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HOCKEY TEAM**

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ACT WOMEN'S HOCKEY

**India
defends
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RIVALRY RENEWED

A spot in the World Test Championship final hangs in balance
as Rohit's men travel Down Under





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OFF-SIDE

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TAKING HOCKEY TO THE HINTERLAND, A BIG BOOST FOR THE SPORT

Tournaments like this, away from the urban centres of India, **will surely help** the 'national sport' to plough back into the conscience of the wider country.

Atwo-hour drive through the meandering roads of Gehlaur Ghati from the Gaya Airport brings you to Rajgir, once the socio-political cradle of ancient India. The capital of the Magadha Dynasty between 544 and 413 BC, Rajgir today is like any other dusty small town in India but with well-laid-out public gardens and continues to be an important pitstop for the devotees of Buddha and Mahavira.

With the historical Nalanda University about 10 km away, the place also attracts history buffs. But for the past 10 days, it has hosted the best women hockey players on the continent. The Women's Asian Champions Trophy Hockey at the Rajgir International Stadium, situated amidst the ambitious Rajgir Sports Complex and the Bihar Sports University campus, has created quite the stir in this small town in India's hinterland. The locals had never seen any international sporting event from such close quarters but are now quick to exalt the virtues of Indian goalkeeper Savita's quick reflexes or young Deepika's panache as the team's latest drag-flick expert.

The roads through the hillocks of Gehlaur Ghati, which saw India's Mountain Man Dashrath Manji carve a 110m-long thoroughfare after 22 long years of hard work with just hammer and chisel in the 1960s and 70s, are now lined with cutouts of the Bihar Chief Minister and the six captains. But in the hamlets, dotting the paddy fields on our way, you will see no child wielding the hockey stick, but a few employing the cricket bat. Hockey is still an alien sport for the people living in the remotest parts of Gaya and Nalanda districts.

But tournaments like this, away from the urban centres of India, will surely help the 'national sport' to plough back into the conscience of the wider country, chipping away at the popularity of cricket. Hockey India, over the past couple of years, has taken the sport to the

interiors of India. A part of the 2023 FIH World Cup was held in Rourkela, more than 300 km away from Odisha's capital Bhubaneswar, but in the heart of Sundergarh district, the hub of hockey in the state. The FIH Women's Olympic Qualifiers were held in Ranchi, with Rajgir now hosting the Women's Champions Trophy.

"We are hopeful that tournaments like this will be the seeds for hockey's growth in newer areas," former India international and the president of Hockey India, Dilip Tirkey, told *Sportstar*. "This has been a great initiative by the Bihar Government. We never expected this level of success at Rajgir. The crowd has been good, and we have definitely created a new fan base for hockey."

The hockey turf at the Sports Complex came up in four months' time ahead of the Paris Olympics, where this tournament was allocated to Rajgir. The centre in the future is expected to be the cradle of sport in Bihar, which over the years has had negligible presence at the Olympics. "The Bihar Sports University is the first of its kind. It is built on 92.6 acres, and 90 per cent of the construction is done. The State Sports Academy, Rajgir, acting as a State Centre for Excellence, will cater to 23 disciplines, both indoor and outdoor," Raveendran Sankaran, a senior IPS officer and Director General of Bihar State Sports Authority, told *The Hindu*. "After the (women's) Asian Championship Trophy (ACT) hockey tournament, we will start our (hockey) academy."

Meanwhile, the two five-year-olds, who had sneaked into the press enclosure with their family, egged their mothers to venture into the field of play for a selfie with Selima Tete. The Indian captain, posing in front of the huge mural of her on the hostel wall in the background, obliged them and many more young girls who had braved the otherwise tight security.

Hopefully, years ahead, a few of these girls will wear the India colours as well.

JUMPERS KNEE.



Come to think of it—many sports involve jumping, and the explosive power that contributes to efficient jumping is often the difference between elite and amateur athletes. A common issue among athletes is knee pain caused by jumping, particularly in the front of the knee and is termed Jumpers Knee. This is often due to the strain placed on the quadriceps tendon, which connects the powerful quadriceps muscle to the knee. It is frequently seen in middle school kids particularly when in the growth spurt period and caused by improper landing technique and lack of regular, systematic stretching before and after the sporting activity. Sudden increase in intensity of training, change in technique or a sudden return from a break, in training, may also be contributing factors. Lack of sufficient rest, burn out and repetitive stress are also factors to be considered. Prevention of Jumpers Knee is by a multi-modal approach:

- **Students with sudden height gain should not be put through repetitive high intensity jump training during this phase.**
- **Strength and Conditioning experts' help in prescribing individualised exercise program based on current intensity of training strength is important.**

While we heavily focus on improving jump height and power through strength training and plyometrics, the landing technique is equally important, as Improper landing places unnecessary stress on the knees and the ankle

To conclude, coaches must instruct athletes on the following points to prevent improper landing:

- **Land softly on the balls of both feet.**
- **Keep feet shoulder-width apart.**
- **Bend knees and hips to absorb impact.**
- **Avoid sudden twists or movements.**

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» WORLD VIEW OF THE FORTNIGHT



« I've kept on thinking about where we went wrong and what we could have done better. I had days where I wasn't feeling great; nights when I didn't sleep well. » – Jannik Sinner on his doping case ➤



« This was one of those situations when you lost but still won. I'm grateful for last night. No regrets to get in ring one last time. » – Mike Tyson after losing to Jake Paul in their heavyweight boxing match ➤

5

English snooker player Mark King was handed a five-year ban after being found guilty of matchfixing and providing inside information in the latest corruption scandal to blight the sport. The punishment for the 50-year-old King, who reached a career-high ranking of No. 11 in 2003, is related to a match against Joe Perry at the Welsh Open played on February 13 last year that was flagged following suspicious betting patterns.

King was suspended by snooker's world governing body a month later, and an

independent disciplinary commission has ruled that he fixed the result of the match while giving information to others about that match for betting purposes. He had denied the charges. His ban ends after March 17, 2028, and King was also ordered to pay more than 68,000 pounds (\$86,000) in costs.



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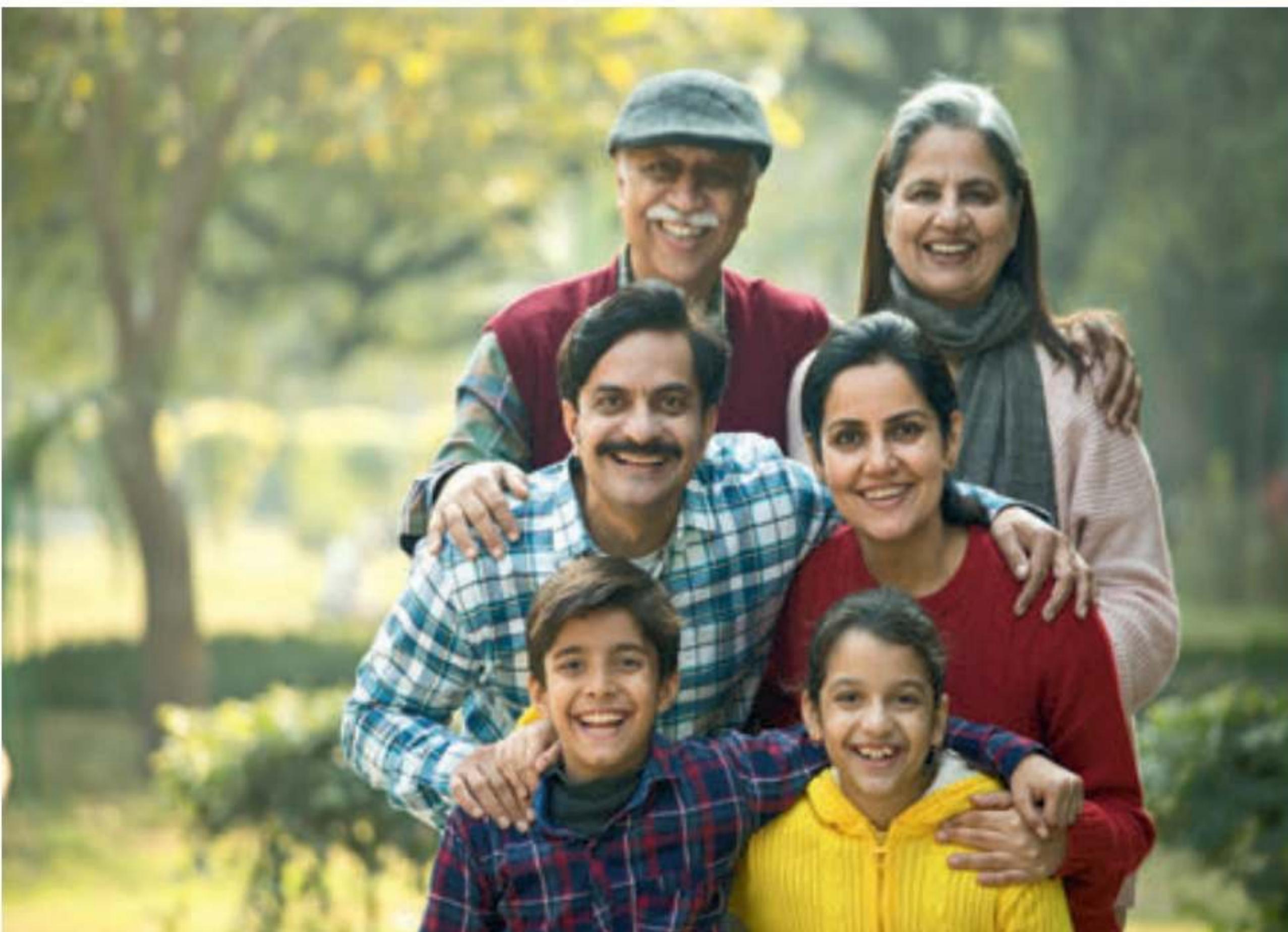
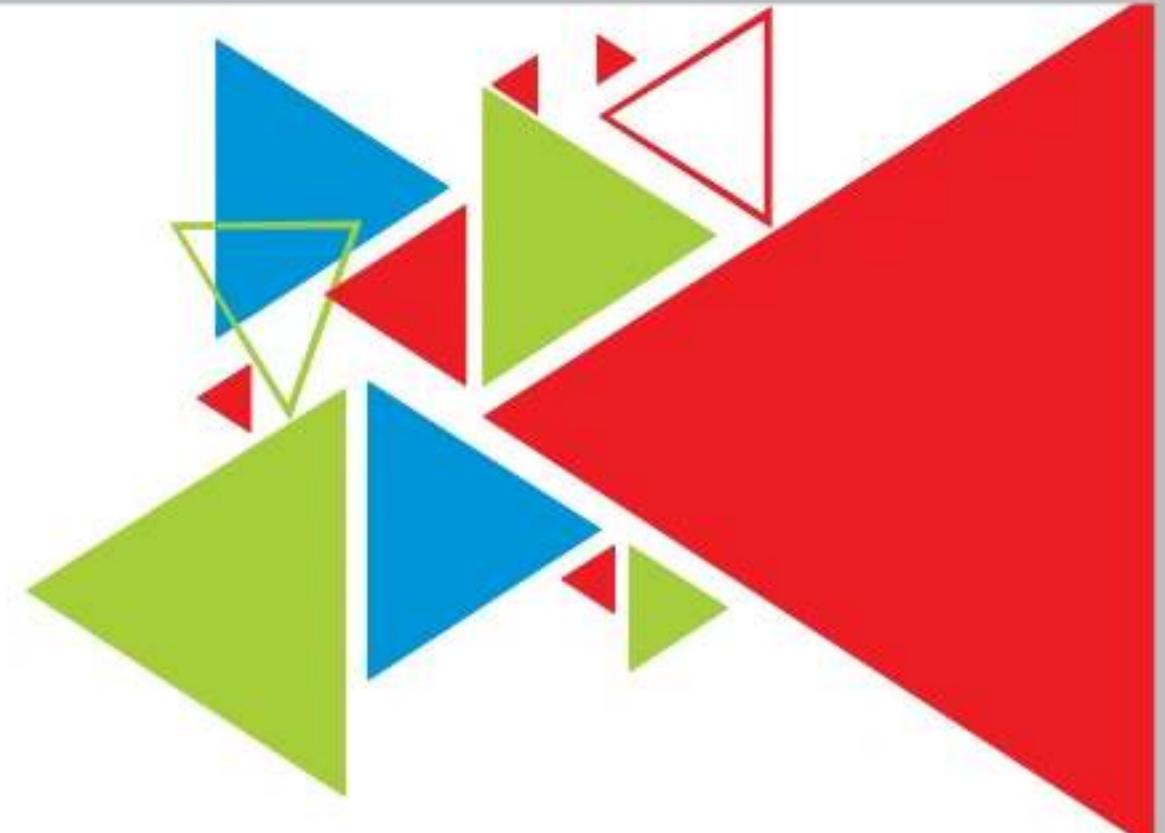
Former Romania and United States coach Bela Karolyi, who trained Nadia Comaneci to become the first gymnast to score a perfect 10 at the Olympics, has died, aged 82, USA Gymnastics said. Karolyi, who was inducted into the International Gymnastics Hall of Fame in 1997, died on November 15, but no cause of death was given. Karolyi coached 14-year-old Romanian Comaneci to three gold medals at the 1976 Montreal Olympics, and her score of 10.0 in the asymmetric bars was the first time the mark had been awarded at the Games.

WINNING WAYS



Nelly Korda ripped off five straight birdies down the stretch and captured her third title at The Annika in Belleair, Florida. Korda now owns three titles in the tournament's five-year existence. She won in 2021 and 2022 when the event was called the Pelican Women's Championship. It also marks the World No. 1's seventh win of the year, but her first since May. AP

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» FIGHT CLUB

A kick here, a jab there

While Jon Jones staved off the Stipe challenge, Jake Paul **stopped Iron Mike** in his tracks.

Nigamanth P

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Jon 'Bones' Jones is still the king. One of the most anticipated bouts finally became a reality on Sunday as Jon Jones returned to action after a year-long injury hiatus, facing Stipe Miocic in a heavyweight title fight at UFC 309.

This was arguably the UFC's most high-profile bout of the year, and it did not disappoint. Despite Jones (above, left) earning a third-round TKO victory, the sheer intensity of the fight, which lasted just over 14 minutes, was truly popcorn-worthy.

Jones, the multi-division champion, began cautiously, gradually building momentum as the fight progressed. He opened with measured jabs, assessing Miocic's stance.

However, when the latter missed a right hook halfway through the first round, Jones capitalised, landing a powerful elbow that rattled Miocic (above, right) — a clear indication of what was to come.

Jones continued to dominate in the second round, raining punches

and forcing Miocic off-balance multiple times. Although Miocic regained his composure and initiated a combination, it was too little, too late, as the round came to an end.

The fight concluded in emphatic fashion. Jones caught Miocic off-guard with a spinning leg kick and followed up with a ground-and-pound that left the 42-year-old on the floor. Jones burst into celebration, performing the trademark dance move of Donald Trump to acknowledge the newly elected US president who was among the spectators.

The 37-year-old now boasts a record of 28-1, with one no-contest over 30 career fights, cementing his status as one of the greatest mixed martial artists of all time.



Reality is often disappointing

A day earlier, in a different ring and under a different set of rules, the contemporary collided with nostalgia.

The augmented boxing bout between YouTuber-turned-boxer Jake Paul and the legendary Mike Tyson (below) took place before over 72,000 fans at the AT&T Stadium in Texas.

The fight deviated from traditional professional boxing matches due to tweaked rules. Instead of the usual three-minute rounds, the fighters competed in two-minute rounds, and heavier gloves were used for balance.

While Tyson's legacy was going in favour of him, the stark difference in age (58 versus 27), coupled with differences in physicality, made the outcome predictable.

Despite occasional flashes of his 'Iron Mike' persona, Tyson's approach was understandably slower and lacked intensity, while Paul's superior endurance allowed him to outmanoeuvre whatever came his way. In the end, Paul earned a unanimous decision victory — 80-72, 79-73, and 79-73.



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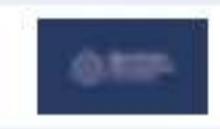
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BATTLE DOWN UNDER: A GENERATION'S LAST STAND

Irrespective of which way this Border-Gavaskar series swings, it will be the final one for many **stalwarts** across both teams, with the next edition slated for early 2027.

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In a country besotted with cricket, it is not uncommon to see the term 'Indian cricket is at the crossroads' thrown about frivolously in the media and amongst the frenzied fans. But with a coveted dominance in Tests at home curtailed, courtesy of the Kiwis, and the heat on the Indian team at its zenith following the failure of stalwarts, the upcoming five-match series Down Under could well be an inflection point.

The Indians don't have the most formidable record in Australia by any stretch of the imagination. With just nine wins across 52 Tests in the country, England, West Indies, and South Africa are historically well ahead in taking the fight to arguably cricket's most unforgiving host.

However, getting down to brass tacks reveals that four of those nine wins have come in back-to-back series wins over the last six years, with the Indians showing more of



FOR MORE
STORIES

a stomach for a fight, even with their backs against the wall.

The 'Gabba Miracle' of 2021, conjured by an injury-ridden Indian side, ended a 32-year Australian hegemony in Brisbane, emboldening even the modern-day laggard West Indies to repeat the feat last year.

Following that triumph, India dared to dream and will take a cue from it when the series opens on a bouncy track in Perth. The absence of skipper Rohit Sharma and Shubman Gill for the first Test, though unfortunate, will perhaps only feed into the recent template of overcoming adversity Down Under.

But one can't sit on its laurels and hope for history to repeat itself. The Indian brigade in transition will rely on a blend of youth and experience in its quest to challenge the world Test champion.

Virat Kohli, India's top run-scorer in the 2011-12 and 2014-15 Border-Gavaskar Trophy (BGT) in Australia, is deemed vital, but without contributions from the likes of Yashasvi Jaiswal, Gill, and Rishabh Pant, the Indian challenge will fall flat, like it did in the series mentioned above.

The last time India toured Australia for the BGT, it showed that setting the tone isn't the be-all and end-all in the longest format, bouncing back from the ignominy of being skittled for 36 in the first Test in Adelaide to script history.

Thus, with injury and unavailability forcing India to shuffle the batting order in Perth, the visitor would know better than to brood over the first Test's outcome. The opening contest will provide Jaiswal with a new opening partner, which could see an under-fire KL Rahul return to the spot he has batted at for the bulk of his stop-start career, or prolific domestic run accumulator Abhimanyu Easwaran handed a debut cap despite a string of poor scores against Australia 'A'. Meanwhile, Dhruv Jurel, who scored 80 and 68 in the second game against Australia 'A' and showcased his affinity for playing on bouncy tracks, could fill in for Gill at No. 3.

In the face of a somewhat new-look Indian line-up, the team might, at some point in the series, rue the void left by crisis men Cheteshwar Pujara and Ajinkya Rahane, who have been the architects of the last two series wins Down Under.

Pujara's ability to get under the skin of the Aussies with his doughty spirit and Rahane's technical genius are undoubtedly in short supply in the current setup. Jaiswal, Gill, and Sarfaraz Khan may need to curb some of their natural stroke-making instinct in challenging conditions and even put their bodies on the line.

In contrast, Australia will tuck into home comforts with most of its Test mainstays still in the fray. Usman Khawaja, Steve Smith, and Marnus Labuschagne





Last dance: The likes of Mitchell Starc, Nathan Lyon and Steve Smith are pushing towards the wrong side of the thirties, lending this upcoming series even more of a context. GETTY IMAGES

continue to be the pillars of the batting unit. David Warner's retirement led to a mini-scramble at the top, which has since been resolved with 25-year-old Nathan McSweeney set to make his debut.

However, the Australian batters had an underwhelming series in New Zealand earlier this year, where all-rounder Cameron Green, who is

ruled out of the BGT due to injury, was the top-scorer. The Indian quicks will thus have an opportunity to prey on the lingering effects of that blip.

India will take a lot of confidence from bowling lynchpin Jasprit Bumrah's exploits Down Under.

Over the last two BGT series in Australia, only Australian skipper Pat Cummins (35 in eight matches) has taken more wickets than Bumrah (32 in seven).

The Indian pacer also has the best bowling average (21.25) across the two series, among bowlers to have taken more than five wickets.

