle out against Asia's best.

The biggest breakthrough came early this month when Ramesh Budihal claimed a bronze at the Asian Surfing Championships (ASC) in Mahabalipuram — a result that signalled to the wider region that Indian surfers were here to compete.

This achievement built on the momentum gained at the 2024 edition in Maldives, when India secured its first-ever Asian Games berths in a sport making its Asiad debut, a few years after its inclusion in the Olympic programme.

The sport's debut at Tokyo 2020 lit a fire across Asia, with countries such as Japan and Indonesia ramping up their programmes, and India following suit.

"Since surfing was included in the Olympics, India started taking the sport seriously," said Budihal after his historic outing. In Japan, the effect was just as striking. "Having surfing in the Olympics in 2020 really brought that reach to the audience in so many countries," said top Japanese surfer Kei Kobayashi. "I didn't even know you could surf in India. It's so nice to see the surfing community develop here."

But ambition alone could not get Indian surfers into the line-up at major events — it needed resources, structure, and a willingness to take a gamble. Without government backing and with scarce resources, Indian surfing was stuck paddling in the same place, waiting for a current to push it forward.

Taking the helm

The tides began to shift during the pandemic — a surge in interest not only boosted participation but also prompted a reset at the Surfing Federation of India (SFI).

The newly formed council, headed by president Arun Vasu, had clear intentions. "India needed the exposure and the competition. We wanted to send an Indian team to the World Games, continental championships, and international events," said Vasu, an avid surfer.

The teams relied on private support for years, hoping to put Indian surfing on the map and attract official backing. Training trips to world-class surf breaks in the Maldives, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka gave Indian surfers much-needed exposure to higher levels of competition and technique. Alongside these efforts, the Surf Turf programme run by the TT Group at Covelong Point, emerged as a crucial grassroots initiative, nurturing local talent and feeding them into the national team.

"Six athletes of the 12-member contingent are products of this project, which has been running for over four years," remarked Vasu, the Chairman and MD of TT Group.

Trend setter: Ramesh Budihal became the first Indian to win an individual medal at the Asian Surfing Championships. R. RAGU

Turning point

The combination of international experience and homegrown development began to pay off quickly. Teams sent to events around the world left a mark, and India's campaign at the 2024 ASC — a recently designated qualifier for the Asian Games — signalled a shift.

SFI treasurer Nawaz Jabbar reflected on the achievement: "The idea of actually being able to compete in the Asian Games itself was unbelievable. And then for us to be one of the countries to compete after winning the few available slots was a little bit of a pipe dream."

According to Nawaz, who also serves as SFI's tournament director, the unprecedented outing propelled Indian surfing into the limelight. "That was a historic moment and huge achievement, and a lot of eyes were on us after that. There was a lot of publicity that we received."

That visibility translated into credibility. For the first time, Indian surfing was seen as a viable competitive sport — and it soon cleared the long-awaited path to gaining recognition.

The SFI received approval from the Sports Authority of India (SAI) earlier this year, a major milestone that unlocked government support and resources for the sport. This endorsement has also helped attract sponsors and integrate the sport firmly within the national sports ecosystem — "It meant that surfing could finally stand on its own legs in India."

New horizons

With one major hurdle out of the way, the focus now is on building a competitive pipeline, both for the upcoming Asian Games 2026 in Aichi-Nagoya, Japan, and beyond. Well aware that the big stage is only a year away, the SFI has begun its mission early to prioritise selection, international training, and nurturing young surfers.

"Age is always a thing, something we have to be wary of. The main effort is really to get more kids involved. The team has to be larger," said Vasu, referring to nurturing younger surfers, as done in countries like Japan and Indonesia.

"The Japanese team were saying that every year, they have 600 kids taking part in their youth programmes. For India, even finding five kids is a struggle. We need to learn from them, and these events will hopefully get us more participation.

"People will see that they can make a future, and that they can be champions. India is at a very good stage in surfing, and today Asia is watching us. We will be there in the bigger leagues soon," said Vasu. Going forward, the Olympics remain a challenging but motivating goal. "I think it's going to be tough getting into the Olympics in two years. But for the edition after that, we will definitely be ready."

The ocean hasn't changed, but India's place in it has — and the next set of waves is already on the horizon.

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

INTERVIEW
YOGESH DAHIYA

From village dust to the bright lights of the PKL

From the dust of Pahladpur to the glare of the Pro Kabaddi League, Yogesh Dahiya stands as its **calmest and most unexpected** star.

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In the Pro Kabaddi League (PKL), raiders usually hog the headlines. But during the frenzy of the PKL 12 auction, it was a right-corner defender who stole the show. Bengaluru Bulls signed Yogesh Dahiya for a record-breaking ₹1.125 crore, briefly making him the most expensive Indian defender in the league's history. Ankit Jaglan later went for ₹1.573 crore.

After a tense three-way bidding war, the final gavel drop sent Yogesh's family into raucous celebration — the kind where disbelief and pride collide. "My family was very happy. They were so happy that their child had become so valuable," Yogesh told *Sportstar*.

Known as a "silent killer", Yogesh's rise has been built not on flamboyance but on quiet, calculated precision. His defensive creed is

Pics: PKL MEDIA

Baptism by fire: In Delhi colours, Yogesh faced the pressure that would harden him into the 'silent killer'.

straightforward. "You have to play with patience. Don't be too aggressive; wait for the right moment to pounce. Play for your team, not for yourself. When my team needs me to tackle, I tackle," he explains.

Hailing from Pahladpur in Haryana, Yogesh's journey from village life to the PKL stage was never mapped out. It began in 2018. "My school seniors used to play in the village. I got interested in kabaddi after watching them. I was never really interested in studies, so it was a good way to get out of doing schoolwork, and I genuinely enjoyed it," he admits with a laugh.

At first, his family saw little point in a boy chasing a sport no one in the household had played. But as his performances improved, their scepticism gave way to full support, matching the steady rise of his career. His first real push came from his cousin Rohit. "He motivated me to start playing seriously. He constantly guided me, offered advice regularly, and worked incredibly hard with me during the COVID period." That mentorship became the bedrock of Yogesh's game.

Soon he joined a nearby academy in Ganaur, sharpened his skills, and broke into Haryana's squad for the Junior Nationals in 2023. There, coach Anup Kumar spotted him and picked him for the India team at the Junior World Cup.

"It was like a dream come true. I couldn't believe it. I always dreamed of wearing the India jersey," Yogesh recalls. In a tense final, India overcame Iran to win the trophy in its first appearance.

"The entire campaign felt like a dream. I had to pinch myself after the final. I gave my best performance of the tournament in the final when the team was under pressure. That time, I thought I was ready to play against the big boys."

Days later, then Dabang Delhi coach Rambir Singh Khokhar called to sign him as a New Young Player (NYP) ahead of PKL 10.

"When I got the call and coach sir introduced himself, I was excited. Without even wasting a second, I told him that I'm in," says Yogesh with a playful smile. But the dream start quickly turned. Overwhelmed by the crowd, lights, cameras and the constant scrutiny, anxiety blunted his execution. "In PKL, there is a lot of crowd, noise, bright lights, and cameras; they follow you

> « With 149 tackle points from 45 matches and a 55 per cent success rate, Yogesh stands among the elite »

Windfall: Bengaluru Bulls signed defender Yogesh Dahiya for a staggering ₹1.125 crore.

everywhere. I got a bit overwhelmed. My preparation was good, but I lacked execution. But after that match, I never looked back." It took six matches before his real game surfaced.

Two seasons on, Yogesh has become one of the league's most ruthless and tactically sharp defenders. With 149 tackle points from 45 matches and a 55 per cent success rate, he stands among the elite. Tall, aware, and versatile, he blends technical skill with raw athleticism. It is telling that seasoned coach B.C. Ramesh has chosen him as a cornerstone of the Bulls' defence. Despite the price tag, Yogesh stays unfazed. He embraces the responsibility and relishes Ramesh's distinctive approach. "Corner defenders are the pillars of the team. Ramesh sir plays a specific brand of kabaddi, which is very enjoyable. It is built on a lot of trust among the teammates, and I feel ready," he says.

After two successful seasons in Delhi, Yogesh now aims to anchor Bengaluru's defence and bring back glory to the 'Garden city'.

Yogesh in PKL
Matches Played — **45**
Total Tackle Points — **149**
Total Tackle — **242**
Tackle Success Rate — **55%**
No. Of Super Tackles — **16**
High 5s — **10**
Average Successful Tackles/Match — **2.95**
Total Raid Points — **5**
Individual Award — **Emerging Player of the Season in PKL 10**

WATCH THE INTERVIEW

THE LUMINARY FROM SAULHEIM

How Vincent Keymer rose from a small-town prodigy to **global chess contender.**

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Every sport loves its wunderkinds — those marked for greatness early on, a picture of promise.

Not too long ago, German Grandmaster Vincent Keymer was one such child prodigy. The man who recognised his potential? Chess legend Garry Kasparov.

"Vincent is incredibly talented and can definitely make his way to the top of the chess world," proclaimed Kasparov in 2015, after a two-hour training and analysis session with a 10-year-old Keymer in Berlin.

The German media soon hailed Keymer as the finest chess talent to emerge from the country since Emanuel Lasker, who reigned as world champion for 27 years, from 1894 to 1921.

Over the next decade, Keymer steadily worked towards the lofty target set for him by those around him. The IM title came in 2017; the GM tag followed two years later.

Consistent performances in prestigious events have seen him establish himself among the global chess elite.

Early in 2025, Keymer provided a stunning exhibition of his capabilities when he won the Weissenhaus Freestyle Chess Grand Slam against a world-class field on home turf.

He beat Alireza Firouzja, Magnus Carlsen and Fabiano Caruana — in that order — in the final three knockout games, to achieve what he believes is the biggest tournament victory of his young career.

The burden of expectation, which has crushed many a wunderkind, has seemingly not affected Keymer. The key, according to him, is naivety.

"I didn't really think about it [being a child prodigy] at the time. I was really quite naive in that sense. I just enjoyed chess.

"I played tournaments and tried to make things right with school. That's pretty much all I did, and it worked," says Keymer, speaking from the sidelines of the Chennai Grand Masters 2025.

It also helped that Keymer came from an environment far removed from the mechanical rigidity of chess.

His father, Christof, is a concert pianist and lecturer in piano at the Hanover University of Music, while his mother, Heike, is a cellist.

In fact, Keymer is a pianist himself — or rather, used to be one. "I played piano as a child, but that's something that was sacrificed for the sake of chess. I haven't played it for

Focus mode on: Vincent Keymer in action at the recently concluded Chennai Grand Masters. VELANKANNI RAJ

at least seven or eight years."

Considering his family background, the fact that Keymer took up chess and stuck with it is a surprising twist of fate.

"Let's put it this way: chess sought out Vincent; not the other way around," said German chess coach Bernd Vokler in 2015 to *Focus* magazine, having witnessed Keymer's growth from close quarters.

Keymer picked up a chessboard by chance when he was five and was taught the rules by his parents. Spoiler alert — it didn't take long for him to beat them.

"Chess doesn't really run in the family. I was just a child being curious about what it was. It could have been any other game as well. I think you can call it fate in some way. I really liked it from the start. Turns out I had some talent for it," says Keymer.

The next stage of his chess lessons came from a local club in Saulheim, his hometown, relying on DVD tutorials. Winning the regional tournament was only a natural progression, and soon he was garnering appreciation from the likes of Kasparov.

While fate got him into chess, Keymer made sure the sport remained fun for him — something he advocates to prevent young players from burning out early.

"It's important that children like playing chess. Of course, you can also make great chess players by pushing someone to certain limits. But then you will often realise they end up quitting at a young age because it's not their true passion. At a certain point, you need to give so much of your life to chess that if you don't really enjoy it, you just don't do it," points out Keymer.

While he has undoubtedly earned his position in the global chess scene, the biggest boost to his profile — at least in India — came thanks to his role as a second for D. Gukesh during the Indian's title win at the World Championship final in 2024.

"He [Gukesh] texted me when I was in Malmo for a tournament. He said he wanted to talk to me personally. I really appreciated him having the conversation directly, and not through a manager or coach.

I think that was important because it's about professionalism. You need a good atmosphere in the team, and I need to feel like I really want to give my 100 per cent support to him for that match," says Keymer.

While working with Gukesh gave him a peripheral view of the long drawn out and tense nature of a World Championship, Keymer believes the experience hasn't

Able ally: Keymer was a second for Gukesh at the World Championship final last year. DEBASISH BHADURI

explicitly seeped into the way he plays. "I believe chess players are a combination of everything we know. I do believe it increased my knowledge and my horizon.

"Maybe I'll implement things in my play that I never did before. I think it can help me. But at the same time, he [Gukesh] is a very different player. So I cannot just try to copy him — and I would never try to," says Keymer.

Having gathered an insider's perspective on a world title challenge, Keymer is ready to mount one himself.

The first step would be to qualify for the Candidates, a tournament in which he is yet to make an appearance. Keymer is leaving all options open to break that duck.

"The two obvious choices [qualification routes] are Grand Swiss and World Cup. I have played well in all my Grand Swiss tournaments and World Cups. It could have gone even better if there wasn't a certain Carlsen always stopping you.

KEYMER IS KEEN TO QUALIFY FOR THE CANDIDATES, A TOURNAMENT IN WHICH HE IS YET TO MAKE AN APPEARANCE

I have already won the German Championship. So, in case a tournament like this one [Chennai Grand Masters] goes really well, I might start to play events for the FIDE circuit points," adds Keymer.

Having successfully navigated the perilous developmental stages, Keymer has positioned himself well for the next phase of his career — where prophecies will be put to the test, promises challenged by the present, and expectations countered by reality.

On problem economy

By C.G.S.Narayanan

Economy in chess composition does not necessarily mean the use of few men.It rather relates to the number of men used to the results obtained usually measured by the variety or complexity of the lines of play.A problem is said to be constructed uneconomically when the same results or effects could have been obtained with fewer or with less powerful men.The use of large number of men at times may be more economically constructed than a lightweight which cannot pull its own weight. The economy in the functioning of the white forces is normally given more stress than in the case of the more passive black force.

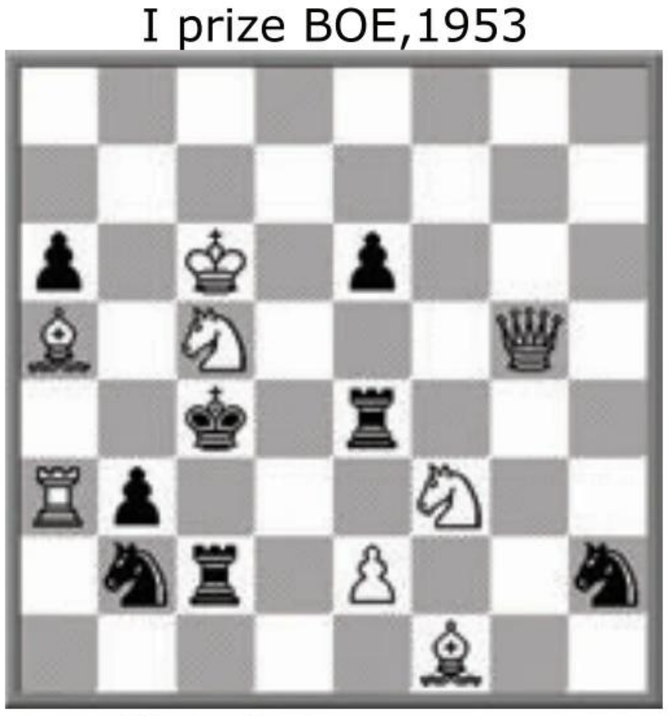
The first problem below follows economy norm such as economy of material (not using more pieces than necessary).It has more content also in a Meredith setting (problems with 8-12pieces).It also satisfies 'economy of space' using the board to the fullest

G.F.Anderson
I prize, SA Society Meredith Ty 1946

Mate in two moves
Key 1.Ka6! (threat 2.Ra5)
1…Rg2 2.Rb1;1…Bc6 2Qa5
1…Bd6 2.Qxg1;1..Rxb6+2.Kxb6

From the single phase traditional two-mover we move on to a multiphase one, a zagoruyko, named after its inventor.

H.Hermanson
I prize BOE,1953



Mate in two moves
Set 1….cRxe2 2.Qc1;1…eRxe2 2.Qf4
Try 1.Nxb3? (2.Qc5)
1…cRxe2 2.bNd2;1…eRe2 2.fNe5 but refuted by 1…Na4!
Key 1.cNd3 (2.Qc5)
1…cRxe2 2.Nxb2;1..eRxe2 2.dNe5

The problem for solving (given below) is a unique triple Grimshaw using only three black men but with only five thematic mates

Kalyan Seetharaman
Northwest Chess 1977

Mate in two moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article'On thematic blends' **Key 1.Qxb4!** (2.Bd4)1…e3 2.Nf4;1…Ke6 2.Qe7;1…Nd6 2.Qxd6

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

THE HEARTBEAT OF INDIA'S MIDFIELD

In a career spanning over 400 matches, Manpreet Singh has been the **quiet constant** in Indian hockey's journey, linking eras with the same unhurried certainty he brings to the midfield.

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WATCH THE INTERVIEW

For nearly 15 years since his debut in 2011, Manpreet Singh has seen the mental battles athletes face — the creeping insecurities, the denial of fading abilities, and the whispers about relevance. "I want to give my 100 per cent every time I go on the ground; I don't want anyone to think that I am taking it easy," the 33-year-old former Indian captain tells *Sportstar*.