But it doesn't work in India's

favour that its expectations with the ball have come down to the individualistic genius of Bumrah.

In the absence of the still recovering-from-injury Mohammed Shami, Bumrah has been shouldering the Indian pace bowling duties almost singlehandedly. In 2024, Bumrah has 41 wickets in nine Tests, while the next-best Indian pacer, Mohammed Siraj, tallied just 19 from the same number of matches.

Even though Akash Deep impressed in patches against England and New Zealand, the heat of the Australian challenge might be a little too much for the Bengal pacer.

This dire situation has forced the Indian management to fast-track Harshit Rana into the Test setup. The 22-year-old's hit-the-deck style could work out on the bouncy tracks of Australia. But betting on a bowler who has played just 10 First-Class games in a high-intensity series like

India and Australia series results in current WTC cycle

India	Australia
Beat West Indies 1-0 (Away)	Drew with England 2-2 (Away)
Drew with South Africa 1-1 (Away)	Beat Pakistan 3-0 (Home)
Beat England 4-1 (Home)	Drew with West Indies 1-1 (Home)
Beat Bangladesh 2-0 (Home)	Beat New Zealand 2-0 (Away)
Lost to New Zealand 0-3 (Home)	



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Bowling lynchpin: Over the last two Border-Gavaskar series in Australia, only Australian skipper Pat Cummins (35 in eight matches) has taken more wickets than Bumrah (32 in seven).

GETTY IMAGES

BGT is a decision fraught with risk.

The form of its spin-bowling all-rounders also contributes to India's selection headache. While R. Ashwin and Ravindra Jadeja suffered one of their worst home series performances against New Zealand, Washington Sundar enjoyed a successful reintegration into the Test

fold. With Nitish Kumar Reddy in contention for the fast-bowling all-rounder spot, only one of Ashwin, Jadeja, and Washington will likely appear in Perth for the first Test. Form, experience, and match-ups will all come into play for coach Gautam Gambhir in a selection call, which could backfire quite easily.

Going into the Australian summer, the under-fire Indians, though, were gifted a brief ray of hope from an unlikely source — Pakistan. Their sub-continent rivals outmuscled the Aussies in the recent ODI series, bringing to light an underlying weakness against

high-intensity pace bowling.

Australia's only Test defeat in the last year came against West Indies at the Gabba, where a charged-up Shamar Joseph ripped through the home side with a seven-wicket haul in the fourth innings.

However, Australia bounced back from that loss by sweeping New Zealand away from home in a two-match series. Its bowling unit, led by Cummins, still retains the same personnel from the last BGT, armed with greater experience and driven by a hunger to reinstate the Aussie honour tarnished over the last two Indian visits.



In addition to pride, also at stake would be a spot in the World Test Championship (WTC) final. Anything other than a series win would severely impair India's hopes of making a third consecutive final appearance, as the BGT is the side's last series of the current cycle.

Australia has a bit more leeway,

IN THE FACE OF A SOMEWHAT NEW-LOOK INDIAN LINE-UP, THE TEAM MIGHT, AT SOME POINT IN THE SERIES, RUE THE VOID LEFT BY CRISIS MEN CHETESHWAR PUJARA AND AJINKYA RAHANE

with the side scheduled for a Sri Lanka series away from home next year.

Irrespective of which way this series swings, it will be the final BGT for many stalwarts across both teams, with the next edition slated for early 2027. For India, it is nearly certain that Test mainstays like Ashwin, Jadeja, and Rohit won't be around by then.

The case is similar for Australia. The likes of Mitchell Starc, Nathan Lyon, and Smith are pushing towards the wrong side of the thirties, lending this upcoming series even more of a context.

For the last decade or so, these two sides, powered by a generation of superstars, have engaged in some of the most combative Test series in the sport's history. Rivalries sprung up for fun, narratives coalesced out of thin air, and battlelines were drawn. And once again, these two teams will lock horns during an Australian summer with everything at stake.

Wildcard: Nitish Kumar Reddy is in contention for the fast-bowling all-rounder's spot ahead of the first Test in Perth. GETTY IMAGES



Litmus test: If in the 1980s and during a part of the 1990s, players burnished their credentials through performances against the mighty West Indies, Australia now serves as the yardstick that separates the men from the boys. GETTYIMAGES

NEW CHAPTER, OLD RIVALS

England may be the old enemy, but for Australia, **India is a clear** and present danger.

K. C. Vijaya Kumar

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The willow game's rivalries, marinated in history, angst, stunning performances, and seasoned with perhaps a touch of geopolitics, have always stirred interest in cricket's ardent devotees. Straight up is the Ashes, pitting the mother country England against a former colony Australia, while both remain tied together with the threads of the

erstwhile Commonwealth Empire.

Then we get the feverish high-pitched notes of India and Pakistan, neighbours split by the Radcliffe Line and a seemingly eternal animosity yet fused by a shared history, cuisine, language and pop-culture references. This is a sport that comes with excessive baggage even before the players have stepped onto the turf.

In this cauldron of emotions, throw in India and Australia, and you get a rivalry, at least in recent times,

second to none. This is cricket at its best, with stars on either side striving hard, doing the impossible, and playing a game that defines their legacy. If in the 1980s and during a part of the 1990s, players burnished their credentials through performances against the mighty West Indies, Australia now serves as the yardstick that separates the men from the boys. Equally, a tour of India is deemed a difficult proposition even if New Zealand proved otherwise with its recent 3-0 sweep in the Tests.



Sachin Tendulkar has 100 international tons, an artificial construct blending Tests and ODIs, but whatever the semantics, his 114 at Perth's WACA in 1992 is still considered his best outing. V.V.S. Laxman's 281 at Eden Gardens in 2001, against flint-eyed Steve Waugh and his men, is perhaps the greatest knock ever played by an Indian in Tests.

That Houdini Act by Sourav Ganguly's men in delirious Kolkata, wherein a first-innings deficit and a follow-on were tided past to register a miraculous victory, turbo-charged the India-Australia rivalry.

It added the weight of expectations and extreme spice, two ingredients that even the present generation of cricketers strictly adhere to while adding fresh chapters of intrigue and excitement.

While India embarks on the latest five-Test series for the Border-Gavaskar Trophy Down

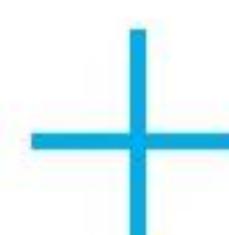
Under, there are hopes about a stirring new tale being gifted to eager fans, be it the ones in Australia or those in India, bleary-eyed after waking up early to catch the action on television.

However, in the past, the immediate presumption was that India would tour Australia and lose to the blitz of pace, while at home, it would quell the opposition with spin and guile. Part of this Nostradamus syndrome was true, but there have always been surprises, and that is the

Fightback for the ages: In January 2021, Rishabh Pant's brilliant 89 piloted India's stunning run-chase, handing Australia its first defeat at the Gabba since 1988. India won the Border-Gavaskar series 2-1. GETTY IMAGES

charm of these two squads, with a long evolution resting on past champions.

In the 1980-81 tour of Australia, India staged the 'Miracle of Melbourne'. Trailing 0-1 after two



Ravi Shastri, the Mumbaikar with an innate Aussie spirit, remains the link between Indian cricket of the past and the present. It is a continuity he still fosters as a commentator.

From the vault: Ravi Shastri is another thread that binds India and Australia. During the 1991-92 tour of Australia that India lost 0-4, Shastri scored a double ton in Sydney while also keeping a sharp eye on a young Sachin Tendulkar. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

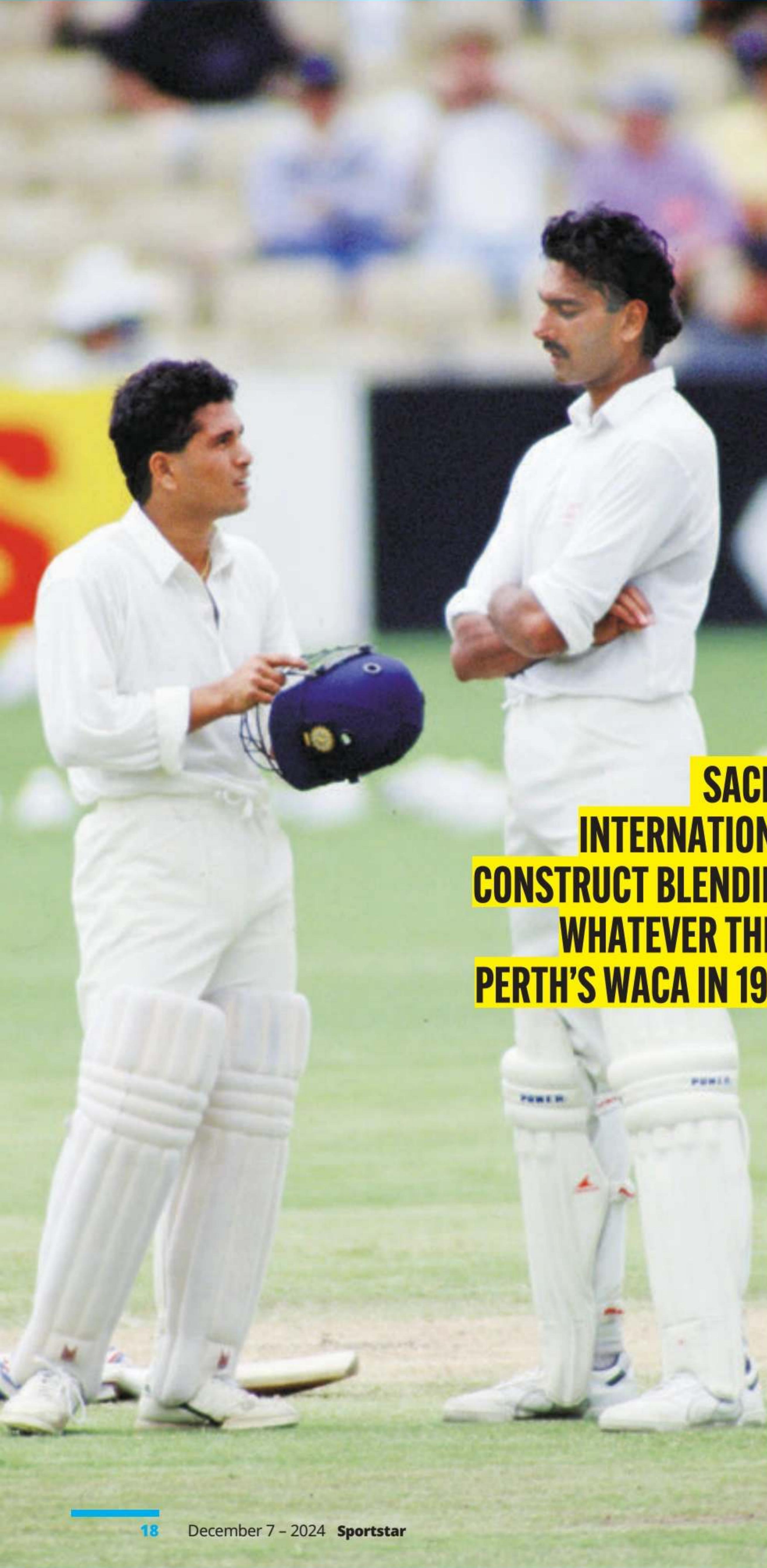
Tests, it seemed as if the script would only get worse as despite Gundappa Viswanath's superb 114, India watched Australia ride high on Allan Border's 124 and gain a 182-run first-innings lead. Sunil Gavaskar's men then posted 324 in the second dig, setting a meagre 143-run target. All seemed lost, but when Viswanath told an injured Kapil Dev that India had never lost when the former scored a ton, the latter was charged up.

Kapil's five-for, with Karsan Ghavri and Dilip Doshi lending support, dismantled the Aussies. India won by 59 runs, and the series was levelled.

SACHIN TENDULKAR HAS 100 INTERNATIONAL TONS, AN ARTIFICIAL CONSTRUCT BLENDING TESTS AND ODIs, BUT WHATEVER THE SEMANTICS, HIS 114 AT PERTH'S WACA IN 1992 IS STILL CONSIDERED HIS BEST OUTING

In the same tour, Sandeep Patil scored a blistering 174 in the second Test at Adelaide. This was an era of slow living and an absence of raucous social media, and it is understandable that the 1980-81 tour is often forgotten while Waugh's failed mission to conquer the Last Frontier in 2001 is regarded as the starting point of a storied rivalry.

Ravi Shastri, a superb all-rounder and a commentator in love with tracer bullets, remains another thread that binds India and Australia.





As a player, he won the Champion of Champions title during the 1985 World Championship in Australia, which India won after defeating Pakistan in the final.

Later in the 1991-92 tour that India lost 0-4, he scored a double ton in Sydney while also keeping a sharp eye on a young Tendulkar. But Shastri wasn't done yet, and as a coach, he shepherded the Indians to defining series triumphs in the 2018-19 and 2020-21 tours of Australia.

The 2020-21 win was epochal as India was considered a team of the walking-wounded, but everyone Shastri blooded as a player became a star. With most of its leading players missing, India still turned up with a touch of steel at Brisbane's Gabba for the fourth and final Test with the series on the line at 1-1.

Be it T. Natarajan or Washington Sundar, Shubman Gill or Shardul Thakur, India had its heroes, and with a calm Ajinkya Rahane at the helm, that 2021 January was tipped to turn

legendary. It did as Rishabh Pant hammered an unbeaten 89 in a tough chase, and India won by three wickets to claim the series at 2-1. Be it Virat Kohli or Rahane, Shastri drew the best from his captains.

The Mumbaikar with an innate Aussie spirit in his demeanour worked his magic and remains the link between Indian cricket of the past and the present. It is a continuity he still fosters as a commentator.

Just as Rohit Sharma (he will miss the first Test in Perth) leads India in the current tour with his fellow late-30s stars in Kohli, R. Ashwin and Ravindra Jadeja, a sense of an ending looms large. Still with vice-captain and spearhead Jasprit Bumrah, and talent like Gill (currently injured), Pant and Yashasvi Jaiswal, under his

Turning point: The Houdini Act by Sourav Ganguly's men in delirious Kolkata, wherein a first-innings deficit and a follow-on were tided past to register a miraculous victory, turbo-charged the India-Australia rivalry. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

charge, Rohit is looking at perpetuating India's recent dominance against the Aussies. A threat that Pat Cummins and his men want to counter in their backyard with the likes of Usman Khwaja, Steve Smith, Mitchell Starc and Nathan Lyon, itching to reveal their best.

England may be the old enemy, but for these Aussies, India is a clear and present danger. A rivalry awaits its fresh installment, and this is box-office gold.

◀ A tour of Australia now serves as the yardstick that separates the men from the boys ▶



ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar



FOR MORE
STORIES

WHEN IT COMES TO THE BCCI AND INDIAN CRICKET, THE KNIVES HAVE TO BE OUT

The kowtowing ended long ago, and that is what **irks the old powers.** It eats at them that they need the BCCI and Indian cricket to keep their finances in good shape.

Remember the words: "This is Australia, this is Perth. I'm setting ourselves up for a really good pace, good bounce, good carry." These are the words of the head curator of the Western Australia Cricket Association. Fair enough. But next time there is a tour by Australia and England to India, and their former players and media start complaining about Indian pitches, every Indian curator should turn around and say, "This is India, this is Chennai, Mumbai, Kolkata, wherever. I am setting up the pitch for some nice turn and variable bounce." Hopefully, our media too will support the curator and tell the visiting media where to go.

As always with the media from the old powers, everything has to suit their team and not the home team. Yes, they can prepare pitches the way they want to in their country, but India cannot do the same in India. Then comes the old chestnut about the curators being independent and preparing pitches according to how they know, while in India, they deliberately make pitches to assist the home team. Give me a break. Every curator everywhere in the world prepares pitches according to the strength of their team. If the pitch has too much bounce and is positively dangerous to life and limb, as the Brisbane pitch was a couple of years back against South Africa

and the game finished on the third day, the excuse given was, "Oh, the curator got it wrong." Really? How did he get it wrong? If your strength in attack is pace, you are going to prepare a pitch that helps the pacers. If the pitch had no help for the pacers and the ball was spinning, then you could argue he got it wrong.

It is just like the old days when we played there and received terrible decisions from the home umpires. The reason given was "human error." However, if Indian or sub-continental umpires got it wrong, they were called "cheats" and "Butchers of Bombay" and so on. The condescending attitude was accepted by some Indian administrators who wanted to be invited to the MCC President's box or another Test venue hospitality box. Now the BCCI has its own hospitality boxes all over the world, where the families and friends of the Indian players and BCCI administrators can watch and enjoy in comfort. The kowtowing ended long ago, and that is what irks the old powers. It eats at them that they need the BCCI and Indian cricket to keep their finances in good shape.

How else do you explain the sudden interest in having the Indian team over every year or so when previously it took decades for an India tour to their countries? India first toured Australia in 1947/48. The next tour was in



1967/68, and the one after that in 1977/78. This last tour of 1977/78 was when they suddenly noticed the following for Indian cricket, as thousands of Indians living in Australia came to watch the Test series. Since then, it has been every four years for India, as it is with their oldest rival, the Mother Country. However, in the last six years, this is India's third tour to Australia, and next year the Indians will be touring for a white-ball series.

With all this, one would expect some sense of gratitude. However, the BCCI bashing continues for no reason. Stories are fabricated without any basis in truth, and if proven wrong, there is no acknowledgement. Thankfully, the current players of both teams accept that they have to play on the surfaces given to them, so while there might be murmurs in the change room and a nudge-nudge to their favourite media person, there is nothing in public. Look at the way Ben Stokes accepted the pitches in India and even recently in Pakistan, saying that his team was outplayed and needed to learn to play on such surfaces.

Have you ever heard an Indian player or a

Adaptability: "Have you ever heard an Indian player or a former player complain about the trampoline bounce of some surfaces or the grazing area for cattle masquerading as a Test match pitch in these countries?" asks the author.

R. RAGU

former player complain about the trampoline bounce of some surfaces or the grazing area for cattle masquerading as a Test match pitch in these countries? Never, as we accept that playing and winning overseas is a challenge since the conditions are different from home. Surprisingly, even the whingeing British media did not have anything to say about the surfaces in the final two Test matches, which they lost in Pakistan, once again strengthening the belief that when it comes to the BCCI and Indian cricket, the knives have to be out. Or maybe it is easier to be condescending to a country that does not have the clout that the BCCI has.

Remember the words, guys. Yes, remember the words and fling them back when the whingeing starts the next time they are in India.



The BCCI bashing continues for no reason. Stories are fabricated without any basis in truth, and if proven wrong, there is no acknowledgement.

Sundar on song

5 } In the Pune Test against New Zealand, India's two off-spinners, Washington Sundar and R. Ashwin, claimed all 10 wickets in the first innings. This marked the first instance of such a feat in Indian Test cricket. For the record, the first occurrence of all 10 wickets being taken by a single off-spinner in Test history was achieved by England's Jim Laker, who accomplished this during the Ashes Test in Manchester in July 1956.

All 10 wickets in a Test innings falling to off-spinners

Wkts	Bowlers	For	Opp	Venue	Month, Year	Result
10	Jim Laker (10/53)	Eng	Aus	Manchester	Jul 1956	Won
10	Tony Greig (8/86), Pat Pocock (2/86)	Eng	WI	Port of Spain	Apr 1974	Won
10	Kumar Dharmasena (6/99), Jayananda Warnaweera (3/63)	SL	Pak	Colombo PSS	Aug 1994	Lost
	M. Muralitharan (1/123)					
10	M Muralitharan (6/26), Ajantha Mendis (4/60)	SL	Ind	Colombo SSC	Jul 2008	Won
10	Washington Sundar (7/59), R. Ashwin (3/64)	Ind	NZ	Pune	Oct 2024	Lost

5 } The maximum number of 'bowled' dismissals in a Test innings involving Indian bowlers. Washington Sundar, against the Kiwis, in Pune became the latest to achieve this feat in a Test innings for India. He became the first Indian bowler and the fourth to claim five or more 'bowled' victims in the same innings against New Zealand.