Despite winning numerous individual and team honours, including two Olympic bronze medals, four Asian Champions Trophy titles and two Asian Games golds, the midfielder still longs for the World Cup — a title India last claimed in 1975. "The next World Cup is my focus, and I'm desperate to earn a medal. It constantly motivates me to keep working harder," he says at the national camp in SAI Bengaluru, where Craig Fulton's

Decorated athlete: From the Arjuna Award in 2018 to being crowned the world's best men's player in 2019 and receiving the Khel Ratna in 2021, Manpreet Singh's career is studded with hockey's highest honours at both national and global levels. K MURALI KUMAR

DATA DRIBBLE
SENIOR INTERNATIONAL CAPS

402
Goals

44
First match

03/09/2011
Most recent match

22/06/2025

According to FIH

Individual awards

- Arjuna Award in 2018
- FIH Best Player of the Year in 2019
- Major Dhyan Chand Khel Ratna Award in 2021
- Hockey India Balbir Singh Sr. Award For Player Of The Year (Men) in 2019
- Hockey India Ajit Pal Singh Award For Midfielder Of The Year in 2014, 2021

Historic feat: Manpreet Singh was the captain of the Indian team that broke a 41-year-old Olympic medal drought in Tokyo by bagging the bronze.
K MURALI KUMAR

team is preparing for the Asia Cup, a qualifier for the 2026 World Cup.

Manpreet captained India to bronze at the Tokyo Olympics in 2021, ending a 41-year Games medal drought. Now, he wants to help end the nation's 51-year wait for a world title. "*Sabko World Cup jeetna hain* (Every athlete wants to win the World Cup). Every team wants to do well in big tournaments. It has been ages since we last won a World Cup medal, and it is high time we change it."

When he broke into the national setup as an 18-year-old alongside Sardar Singh, the team entered an era where fitness was valued as much as skill. Now the senior-most figure in the side, he is again leading by example, arriving at camp leaner than ever, which he says makes him "faster than before." "Several talented youngsters are coming through the ranks; they are fit. So, if I have to compete with them, if I want to play good hockey for the next two to four years, then I have to be fitter than ever," says Manpreet.

As a Cristiano Ronaldo diehard, he has borrowed more than the Portuguese superstar's number 7 shirt. "I'm a huge fan of his mindset. Despite being over 40, he maintains his body like a youngster. I always draw inspiration from his work ethic. Even at this age, he has the hunger and continues to play well."

His renewed fitness focus paid off. In a bleak FIH Pro League 2024–25 campaign, he emerged as one of the few bright spots. After starting strongly in Bhubaneswar with 15 points, the team slumped in Europe, adding only three more and finishing eighth out of nine. A record seven-match losing streak was broken only by Ireland's poorer run, sparing India from relegation.

Despite the results, Manpreet sees value in the experience. "We live in a result-oriented world, and it didn't go our way. However, it made us identify our mistakes. We didn't play bad hockey, but there were some silly mistakes and lapses in concentration in our game. Ahead of the Asia Cup and leading to the World Cup, we will have to become better in every aspect," says the 2019 FIH Player of the Year.

During this period, on June 15, 2025, Manpreet became only the

India best performances at World Cups

- Third place in 1971 (Inaugural edition)
- Runner-up in 1973 (Second edition)
- Champion in 1975 (Third edition)

Role model: Manpreet Singh dons the iconic number seven, a nod to Portuguese great Cristiano Ronaldo, whose fitness, skill, and tireless work ethic at 40 continue to inspire him. REUTERS

second Indian after Dilip Tirkey to play 400 international matches. He received a guard of honour and a special jersey from the Australian team.

Yet milestones leave him unfazed. "These individual numbers don't excite me. Make no mistake, I'm proud to represent my country on the international stage, but for me, what I'm doing to make my team win matters the most."

A veteran of four Olympics, Manpreet has witnessed Indian hockey's transformation over the last decade and a half — and his own life has evolved alongside it. "*Zameen aasman ka fark hain* (There's a world of difference). Hockey has become faster. Several rule changes, especially the self-start rule, have increased the pace. It has become more and more tactical," he says.

Asked how the midfielder's role has evolved, he is direct. "*Kaafi change hua hain* (It has changed a lot). Midfield is the bridge between attack and defence, so we have to participate in both. It demands versatility, athleticism, and tactical intelligence," he explains.

Leading into the Asia Cup, the Khel Ratna awardee reflected on the mental steel athletes need. "*Agar aapke andar belief hain, to aap kuch bhi kar sakte hain* (if you believe in yourself, you can achieve anything)." He says the team focuses on the future: "As a collective, we talk about 'What's next?' Whatever has happened in the past cannot be changed, but we can make things better for each other in the future."

Speaking about the personal sacrifices of international hockey, Manpreet becomes emotional. "It's very tough. I've two daughters; one is three, and the other is just three months old. I don't get to spend a lot of time with them. But whenever my elder daughter comes to see me play, it gives me extra motivation to perform. I hope she will be proud of my achievements as a player."

His journey began in Mithapur, a small village in Jalandhar, Punjab, with a rich hockey history. Idolising local hero Pargat Singh, he honed his craft and rose to become a mainstay of the national team. Despite his accolades, he isn't dwelling on legacy. "*Abhi tohh khelna hain, aur bhi jeetna hain* (I still have to play and win a lot more titles)."

Rapid fire

If you weren't a hockey player, what would you be?
I would probably be a driver somewhere in a foreign country.

Last movie you watched?
Housefull 5.

If you could get a superpower for a day, what would it be? And what would you do with it?
I would like to have the speed of Flash. If I have that power, I can always go back home every day from anywhere while continuing my career.

What is your favourite cheat meal?
Either pizza or burger.

Who is your favourite singer?
It depends on my mood and my environment. Before a match, I get pumped up with the energetic beats of Diljit Dosanjh and Sidhu Moose Wala. But when I'm alone and relaxing in my room, I prefer the soulful melodies of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Jaani, and B. Praak.

An outright win in regulation time or a win through a penalty shootout?
Shootout.

Which team-mate can help you escape from a deserted island?
I won't choose anyone. None of them have any survival skills. Their presence would likely hinder my chances of survival (laughs).

A secret talent you have?
I'm good at calming babies. I have a lot of experience in this department now.

Who's the GOAT of hockey?
Dhyan Chand is the greatest. In the modern era, I would say Moritz Fürste. He is my idol.

Toughest test yet: With Savita Punia likely to miss the upcoming Asia Cup in China due to an ankle injury, Bichu Devi will take on the mantle of guarding the goal. PICS: HOCKEY INDIA

THE RELUCTANT GUARDIAN

A twist of fate and father's advice turned a football-mad teenager into India's **next hope** under the crossbar.

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Bichu Devi was in sharp form during a training session at the SAI centre in Bengaluru.

"You want a break, Bichu?" asked Dave Smolenaars, the Indian women's hockey team's analytical coach.

"No, coach," the goalkeeper replied.

Watching from the dugout was Savita Punia, India's mainstay in goal for almost two decades, her foot in a boot due to an ankle injury. The former captain sustained it during the FIH Pro League and is likely to miss the upcoming Asia Cup in China.

In the senior's absence, Bichu will have to step up and take on the mantle of guarding the goal — and, as it turns out, Savita had already prepared her for it.

"The day she got her reports and

Being from Manipur, a young Bichu naturally fell in love with football. But due to a twist of fate, she gradually grew an affinity for hockey.

WATCH THE INTERVIEW

found out she was unlikely to play the Asia Cup, she sat me down and told me — 'Your time is coming and you can't do anything about it.' She told me to play with a free mind and not to take pressure. I train now with that mindset. Even if I feel pressure when I go there [Asia Cup], I'll just call her for advice," the 24-year-old from Manipur's Thoubal told *Sportstar.*

Many think it's a fight for the spot in the team between the 35-year-old Savita and Bichu. But according to the latter, it's nothing but love and a sense of sisterhood.

"Whatever I say about her will not be enough. If I concede a goal or get demoralised after a bad performance, Savita *di* has the experience to guide me through all scenarios because she has gone through them herself. Even when Rajani [Etimarpu] *di* was there, both of the seniors have helped me through my bad times."

While Bichu may feel the heat when she plays in the Asia Cup, where a World Cup spot is at stake, Paramjit Singh — her coach at the Madhya Pradesh Hockey Academy — feels that giving the youngster responsibility will only improve her performance.

"When she's given the responsibility of being the main goalkeeper, she thrives. She has assisted Savita in the past and played under her. Bichu now has the experience. If she goes to the Asia Cup as the main goalie, her confidence will go up a notch," the 62-year-old said.

Bichu might be a livewire now on the hockey turf, but picking up the stick was never part of her plans.

An Olympian's eye

In Manipur, football is part of the state's fabric. Naturally, a young Bichu fell in love with kicking the ball around.

"I have always loved playing football and used to play with the boys. I had short hair then and people couldn't tell whether I was a girl, so I blended right in. The boys would discourage me from playing, saying, 'You're a girl, you'll get hurt,' but I didn't pay heed. So I continued playing."