Most bowled victims in a Test innings for Indian bowlers

Bowled	Bowler (bowling)	Against	Venue	Month, year	Result	Bowling style
5	Jasu Patel (9/69)	Australia	Kanpur	Dec 1959	Won	Right-arm off-break
5	Bapu Nadkarni (6/105)	Australia	Mumbai BS	Jan 1960	Drawn	Left-arm spin
5	Anil Kumble (6/53)	South Africa	Johannesburg	Nov 1992	Drawn	Right-arm leg-break
5	Ravindra Jadeja (7/42)	Australia	Delhi	Feb 2023	Won	Left-arm spin
5	Washington Sundar (7/59)	New Zealand	Pune	Oct 2024	Lost	Right-arm off-break



K. BHAGYA PRAKASH

Patel and Nadkarni achieved this in successive Tests. Jadeja and Sundar are the only bowlers to do so since 2003 in the Test cricket

Most bowled dismissals in a Test innings by bowlers against New Zealand batters

Bowled	Bowler (bowling)	For	Venue	Month, year	Result	Bowling style
6	Bill Bowes (6/34)	England	Auckland	Mar 1933	Drawn	Right arm pace
6	Mohd Nazir (7/99)	Pakistan	Karachi	Oct 1969	Drawn	Right-arm off-break
5	Shoaib Akhtar (6/11)	Pakistan	Lahore	May 2002	Won	Right arm pace
5	Washington Sundar (7/59)	India	Pune	Oct 2024	Lost	Right-arm off-break

6 } The number of Indian bowlers to claim seven or more wickets on the opening day of a Test match. Washington Sundar, making his comeback to Test cricket after three and a half years, became the latest bowler to do this for India. Irfan Pathan was the only Indian pace bowler to accomplish this, and he is the only one to do so in an away Test — against Zimbabwe in Harare in September 2005. Interestingly, whenever an Indian bowler takes seven or more wickets on the opening day of a home Test match, India has never won that match.

Seven or more wicket haul by Indian bowlers on Day 1 of a Test match

Bowling	Bowler	Against	Venue	Date	Result	Bowling style
9/102	Subhash Gupte	West Indies	Kanpur	12 Dec 1958	Lost	Right-arm leg-break
7/27	Maninder Singh	Pakistan	Bengaluru	13 Mar 1987	Lost	Left-arm spin
7/48	Anil Kumble	Australia	Chennai	14 Oct 2004	Drawn	Right-arm leg-break
7/49	Ghulam Ahmed	Australia	Kolkata	2 Nov 1956	Lost	Right-arm off-break
7/59	Irfan Pathan	Zimbabwe	Harare	20 Sep 2005	Won	Left-arm pace
7/59	Washington Sundar	India	Pune	24 Oct 2024	Lost	Right-arm off-break

** The Chennai Test was drawn after rain washed out play on the fifth and final day, with India (19/0) chasing a target of 229 runs

3} The number of opposition bowlers claiming 12 or more wickets in a Test match against India. Kiwi left-arm spinner Mitchell Santner has now joined his teammate Ajaz Patel, who took 14 wickets in Mumbai in December 2021, and England's all-rounder and pacer Ian Botham as part of this elite group. Notably, Patel's and Santner's match bowling figures are the second and third best for New Zealand in Tests, following Richard Hadlee's impressive 15/123 against Australia in November 1985 in Brisbane.

Most wickets in a Test match against India

Bowling	Bowler	For	Venue	Month, year	Result	Bowling style
14/225	Ajaz Patel	New Zealand	Mumbai WS	Dec 2021	Lost	Left-arm spin
13/106	Ian Botham	England	Mumbai WS	Feb 1980	Won	Right arm fast medium
13/157	Mitchell Santner	New Zealand	Pune	Oct 2024	Won	Left-arm spin

Note: The best bowling match figures against India by a left-arm pacer is 12/124 by Australian Alan Davidson in Kanpur in December 1959 and by an off-spinner is the 12/286 by another Aussie Nathan Lyon in Adelaide in December 2014.

4} The number of Test players to score over 2,000 runs and take more than 200 wickets in home Test matches. During the Pune Test match, Ravindra Jadeja became the latest player to join this elite group. He is also the second-fastest, after Ian Botham, to achieve this remarkable double in home Test matches.

2000-plus runs and 200-plus wickets in career home Tests

Player	Career span at home	M	Inns	Runs	Ave.	HS	100/50	Balls	Runs	Wkts	Ave.	S/R	5i/10m	Best
I. T. Botham (Eng)	1977-1992	59	89	2969	34.93	208	8/13	12243	6226	226	27.55	54.17	17/2	8-34
Kapil Dev (Ind)	1978-1994	65	86	2810	36.97	163	5/15	12211	5803	219	26.50	55.76	11/2	9-83
S. Broad (Eng)	2008-2023	98	134	2495	21.51	169	1/11	19979	10320	398	25.93	50.20	14/3	8-15
R. Jadeja (Ind)	2012-2024	49	68	2023	37.46	175*	3/13	12191	4929	238	20.71	51.22	13/3	7-42

Note: ** Ian Botham is the quickest to reach this milestone in fewest Tests (45 matches in 1985), followed by Ravindra Jadeja (48 in 2024), Kapil Dev (58 in 1990) and Stuart Broad (69 in 2018).

2} The number of Indian batters to aggregate 1000 or more runs in a calendar in Tests at home. Yashasvi Jaiswal, who made his Test debut in July 2023 and playing his first Test at home this year, has become the highest run-scorer for India at home in a calendar year, accumulating 1,091 runs. He surpassed Gundappa Viswanath's previous record of 1,047 runs set in 1979, 45 years ago.

Most runs in a calendar year in India

Runs	Batter	Year	M	Inns	No	Ave.	HS	100	50
1091	Yashasvi Jaiswal	2024	10	19	1	60.61	214*	2	7
1047	Gundappa Viswanath	1979	13	19	2	61.58	179	4	3
964	Virat Kohli	2016	8	14	2	80.33	235	3	2
898	Virat Kohli	2017	7	12	1	81.63	243	4	1
875	Dilip Vengsarkar	1987	9	14	4	87.50	166	4	3

6} The number of times India has lost three Tests in a home series. New Zealand recently became the fourth visiting team to achieve this feat, joining West Indies, Australia, and England. Notably, New Zealand became the first visiting side to whitewash India by winning all the matches in the Test series. The closest any visiting team in India has come to New Zealand's success was South Africa, which won a two-match Test series under Hansie Cronje in February-March 2000.

India losing three or more Tests in a home series

Series Result	Opponent	Opponent captain	Series Dates	Losing Indian captain
0-3 (5)	West Indies	Gerry Alexander	28 Nov 1958 to 11 Feb 1959	Polly Umrigar (1), Ghulam Ahmed (2), Vinoo Mankad (1), Hemu Adhikari (1)
1-3 (5)	Australia	Bill Lawry	4 Nov 1969 to 28 Dec 1969	Mansur Ali Khan Pataudi
2-3 (5)	West Indies	Clive Lloyd	22 Nov 1974 to 29 Jan 1975	Mansur Ali Khan Pataudi (4)/S Venkataraghavan (1)
1-3 (5)	England	Tony Greig	17 Dec 1976 to 16 Feb 1977	Bishan Singh Bedi
0-3 (5)	West Indies	Clive Lloyd	21 Oct 1983 to 29 Dec 1983	Kapil Dev
0-3 (3) #	New Zealand	Tom Latham	16 Oct 2024 to 3 Nov 2024	Rohit Sharma

All records are correct and updated until 16 November 2024.

India's only whitewash series defeat of three or more Tests at home; ** In the 1958/59 series India had four captains, Polly Umrigar (1st Test), Ghulam Ahmed (2nd and 3rd), Vinoo Mankad (4th) and Hemu Adhikari (5th). Under Ghulam and Mankad India lost two and one respectively; ** In the 1974/75 series, India had two captains, Pataudi (won 2, lost 2) and S. Venkataraghavan (2nd Test - lost)

» T20Is PHOTOLINE
INDIA-SOUTH AFRICA



1st



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IMAGES

Samsonite: Sanju Samson (107 off 50 balls) etched his name in history as the first Indian to score consecutive T20I centuries, achieving the feat in the opening game in Durban. His blistering hundred, reached in just 47 balls, is the fastest by an Indian against South Africa in T20Is. AP



2nd

Roaring return: Playing an international match after 166 days, Gerald Coetze struck off his first ball to remove opener Abhishek Sharma cheaply. He later picked up wickets of Hardik Pandya and Rinku Singh to keep India's score to 202/8.

AFP



3rd

Timely blows: Ravi Bishnoi, along with Varun Chakravarthy, kept chipping away with wickets at regular intervals — picking three each — as India bowled out South Africa for 141, winning the match by 61 runs. GETTY IMAGES



4th

Finishing touch: South Africa's sensational bowling had India 45/4 inside eight overs and 87/6 in the 16th over. Even though Hardik Pandya struggled to time the ball initially, he found his rhythm eventually and got India to a fighting total of 124/6. AP



5th

Magical turn around: Varun Chakravarthy weaved his magic, turning a modest target of 125 runs into an insurmountable challenge for the South African batters. Chakravarthy claimed his best figures in T20Is, 5/17, including wickets of Aiden Markram, Reeza Hendricks, Marco Jansen, Heinrich Klaasen, and David Miller, to reduce South Africa to 66/6 inside 13 overs. AP



6th

Rescue act: Tristan Stubbs hit a 41-ball 47, along with Gerald Coetzee's quickfire 19 off nine balls, and got South Africa over the line in a tense chase to level the series. AP



7th

Centurion: Tilak Varma, batting at number three for the first time this series, smashed his maiden T20I hundred — finishing unbeaten on 107 off 56 balls — to take India to 219/6 after being put in to bat first.

AP

8th

Long levers: Marco Jansen went berserk as he smacked five sixes and four fours en route to his maiden T20I fifty to keep South African hopes alive in a chase where the host looked down and out till the 18th over with 169/6 on board. AFP



9th

Wrecker-in-chief: Arshdeep Singh helped India finish on the right side of the result with his timely strikes. He first removed Ryan Rickelton in the PowerPlay, then had dangerous-looking Heinrich Klaasen (41 off 22) caught before finally removing Marco Jansen in the last over. GETTY IMAGES



10th

Combining powers: Tilak Varma (120 not out) and Sanju Samson (109 not out) hit a century each, becoming the first pair from a Full Member nation to score a hundred in the same T20I innings, as India posted its second-highest score in the format: 283/1.

AFP





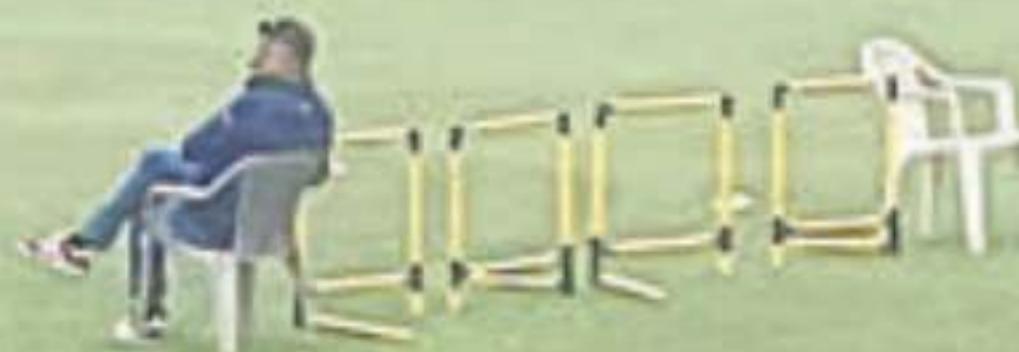
11th

Collective effort: Indian bowlers kept picking wickets regularly, with Arshdeep Singh leading the way, taking three, and Varun Chakravarthy and Axar Patel claiming two each. Ramandeep Singh, Axar Patel and Hardik Pandya got one apiece as India bundled out South Africa for 148 to win the match by 135 runs. AP

12th

Dominating performance: India defeated South Africa 3-1, winning its fifth series this year and ending 2024 with 24 wins out of 26 T20Is, including a T20 World Cup victory — a win percentage of 92.30. AFP





Killing time in smog and IPL auction fever hits home!

Our correspondents bring you the highlights and intriguing moments, both on and off the field, from the **fifth round** of Ranji Trophy fixtures.

Pranay Rajiv and Vivek Krishnan

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Cricket is probably the only sport where players warm up for a game by playing another sport.

Imagine Novak Djokovic whipping out a cricket bat

before a Wimbledon final and playing a couple of straight drives into the net. Too much grass on the surface, he would say. Sorry!

As the start of the Ranji Trophy match between Haryana and Kerala was delayed due to an unexpected bout of smog, this unique occurrence was on full display.

Both teams started with a game of

foot volley — separately, of course — with training hurdles and plastic chairs acting as make-shift nets.

Evidently, one team was better at this sport than the other. While one struggled to maintain rallies with their stiff footwork, it was boringly easy for the other. You know which one is which. Trust the stereotype.

Soon enough, the Kerala players



PRANAY RAJIV

caught hold of a couple of fielding nets, converted them to goals, and started a game of three-on-three football. Who is surprised?

The home players, though, chose to return to their basics, as they kickstarted a passionate game of one-pitch, one-hand tennis ball cricket right in front of their dressing room. Meanwhile, the Kerala players wrapped up their football game. But with the smog refusing to subside, there was still some time to bide. And thus began a game of tennis, if you could call it that.

The foot-volley nets retained their position. Two tennis racquets were acquired. But you need two more to play doubles, right? Out came two cricket bats, one the normal size and the other the shorter one used for fielding practice. Talk about innovation. Unlike the foot volley game, this was a struggle — to play and watch. The rallies were comically short, with the tennis ball bouncing all over the place. Soon, the smog dissipated, allowing the players to indulge in the sport they were actually paid to play.

IPL franchises keeping an eye on Ranji Trophy

As the IPL has grown in stature, the competition among franchises to find untapped young talent has only risen.

It has become customary, thus, for these teams to send their coaches, scouts and analysts to the different state-run T20 leagues through the year as well as the country's premier domestic T20 and 50-over tournaments — the Syed

Mushtaq Ali Trophy and Vijay Hazare Trophy, respectively.

But with the Ranji Trophy having kicked off the domestic season this time in an effort to retain the primacy of First-Class cricket, IPL franchises didn't really have an opportunity before the mega auction to track players and make prudent choices based on the domestic white-ball events. Nonetheless, they kept a close tab on the first five rounds of the Ranji season for any insight they could get on the players to back at the mega auction.

When Delhi played Tamil Nadu at the Arun Jaitley Stadium in October, Vikram Solanki (**left**), Gujarat Titans' Director of Cricket, was a keen observer from the media enclosure on all four days of the contest.

For the match between Delhi and Jharkhand in the fifth round, the Titans had assistant coaches Amit Bhandari and Narendar Singh Negi at the venue. Even though it was with an eye on the IPL, the Ranji

Trophy is at least attracting greater interest than it has in recent seasons.



VIJAY SONEJI

Ajay Jadeja: India should return with a series win from Australia; we are well equipped

Former India captain Ajay Jadeja believes Rohit Sharma's team has **nothing to lose** and everything to gain in Australia, following their 0-3 Test series defeat to New Zealand at home.

Team Sportstar

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Ajay Jadeja played 15 Test matches for India from 1992 to 2000, amassing 576 runs with an average of 26.18, including four half-centuries and a top score of 96. His ODI career, however, truly showcased his talent, as he represented India in 196 matches, scoring 5,359 runs at an impressive average of 37.47, with six centuries and 30 half-centuries to his name.

In a conversation with senior sports journalist Vijay Lokapally at the Sportstar Sports Conclave – Focus Rajasthan, Jadeja shares his experience coaching Afghanistan, highlights from his playing career, and India's prospects in the upcoming Border-Gavaskar Trophy.

What was your experience like with the Afghanistan team, and do you see the potential in them to become world beaters?

I was privileged to have spent time with them. They started in Division Five of the World Cricket League about 14 years ago. No team has climbed the ladder as fast as they have. Now, you see smiling faces; you see these boys enjoying their sport. Whether it's Mohammad Nabi or Rashid Khan, they have convinced the world that these are good people who can gel with anybody. They were world-beaters at the ODI World Cup. They have taken that leap. For me, it was one of the best periods of my life — to be part of a team that was evolving and growing. They recently won the emerging trophy [ACC Emerging

Teams Asia Cup], and it won't be long before they become champions.

What's the most cherished memory from your playing career?

If you're a batter, you only feel truly satisfied when you score a hundred. The first time I scored a hundred for India, against the West Indies [in 1994] — and back then, the West Indies was a formidable side — remains special. That moment gave me assurance, even if I had doubts, that yes, this is what I had been dreaming of. It's similar to winning a medal at the Olympics. Sure, getting picked for the first time feels great, but that's just the beginning. The first moment I truly felt happy was when I scored that hundred in Cuttack. Some moments stay with you forever. Like when I was bowled by Ronny Irani — I remember thinking, if you can't handle Irani, you can't play Test cricket. That day, I closed the chapter on Test cricket for myself. But in One-Day Internationals, that hundred [against West Indies] has always stayed with me.





In the 1996 World Cup quarterfinal, you famously scored 22 runs off one Waqar Younis over — a knock that has become part of cricket folklore. When you meet Waqar now, do you ever remind him of that innings?

It's a long story that began in 1988 when we played Under-19 cricket in Pakistan. We've been great friends since then and even played league cricket together in England. Waqar often jokes, since he's gotten me out more times, '*sau sunar ki, ek lohar ki*' (one powerful blow is worth a hundred smaller ones). Sometimes, you have those perfect days, and that happened to be one of them on the ideal stage.

What do you expect from India in its upcoming five-match Test series against Australia?

I think we'll do well. We might not perform well enough to reach the World Test Championship final since that would require four wins out of

five, which could be tough. Still, I believe we should come back with a series win. We are a better side.

Even though India won the last two series in Australia, the Aussies say they're ready for us, especially after India's 0-3 loss to New Zealand at home. What challenges will India face there?

They always have something to say. It has always been one of their strengths. They play with your mind. Our cricket has changed. Earlier, we would go to Australia once in eight or nine years, so, in a side of 15, there were just two or three players who had travelled or played in those conditions. Now you have emerging teams going there; every two or three years you go to Australia. So, our team is well equipped. When you have nothing to lose, that is when you will be dangerous. When you have lost 0-3 here [against New Zealand], going there you have nothing to lose and everything to gain.

Impact player: "Rishabh Pant is freakish; he is brilliant, and as long as he's playing, he will be the best," said Ajay Jadeja in a conversation with Sportstar's consulting editor Vijay Lokapally at the Sportstar Sports Conclave — Focus Rajasthan.

R.V. MOORTHY

Rishabh Pant has exceptional talent and the ability to turn a match on his own. Do you think he could become the greatest Indian cricketer of all time?

He is freakish, brilliant and as long as he's playing, he will be the best. He is a genius, no doubt, but you fear these geniuses. You do not know what they do next. But he should stay like this; otherwise, he would not be a genius. This is a fine line as a coach. How do you tame a genius? You got to enjoy them as long as it lasts. As soon as you try to tame them, you take away their brilliance. It is a double-edged sword.



APP

Pakistan clinches ODI series against Australia

1

Following a nervy two-wicket defeat in the series opener, Pakistan, led by Mohammad Rizwan, **thrashed Australia** in the following two games.

Pakistan clinched its first ODI series win in Australia since 2002 after beating the host 2-1. Following a nervy two-wicket defeat in the series opener, Pakistan, led by Mohammad Rizwan, thrashed Australia in the

following two games with pacer Haris Rauf, who picked 10 wickets in three games, wrecking the host's batting line-up. However, Pakistan was dealt a chastening reality check in the T20 Internationals leg as Australia

swept the series 3-0. After managing to lose nine wickets for 64 runs in a seven-over rain-curtailed contest, Pakistan crumbled again in the next two games, folding for 134 and 117, respectively.



2

New Zealand pacer and former captain Tim Southee will retire from Test cricket after the upcoming three-match Test series at home against England. He has played 104 Tests for New Zealand and taken 385 wickets. He is the most successful Kiwi bowler across formats with 770 scalps — he is the only player in the world to take more than 300 Test wickets, 200 ODI wickets and 100 T20I wickets. Southee will be available for selection if New Zealand qualifies for the World Test Championship (WTC) final next June.



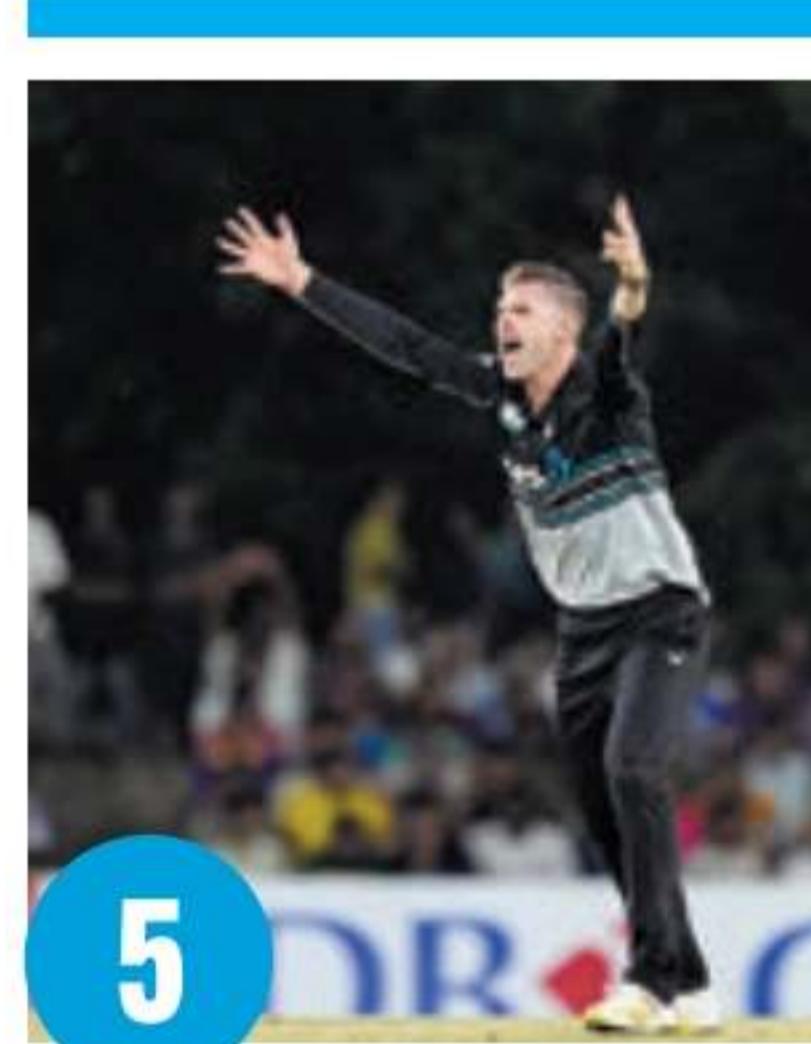
3

After conceding the ODI series 1-2 to West Indies, England bounced back to clinch the five-match T20I series 3-1. Skipper Jos Buttler, returning from injury, led England to an unassailable 3-0 lead in the T20I series, backed by pacer Saqib Mahmood's impressive nine wickets, which restricted the hosts to below-par totals. Although West Indies secured a consolation win in the fourth T20I by successfully chasing down a mammoth 219-run target, the series finale was washed out. In the ODI series earlier, Liam Livingstone captained England and played a significant role by scoring an unbeaten 124 in the second match, helping England chase down 329 to level the series. Despite this, West Indies excelled in the series decider, with Brandon King and Keacy Carty's 225-run partnership enabling them to chase down a middling total.



4

Azmatullah Omarzai's all-round brilliance handed Afghanistan a 2-1 ODI series win against Bangladesh in Sharjah. Omarzai picked four wickets to restrict Bangladesh to 244 for eight before smashing an unbeaten 77-ball 70 to guide his team home with five wickets in hand and 10 balls to spare. The Afghans had taken a 1-0 lead in the series after Bangladesh suffered a spectacular collapse, triggered by off-spinner AM Ghazanfar, as it lost eight wickets for 23 runs, falling short by 92 runs while chasing 236. The Tigers squared the series by winning the second ODI by 68 runs, but the Afghans had the last laugh.



5

Lockie Ferguson picked a hat-trick across two overs to help New Zealand defend 108 runs in the second T20I against Sri Lanka as the two-match series ended in a 1-1 stalemate. In the first T20I, Sri Lanka, wobbling at 87 for five, rode on skipper Charith Asalanka's unbeaten 35 to chase down New Zealand's 135 with an over to spare.



6

Afghanistan all-rounder Mohammad Nabi announced his decision to retire from One-Day Internationals after next year's Champions Trophy. The 39-year-old has featured in 167 ODIs since 2009, scoring 3,600 runs in 167 matches, including two centuries and 17 fifties. He picked up 172 wickets, including four four-wicket hauls and a fifer (5/17). Afghanistan qualified for the Champions Trophy after it finished in sixth place during last year's ODI World Cup in India. It will be Afghanistan's first-ever appearance in the eight-team competition.



Testing times: East Bengal has blamed poor refereeing for the team's struggles in the ongoing ISL, where it currently sits at the bottom of the standings with just one point from seven matches. Pics: FSDL

EAST BENGAL ON A VARFOOTING

Although clubs have long demanded the introduction of the technology, the **extraordinary costs** associated with procuring and maintaining it have reportedly restrained ISL organisers from implementing it.

East Bengal Club has sought the All India Football Federation's (AIFF) intervention for the implementation of VAR technology as a solution to improving refereeing standards in the Indian Super League (ISL). Club officials have blamed poor supervision for the team's struggles in the ongoing ISL, where it currently sits at the bottom of the standings with just one point from seven matches.

The flashpoint came during its seventh outing, in which East Bengal received two red cards before managing to secure a goalless draw against city rival Mohammedan Sporting. The issue was discussed at a recent meeting of East Bengal's executive committee, and the club decided to "approach the AIFF president, Kalyan Chaubey, to complain against the unjust refereeing decisions and the installation of VAR technology," said one of the club's key functionaries, Debabrata (Nitu) Sarkar.

"We want the Federation to act against the poor standard of refereeing in the ISL. Our fans, supporters, and even former players are voicing their disapproval against debatable refereeing decisions. We will be writing a letter to the president of AIFF, looking for a

solution against the discrimination East Bengal is repeatedly facing," said Sarkar. "It is high time the AIFF started installing VAR in ISL stadiums. When the clubs can spend an average of ₹70 to ₹80 crore on team selection, why can't we spend a little more to ensure the implementation of VAR technology?" he added.

Although clubs have long demanded the introduction of VAR, the extraordinary costs associated with procuring and maintaining the popular video technology have reportedly restrained ISL organisers from implementing it. East Bengal will hope its appeal expedites the process.

Amitabha Das Sharma

The penalty that drained the Blasters

After losing two consecutive games, Kerala Blasters was desperate when it took on Hyderabad FC in Kochi. There was a glimmer of hope that the Blasters might return to winning ways. When the home side scored an early goal after a series of quick moves, the Blasters fans believed they might finally have a reason to celebrate after a long time.

But then came Hyderabad's equaliser, followed by a 70th-minute penalty that shattered the Blasters, resulting in their third straight loss.

It should not have been a penalty, as replays showed that the Blasters defender Hormipam did not handle the ball; however, the referee thought otherwise. Andrei Alba happily converted the penalty, scoring his second goal of the night to give Hyderabad a rather unexpected victory.

"I have to admit that the penalty drained us. That decision to give them a penalty in that moment was really, really hard for us. We were stressed after that and we lost the calmness with the ball, and made mistakes," said Blasters head coach Mikael Stahre.

"We lost control because of that penalty. I'm not that type who complains about referees... but you can't make a decision to give a penalty for that. Unfortunately, we lost the game by that. Of course, we have to look at ourselves in the mirror and perform better. The performance was obviously not good enough, but that penalty drained us."

Stan Rayan

Elation, and then frustration

Under normal circumstances, Chennaiyin FC might have exercised a certain degree of caution in a home match against Mumbai City FC. After all, the latter is the defending ISL Cup champion.

But contrary to that, there was a palpable sense of swagger from Owen Coyle's Chennaiyin side, which seemed determined to take the game to Petr Kratky's Mumbai outfit.

Fresh from signing a contract that



would keep him at the club until 2026, Coyle urged his team to surge forward as soon as the referee blew the kick-off whistle. Mumbai's slow start to the season encouraged the home team to play with panache, buoyed by an enthusiastic crowd of about 8,000.

While the first half lacked goals, the entire contest came down to three minutes in the second half.

The crowd inside Nehru Stadium was brimming with anticipation. When Chennaiyin finally scored in the 60th minute — with captain Ryan Edwards heading home from a corner — the roof nearly came down. The celebrations were such that it felt as if nothing could go wrong.

But football, time and again, takes its fans on a rollercoaster of emotions, and this match was no exception. Just three minutes after the jubilant scenes of Edwards' goal, the crowd fell silent. Mumbai City equalised through Nathan Asher Rodrigues (**right**), ensuring the teams would share the points in a 1-1 draw.

"How did we not win this match? We had them, trust me," a Chennaiyin fan was overheard telling a friend while leaving the stadium. That question encapsulates the very essence of football.

Aneesh Dey

Marked man: Hyderabad's Andrei Alba (left) scored two goals, including a contentious penalty, handing Kerala Blasters its third straight loss.



Decisive: Matt O'Riley scores Brighton & Hove Albion's second goal against Manchester City. REUTERS



IN DIRE STRAITS

Manchester City's **bad run continues** while Messi and Inter Miami fall short of the MLS Cup dream.



Joan Mathew Jacob
joan.mathew@thehindu.co.in

Pep Guardiola (**right**) lost four successive games in all competitions for the first time in his managerial career after Manchester City suffered a 2-1 defeat to Brighton & Hove Albion just before league football went into the international break. Erling Haaland's 12th league goal of the season went in vain as substitutes João Pedro and Matt O'Riley found the back of the net, five minutes apart in the second half, to give the Seagulls a remarkable victory.

The loss left City in second place on the table with 23 points, five behind leader Liverpool, and in danger of being left behind in the title race.

Manchester United remained undefeated under interim manager Ruud van Nistelrooy (**left**) as it thrashed Leicester City 3-0 in the



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Dutchman's final game in charge. Captain Bruno Fernandes led the side from the front, scoring one and creating two in his 250th appearance for the Red Devils. The win leaves United in 13th place with 15 points, ahead of newly appointed Portuguese coach Ruben Amorim taking the reins.

Promoted Ipswich Town secured its first win of the season and its first in the top flight since 2002 after beating an inconsistent Tottenham Hotspur side 2-1. Goals from Sammie Szmodics and Liam Delap lifted Kieran McKenna's side out of the relegation zone and up to 17th place in the standings.

High-flying Nottingham Forest was given a reality check as Newcastle United came back from a goal down to win 3-1. Alexander Isak scored in his fourth consecutive game for Newcastle while Joelinton and Harvey Barnes landed the knockout punches. Despite the loss, Forest is in fifth place, while Newcastle climbed to eighth.

The London Derby between Chelsea and Arsenal was the talk of the weekend, and both teams shared the spoils in a tense 1-1 battle. Martin Ødegaard's return to action was a major boost for the Gunners as he assisted Gabriel Martinelli's opener. Pedro Neto netted his first Premier League goal for Chelsea to equalise and ensure that his side went into the international break in third place, level on 19 points with Arsenal in fourth.

With all its challengers dropping points, Liverpool took the opportunity to extend its lead at the top of the table after beating Unai Emery's Aston Villa 2-0. Darwin Núñez and talisman Mohamed Salah got on the scoresheet as Liverpool made it 15 wins out of 17 games in all competitions under new manager Arne Slot.

La Liga

It was the Vinícius Jr. show as he scored a hat-trick in Real Madrid's 4-0 thumping of Osasuna. Englishman

Cap class: Bruno Fernandes scored one and created two goals in his 250th appearance for Manchester United.

GETTY IMAGES



REUTERS



In fine form: Vinícius Jr. scored a hat-trick in Real Madrid's 4-0 thumping of Osasuna. AFP

Jude Bellingham also found the back of the net for his first goal of the season in a victory that was ultimately marred by injuries.

Brazilian Rodrygo was forced off the field with an injury before his compatriot Éder Militão suffered an ACL injury that has ruled him out for several months. Additionally, right-back Lucas Vázquez was removed at half-time after he was visibly suffering from a leg issue.

Barcelona travelled to Real Sociedad looking to extend its lead to nine points at the top of the table but ended up suffering a shock 1-0 defeat. Playing without teenage sensation Lamine Yamal, the side not only ended its seven-match winning streak in all competitions but also failed to register a shot on target in the entire match. Hansi Flick's side still leads the standings with 33 points from 13 games, six ahead of Real Madrid, which has one game in hand.

Atlético Madrid stayed in the hunt

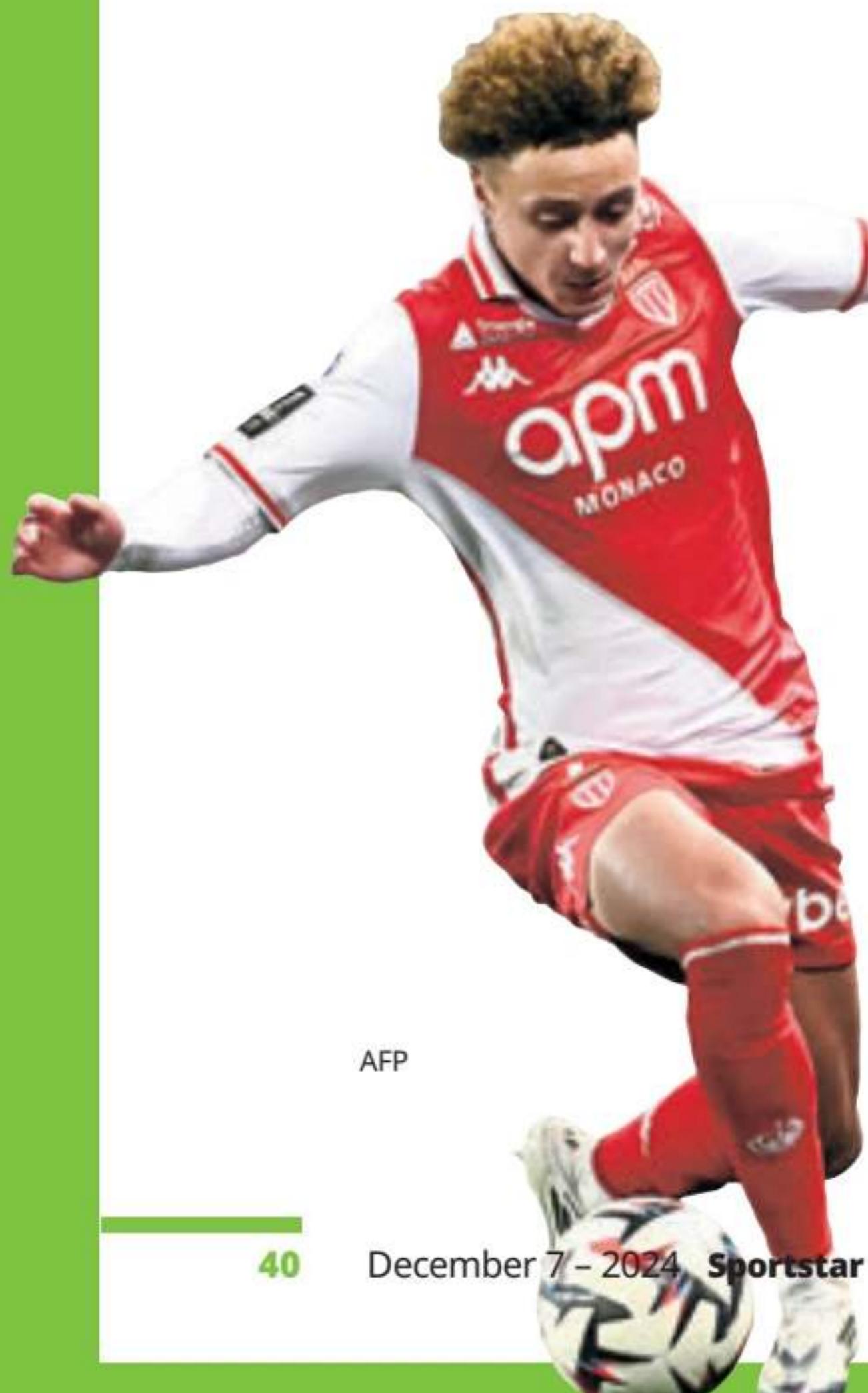
for the title after edging past RCD Mallorca 1-0, thanks to a second-half strike from Julián Álvarez. The Argentine has now scored seven goals in 18 appearances for the club, the most by any Atlético player in his first 18 games since Luis Suárez in 2021 (11).

Having played a game more, Diego Simeone's side is third in the table, one point behind city rival Real. It is closely followed by Villarreal in fourth, which secured three points against Espanyol, thanks to a brace from Ayoze Pérez.

Ligue 1

Paris Saint-Germain maintained its unbeaten record in the league, beating newly promoted Angers 4-2. Bradley Barcola and Lee Kang-in netted twice each as PSG extended its lead to six points at the top of the table.

19-year-old Eliesse Ben Seghir (**left**) scored a brace as AS Monaco beat RC Strasbourg 3-1 to climb to second place with 23 points, ahead of



AFP



Olympique de Marseille in third.

The Roberto De Zerbi-coached Marseille continued its poor run at home (one win, two losses, and two draws), losing 3-1 to AJ Auxerre. It is three points behind Monaco and nine behind PSG.

LOSC Lille failed to capitalise on Marseille dropping points and was held to a 2-2 draw by OGC Nice, despite taking a two-goal lead. Lille completes the top four with 19 points, one behind Marseille.

Serie A

The last two Italian champions – Inter Milan and Napoli – faced off in a high-intensity clash at the San Siro Stadium, with both teams walking away with a point after a 1-1 draw. Hakan Çalhanoğlu (**right**) cancelled Scott McTominay's opener but failed to convert from the penalty spot to take all three points. He ended his streak of 19 consecutive penalties scored, his last miss coming in 2016 when he played for Bayer Leverkusen.

The result tightened the race for the Scudetto, with Napoli leading the way with 26 points, followed by Atalanta, Fiorentina, Inter and Lazio, all on 25.

Juventus, the only unbeaten team in the league, overcame Torino with a goal each from Kenan Yıldız and Timothy Weah, settling into sixth place, two points behind leader Napoli.

12th-placed Roma sacked its manager Ivan Jurić following a 3-2 loss to Bologna and managed to bring back 73-year-old Claudio Ranieri to take charge of the club until the end of the season.

Bundesliga

Bayern Munich preserved its unbeaten start to the league season after overcoming newly promoted FC St. Pauli courtesy of a Jamal Musiala stunner. In a closely contested game, the 21-year-old unleashed a strike from 30 yards out that went in off the crossbar. The victory took the German giant to 26 points, five clear

Hero of the day: Atlético Madrid stayed in the hunt for the title after edging past RCD Mallorca 1-0, thanks to a second-half strike from Julián Alvarez (centre). AFP





Sour moment: Lionel Messi in action against Atlanta United, which beat Inter Miami in the deciding leg of their MLS Cup clash. REUTERS

of RB Leipzig in second.

Leipzig wasted the chance to cut down Bayern's lead after being held to a 0-0 draw by Borussia Mönchengladbach.

Borussia Dortmund slipped further down the table and into seventh place after losing 3-1 to FSV Mainz, making it a fourth consecutive defeat on the road this season. Nuri Şahin's side played the majority of the match with 10 men after Emre Can was sent off near the half-hour mark for a reckless challenge.

Defending champion Bayer Leverkusen had a full three points snatched from under its nose after it was held to a 1-1 draw by last-placed VfL Bochum, with Koji Miyoshi (**right**) scoring an 89th-minute equaliser. Despite the result, Leverkusen is still in fourth place, nine points behind

leader Bayern.

Third-placed Eintracht Frankfurt continued its top form in the league after beating VfB Stuttgart 3-2, thanks to goals from Omar Marmoush, Hugo Ekitiké and Nathaniel Brown. After scoring a free-kick in the match, Marmoush is now tied with Harry Kane at the top of the Golden Boot standings with 11 goals.