In 2012, she went to give trials at the SAI centre in Imphal for the football team. Unfortunately, she was late and all the spots had been filled. Her father, Romen Singh, pleaded with the SAI director, who happened to be from the same village. As a solution, the director suggested hockey to Bichu.

"Hockey players were very few at SAI, and in Manipur. The director said I should give trials for hockey, stay at SAI for a few months, and then shift to football if a vacancy opened up. I didn't have any idea about hockey. I didn't even know how to hold the stick, but I passed all the physical tests and got into the team," Bichu recalled.

However, she continued playing football. "I wouldn't even look in the direction of hockey," she remembered. "After a couple of months, my father came to speak to the director regarding shifting back to football, but he refused. My name was nationally registered as a hockey player and the director said I couldn't play football. I cried a lot."

Romen then asked his daughter to give hockey a shot. Age was on her side, he argued. If she still didn't like it, he would help her return to football or take up any other sport she preferred.

Gradually, she grew an affinity for hockey. A striker in those days (in football too she was a forward), Bichu loved to leap about and hit the ball goalwards. But there was another twist on the way.

"Manipur's first Olympian, Nilakomol [Singh] sir, came to SAI to train us for six months. He watched me in training and said, 'Make her a goalkeeper. Her height and footwork are good; she'll play for India soon.'"

This began another cycle of Bichu not liking what she was doing, and her father encouraging her to give it a go.

Special bond: Bichu insists her relationship with Savita is driven by love, mutual respect, and sisterhood.

"I remember once I was playing at the Sub-Junior Nationals in Ranchi and it was a match against Patiala. Although we lost 0-1, I played really well. I don't even know how. Napolean [Singh] sir, a coach from Manipur, referred me to the Madhya Pradesh Hockey Academy. That's when I left Manipur for MP in 2015."

After moving to central India, Bichu had to wait for around four to six months to be officially inducted into the academy and receive her own kit. In the meantime, she stuck to physical training or borrowed a senior's kit whenever they were sidelined by injury.

It was only when Bichu was inducted and got her own kit that she believes her journey towards making the Indian team actually began.

"Whatever happens, happens for a reason. If I hadn't played hockey, I wouldn't be here. I also want to thank my father who made me understand, and perhaps saw something in me," she said.

Righting the wrongs

Bichu made 10 appearances in the FIH Pro League 2024–25 season, including two starts, at the end of which India faced the ignominy of being relegated to the FIH Nations Cup. The team conceded the third-highest number of goals (43) in the campaign among nine teams.

"We are mainly focusing on defending penalty corners because that's where we leaked goals. We end up spending about an hour of training on this," she said of how the team is working on its mistakes at the SAI camp in Bengaluru.

The absence of seasoned defenders and midfielders like Udita and Nikki Pradhan also contributed to the team's porous backline, Bichu admitted.

"We had newer, inexperienced defenders. The connection with them was lacking, especially during penalty corners. The positioning went amiss, which would affect my stance as well. It's not completely their fault. In training, we are trying to improve on how to manage and position ourselves during PCs."

On the other hand, Paramjit believes his ward needs to improve her diving.

"She's a specialist in covering tight angles. All the narrow shots that come her way, she can keep them out. When it comes to diving, she can improve her left side."

"We are disappointed [with the Pro League] but we need to forget and move on. If we win the Asia Cup, we qualify for the World Cup. And medalling at the World Cup will do our confidence a world of good," Bichu said, sounding hopeful.

The keeper won't feel like she's being thrown in at the deep end when playing Asian sides. At last year's Asian Champions Trophy, she featured in all seven matches of India's unbeaten campaign.

From clinching silver at the 2018 Youth Olympics and winning the Asian Games bronze medal to lifting back-to-back Asian Champions Trophy titles, Bichu will now aim to step out of Savita's shadow and add the Asia Cup to her trophy cabinet.

Rapid fire

If you could possess any superpower for a day, which would you choose?
Become Superman

What is your favourite cheat meal?
Anything non-vegetarian

Who is your favourite singer?
Arijit Singh

Would you prefer to secure an outright victory in regulation time or a win via a penalty shootout?
An outright win

Which teammate would you call upon to rescue you if you were stranded on an island?
Savita Punia

If the world were to end tomorrow, how would you choose to spend your final day?
Spend time with my family

What is the one thing about you that people may not know but should?
I might seem like someone who gets angry, but I'm actually very kind

Who is your all-time favourite hockey player?
Savita Punia

Who is the best player you have ever played against?
Eva Drummond (Netherlands)

A bronze stage studded with golden performances

From Annu Rani's winning throw to Murali Sreeshankar's big leap, India made its mark at the inaugural World Athletics Continental Tour Bronze.

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Performances by seasoned javelin thrower Annu Rani, ace long jumper Murali Sreeshankar and promising sprinter Animesh Kujur were among the major highlights of India's first-ever World Athletics Continental Tour Bronze event at the Kalinga Stadium in Bhubaneswar on August 10.

With very different backstories this season, these athletes have performed consistently in events across the world.

Annu spent three weeks training in Europe, ending her stint with a season-best throw of 62.59m in Poland. Within three days, and after travelling from a different time zone and cooler climate, she defied jet lag to produce two 61m-plus throws, including her winning effort of 62.01m on her fourth attempt.

For the 32-year-old, a few 60m-plus throws after more than a year — since winning the Asian Games gold — were a welcome confidence boost.

She also found encouragement in the atmosphere at the Kalinga Stadium, with spectators in the stands behind her spurring her on. She did not disappoint the young fans.

One bizarre moment came when Annu's cheering supporters kept the warmed-up men's 100m finalists waiting on the blocks for eight minutes. The delay was caused by concerns that the sprinters might miss the starting gun amid the noise.

Placed 30th on the Road to Tokyo rankings and set to compete in her fifth World Championships (the most by any Indian javelin thrower), Annu thanked her fans for their support and spoke of her technical focus ahead of the Worlds in Japan from September 13.

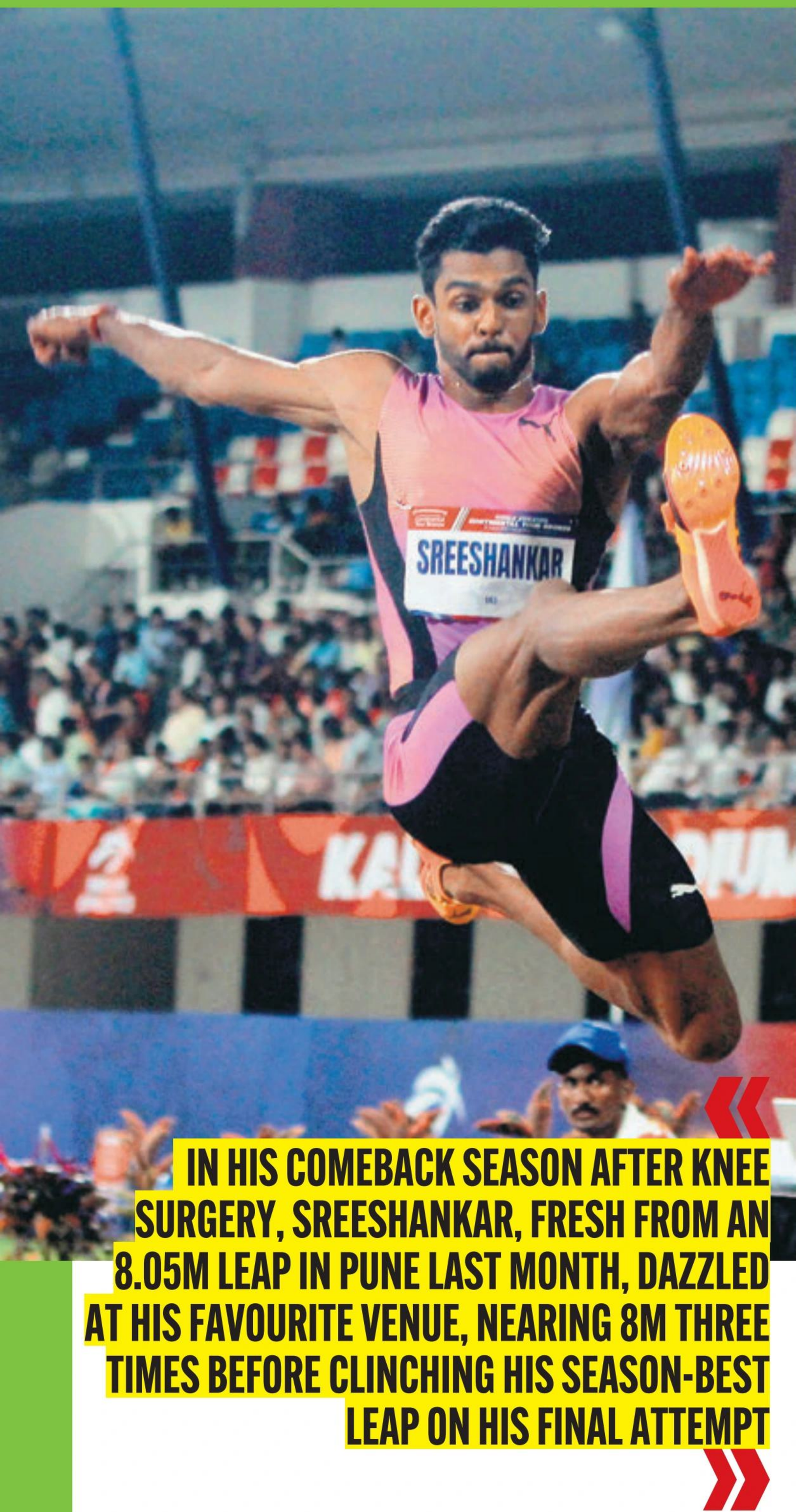
"When I throw, it's usually at a high angle. I'll have to keep it front-on. The other area is my run-up — I'll have to make it fast and smooth," said Annu, a two-time Worlds finalist.

Away from the spotlight, Sreeshankar thrived at his favourite venue — the place where he first crossed the 8m mark in 2018. In his comeback year, after missing the Paris Olympics due to a knee injury requiring surgery, the Kerala jumper has put in several impressive performances, including an 8.05m jump in Pune, both at home and abroad.

In the men's javelin, Sri Lanka's Rumesh Tharanga (86.50m — better than the direct Worlds qualification mark of 85.50m) and Sumedha

Javelin queen: Annu Rani soared to a commanding win, hurling the javelin 62.01m to reign supreme at the World Athletics Continental Tour event.

Pics: BISWARANJAN ROUT



IN HIS COMEBACK SEASON AFTER KNEE SURGERY, SREESHANKAR, FRESH FROM AN 8.05M LEAP IN PUNE LAST MONTH, DAZZLED AT HIS FAVOURITE VENUE, NEARING 8M THREE TIMES BEFORE CLINCHING HIS SEASON-BEST LEAP ON HIS FINAL ATTEMPT

Ranasinghe (80.65m) took first and third places respectively. Both secured automatic Worlds qualification, underlining the growing dominance of South East Asian throwers, alongside Olympic champion Arshad Nadeem and World champion Neeraj Chopra.

Among the Indians, Shivam Lokhare (80.73m) claimed second place, while Rohit Yadav, Asian Championships silver medallist Sachin Yadav (PB 85.16m in May) and Yashvir Singh finished fourth, fifth and sixth with 80.35m, 79.80m and 78.53m respectively.

The Ramaraj sisters endured disappointment. Vithya was disqualified for a false start in the 400m, while Nithya, leading comfortably in the 100m hurdles, stumbled at the eighth hurdle, fell, and fractured her leg.

Sreeshankar, who trained at the Kalinga Stadium for about a week, leapt close to 8m three times before summoning his remaining energy to better his season best with a winning effort of 8.13m. He will be aiming to improve that by another 14cm at the Inter-State Championships in Chennai to secure a Worlds berth.

Notably, national record holder Jeswin Aldrin did not start.

In the women's long jump, Shaili Singh (6.28m) fell short of her season best of 6.64m.

Kujur, who set national records in the 100m (10.18) and 200m (20.32) this season and spent six weeks training and competing in Europe, found it difficult to acclimatise to the hot, humid home conditions after developing cold-like symptoms on his return.

Training at the venue, Kujur withdrew midway through the 100m heats in the morning to focus on the 200m. The Asian Championships bronze medallist clocked 20.99 in the heats before overcoming Korean Ko Seunghwan in the final, regaining the lead in the last 30m to claim victory in 20.77, cheered on by a vocal crowd.

"The European exposure was new for both me and my coach. We are learning. I wanted to perform close to my personal best, but this is okay.

I'm not focusing on the Worlds — I'm looking forward to the Commonwealth Games and Asian Games next year," said Kujur.

The Bronze event lost some sheen due to the absence of several well-known Indian athletes — including Olympic medallist Neeraj, Asian Games silver medallist Kishore Jena, national record-holding distance runner Gulveer Singh, steeplechasers Avinash Sable and Parul Chaudhary, triple jumper Praveen Chithravel, sprinters Gurindervir Singh and Manikanta Hoblidhar, and long jumper Ancy Sojan — owing to various reasons. Many withdrawals were injury or fitness related.

Even so, Indian dominance in an international field of 156 athletes from over 15 countries was a foregone conclusion. This was perhaps best illustrated in the women's section, where the Indians completed a clean sweep.

Among other notable performances, triple jumper Abdulla Aboobacker, with a season best of 17.19m, jumped 16.53m in his third attempt to beat compatriot Karthik Unnikrishnan by 11cm.

Vishal T.K. clocked 45.72 to take the men's 400m title, with second-placed Amoj Jacob — who had run 50.26 in the heats — recording his season best of 45.86.

By hosting the event, the Odisha Government continued its policy of promoting sport. Apart from allocating close to ₹10 crore, including prize money ($800, $400, $300 and $200 for first to fourth place respectively) and organisational costs, the government brought in schoolchildren to fill the stands and arranged folk dance performances to give the event a festive feel.

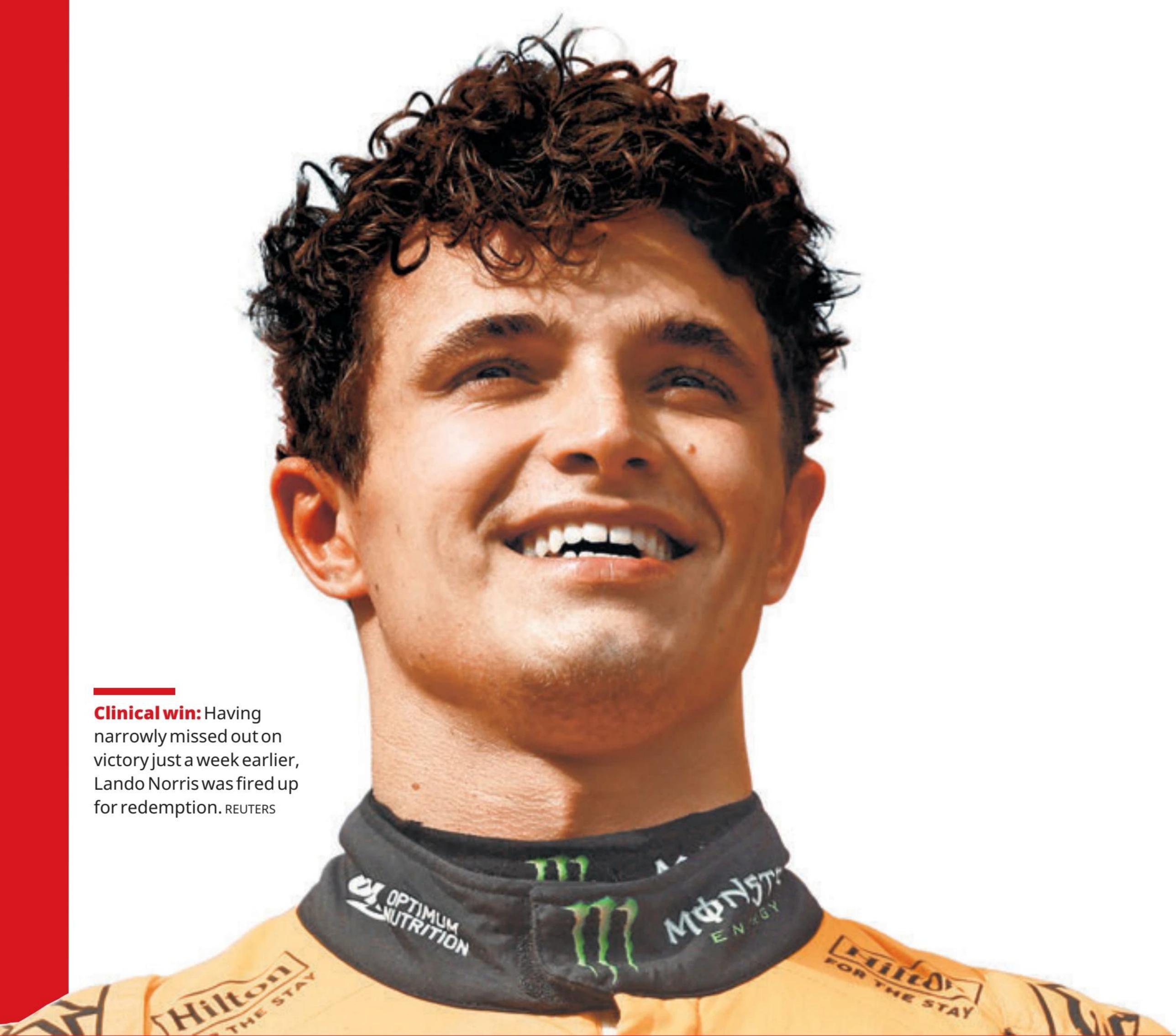
The Athletics Federation of India (AFI), which aims to raise the Bronze event's status in future and hopes one day to host the World Championships, will need to fine-tune operational areas to ensure smoother conduct of the competition.