MLS

After a record-breaking regular season, Inter Miami's bid to win the MLS Cup came to a halt as it lost 3-2 to Atlanta United in the third and deciding leg of round one of the post-season.

The first leg of the three-match series ended 2-1 in Inter Miami's favour, while the scoreline was reversed in the second leg.

Matías Rojas gave Miami the lead, but Atlanta responded immediately

through Jamal Thiaré, who scored twice in two minutes. Atlanta goalkeeper Brad Guzan frustrated the home side with save after save before Lionel Messi headed the ball in from close range to equalise.

However, just over 10 minutes after the leveller, the Inter Miami defence was caught out once again as Bartosz Slisz leapt into the air to head the ball in off an inviting cross from defender Pedro Amador.



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SINQUEFIELD



Date with destiny: If Gukesh defeats Ding Liren, he will not only become the 18th World Chess Champion but also, at just 18 years old, the youngest World Chess Champion in history. LENNART OOTES/FIDE

History beckons as Gukesh and Ding battle for supremacy in Singapore

If D. Gukesh becomes the 18th World Champion, it will mark **yet another great moment** for Indian chess, especially in a year when the country secured twin golds at the Olympiad.

P. K. Ajith Kumar
ajithkumar.pk@thehindu.co.in

If you want to search for the most exclusive clubs in international sport, you needn't look beyond the one reserved for the World Chess Champions. In the

tournament's history, dating back to 1886, there have been only 17 World Champions. **And we will soon know if we will get the 18th after the World championship match that kicks off in Singapore on November 23.**

If D. Gukesh, the 18-year-old from Chennai, beats Ding Liren of China,

he will become not just the 18th World Champion but also the youngest in history. He will break the record set by Garry Kasparov in 1985.

Kasparov became the 13th World Champion after defeating fellow Soviet Union player Anatoly Karpov in a remarkable match that lasted —



Golden finish: GM D. Gukesh was the lodestar of the Chess Olympiad, along with Arjun Erigaisi, for the Indian men's team. Playing on boards one and three respectively in Budapest, they won individual gold medals while guiding the team to a historic first-place finish. MICHAL WALUSZA/FIDE

THE CONSENSUS AMONG THE WORLD'S TOP CHESS PLAYERS IS THAT D. GUKE SH IS A FIRM FAVOURITE AGAINST DING LIREN

believe it or not — more than a year. The match began on September 24, 1984, but was stopped on February 10, 1985, after 48 games. Karpov was leading 5-3, but the momentum had shifted to Kasparov, who, therefore, wasn't happy at all with the world chess governing body FIDE's decision, apparently made due to concerns about the players' health.

The rule for that World Championship was that a player who won six games would be the winner. Karpov had taken a 5-0 lead after the 27th game. Then, Kasparov, the younger and hungrier player, staged one of the greatest comebacks in the history of any sport.

However, he had no option but to replay the match in late 1985. This time, FIDE ensured it would not become a never-ending war: it was set to be a best-of-24-games contest, with Karpov as the defending champion, needing only to draw the match.

But Kasparov won 13-11 thanks to his victory with the black pieces in the

final game. He was 22 then and broke the 25-year-old record of Mikhail Tal. The question is whether Gukesh will surpass Kasparov's record in this World Championship.

The current form of both Gukesh and Ding suggests it is quite probable. The consensus among the world's top chess players is that the Indian teenager is a firm favourite.

Gukesh enters the match after playing exceptional chess over the last two years. It all began with his incredible performance at the Chennai Chess Olympiad in 2022. As the host, India fielded three teams in both the Open and Women's sections, and he was part of an exciting India-2 team.

Expectations were higher for that team than for India's main team. But what Gukesh did on the top board defied expectations. He won his first eight games in a row. It was a remarkable feat, defeating the top player of each country consecutively. This performance is regarded as one of the best in chess history.

At the next Chess Olympiad, two years later in Budapest, Gukesh delivered another spectacular effort on the top board, leading India to a historic gold medal.

Before that, he had won the Candidates Tournament — the qualifying event for the World Championship — in Toronto, where he topped an extremely strong field

Eyeing encore: Ding Liren is the defending World Champion, having claimed the title in 2023 by defeating Ian Nepomniachtchi in a tense match that went to tie-breaks. LENNARTOOTES/FIDE



that also included two other Indians.

Ding, however, has had a different story. After defeating Russia's Ian Nepomniachtchi to win the World Championship in Astana, Kazakhstan, he has struggled both on and off the board. He has openly stated that he has consulted a psychiatrist.

"It doesn't seem like I've been playing the way I used to," he told *The Straits Times* recently. "The assessment (about my form) is correct, and I don't know if I will ever reach that level again."

However, he added that he was feeling okay, had been playing basketball after dinner, and was trying not to stress himself too much. Ding has also said that he is the underdog against Gukesh.

That might sound strange in another context, with Ding being the

champion and far more experienced. Gukesh, too, is taking nothing for granted.

During a recent online interaction with select media, including *Sportstar*, he said he expected Ding to approach the World Championship match in the right spirit. "He will be trying his best," Gukesh said. "My approach is to treat every game with the utmost respect and energy and give it my best. But there is no additional pressure because of what people are saying (about my chances)."

One of those people, World No. 3 Hikaru Nakamura, has said Gukesh's chances at the World Championship are 80-20. World No. 1 and five-time World Champion Magnus Carlsen isn't as generous, though he also believes Gukesh has the upper hand.

"Gukesh is the significant favourite on current form, but in terms of peak chess ability, it is quite even," Carlsen said shortly after winning the Tata Steel Chess India rapid title in Kolkata. "And Gukesh was quite vulnerable in the last tournament he played.

"All that aside, if I were to make a prediction at this stage, I would go with the guy who has played by far the best chess between these two players over the last couple of years, which is Gukesh."

If Gukesh wins in Singapore, it will mark yet another great moment for Indian chess, especially in a year when the country secured twin golds at the Olympiad. He will be the second Indian to win the World Championship. Viswanathan Anand had won the first of his five world titles in 2000 in Tehran.

Twenty-four years later, another Asian city is gearing up for the first-ever all-Asian battle for the World Chess Championship. It is a 14-game match. If the score remains tied, games with shorter time controls will decide the winner.

« If I were to make a prediction at this stage, I would go with the guy who has played by far the best chess between these two players over the last couple of years, which is Gukesh – Magnus Carlsen »

Correcting the correction

By C.G.S.Narayanan

Try is a move which almost solves a problem and these tries are also called 'almosts'. But such definitions cannot be considered satisfactory because sometimes there are many strong attacks defeated by only one reply of black which may hardly constitute tries. It would therefore be better to define try as a method of attack which draws the solver's attention and obscures the real solution. In such a case the try must make an impression which is as good as the true solution is likely to make. Otherwise however subtle a try may be if it were not noticed till after the problem had been solved its merit would purely be academical. It is for this reason tries in white correction problems often arise by having the key-piece somewhat obvious with deception centering around its disposition. In the problems for study in this article the key-piece can easily be identified but the logic behind the tries cannot be missed.

V.Tinebra
Sakkelet 1996



Mate in two moves

Set mates are provided for 1...fxe and 1...Nxb5 with 2.Qxg5 and 2.Bf4 prevents the threat 2.Qd3. So WNd3 starts avoiding this lethal pin 1.Nc5? fails to 1...fxe4! Try 1.Ne5? provides for 1...fxe4 with 2.Ng2 but fails to

1...Nxb5!(2.Bf4?) Key 1.Nf4!!(2.Qd3) providing for 1...fxe4 2.Nfg2 and 1..Nxb5 2.Nd5. A highly original white correction try sequence

C.G.S.Narayanan
The Hindu, Nov 1996



Mate in two moves

The quaternary white correction problem above with reduced mates was inspired by Tinebra's twoer quoted in this article

Try 1.N any? (2.Qe5/Qxf4)
1..Qxf5 2.Qc2; 1....Bb8 2.Qc4
But 1...Qc3! Try 1.Nc4? Qxf5! 2.d3
but 1...Bb8! (2.Qc4?) **Key 1.Nc6!**
1....Bb8 2.Rd4; 1...Qxf5 2.Bd5

A white correction problem for solving is given below

C.G.S.Narayanan

5th HM, Probleemblad 1999



Mate in two moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article: 'Three interferences on the same square' Set: 1....Be6 2.Qh2; 1...e6 2.Qd2; 1...Ne6 2.Qd5. **Key 1.Qxa7!** (2.Qxd7) 1..Be6 2.Bh2; 1...e6 2.Rd4; 1...Ne6 2.Rd5

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



EN PASSANT

Viswanathan Anand



EXPECT A TOUGH STRUGGLE EVERY DAY IN THE 14-GAME MATCH

Both have quite **combative styles**. D. Gukesh is very aggressive, while Ding Liren can be a bit more positional, though he is also capable of mixing up the struggle.

I am excited about the upcoming World Chess Championship match in Singapore between Ding Liren and D. Gukesh. It has a lot of very interesting plots to it.

It is the first all-Asian title match in the history of the World Championship. I believe that a rivalry between India and China will be fascinating to watch. And this is a historic match, as Gukesh is the world's youngest challenger of all time.

Now, at the age of 18, he also has the possibility of becoming the youngest World Champion. And I think the location in Singapore is also fantastic. It shows the



heightened global interest in chess.

I expect a tough struggle every day in the 14-game match. The participants will be probing each other for weaknesses right from the beginning.

They both have quite combative styles. Gukesh is very aggressive, while Ding can be a bit more positional, though he is also capable of mixing up the struggle, as he showed in his World Title match last year against Ian Nepomniachtchi; he had displayed great resilience in coming back from setbacks several times. I think the match in Singapore will be fascinating from Game 1.



Gukesh has had a much better year. His performance was phenomenal on the top board for India in the Budapest Chess Olympiad. Ding has, of course, been in a crisis for a while, and I think this year he was trying to snap out of it but just hasn't managed. Having said that, the World Championship is quite famous for people who have been in red-hot form in other events but then not being able to generate the same dynamic in the actual match.

Gukesh will have to fight for every point. He should be confident with his play but should not expect that the resistance will be lower. Ding will have a chance to motivate himself, and he showed in his match against

Tough ask: According to the author, Gukesh will "have to fight for every point" against Ding Liren in the World Championship final. MARK LIVSHITZ/FIDE & THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

Nepomniachtchi that he is quite tenacious. So I don't think that the past results are themselves very indicative of anything.

Whether Ding will be able to recover from the slump of form is one of the question marks. I don't know what to expect. He might try to settle in early in the match. I think it may be more appropriate for him to start fighting from Game 1 because of the short runway to get into the match.



I believe that a rivalry between India and China will be fascinating to watch. And this is a historic match, as Gukesh is the world's youngest challenger of all time.

MAGNUS OPUS

The Norwegian genius showcased his **unparalleled mastery** of the game, clinching both the rapid and blitz titles in dominating fashion.

Mayank

mayank.c@thehindu.co.in

Magnus Carlsen once described chess in three words: "I am him." Was he being arrogant? Overconfident? Was it just a casual flex after winning a minor tournament? No. For Carlsen, it was pure honesty — a statement of fact from a man who, in his own words, has arguably "completed" chess.

With five Classical World Championships, four Rapid titles, and six Blitz Championships, Carlsen's accolades are unparalleled. Add to them his triumphs at the Candidates Tournament, the World Cup, the Sinquefield Cup, Norway Chess, and Tata Steel Chess, among hundreds of others, and the list of achievements feels endless.

For someone who once admitted to finding chess "boring," what keeps him motivated to continue and remain the best? "I like to play chess. It's my favourite hobby in the world," he said with a sheepish smile, his words belying the relentless dominance he exhibits on the board.

"It's very satisfying that I can still be quite good, especially against the younger generation. For me, that's motivation enough in itself. Coming to each new event, it's like I've never won anything before."

At the Tata Steel Chess India 2024, Carlsen's passion for the game was evident as he secured both the rapid and blitz titles, claiming victories with a round to spare.

Carlsen's slow start to the tournament proved to be an illusionary prelude. After drawing his first two games in the rapid round against R. Praggnanandhaa and Nihal Sarin, the Norwegian maestro unleashed a six-game winning streak, crushing opponents one after another.

Of all his victories, Carlsen singled out his sixth-round triumph over Arjun Erigaisi as his personal favourite. Playing with black pieces, he employed a rare line of the Taimanov Sicilian, demonstrating exceptional positional understanding and tactical awareness to outmanoeuvre the young Indian star.

"Arjun is an extremely dangerous player when he has the initiative and gets to attack. I willingly got into a position where he had the initiative, and while my play wasn't perfect, I'm very happy I

Top class: Magnus Carlsen with the winners of the blitz and rapid sections in the women's section — Kateryna Lagno and Aleksandra Goryachkina (L-R). Pics. DEBASISH BHADURI



managed to handle the resulting complications better than he did."

Carlsen also weighed in on the much-anticipated clash between D. Gukesh and reigning World Champion Ding Liren.

"Based on current form, Gukesh is a significant favourite. But based on peak chess ability, I think it's quite even. So if Ding can regain that form, he has a good chance. Also, Gukesh was quite vulnerable in the last tournament that he played. But all that aside, if I were to make a prediction at this point, I'd go with the guy who's played by far the best chess of these two players over the last couple of years, which is Gukesh," he said.

However, he didn't rule out Ding's chances of retaining his title. "Each World Championship has its own

rhythm. It's something he hasn't experienced before, so I think he might take some time getting into it. Ding probably justifiably feels that he's the underdog, so maybe he doesn't have that much to lose. Overall, it's not a foregone conclusion. I believe that some people think this match is almost a formality at this point, but I think there is more than a 50 per cent chance that this match is quite even."

Carlsen also reaffirmed his disinterest in returning to the World Championship cycle, regardless of who holds the title. "A long-form classical match doesn't interest me against anybody. Whoever wins the Championship, it will be tremendous, but it's not something I'll seek to challenge," he said.

Addressing criticism from Garry



Final Standings – Open

Rapid

Magnus Carlsen (7.5); R. Praggnanandhaa (5.5); Wesley So (5.5); Nodirbek Abdusattorov (5); Vincent Keymer (4.5); Nihal Sarin (4); Daniil Dubov (3.5); Arjun Erigaisi (3.5); Vedit Gujrathi (3); S. L. Narayanan (3).

Blitz

Magnus Carlsen (13); Wesley So (11.5); Arjun Erigaisi (10.5); R. Praggnanandhaa (9.5); Vedit Gujrathi (9); Daniil Dubov (9); Nodirbek Abdusattorov (8); Nihal Sarin (7); S. L. Narayanan (6.5); Vincent Keymer (6).





Rare blemish: Despite Carlsen's commanding performance, both Praggnanandhaa and Erigaisi managed to challenge the champion, with Erigaisi delivering Carlsen's sole defeat of the tournament.

Kasparov, who dismissed the match as unworthy of the Championship title, Carlsen offered a different perspective.

"They qualified for the World Chess Championship match, and they are deserving of being there. The World Championship in the past has very often been the contest to determine who the best player in the world is, but it has not always been that way, and the fact that it may not be this time just is the kind of way it is. As a chess fan, it is a great spectacle regardless."

A staunch advocate for creativity on the chessboard, Carlsen has been championing freestyle chess, a variant that eliminates reliance on opening theory. The format, inspired by Bobby Fischer's vision, excites Carlsen far more than traditional classical chess.

"I'm very excited about the future of freestyle. The idea itself of sitting down at the chessboard and thinking for a long time does not bore me — that's not the reason why I'm not into standard and classical chess so much. It's more about the preparation and the difficulty of actually getting inside the game.

"But when you play freestyle, you're guaranteed that because there's no opening theory. So we've got a lot of tournaments coming up next year. I am playing Fabiano Caruana in Singapore as an exhibition, so hopefully that will be fun. I believe, not only for myself but also for other top players, it is a format that everyone is excited about."

HOW THE TOURNAMENT UNFOLDED

Upsetting Carlsen in a game is a monumental feat. Beating him in a tournament to claim the title ahead of the all-time great? That's an even taller order.

Although Erigaisi managed the former — stunning Carlsen in a blitz round at Tata Steel — stopping the

Norwegian maestro's storm proved impossible as Carlsen swept both the rapid and blitz events. In his second appearance at this marquee event in India, Carlsen mirrored his 2019 performance, leaving Kolkata with two titles in hand.

A masterclass in Kolkata

At the stunning new venue of Dhono Dhanyo Auditorium in Kolkata — a city renowned for its passionate love of sports — Carlsen found himself in a unique spotlight. Chess took centre stage as a spectator sport, and the crowd's admiration for the 33-year-old legend was discernible.

After a slow start, where Praggnanandhaa and Sarin held him to draws, Carlsen shifted gears. The four-time World Rapid Champion unleashed a ruthless streak, dismantling some of the brightest talents in chess — including Vincent Keymer, Daniil Dubov, Erigaisi, Vidit Gujrathi, S.L. Narayanan, and Wesley So. Seven consecutive wins followed, sealing his triumph in emphatic fashion. In blitz, the time controls may have changed, but the outcome



remained the same.

Carlsen led the leaderboard almost wire-to-wire, barring a brief moment when Erigaisi overtook him, also handing him his sole defeat of the tournament. Carlsen, however, quickly regained his footing, leaving no doubt as to who was in control.

Wesley and Erigaisi impress

Former World Fischer Random Champion Wesley So had an impressive tournament as well. He finished third in the rapid event behind Praggnanandhaa and surged to second place in blitz.

Erigaisi, despite a strong showing, will rue his missed opportunities. Leading the blitz event after 15 rounds, he suffered a heartbreaking collapse, losing his last three games and slipping to third.

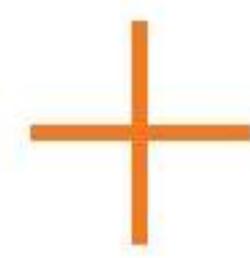
Russian resilience

In the Women's section, Russian dominance was the central theme. Aleksandra Goryachkina's (**above**) consistent play saw her capture the rapid title, while three-time World Blitz Champion Kateryna Lagno (**right**) exhibited her trademark

poise and control to win the blitz crown, both with a round to spare.

Among Indians, only Vantika Agrawal had a strong showing in both time formats.

She finished third in the rapid, while just missing out on a podium finish in blitz due to an inferior tiebreak with third-placed Goryachkina.



Final Standings – Women

Rapid

Aleksandra Goryachkina (7.5); Nana Dzagnidze (5.5); Vantika Agrawal (5); Kateryna Lagno (4.5); Harika Dronavalli (4.5); Valentina Gunina (4.5); Divya Deshmukh (3.5); R. Vaishali (3.5); Alexandra Kosteniuk (3.5); Koneru Humpy (3).

Blitz

Kateryna Lagno (11.5); Valentina Gunina (11); Aleksandra Goryachkina (9.5); Vantika Agrawal (9.5); Alexandra Kosteniuk (9); Koneru Humpy (9); Harika Dronavalli (8.5); R. Vaishali (8); Divya Deshmukh (7.5); Nana Dzagnidze (6.5).

ACING ACT TEST BODIES WELL FOR GREATER CHALLENGES AHEAD

With the Hockey India League approaching, the Pro League will be the **next chance** for this squad to play together for India.

Uthra Ganesan
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Even before the Asian Champions Trophy (ACT) was officially announced, it was evident that the Indian women's hockey team would be markedly different from what it had been for some time. A new coach, new challenges, and significant baggage to shed meant the tournament — regardless of its position in the hierarchy of major international competitions — would be important as both a measure of recent developments and a precursor to future prospects.



India found itself in the unique position of being the defending champion while dealing with a long string of losses, a restructured team composition, and a new management espousing a completely different philosophy and style of play compared to former coach Janneke Schopman. That the host managed to retain the title despite these challenges augurs well for the team. **However, it didn't come easy, and the road ahead will only get tougher for coach Harendra Singh and his squad.**

By all accounts, the event in Rajgir served as



an important foundation. Although Harendra took charge during the away leg of the FIH Pro League 2023-24, he had little opportunity to make an impact as the team struggled with poor form, uninspiring results, and low motivation. With the other eight teams in the competition already qualified for the Paris Olympics, the entire Pro League campaign held a very different meaning for them

compared to India. The sole saving grace for India was the USA's worse performance, which ensured India avoided finishing last and, by extension, relegation to the Nations Cup.

A new Olympic cycle and a fresh start for teams with their eyes on Los Angeles Olympics 2028 also allowed India to wipe the slate clean. Even though a look at the team compositions of other major sides —

Celebratory run: India secured its third Women's Asian Champions Trophy title with a 1-0 victory over China in the final, courtesy of Deepika's decisive goal in Rajgir, Bihar.

Pics: R. V. MOORTHY



Well begun is half done: That India managed to retain the title despite all the challenges augurs well. But it didn't come easy and the road ahead will only get tougher for coach Harendra Singh and his girls.

especially China and Japan, the two Asian teams which played in Paris — highlighted India's status as favourites, with enough experience in its ranks, the shadow of eight consecutive losses loomed over the players.

"The makeup of the other team is neither our concern nor our problem. For us, it's about our process and targets, and that's what I have always emphasised. If you focus on your game, you can achieve results. If you get preoccupied with the opponent's game — it's important to plan and strategise, no doubt — you risk losing sight of yourself," Harendra insisted throughout the tournament.

Although the team trained for a

few weeks before the ACT kicked off, the uncertainty of performing in match situations after a five-month hiatus, coupled with reminders of past struggles, was evident early on. India's first match of the tournament, played on the newly-laid turf at the brand-new and barely completed hockey venue at Rajgir Sports Complex, was tentative. **It took a break and some encouraging words from the bench for the girls to regroup and secure a 4-0 win against a much lower-ranked Malaysia.**

There was uncertainty inside the circle and a lack of cohesion and clarity overall. The players appeared

hurried and, at times, unsure of their positioning and plans. "They needed to settle down, calm themselves, and avoid being rushed. Emotional control is something we are constantly working on," Harendra admitted.

The team improved as the tournament progressed. There was a noticeable enhancement in fitness levels and a growing understanding among players and of game situations. By the time India faced China — the toughest competitor besides the host and the top-scoring team in the competition till then, including a 15-0 thrashing of

With a revamped and inexperienced forward line in the absence of veteran Vandana Katariya, everyone had to adapt to new roles and responsibilities.





Thailand — it appeared ready for the challenge.

The players rose to the occasion. With a revamped and inexperienced forward line in the absence of veteran Vandana Katariya, everyone had to adapt to new roles and responsibilities. With an average age of 21.5 years, it was perhaps one of the youngest Indian attacks in recent times. Sangita Kumari, Deepika, and Beauty Dung Dung, bolstered by the comeback of experienced Preeti Dubey and supported by Sharmila Devi and Lalremsiami, proved up to the task.

The midfield also held firm, with Sushila Chanu making a comeback and Neha Goyal — putting her wedding preparations on hold — serving as the heart of the team. **The defence line was equally impressive, conceding just two goals through the league stage** — off a penalty corner (PC) and a penalty stroke (PS), both to Korea. Even more impressive was the fact that the Indian defence of Udita, Jyoti and Ishika conceded just

seven PCs through the competition!

"Our first priority is to keep a clean sheet and not concede goals, and I'm happy we managed that. Yes, scoring is important, but you must first protect your own goal before attacking the opposition's. On that count, I'm satisfied with my girls," Harendra said.

According to the players, the biggest shift has been in the combination of mental and physical fitness. "We dance, laugh, and have fun on the team bus, in the dressing room, and before the game. That helps create a positive environment, keeps us happy and fresh, and reflects on the field. It may not seem like much, but it plays a big role," explained Salima Tete, shouldering the captaincy responsibilities at the age of 22. "Goal ki bhookh (hunger for goals)" is how Sangita describes the team's mindset on the field. Improved physical fitness translates to sharper decision-making, sustained pressure on opponents, and quicker exploitation of errors.

Leading from the front: Salima Tete (L), at 22, spearheaded India's unbeaten run throughout the tournament.

However, there are areas of concern. India's finishing remains a work in progress, with shots on target yielding fewer goals than expected. The semifinal against Japan was a massive wake-up call, with the inexperienced Japanese side forcing India to work hard for a narrow win. The team must realise that mistakes it got away with here will be punished by stronger opponents.

With the Hockey India League approaching, the Pro League will be the next opportunity for this squad to play together for India. **Until then, there is much work to do if this group of players is to achieve the ambitious goal of a medal at the 2026 World Cup.** The ACT, hopefully, has provided enough pointers in the right direction.

SINNER OUTCLASSES THE ELITE CLUB

By winning his first ATP Finals title, Sinner became **only the third player**, besides Novak Djokovic and Roger Federer, to win this tournament along with the Australian and US Open in the same year.

Paul Fein

The gulf between Sinner and everyone else in this tournament is a pretty big body of water." — Jim Courier, former world No. 1.

With the preternatural calmness of Björn Borg, the technical perfection of Novak Djokovic, and the endearing humility of Rafael Nadal, an Italian sensation with a surname that's a misnomer has taken over men's tennis. He has also become wildly popular, particularly in football-mad Italy.

Jannik Sinner had already clinched the year-end No. 1 ranking a month before the season-ending Nitto ATP Finals in Turin. He underscored his near-total hard-court domination this season by thrashing every opponent without dropping a set — a feat last achieved in 1986 by Ivan Lendl.

Even more impressively, Sinner became only the third player, besides superstars Djokovic and Roger Federer, to win the three biggest hard-court events — the Australian and US Opens and this tournament — in the same year.

In contrast to Carlos Alcaraz's panache — bright

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sleeveless shirts, flashy shots, and broad smiles — Sinner seems almost colourless in his Nike attire: grey shorts, a navy-blue shirt, and a white baseball cap. As he strolls onto the court before matches, he appears expressionless. No headphones with music, like Frances Tiafoe. During the coin toss, no kangaroo jumps followed by serpentine sprints, like Nadal.

Understated in personality, Sinner is overwhelming in power. During his decisive 6-4, 6-4 victory over No. 5 Taylor Fritz in the final, *Tennis Channel* analyst Jim Courier remarked, "Fritz does nothing better than Sinner. I would have said, arguably, maybe his first serve is better — but not today."

Sinner, lanky and wiry-strong at slightly over 6'3", surpassed Fritz with an overall service rating of 323 to 288. He whacked more aces, 14 to 8, with no double faults; won 83 per cent of his first-serve points compared to 70 per cent for Fritz; and faced only one break point, which he saved with a wickedly wide serve in the last game of the opening set.

Imagine averaging 123 mph with 50 per cent of his first serves landing within a mere foot of the centre line or sideline. That astounding precision comes from countless practice hours and his penchant for perfectionism. His choice of the Head Graphene Touch

Speed racket followed a series of blind tests at the Monte Carlo Open in April, using several Head frames painted identically. "That's the mark of a hungry player, always looking for the [extra] edges," said Courier.

A technique change also paid off handsomely. "Sinner's serve is so much better since he switched [from a platform stance] to a step-up serve," *Tennis Channel* analyst Andy Roddick pointed out. A rocket server himself, Roddick was the last American man to win a Grand Slam singles title, 21 years ago at the US Open.

Sinner's superiority over Fritz was even more pronounced in the return stats, with a rating of 124 compared to just 55 for the American. Overall, Sinner finished with 28 winners and only nine unforced errors, compared to Fritz's 20 and 15 respectively.

Besides becoming the first Italian to capture this prestigious title, Sinner earned the biggest prize money for champions in the history of the Tour — \$4,881,500.

Sinner had already defeated Fritz by an identical 6-4, 6-4 score in the round-robin stage, where he also stopped a much-improved Alex de Minaur 6-3, 6-4, and Daniil Medvedev 6-3, 6-4. That was Sinner's third straight win over the declining, 28-year-old Russian and eighth in their last nine meetings. Medvedev, who has lost four

straight matches against Alcaraz, admitted that losing regularly to the new Big Two has sapped his motivation for the sport.

Other players Medvedev once dominated are also figuring out how to outsmart and overpower 'The Octopus'. During his 6-4, 6-3 loss to Fritz, the once-lovable Russian villain — remember his irritating, and later amusing, antics when winning the 2021 US Open — became downright unlovable.

Smashing his racket and a courtside microphone earned him two separate code of conduct violations, a point penalty, and jeers from the 13,000 spectators. "I get angry and frustrated," Medvedev said. "This time it was completely with myself — not with anyone else. Just with myself."

Young guns: Sinner, lanky and wiry-strong at slightly over 6'3", surpassed Fritz with an overall service rating of 323 to 288. GETTYIMAGES

Besides becoming the first Italian to capture this prestigious title, Sinner earned the biggest prize money for champions in the history of the Tour — \$4,881,500.





REUTERS

« Daniil Medvedev admitted that losing regularly to the new Big Two has sapped his motivation »

Andrey Rublev, another volatile top-10 Russian, is notorious for his combustible temper and occasional masochism on the ATP Tour. A year ago, he bloodied his knee with a vicious racket swing in frustration against Alcaraz. During Rublev's 6-4, 5-7, 6-2 round-robin loss to the mild-mannered Casper Ruud, the Russian's demons returned, and he smashed his racket on the court after losing serve to go down 2-1 in the deciding set.

Ruud, coached by his father Christian, a former top-40 player, takes a philosophical approach to the vicissitudes of the Tour.

Reflecting on his third straight ATP Finals semifinal, Ruud remarked, "Tennis is interesting sometimes. I don't know what I'm doing better this week than in the last weeks"—where he lost his opening match in six of his last seven tournaments. "The only thing I can really feel is serving; I'm serving really good, so hopefully I can keep it going tomorrow — I'm going to need it."

Alas, not even exceptional serving or the Norwegian's superb topspin forehand could stop the irresistible force that Sinner has become. Nor could the advice of *Tennis Channel* analyst Prakash Amritraj, the genial son of Indian tennis icon Vijay Amritraj: "You need delusional confidence to beat the top guy."

Ruud had won 11 of his 12 titles on clay, but on fast indoor hard courts, he became cannon fodder. As expected, Sinner pummeled the world No. 6 Ruud in a 6-1, 6-2 masterclass, highlighted by 23 winners against only nine unforced errors.

The near-flawless Italian seized 12 of the first 15 points, saved the only two break points he faced in the fifth game, and reeled off 12 of the last 15 points, finishing the rout with two forehand winners and a service ace.

The other semifinal was both predictably close and unpredictable. Alexander Zverev had risen to a career-high No. 2 after reaching the French Open final and claiming



**DURING ANDREY RUBLEV'S (RIGHT)
6-4, 5-7, 6-2 ROUND-ROBIN LOSS TO THE
MILD-MANNED CASPER RUUD (LEFT), THE
RUSSIAN'S DEMONS RETURNED**

Masters 1000 titles in Rome on clay and Paris indoors just two weeks before Riyadh. Besides momentum, the 6'6" German carried confidence from winning the ATP Finals in 2018 by defeating Federer (semis) and Djokovic (final), and again in 2021, overcoming Djokovic (semis) and Medvedev (final).

Fritz's advantage was more personal and recent. The 27-year-old American had beaten Zverev in their last three encounters, all in 2024, with the most significant victories coming in a tough five-setter at Wimbledon and a four-setter at the US Open. Additionally, in a breakthrough year, Fritz reached his first Major final at Flushing Meadows and ascended to

a career-high ranking of No. 5.

This semifinal featured two heavyweight servers but average returners. Zverev ranked No. 1 among ATP Serve Leaders, with Fritz at No. 7. But neither ranked among the top 25 Return Leaders. This crucial 'under pressure' rating placed Fritz at No. 17 and Zverev at No. 23.

Though not a vast difference, Fritz held a significant lead in tiebreaks won, 65.6 per cent compared to 60 per cent. In their

head-to-head encounters, Fritz had won six of eight tiebreaks.

These stats proved relevant in Fritz's razor-thin 6-3, 3-6, 7-6 (3) victory. In fairness, it was more than just a serving contest, despite each player managing only one service break. Both displayed powerful groundstrokes, excellent mobility, and grit.

In the deciding set, Zverev saved three break points in the eighth game and pounded his trademark backhand down the line to hold for



AFP

4-all. Fritz staved off three break points of his own in the fifth game and another in the 11th. "Is there a better pure competitor in tennis than Taylor Fritz?" asked Courier, himself a terrific competitor in the 1990s.

A tiebreaker concluded one of the best matches of the year. It ended with a bang for the bolder Fritz, who walloped two forehand winners and a swinging backhand winner, and with a whimper for the passive Zverev, who committed three unforced forehand errors.

"Zverev doesn't have trust in his A-game the way Fritz does," observed Courier. "Sascha is trying to trust it and make his forehand a weapon [like Fritz's]. Just settling into backhand [crosscourt] rallies works against most players, but not the top players."

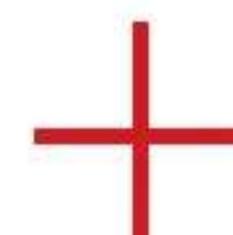
Now Fritz is firmly established as

a top player, at least in his own mind. "I have a lot of belief in myself. Love-40 [holds] is not as much out of reach [anymore]," he said after notching his 10th top-10 win of the year — the most by an American man since 1999, when Agassi had 12 and Sampras 10.

"I trust my game and my level, and I don't feel nearly as uncomfortable in these situations

anymore because I've been playing the top guys at big events a lot lately. I'm getting more comfortable in the moment. I'm really, really confident in my game."

Although Fritz has climbed to a career-best No. 4, he will need to improve his volleys and athleticism to upend Sinner and Alcaraz in best-of-five-set encounters at the Majors. "I did surprise myself with



In the semifinal between Zverev (above) and Fritz, both players displayed powerful groundstrokes, excellent mobility, and grit.

the results here," Sinner told Amritraj. "But I know how much I practise and dedicate myself to the sport. It's been an amazing year."

Indeed, it was for the carrot-loving Italian, whose penchant for the orange vegetable and curly, reddish-orange hair has inspired fans to don all kinds of orange costumes in his honour.

Sinner started the year with a 22-27 career record against top-10 opponents but finished the season with a 17-5 record, winning 10 of his last 11 matches against them. With a terrific 70-6 match record, he has won eight tournaments — more than the number of matches he lost — a rare feat.

"I have no question Sinner will be a force next year," said Courier. "But will he play? WADA may suspend him for a year or two."

Sinner maintains he has "a clear conscience" regarding the two positive drug tests from last March. The World Anti-Doping Agency has appealed an innocent verdict delivered in September, and the Court of Arbitration for Sport will issue its final ruling early next year.

The other question involves Djokovic. The GOAT decided not to defend his ATP Finals title. If you're wondering what the ever-intriguing Serb has been up to — or on — check out the incredible photo of Djokovic showcasing his incomparable balance and flexibility while doing splits on a tennis net.

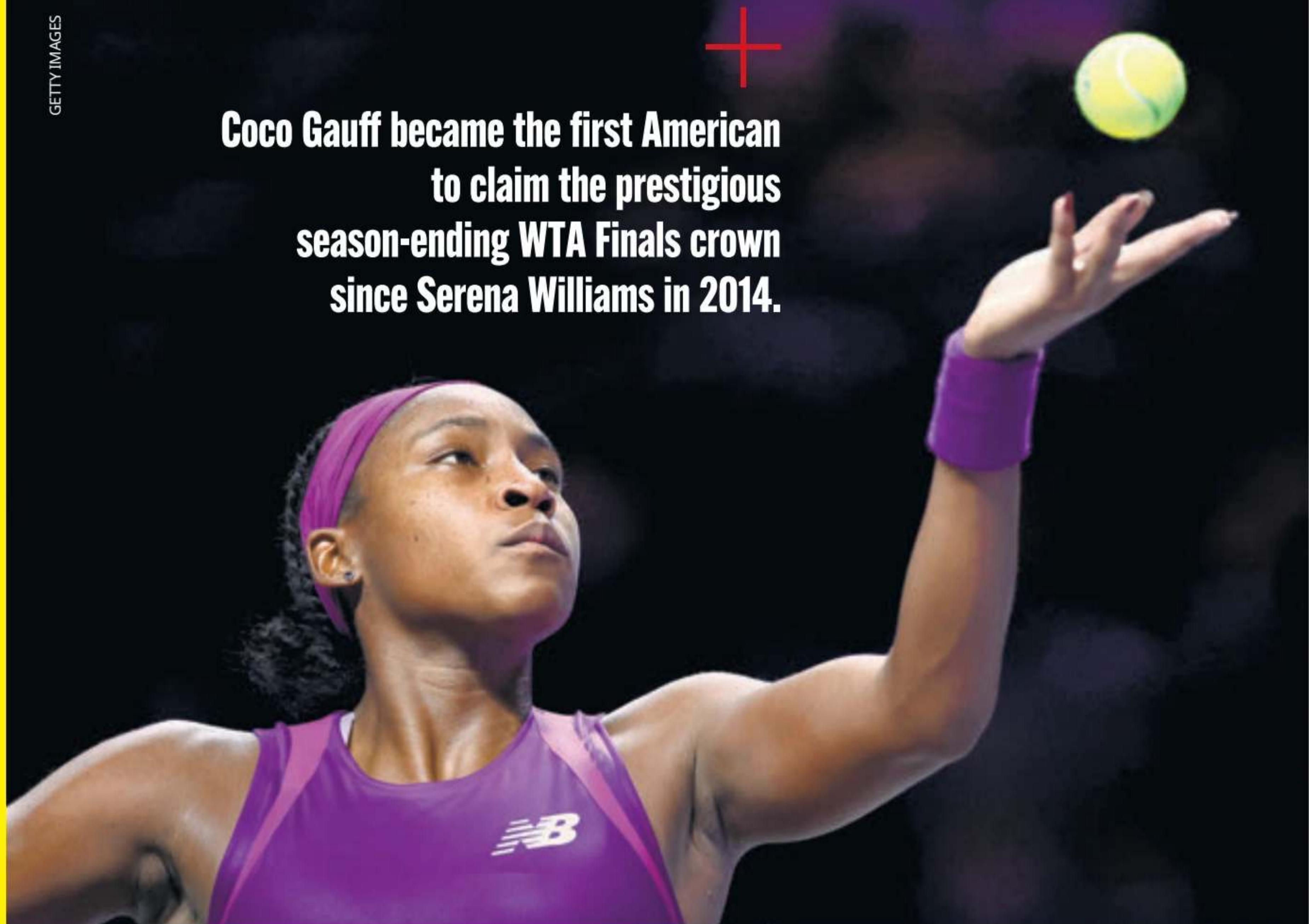
"This is an absolute fake photo, and I love it," said an amused Courier. "[But] if this is real, he's up there with [high-wire daredevils] The Flying Wallendas."

REUTERS



»
ALTHOUGH FRITZ HAS CLIMBED TO A CAREER-BEST NO. 4, HE WILL NEED TO IMPROVE HIS VOLLEYS AND ATHLETICISM TO UPEND SINNER AND ALCARAZ IN BEST-OF-FIVE-SET ENCOUNTERS AT THE MAJORS
«

Coco Gauff became the first American to claim the prestigious season-ending WTA Finals crown since Serena Williams in 2014.



FIVE TAKEAWAYS FROM THE WTA FINALS

A new Big Four in women's tennis

A new Big Four has emerged in women's tennis, led by the clear No. 1, Aryna Sabalenka. Sabalenka — the champion at the Australian Open, US Open, Cincinnati, and Wuhan and semifinalist in the WTA Finals, where she lost to Coco Gauff. The Belarusian Basher dethroned Iga Świątek, who still managed an impressive season, capturing her fourth French Open title, along with victories in Rome, Madrid, Indian Wells and Qatar.

Despite not winning a Major this year, rising stars Gauff and Zheng Qinwen secured their place in the Big Four during the WTA Finals in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Gauff became the first American to claim the prestigious season-ending crown since Serena Williams in 2014 and the only player to defeat both Sabalenka and

Świątek in the same tournament this year. Zheng had a breakthrough campaign, reaching the Australian Open final, winning China's (and Asia's) first singles gold medal at the Paris Olympics, and narrowly losing to Gauff in the Riyadh final.