> « The Ramaraj sisters faced heartbreak: Vithya was disqualified for a false start in 400m, and Nithya fell while leading in the 100m hurdles »

Speed merchant: Kujur, the national record holder with 20.32 set at the Asian Championships in May, stormed to the 200m title in 20.77.

HUNGARORING HEROICS

Budapest served up a classic, with Norris **closing the gap** on Piastri before the summer break.



Clinical win: Having narrowly missed out on victory just a week earlier, Lando Norris was fired up for redemption. REUTERS

Kavita Menon
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As the 2025 Formula One season approached its crucial pit stop — the 14th race and final event before the traditional four-week summer break — the Hungarian Grand Prix emerged as a high-stakes arena where every decision could tilt the championship battle. The Hungaroring has long been known for testing patience as much as pace, and this year it became the stage for a weekend of finely balanced strategy and unexpected results.

At the heart of the action was the simmering rivalry between McLaren's young stars — Lando Norris and Oscar Piastri. They have pushed each other to new heights throughout the season, and Budapest was no exception. Having narrowly missed out on victory at Spa just a week earlier, Norris was fired up for redemption.

The Brit perfectly executed a one-stop strategy, much to the dismay of Piastri, the leading McLaren driver who had done the same the previous weekend. In the closing stages, Norris was in total control. He crossed the finish line to take his ninth career victory and, more importantly, cut the championship gap to Piastri down to nine points. With the summer break looming, teams were desperate to take positives away from Budapest. For McLaren, it was a weekend of validation and rising intensity between teammates. In other garages, it was a stark reminder that consistency continues to evade them. And amid it all, unexpected performances from other contenders shook up the status quo.

Unexpected pole and race-day surprises

Saturday's qualifying session at the Hungaroring brought a shock to the paddock when Charles Leclerc secured pole, outpacing both McLarens. The Monegasque driver's blistering lap was a rare moment of brilliance for Ferrari this season, made even more remarkable by the incredibly tight margins — just 0.5435 seconds separated the top ten drivers, the closest qualifying session in Formula One history.

Leclerc's crucial lap caught many by surprise, including the driver himself. "I don't understand anything in Formula One," he admitted with a grin, reflecting both the unpredictability of the weekend and the sudden resurgence of Ferrari's pace. However, the promise of pole position quickly faded on race day. Despite initially defending his lead, Leclerc was hampered by a costly second pit stop that significantly compromised his race. Mechanical issues soon compounded his troubles, forcing him off the podium and leaving Ferrari to rue what might have been.

Mercedes, however, quietly capitalised on the opportunities presented by the chaos ahead. George Russell delivered a composed and strategic drive to secure third place on the podium, marking an important result for the Silver Arrows — and giving the Brit a much-needed confidence boost in what has been an up-and-down season.

Meanwhile, Max Verstappen failed to challenge at the front, highlighting concerns about pace and strategy for Red Bull. His ninth-place finish marked a fourth consecutive race without a podium — a statistic almost unthinkable just a season ago. There were plenty of questions around the team's decisions, but with Verstappen confirming his intention to stay with Red Bull in 2026, the outfit will breathe a little easier.

Adding to the head-turning results were Fernando Alonso and Gabriel Bortoleto. The Spaniard was at the forefront of Aston Martin's sudden resurgence, while the young Brazilian delivered another positive weekend for the team in transition. Racing Bulls' Liam Lawson also finished ahead of former teammate Verstappen, underscoring just how unpredictable the season has become.

The battle within

In the middle of the turbulence, McLaren played its hand to perfection. The team's decisive call to keep Norris on worn tyres in the final stint paid off. He knew the closing laps would bring a charging Piastri into his mirrors. The two have been locked in a season-long duel and served up another tense, edge-of-the-seat showdown.

Piastri shadowed Norris through the winding Hungaroring, probing for the smallest mistake, but he absorbed the pressure with clinical precision. When the chequered flag fell, Norris had secured not only his fifth win of the season but also the team's 200th Formula One victory.

As the summer break begins, McLaren has made it clear that it will let its drivers fight, setting the tone for the second half of the season. The gap between the pair is now small enough for fortunes to change in a single race.

The doors have swung wide open — not just for the championship battle, but for teams up and down the grid searching for their own turning points in the months to come as the season braces for a dramatic final ten rounds.

Surprise, surprise: Charles Leclerc's pole in qualifying shocked everyone, incuding himself. REUTERS

INTO UNCHARTED TERRITORY

Two Indian chess Grandmasters, Arjun Erigaisi and Nihal Sarin, competed in the **online chess finals** — both reached the quarterfinals, with Erigaisi finishing fourth.

Neeladri Bhattacharjee
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The Esports World Cup (EWC) might have been another of Saudi Arabia's opportunities to showcase its prowess in organising global sporting events. For India, however, it was a chance to leave a mark in uncharted territory.

Two Indian chess grandmasters, Arjun Erigaisi and Nihal Sarin, competed in the online chess finals — both reached the quarterfinals, with Erigaisi finishing fourth.

Sarin, representing Indian esports organisation S8UL Esports, defeated Anish Giri and Maxime Vachier-Lagrave before falling to eventual champion Magnus Carlsen in the quarterfinals.

"I have never experienced anything like the love of S8UL Esports before. Esports World Cup is a dream! It was an honour to play Magnus in a match, which is different from facing him in a tournament game. Got crushed yesterday. Lots to learn," Sarin wrote on *X*.

S8UL—the first and only Indian esports organisation at the EWC—had more reasons to celebrate. Its athlete Jonny reached the quarterfinals in EA Sports FC 25, while their Apex Legends team advanced to the Grand Finals.

UPSETS AND UNDERDOG TRIUMPHS

The tournament was not short of surprises. In Rainbow Six Siege X, favourites Team Falcons suffered an early exit, while the world No. 1 in FC Pro 25, Anders "Vejrgang" Vejrgang, failed to make the top 16.

Against all odds, Team Liquid's Manuel "ManuBachoore" Bachoore clinched the title, defeating Team Vitality's Brice "Brice" Masson 5-3. The Dutchman became

VALORANT RANKINGS

ABHIRUP "LIGHTNINGFAST" CHOUDHURY

GANESH "SKROSSI" GANGADHAR

SHRAVANA "TECHNO" SAHOO

AMAN "HOAX" YADAV

SAGNIK "HELLFF" ROY

the first two-time EA SPORTS FC world champion and only the second player to lift the Esports World Cup trophy—a true underdog story.

Despite being a former world champion (2023), ManuBachoore had to qualify through the FC Pro World Championship Play-Ins, a tougher path than standard qualifiers.

"I came here through the play-ins. I wasn't even sure I'd qualify for the tournament," ManuBachoore told the EWC website. "I say it every tournament, but it's a dream."

Meanwhile, Brice endured a forgettable season, crashing out in the first round of the eChampions League without a single win.

FOOTBALL LEGENDS FACE OFF

Football fever gripped the EWC as Ballon d'Or winners Kaká and Ronaldo Nazário faced off in an EA Sports FC exhibition match.

Kaká dominated his former teammate 3-0 in a best-of-three series (3-2, 11-6, 3-2). Ronaldo took the loss in good spirits, vowing revenge in Call of Duty next time:

"Next time, next year, we play Warzone," he said with a smile.

TEAM ORANGUTAN WINS IQOO BATTLEGROUNDS SERIES

The inaugural iQOO Battlegrounds Series, featuring a ₹1 crore prize pool, concluded on August 10 in Noida, with Team Orangutan emerging victorious with a 61-point lead and taking home ₹55 lakh.

The tournament began on July 21 with 32 teams—30 invited and two qualifying via the Community Cup.

"Four years ago, it was just a dream. Today, it's in our hands. Every setback, every close call, every tough day only made us stronger. We never gave up, and that made all the difference," said Arman "Aaru", Orangutan's in-game leader (IGL).

Meta Ninja (156 points) and K9 Esports (121 points) secured second and third place, respectively. Ankit "AKop" Shukla of Orangutan was named MVP with 62 finishes in the finals.

"The iQOO Battlegrounds Series is a perfect example of performance-driven innovation meeting grassroots talent and world-class tournament execution. Congratulations to Orangutan on a well-deserved victory," said Akshat Rathee, co-founder of NODWIN Gaming, the tournament's organiser.

Did you know? Chelsea legend César Azpilicueta founded a Spanish esports organisation named Falcons in 2020, primarily competing in EA Sports FC (unrelated to the Saudi Arabian team of the same name).

WHO AM I?