Gauff and Zheng shine in the final

The intriguing final in Riyadh showcased a thrilling battle between 'The Great American Hope' and 'The Great Chinese Hope'. The player who idolised Serena versus the player who said she strives to play like Serena. "The best competitor on the women's tour," according to esteemed coach and *Tennis Channel* analyst Paul Annacone against a "cut-throat" rival, according to No. 8 Emma Navarro.

Gauff's 3-6, 6-4, 7-6 (2) over Zheng at Riyadh was the youngest final with a combined age of 42 years and 271 days since Maria

Sharapova upset Serena in 2004. Gauff also became only the fourth American to win this title before the age of 21, joining teenage champions Serena, Chris Evert, and Tracy Austin.

How Gauff prevailed

The match was filled with twists and turns, but the more consistent player — especially in critical games — eventually emerged victorious. Zheng, who had been in red hot form with a 31-5 record since Wimbledon, raced to a 6-3, 2-0 lead. Behind 2-3, the younger but more experienced American broke Zheng's potent serve three consecutive times to seize the second set, 6-4.

The Chinese, who led the Riyadh field with 35 aces and 54 per cent of her first serves unreturned before entering the final, won just three service points during the turnaround. Another key: Gauff improved her court position in rallies from six to

20 per cent inside the baseline and from 55 to 33 per cent in exchanges more than six feet behind the baseline. The momentum reversals continued in the deciding set with each player breaking twice to force a tiebreak. Gauff belted a forehand winner on the first point to set the tone for the lopsided 7-2 breaker and finished off Zheng with a slice forehand approach winner.

No margin for errors

"The match today, it's just a couple of important points," rightly noted Zheng. "Nothing more to say. The match was very close, and then, you know, at the end, when you play this type of match, it's not about tennis, it's just about the choices on court." Zheng's poor shot selection, particularly reckless and wild errors, ultimately cost her the match.

"I was just telling myself — another point, another chance. I've been in situations like this in the past where I've been able to turn it around, and I was just hoping I could do it again today," said Gauff, who came back from two service breaks in the deciding set and hung tough to break back when Zheng served for the title at 5-4.

How Gauff and Zheng can challenge the Big Two

Sabalenka has earned the unofficial title of 'Queen of Hard Courts' by winning the last three Majors on that surface, while Świątek, the undisputed 'Queen of Clay', already boasts four French Open titles at just 23. However, neither has won Wimbledon nor even reached its final. Sabalenka has reached the semifinals twice, while Świątek's best result is a single quarterfinal appearance.

Gauff and Zheng will need to master different surfaces as well as their rivals. Both possess the athleticism, power, versatility, and competitiveness to win on any surface. However, in head-to-head records Świątek leads Gauff 11-2 (including 5-0 on clay), while Sabalenka holds a 5-0 advantage over Zheng, with four of those wins coming on hard courts this season.



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« Gauff and Zheng will need to master different surfaces in order to pose a threat to Sabalenka and Świątek »

Ashu Malik anointed a leader for future

Malik's understated approach, coupled with a **diverse skill set**, makes him a unique and effective player.

Saikat Chakraborty

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Ashu Malik, the young raider from Haryana, has represented Dabang Delhi KC for several seasons, quickly becoming one of the brightest stars in the Pro Kabaddi League (PKL).

A standout feature of Ashu's career has been his consistency as his team's crisis man. In the absence of the injured Naveen Kumar, Ashu has become the focal point of Delhi's attack over the past two seasons.

After finishing last season as the top scorer with the most raid points, the 22-year-old is again leading the PKL 11 charts with 139 points from 12 matches (as of November 20).

Calm under pressure, Ashu maintains a stoic demeanour on the mat. However, when he raids, he transforms into a formidable force.

Born into a farming family in Sonepat, Haryana — a region renowned for producing exceptional kabaddi players — Ashu was immersed in the sport from a young age. Watching his seniors play at Saraswati Vidya Mandir ignited his

passion and set him on the path to becoming an athlete.

"Kabaddi is very popular in my village. I first became captivated by the game watching my seniors play on our school's court. It wasn't long before I joined them," Ashu told *Sportstar*.

After climbing the local kabaddi ladder, from Under-14 to senior level, Ashu first caught the attention of PKL scouts through his performances in tournaments like the Yuva Kabaddi Series and K7 Kabaddi tournaments.

His standout performance in the 2022 Summer Yuva Kabaddi Series, where he scored 295 points in 26 matches, averaging 11.34 points per game, made waves in the kabaddi world.

"When that league started, I was unaware of its potential or impact. For me, it was just another tournament to play in. However, when I went there, I saw PKL coaches and realised this could be a pathway to Pro Kabaddi. Almost 90 per cent of the NYPs among all

teams have come through Yuva Kabaddi," recalls Ashu.

Dabang Delhi signed Ashu as a New Young Player (NYP) ahead of PKL 8. However, he had to adapt to the league's fast pace and live television pressure during his debut season.

"The team boasted a wealth of experienced players. Training alongside them, I understood the contrast between age-group kabaddi and the professional arena. From them, I learned tactical nuances, how to anticipate game situations, and even how to conduct myself on the mat," he recollects.

His PKL journey couldn't have started better — on his debut campaign in season 8, Delhi won its first-ever PKL title.

"I consider myself lucky to win the title in the first season. Many good players have played for 7-8 seasons without lifting the trophy," he adds.

The Roman philosopher Seneca's adage, "Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity," proved true for Ashu. After two



One for the future: Calm under pressure, Ashu Malik (in blue) maintains a stoic demeanour on the mat. However, when he raids, he transforms into a formidable force. PKL MEDIA

seasons of hard work, he was thrust into a leadership role when the team's talisman was sidelined for the year.

"Luck plays a significant role in not only sports but also every aspect of life. At some point, everyone relies on a bit of good fortune," opines Ashu.

Despite being only in his third season, Ashu was named stand-in captain by then Delhi coach Rambir

Singh Khokar.

He ended PKL 10 with 276 raid points from 228 successful raids. He also led the matrix in average raid points (12), do-or-die raid points (41), and super raids (9), which helped guide his team to the playoffs.

"There wasn't any pressure on me. The team was mostly young players. I was one of the more experienced members. Everyone was very supportive. The coach

helped us bounce back from our initial struggles, and we soon started to play with renewed confidence," explains the raider.

Ashu's fairytale journey didn't end there. After the PKL season, the 22-year-old played a pivotal role in helping Haryana clinch the Senior National Kabaddi Championship after over a decade. He was named Player of the Match in the final, where his 13 raid points guided Haryana to a narrow 34-31 victory over Railways.

Ashu defies the stereotype of a flamboyant raider. His understated approach coupled with a diverse skill set makes him a unique and effective player. But it's his uncanny ability to read the game that elevates him over the rest.

In Delhi's opening match of PKL 11 against U Mumba, Ashu executed a brilliant raid, scoring two points with a simple yet effective move. Targeting the left chain of the six-man Mumba defence, he cleverly kicked the joined hands of two defenders.

"Ashu has a very calm and mature head on his shoulders. His game awareness is beyond his years and it's always a sign of a good player and, more importantly, a leader," opines Delhi coach Joginder Narwal, who was also Ashu's first skipper in PKL.

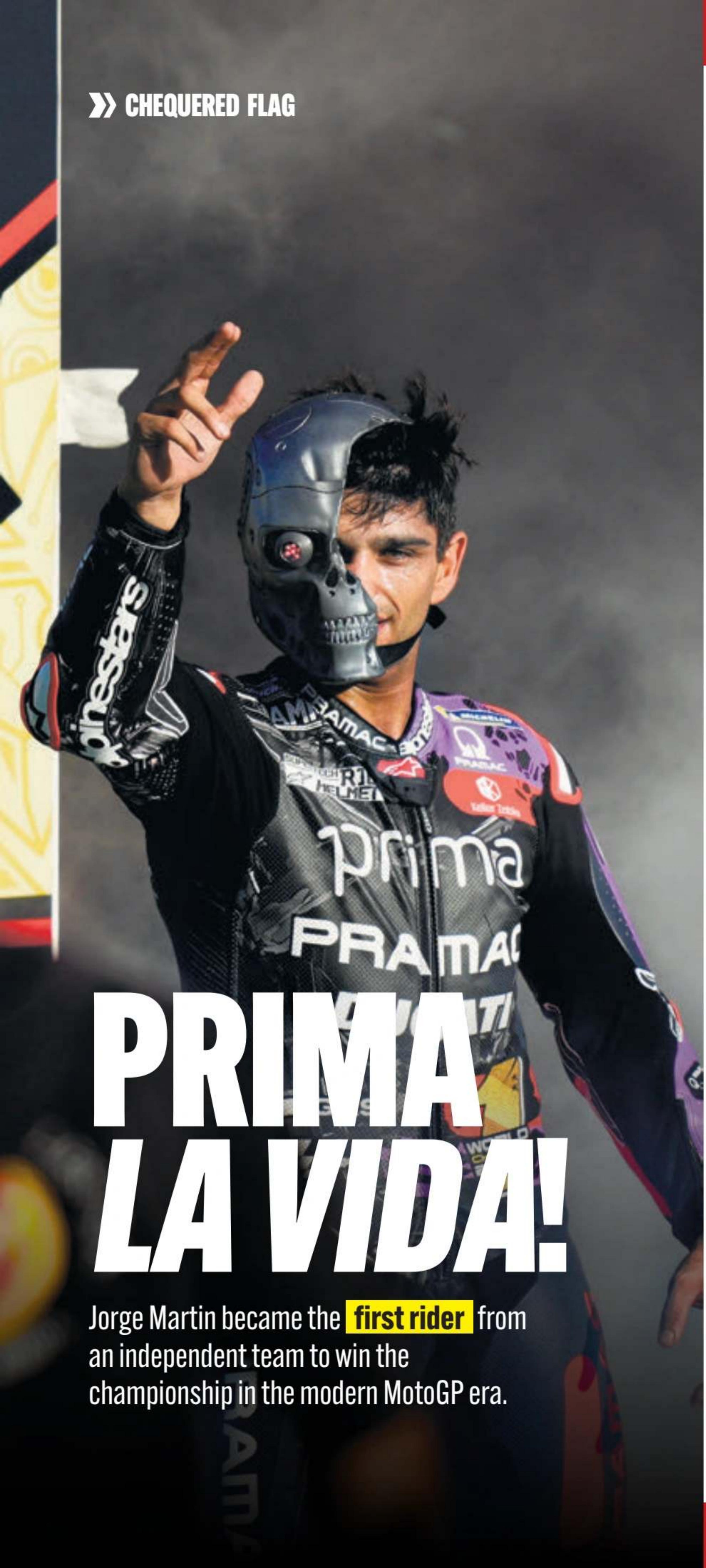
Now a full-time PKL captain, Ashu explains how he adapts his team's approach according to match situations. "If we find ourselves trailing by a substantial margin, we shift our focus to tightening our defensive line and prolonging the match. As the game enters its final phase, we intensify our offensive tactics, employing aggressive raiding and defensive strategies."

As his PKL career flourishes, Ashu is driven to excel and ultimately secure a spot on the Indian team, aiming for Asian Games gold.

"The aim is to represent India. Winning the Asian Games gold for the country is the ultimate dream for any kabaddi player," concludes Ashu.

As PKL enters a new decade, kabaddi is advancing rapidly, with players like Ashu leading the way.

» CHEQUERED FLAG



PRIMA LA VIDA!

Jorge Martin became the **first rider** from an independent team to win the championship in the modern MotoGP era.

Kavita Menon

kavita.menon@thehindu.co.in

At the final winners' ceremony of the 2024 MotoGP season, two-time world champion Francesco Bagnaia stood atop the podium — alongside Marc Marquez and Jorge Martin — after winning the Solidarity Grand Prix in Barcelona, Spain. The Italian anthem echoed along the main straight as teams and spectators watched the top three riders one last time this year.

But there was a bright, wide smile spread across Martin's face, despite standing on the third step. Everyone knew what it meant. The Spaniard, who started the race in fourth, had achieved what he had set out to do at the beginning of this season. **After 20 thrilling races, Prima Pramac's Martin was crowned the 2024 MotoGP World Champion, with a 10-point advantage over Bagnaia.**

There were joyous celebrations and raw emotions as the 26-year-old crossed the finish line, becoming the first rider from an independent team to win the championship in the modern MotoGP era. [An independent team, like Prima Pramac Racing, partners with a factory, such as Ducati, to use their bikes and technology].

Martin held his nerve when it mattered most, delivering an error-free weekend to secure his maiden crown while denying his rival a third successive one.

What began as yet another season of 'The Rematch' (a term used to describe a high-stakes showdown between two contenders for the championship) kept fans on the edge

Dream come true: This was Martin's maiden MotoGP crown. Defending champion Francesco Bagnaia came second in the standings. REUTERS

of their seats until the very end. A battle between Martin and Bagnaia was always on the cards, especially considering how the previous season concluded: Bagnaia clinched his second title with a comfortable 39-point margin over Martin.

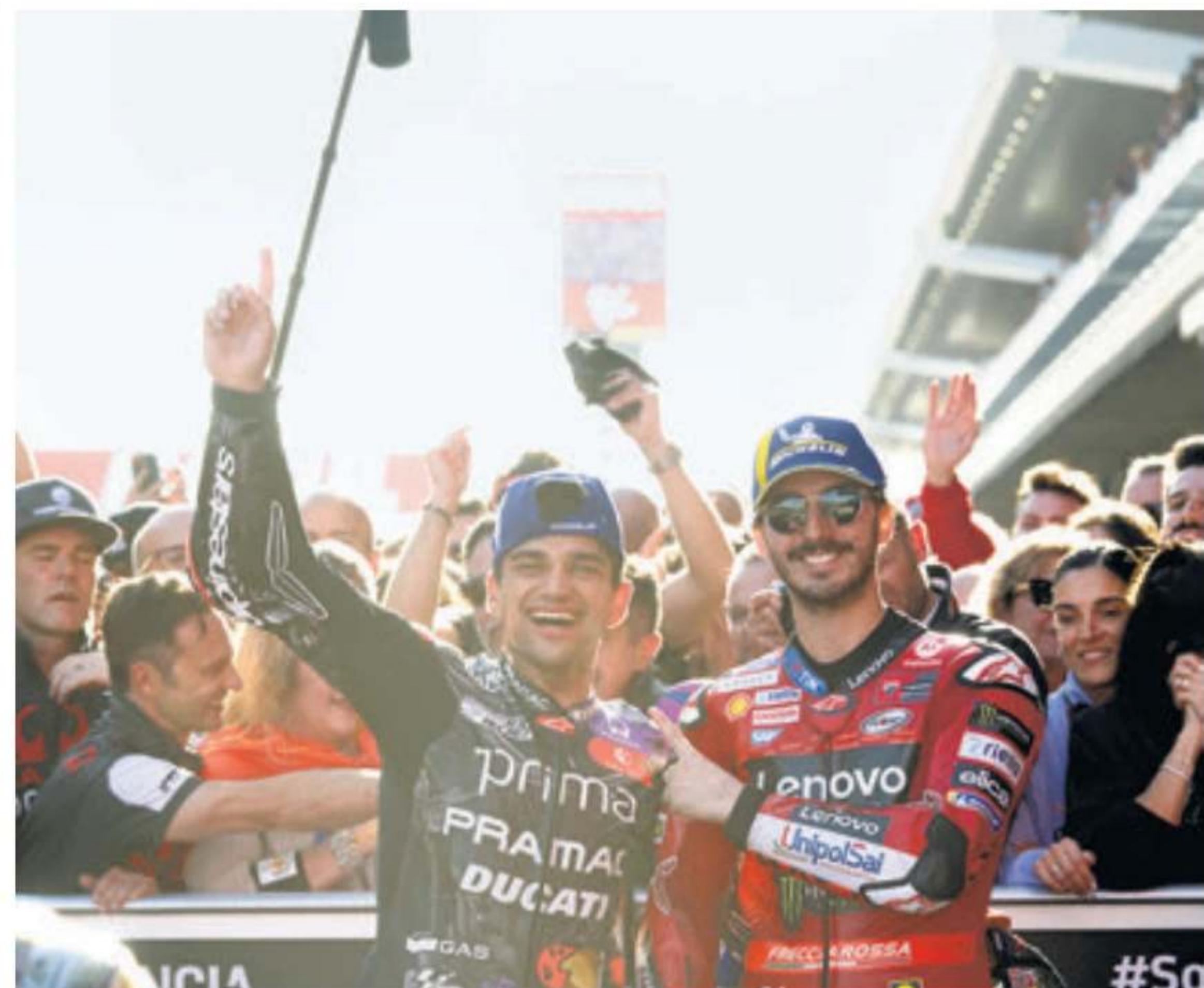
However, since the opening round in March, Martin was a man on a mission. He announced his championship challenge with a sprint victory in Qatar, followed by a P3 in the main race. Victory in Portugal in the next round put Martin at the top of the points table, a position he only relinquished to Bagnaia once. This time, Martin ensured he protected his lead by working on the one factor the lack of which he knew had cost him previously — consistency.

His strong suit has always been the shorter sprint races, and he maintained that trend, securing seven wins and 10 podium finishes in 20 races. However, it was his improved GP results that bolstered his campaign. Martin appeared on the Sunday podium 15 times — including three race wins — and maintained a critical nine-race point-scoring streak, consistently finishing in the top three. But Bagnaia never stopped knocking at his door, making use of every opportunity to edge past, or at least attempt to.

Bagnaia won a stunning 11 of 20 races, including the penultimate round in Malaysia, to keep himself in contention. The 27-year-old had a better start to the weekend at the Circuit de Barcelona-Catalunya, the stand-in venue for Valencia's Circuit Ricardo Tormo, which was dropped due to catastrophic floods in the region. Martin could only qualify fourth, handing the advantage to pole-sitter Bagnaia, who now had two attempts to cut the 24-point deficit.



GETTY IMAGES



During the 12-lap affair, Enea Bastianini, Bagnaia's teammate, executed a perfectly timed overtake in the final lap to snatch second place from Martin, helping Bagnaia by the barest of margins and keeping his hopes alive. However, the bold move may not have been purely for Bagnaia's benefit, as Bastianini was also fighting Marquez for third in the championship.

Martin quickly climbed to second and maintained his pace behind the leader but had Bastianini breathing down his neck often. He certainly

didn't anticipate a move of that nature in the final lap, but the Pramac rider chose not to engage and settled for third, aware that a tense showdown was yet to come.

When the lights went out on Sunday, Martin once again got a good start and was behind Bagnaia before being passed by Marquez.

Close encounter: The nail-biting contest between Martin (left) and Bagnaia (right) kept fans on the edge of their seats until the very end.

GETTY IMAGES

Ahead of him were Ducati's new pairing for the 2025 season — a seat Martin had been vying for, which instead went to the 31-year-old Gresini rider. But at that moment, it mattered little. Martin knew he only needed a top-nine finish, and he achieved just that, though six places better.

Turning into the final corner, Martin was overwhelmed with disbelief and ecstasy, finally realising his dream at the culmination of a 10-year journey marred with injuries and setbacks.

A title that slipped through his fingers in 2023 was finally in his grasp, with Martin giving his team the perfect farewell gift. As he prepares to join Aprilia in 2025, the next conquest awaits — not hunting down his rival but defending his crown.