I'm a Mumbai-born gamer who started my professional journey in 2016. I got a nickname based on my gaming handle "SwiftBlade." I made history by being part of the first Indian team to reach the finals of The International Open Qualifiers for DOTA 2. Who am I? The answer will be revealed in the next issue.

Answer to previous issue's quiz:
Abhirup "Lightningfast" Choudhury

BUSINESS OF
ESPORTS

Esports giant Konami extended its partnership with FIFA to promote football esports through FIFAe competitions until 2026.

EASTER EGG
'GANK'

Gank refers to multiple team members virtually converging to ambush and eliminate an opponent. It is usually a strategy used in Multiplayer Online Battle Arenas (MOBAs).

Rankings and quiz powered by NODWIN Gaming

Angad Cheema coasts to four-shot win at India Open

Angad Cheema continued playing close to his best as he shot a two-under 70 in the fourth round to clinch the trophy with an overall 13-under 275 in the Rs. 1 crore Coal India Open at the Kensville Golf and Country Club.

It was the second successive title on the PGTI Tour for the 35-year-old Angad, who had won the previous tournament in April, the Kapil Dev Grant Thornton event in Bengaluru, which had earned him Rs. 30 lakh.

This time around, Angad, who had shot 69, 67, 69 in the first three rounds, pocketed a Rs 15 lakh prize, which catapulted him to the second spot in the Order of Merit with Rs 55,56,726, a few thousand rupees behind leader Yuvraj Sandhu.

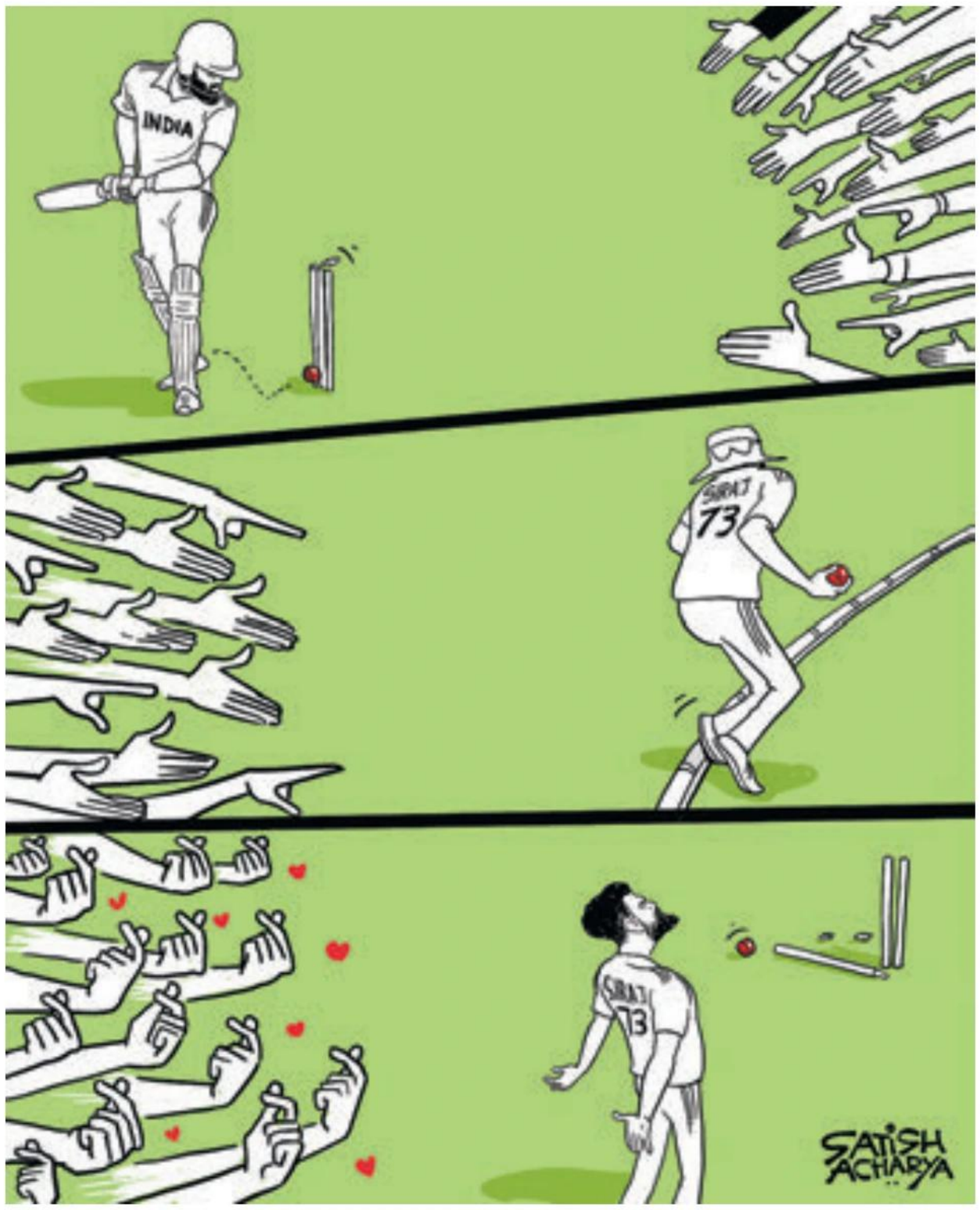
"It feels great to win back-to-back. It makes me more determined to play better in the events ahead," said Angad. He had two more birdies on the back nine, but dropped three shots as well.

"I played well from start to finish. I putted better than others. I made some long conversions in every round. I would like to give credit to my caddie, Khushi Ram, who gave me the correct lines and speed on the greens," said Angad.

KAMESH SRINIVASAN

INDIAN PLAYGROUND

SPORTOON



The Union Government passed the National Sports Governance Bill and National Anti-Doping Amendment Bill in the Lok Sabha even as the Opposition continued their protests against other raging national issues. Both the Bills were moved by Sports Minister Mansukh Mandaviya.

The Sports Governance Bill seeks to regulate the various sports administrators in India, while the Anti-Doping Amendment Bill provides greater "operational independence" to the country's Anti-Doping Agency (NADA) as prescribed by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA).

"The National Anti-Doping (Amendment) Bill, 2025, seeks to enhance institutional and operational independence of the National Anti-Doping Appeal Panel and the National Anti-Doping Agency to ensure autonomy in their decisions pertaining to operations, investigations, and enforcement activities," the Bill's objectives stated.

"The Bill will be the single biggest reform in sports since Independence. Through this bill, we hope to realise the dream of ground to glory," Mandaviya said of the Sports Governance Bill.

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FITNESSWISE

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FOR MORE STORIES

The GOAT standard

Everybody loves a GOAT debate. But **who truly qualifies** for the crown?

This question lingers on many people's minds — who is the GOAT among all athletes? Of course, there is no real answer to this question, so the topic can be admittedly puerile. On the other hand, debates around this topic are fun, intense, and sometimes involve useful analysis, data, and performance that may apply to more real-world problems. As per my knowledge about this subject, one of the key topics was distinguishing the concepts of athleticism and skill, and understanding how they correlate.

Athleticism vs Skill

Athleticism in sports refers to the combination of physical attributes and skills that enables an athlete to perform well in various sports and physical activities. It encompasses more than just fitness — including qualities like strength, speed, power, agility, balance, coordination, endurance, as well as mental toughness and the ability to adapt to different situations.

Skill, in sports, refers to an athlete's ability to perform a specific task or movement effectively and efficiently, often with a high degree of consistency and minimal effort. It includes the ability to choose and execute the correct techniques at the right time, adapting to the demands of the situation. Skills are developed through practice and training, allowing athletes to optimise performance and achieve their objectives. A simple way to explain the difference: athleticism is like the Formula 1 car, and skill is like the driver. Or, you could say athleticism is the hardware, and skill is the software.

Cricket vs Track and Field

We all know that a game like cricket requires more technical skill than track and field. But I was pondering what kind of evidence might support this claim.

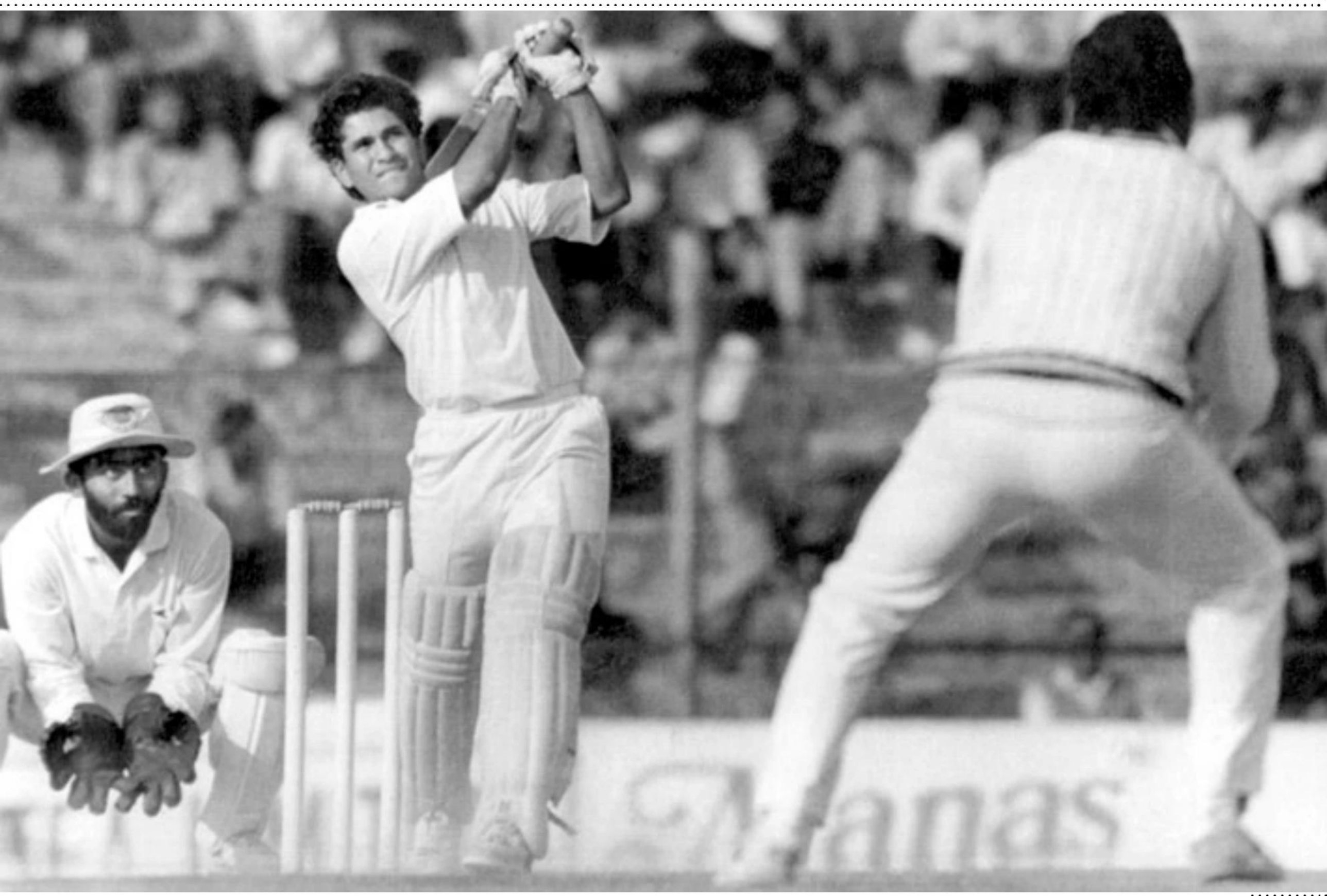
Take an example of a 16-year-old athlete who has never taken part in a track and field event but has all the basic athletic qualities of a State-level athlete — speed, strength, and aerobic ability. How many years of technical training would it take to develop this person into someone who could make the team? My unbiased guess is that many athletes with the necessary desire and work ethic could succeed within a year or two. In fact, we have examples of this happening in the past — such as Willie Gault, who turned raw speed into pro-level football performance with just a few years of specific practice.

Now imagine the same hypothetical scenario with cricket. How many years of technical training would it take to turn a raw athletic talent into someone who can play at the base level? Even for the simplest positions, it would probably take more than a few years to develop the necessary batting, bowling, and fielding skills. And for a specialist batter or bowler, the timeline would be even longer. In fact, we might guess that many superior athletes could never acquire the necessary skills — even with a decade of high-quality practice. Not everyone can do this.

So one way to measure the skill requirement of a sport is to ask how many years of specific practice the average pro needs to get where they are. In sports like golf, tennis, and cricket, the best performers usually start young and specialise before their teens. In sports like football or basketball, general athletic ability takes you a long way, and you can delay specialisation until late high school or even college.

Nature vs Nurture

Another interesting difference between athleticism and skill is the role of natural talent versus training. Many elite athletes don't train much aside from just playing their sport. For example, Sachin Tendulkar avoided heavy weight training in his early years, and so did M. S. Dhoni and Kapil Dev. It seems that for some genetically gifted people, elite athleticism is their natural state, and they need to do very little to maintain it. And for those without genetic gifts, there is no amount of training that will allow them to score a century, run a sub-5.3 in 40 metres, or a sub-19-minute 5K.



Game ready: Many elite athletes don't train much aside from just playing their sport. For example, Sachin Tendulkar avoided heavy weight training in his early years. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

Technical skill is different. In most cases, it correlates closely with hours of practice — like the 10,000-hour rule to become elite. For example, if you watch five to six-year-old kids playing with a ball, you will notice huge differences in hand–eye coordination. This is probably caused more by differences in hours of practice than natural talent. Some kids start playing as soon as they can crawl and soon clock hundreds of hours. Others never gain that experience. So it can be hard to separate natural talent from natural interest.

Still, the existence of prodigies shows us that natural talent in physical skill acquisition is real. Some kids learn sports techniques way faster than others — even with equal training. Also, the speed of skill acquisition may depend on athleticism. In tennis or cricket, proper stroke technique requires some baseline level of speed, power, balance, and agility. I've seen many cricketers decline in their technical skill over time — not because they were out of practice, but because their athleticism declined.

Skill vs Structure

Good technique is also affected by the body's physiology — something often overlooked in discussions around coordination. Good skill or technique can only be acquired when the body is aligned with the right movement patterns. If the body is not moving in the right way, it takes time to adapt the movement pattern through more practice.

Another clue that physical structure plays a big role in coordination is our intuitive ability to identify good athletes based purely on appearance — even when they're not performing. This could be called genetic physiological loading. Many times, we see someone on the street who gives the impression of being a professional athlete — and sometimes, we're fooled by the structure. Generally speaking, it comes down to proportional build or simply the way they move.

Skill vs Passion and Psychology

Passion and psychology also play a key role in how fast someone learns a skill. Passionate people spend enormous amounts of time focussing intensely on perfecting a skill. An example I read about: when Tiger Woods was a kid, he used to watch his dad practise his golf swing. As he grew older, he'd even ask his driver to stop the car during long trips so he could step out and practise swings on the roadside. His natural talent, passion, and psychology were all interconnected.

Slice of cricket-writing history

Writer and broadcaster John Arlott wrote on India's tour of England in 1946 in his book, *Indian Summer.* The cricket might have been disappointing, as India, led by Pataudi Sr., lost all three Tests, but **the writing about it was fabulous.**

Suresh Menon

As the Indian cricket team was making its way around England during an exciting cricket series, I spent some time with John Arlott. Or more precisely, the book he wrote on India's tour of England in 1946, the first series after World War II. India were led by Pataudi Sr., and lost all three Tests.

There is something exciting about the start of a tour. In England those days, tourists played First-Class matches against the counties, traditionally starting with one against Worcestershire. I love the way Arlott **(in pic)** tells it in *Indian Summer*: "On the morning of 4 May 1946, I sharpened six pencils, pocketed a new notebook, looked out of the window of the perfect cricketers' hotel beside the Severn at Worcester, congratulated myself on having left my grey flannel suit at home in favour of a tweed suit and set off for the first real cricket match for six and a half years."

GETTY IMAGES

There's a slice of cricket history there; so too cricket-writing history.

Here's how the Indian team got there, in Arlott's words: "Gradually, in twos and threes, the Indian team arrived, their heads ringing still with the noise of airplane engines, to wait in vain for their sea-borne cricket gear, to skid through a mud-and-rain-bound mockery of net practice at Lord's, and to leave, on the evening before the game, for Worcester — in a coach that lost its way in the Midlands and deposited them at their hotel shortly before three o'clock on the morning of their first match..."

This was another time, another world. Shubhman Gill and his team didn't play First-Class matches at Worcester or anywhere else; if their bus got lost on the road, it would have become an international incident.

This current Indian team has the world's No. 1 all-rounder and left-arm spinner, Ravindra Jadeja. So did that 1946 team. This was Vinoo Mankad, "his rebellious straight black hair gleaming, laughter richly present in his deep-set eyes, he bustles powerfully through his short run and bowls with a thick left arm." Arlott might have been writing about Jadeja when he said, "His over will last little more than a minute, ...(he) never allows a batsman to rest."

How was the first post-War Test received? It was, says Arlott, "attended by the sun, who saw very little First-Class cricket in 1946. On the first day, 29,000 people watched the play in varying degrees of cramming." This was at Lord's, where the England captain Walter Hammond caught Vijay Hazare at slip, "with an unhurried ease which suggested that he had been warned in advance."

Indian Summer is a slim book. Before the appendix (statistics), there is this: "....you sir, who have followed me relentlessly with your pencil to mark off my errors — you may have the appendix and I have no doubt that you may be happy with your figures while I slink off and attempt to arrange to pack my bag again."

The cricket might have been disappointing, but the writing about it was fabulous!

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