» CROSSWORD

N. SOORYA PRAKASH



ACROSS

- 1 & 19** Identify this Indian Formula 1 test driver for BWT Alpine Team. (4,5)
- 6** Who scored an unbeaten hundred for England which helped it win the second ODI versus the West Indies in North Sound? (4)
- 8 & 3** Which NBA player joined his legendary father for the first time for LA Lakers in its opening fixture on October 23, 2024? (6,5)
- 13** Who is appointed as the new head coach of Punjab Kings IPL team for the 2025 season? (5)
- 17 & 21** Who is appointed as the new chief of BCCI's Anti-Corruption Unit? (6,5)
- 18** Which city in Kazakhstan hosted the Asian Table Tennis Championships recently? (6)
- 27** Which Indian teenage squash sensation recently won her seventh PSA Challenger title at the NSW Open 2024? (6)
- 28** Which American tennis player became the youngest ever to win the WTA final in Riyadh on November 9, 2024? (4)
- 29 & 10** Who became the most

expensive player of the Women's Hockey India League auction held recently? (5,5)

DOWN

- 1** Who scored a hundred for the West Indies and won the player of the match award also in its ODI against England in Bridgetown? (4)
- 2 & Across 30** Which Pakistani fast bowler ended up with most wickets in the three-match ODI series versus Australia? (5,4)
- 4** Which Indian fast bowler made his debut and played in all three T20Is held recently against Bangladesh? (6)
- 5 & 12** Name the Pakistani spinner who won the player of the match award in its second Test against England played in Multan? (5,4)
- 7 & 24** Which Irish fast bowler took four wickets in the second T20I against South Africa enabling Ireland to win and square the two-match series held recently? (4,5)
- 9** What is the nickname of the city which hosted the third Test match between Pakistan and
- England held recently? (5)
- 11** Name this Sri Lankan wicketkeeper who scored an unbeaten hundred versus New Zealand in the second Test held in Galle in September 2024? (5)
- 15 & 14** Who is traded off from UP to RCB for the WPL 2025 season? (5,5)
- 16 & 6** Who took most wickets for England in the three-Test series versus Pakistan in October? (4,5)
- 20** Who recently won a historic 28th World title in the World Billiards Championship held in Doha on November 9, 2024? (6)
- 22** Who scored the first hat-trick in the current season of Serie A? (5)
- 23** Which flamboyant southpaw from India scored a superb 53 off just 29 balls in the second T20I versus Bangladesh held in Delhi? (5)
- 25** Who won the Australian Moto GP race held in October 2024? (4)
- 26** Who was the match referee for the India versus Bangladesh Test and T20I series held recently? (4)



SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD



M. VEDHAN

National championship format needs to evolve, says Dilip Tirkey

Hockey India president Dilip Tirkey, who witnessed the final of the 14th Senior Men's National Championship 2024 at the Mayor Radhakrishnan Hockey Stadium in Chennai, spoke about his federation's vision to restructure the tournament and make it more competitive to safeguard hockey's future in the country.

"The national championship needs to evolve in terms of the format. It has been going on for over 80 years in the same tradition. The one-sided pool matches are not good for the future of Indian hockey. Even the spectators will not attend if there is no competition. We are thinking of revamping the format and introducing a new division for the weaker teams," the former India captain told *Sportstar*.

While all current senior national team players participated in the 2023 senior nationals ahead of the Paris Olympics, only a handful were involved this year. The Hockey India chief explained this decision as a strategy to rest the players after a demanding international schedule, preparing them for the upcoming revamped Hockey India League.

For the record, Odisha hammered two-time champion Haryana 5-1 in the final, while Uttar Pradesh beat Manipur 2-1 to bag the bronze medal.

SAIKAT CHAKRABORTY

» INDIAN PLAYGROUND

SPORTOON



1

Aravindh Chithambaram secured the title by defeating Levon Aronian (USA) 2-0 in a blitz tie-break during the second edition of the Chennai Grandmasters Classical Chess Tournament, held at the Anna Centenary Library Auditorium in Chennai. In the final round, it was a three-way tie between Arjun Erigaisi (4.5), Aravindh (4.5), and Aronian (4.5) for the championship. Since Aravindh had the best tie-break in terms of direct encounter, he was given a bye to face the winner of the Arjun-Aronian blitz tie-break (two games). But as that tie-break once again ended in a tie (1-1), Arjun and Aronian played an Armageddon decider. Aronian won by virtue of holding Arjun to a



Aravindh Chithambaram (left) and V. Pranav, with their prizes.

B.JOTHI RAMALINGAM

draw with black pieces. V. Pranav drew with Leon Luke Mendonca in the final round to secure the Challengers title.

S. PRASANNA VENKATESAN



"We will be starting our new academies in some of the private and public universities," said Rajasthan Sports Minister Col Rajyavardhan Singh Rathore, during the Sportstar Sports Conclave — Focus Rajasthan, at the Poornima University in Jaipur.

R.V. MOORTHY

Will launch mega talent hunt in Rajasthan ahead of 2036 Olympics, says Rathore

Olympic silver medallist and Rajasthan's Minister of Youth Affairs and Sports, Colonel Rajyavardhan Singh Rathore, laid out an extensive plan for the development of sport in the State during the *Sportstar Sports Conclave — Focus Rajasthan*, at Poornima University in Jaipur.

"In Rajasthan, we have four years ahead [of us]. We have made some major decisions. To begin with, India has officially applied to host the 2036 Olympics, and I am sure we will get it. As preparation for the next 12 years, in Rajasthan, we will conduct a mega talent hunt for children aged between 10 and 14 next year. In India, all the athletes who come to the forefront do so because of their skills. But the

physical part of the talent is neglected, and only the skill part of the talent is highlighted. But skill can only take you so far. Physical ability, mental ability, and willpower are of utmost importance to bridge the gap between being one of the athletes and being a champion," Rathore said while delivering the keynote address.

"After the talent hunt, in 12 years we will hope that when India hosts the Olympics in 2036, Rajasthan wins the most medals for India. Education, nutrition, coaching, and atmosphere are important, and an isolated academy for this is not a good idea. We will be starting our new academies in some of the private and public universities," he added.

"With the help of the Government of





Col Rathore presenting the Unsung Hero Award to former athlete Sriram Singh. PICS: R.V. MOORTHY

Rajasthan, we want to set up some centres of excellence with some top corporates who have their hearts in the right place. They will provide international-level facilities and guidance. In the next four years, we will have one stadium in every district for sure. Our ambition is even higher: one stadium in every *tehsil* of Rajasthan. We would create 50 stadiums per year. We will also start Khelo Rajasthan from this year, along the same lines as Khelo India. We will also have our own version of TOPS [Target Olympic Podium Scheme]. The best athletes will be supported by us. We have formed a new policy for sports, and we have formed a new youth policy as well," Rathore said.

Hailing Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Rathore said, "Sports has received an impetus since 2014. I have seen the whole spectrum of Indian sports. I have worked at the central and state levels in sports. Prime Minister Narendra Modi ji has started a revolution in Indian sports. Khelo India and TOPS started it, giving Indian sports a new standard.

"TOPS has marked a transformative moment for Indian sports, raising the profile and standards of athletes across the nation. This initiative brought in professional management to oversee all aspects of athlete preparation, including final training, boarding, and lodging, ensuring a seamless experience.

"Athletes were provided with daily access to top-tier facilities and sports science support, whether they were training in India or abroad. A groundbreaking addition was



Archer Pranjal Tholiya receives the Young Achiever Award from Col Rathore. Sportstar Editor Ayon Sengupta is at right.

the introduction of a pocket allowance, with the top 200 Olympic medal hopefuls each receiving Rs. 50,000 per month to aid in their training and development."

Rathore also highlighted the challenges athletes faced during his playing days, while emphasising significant improvements in facilities available to athletes today.

"I remember our colleagues from that era, when we used to travel by train. The accommodations we stayed in and the way we managed were vastly different back then. For breakfast, we often had simple meals like milk and jalebi. Just thinking about the nutritional value of those meals compared to what athletes have access to today is remarkable. It's incredible how far we've come in terms of nutrition and overall athlete support.

"Today, with events like Khelo India, there are seven or eight hotels reserved for the players, with AC accommodations. Players travel by air, and the games are broadcast in high definition, reflecting the level of professionalism involved. Each Khelo India event hosts over a thousand athletes, and they receive an annual stipend of Rs. 5 lakh for up to eight years. This is a huge step forward, providing substantial support to athletes — something we could only dream of back in the day."

Rathore also honoured Sriram Singh, one of India's greatest middle-distance runners, with the Unsung Champion Award, recognising his exceptional contributions to the sport. He presented the Young Achiever Award to Pranjal Tholiya, a rising star in Indian archery, celebrating her promising talent and achievements.

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Lalit Modi taught us what we can do with cricket, says former Rajasthan captain Sanjay Vyas



At the Sportstar Sports Conclave - Focus Rajasthan, held at Poornima University, former Rajasthan cricket team captain Sanjay Vyas praised administrator Lalit Modi for transforming the State's cricket structure. "I have seen many changes. When I started, Rajasthan cricket was run by the Rungtas, who managed it like a family business. Lalit Modi brought professionalism. We didn't know how to commercialise cricket until Modi showed us. He organised an exhibition match between the England team and Rajasthan players, raising Rs. 1 crore for Rajasthan cricket and increasing our DA fourfold when we requested," Vyas shared in a discussion led by Sportstar's senior assistant editor, Shayan Acharya.

Vyas attributed Rajasthan's back-to-back Ranji Trophy wins in 2010/11 and 2011/12 to Modi's administration. "We needed a coach, and he wanted only the best. He appointed Greg Chappell and set up a system. By 2009, a pool of fast bowlers was established, leading to our Ranji victories," he said.

Gagan Khoda, former India international and Rajasthan player, highlighted the State's recent surge in talent. "Self-belief has grown, especially with the IPL's influence. Sharing dressing rooms with top players has boosted confidence and mental toughness. Players like Rahul Chahar, Khaleel Ahmed, and Ravi Bishnoi have represented India. Now, talent is emerging

(L-R) Gagan Khoda, Sanjay Vyas and Rajeev Khanna in conversation with Sportstar senior assistant editor Shayan Acharya during the Sportstar Sports Conclave — Focus Rajasthan at the Poornima University. R.V. MOORTHY

from all districts, not just major cities like Jaipur," Khoda noted.

Despite this, Rajasthan has struggled to produce Test players, with Pankaj Singh being the last to earn a Test cap. Khoda stressed the importance of better infrastructure. "We need grounds accessible to all, including remote districts, which report to main centres like Jaipur. Diverse playing conditions are essential; we mainly played at the KL Saini ground, with limited matches at the Sawai Mansingh Stadium. More exposure to different pitches is needed," Khoda added.

Rajasthan Royals vice president Rajeev Khanna announced a significant step forward: "We have signed an MoU with the Rajasthan government for a Rs. 10,000 crore multi-sport hub. It will be a complete sports city."

Khanna also shared efforts to develop women's cricket. "We recently held a girls' talent hunt involving 1,500 schools from districts like Bikaner. Though we couldn't join the Women's Premier League, we aim to create a talent pool for state and WPL teams," he said.



Rahul Singh: 'Sports and education are not 180 degrees apart; they are one'



(L-R) Hogne Hide, Co-owner of Norway Chess; Rajeev Khanna, Vice President of Rajasthan Royals; Rahul Singh, Director of Poornima University; Vivek Lodha, Co-founder and Director of the Premier Handball League; and moderator Prashant S., Partner at KPMG. R.V. MOORTHY

Rahul Singh, Director of Poornima University, shared his deep commitment to sports during the *Sportstar Sports Conclave - Focus Rajasthan*. Reflecting on the university's foundation, he credited his mother for inspiring the emphasis on sports, saying, "When we started Poornima University, my mother was a major inspiration. She always encouraged us to stay fit and play sports." Singh highlighted how sport has helped channel youthful energy, particularly in addressing aggression and negative behaviour, adding, "Sports became the perfect solution to channel that energy."

Singh also shared significant developments at Poornima, revealing the university's investment of approximately Rs 2-2.5 crore in sports infrastructure. He further announced plans to offer new courses in sports management and sports sciences. The university has also requested the Rajasthan government's support in setting up a sports academy and arena. On November 7, Singh signed an MoU at the Rising Rajasthan Pre-Summit, committing Rs 140 crore for the development of sports. He emphasised, "For us, sports and education go hand in hand. They are not 180 degrees apart; they are one." The session on 'Sports Industry Powering Rajasthan's Economic Growth' was moderated by Prasanth S, Partner at KPMG India.

Another panel titled 'Harnessing Science and Technology for Sports', moderated by *Sportstar*'s senior sub-editor, Santadeep Dey, featured insightful discussions from prominent figures in the sports industry. Hogne Hide, co-owner of Norway Chess, highlighted the transformative power of chess, especially in India, where the game is seeing rapid growth. He expressed

excitement over the increasing youth engagement with chess, noting, "Chess has evolved into a global phenomenon, fascinating people with its rich history."

Anil Kumar, founder of Great SportsTech, reflected on the progress of sports infrastructure in India, citing a shift in the private sector's perception of sports as financially viable. "In the last 10-15 years, there has been significant investment in the sector, with both private and public sectors contributing," Kumar noted.

Martin Owens, Head Coach at Reliance Foundation Youth Sport Odisha High Performance Centre, shared a contrasting perspective on coaching in India and the UK. "The big difference between Indian athletes and those in the UK is the passion," Owens observed. "In India, sports are often seen as a route to a job, whereas in the UK, coaching is volunteer-based and driven by a love for the sport."

(L-R) Martin Owens, Head Coach of the Reliance Foundation Youth Sport Odisha High Performance Centre; Nasir Ali, MD & CEO of Gallant Sports; Anil Kumar, Founder & MD of Great SportsTech; and Dr. M.S. Dasgupta, Senior Professor in the Department of Mechanical Engineering at BITS Pilani and President of the Sports Engineering Association, addressed the gathering. R.V. MOORTHY



Paris Paralympics bronze medallist Mona Agarwal hopes for sustained support for parasports



At the Sportstar Sports Conclave - Focus Rajasthan, held at Poornima University, Jaipur, Paris Paralympics 2024 bronze medallist shooter Mona Agarwal shared the challenges she faced with equipment upgrades before the event. "The government's schemes are good, but many athletes don't receive the necessary support. I secured a Paralympic quota in March but struggled for six months to upgrade my equipment, eventually competing with basic gear," said Mona during a panel moderated by Suresh Balakrishna, Chief Revenue Officer of *The Hindu Group*.

Mona, who began shooting in December 2021 after participating in powerlifting, volleyball, and athletics since 2016, highlighted societal barriers that deter women from sports. "Progress for women is difficult to accept here, and many face hurdles they can't overcome. More women need opportunities," she stated.

Former squash international Surbhi Misra, head of the Surbhi Misra Foundation, echoed Mona's concerns, citing limited corporate and government aid. "Support exists but is barely sufficient. Corporations should focus on specific sports. Spreading thin leads to reduced outcomes," she noted, adding, "What we need is for corporations to choose a few sports. When you try to take up too many sports, it does not work. The government cannot do everything. [For example], they give us Rs 2 crore and want six medals in return. And if the success does not come, the funds go down next time. The players also say the same. It is us pushing them. Another problem then is to go to the

(L-R) Manjusha Kanwar (DGM, Sports – IndianOil), Surbhi Misra (Squash international), Anupam Nidhi (CSR Head, Vedanta Group & Hindustan Zinc) and Mona Agarwal (Paris Paralympics bronze medallist in shooting) in conversation with Suresh Balakrishna, Chief Revenue Officer of The Hindu Group. R.V. MOORTHY

grassroots. We are looking at just 30-40 players, what about the next crop? We need to work on the next generation."

Anupam Nidhi, Hindustan Zinc's CSR Head, emphasised grassroots success with the Zinc Football Academy, which has produced players like Mohammed Kaif, part of India's U-17 SAFF Championship squad. "Infrastructure, coaching, and technology are key. Our holistic approach has brought results," said Nidhi. She pointed out India's underinvestment in sports, citing a CSR spend of about one per cent in sports out of an overall Rs 25,000 CSR spend.

Commonwealth medallist Manjusha Kanwar, now DGM - Sports at Indian Oil, shared that corporate focus on women's sports has increased, driven by Olympic successes. "At Indian Oil, women receive

equal priority. We've also invested in para scholarships with equal distribution for men and women," she said. To boost grassroots engagement, Manjusha urged deeper outreach into districts and villages and stressed that the government and stakeholders must collaborate effectively, and allocate clear roles to avoid repetition.





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Col. Rajyavardhan Singh Rathore

Olympic Silver Medallist & Cabinet Minister
Industrial & Commerce
Youth Affairs & Sports Department

Yuzvendra Chahal

Renowned Cricketer
Indian Cricket Team &
Rajasthan Royals

Surbhi Misra

Vice President
Squash Racket Federation of India
Former International Squash Player
Maharana Pratap Awardee

Trent Boult

Renowned Cricketer
New Zealand Cricket Team &
Rajasthan Royals

Ajay Jadeja

Former Cricketer
Indian Cricket Team

Divyakriti Singh

Gold Medalist, Equestrian
Asian Games 2022
Arjuna Awardee



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'Polo not a sport for privileged few; it is for everyone' – Lt. Col. Vishal Chauhan and Col. Garcha



A thought-provoking session titled 'The Legacy of Polo' took place at Poornima University during the *Sportstar Sports Conclave - Focus Rajasthan*. The discussion featured two polo stalwarts: Col. K.S. Garcha, former India polo captain, and Lt. Col. Vishal Chauhan, former India polo player, who shared their insights on the sport's cultural significance and its future in India. The session was moderated by Sportstar's senior sub-editor, Lavanya L.

For Chauhan, polo's allure began at the army academy, where he first picked up the polo stick. He recalled how his early exposure to horses, thanks to his father's military career, sparked an interest in equestrian sports, but it was polo that truly captivated him. "When I sat on the horse and picked up the stick, I didn't want to play any other sport — it was addictive," Chauhan said. He stressed the profound bond between the rider and horses, describing it as "another being, an animal that has its own soul."

Polo's roots trace back to Central Asia, with Genghis Khan's legendary matches, and it was revived in 19th-century India by British officer Robert Stewart. The sport gained global recognition as an elite pastime among royalty. In post-1947 India, the army preserved polo's legacy, and today, it thrives in nearly 100 countries.

Chauhan also highlighted polo's indigenous origins in Manipur, where the sport is still played in its original

Col. K. S. Garcha and Lt. Col. Vishal Chauhan weigh in during a panel discussion moderated by Sportstar's senior sub-editor, Lavanya Lakshmi Narayanan. R.V. MOORTHY

form. "Polo is indigenous to India; it originated in Manipur, and we still play the original version in Ladakh and Manipur, where the rules are different," he said. He noted how polo is woven into Rajasthan's folklore, adding to its cultural significance.

Despite its rich history, polo in India faces a stigma, often seen as elitist. "Unfortunately, polo today is at its lowest ebb. It is a heritage sport, and it is important for us to keep it alive. We should ask the government to provide support and recognition for the sport, ensuring that it continues to thrive for future generations," Garcha said. He also highlighted the potential for expanding polo in Rajasthan, particularly in cities like Jaipur and Jodhpur, but noted the need for investment and patronage. "India is one of the cheapest places to play polo, with army clubs offering affordable horse rentals," Garcha said. "However, we need patrons to support the sport."

Both experts agreed that polo could flourish in India with stronger investment, government backing, and a shift in public perception. With the right support, polo can once again become a cherished part of India's sporting landscape.

Divyakriti Singh: Need to earmark priority sports to produce Olympic champions from Rajasthan



At Sportstar Sports Conclave — Focus Rajasthan, Divyakriti Singh Rathore, a gold medallist in the Dressage Team event at the 2023 Asian Games, highlighted the need for more corporate and government support to improve equestrian infrastructure in India. The panel discussion, titled 'Project Gold - Producing Medal Winners from Rajasthan', was moderated by Sportstar assistant editor Jonathan Selvaraj.

"Rajasthan has the history, but India lacks the infrastructure needed to compete with top equestrian nations. In terms of weather, climate, coaching, and equipment, we are not yet on par. I began riding in India during school, but when I chose to pursue it professionally, I had to move to Europe in 2020 and have been there for four years. My ultimate aim is to do it from India," Divyakriti said.

She acknowledged the sport's growth in India, highlighting Madhya Pradesh's proactive approach. "In the last three years, the sport has grown exponentially. Around 100 horses are imported annually, and riding schools, associations, and clubs have emerged. It's an expensive sport and needs corporate and government backing. Madhya Pradesh's model, where they send riders and acquire horses abroad, is exemplary. They've already sent six riders to Europe for the 2028 Olympics — a great example to learn from," she added.

Divyakriti urged the state to earmark 'priority' sports in order to produce Olympic champions. "Rajasthan has a rich equestrian history. The last gold medal before

(L-R) Divyakriti Singh, Divyansh Panwar, Rajat Chauhan, Shagun Chaudhary, and Ripu Daman Singh share their views with Sportstar assistant editor Jonathan Selvaraj.

R.V. MOORTHY

ours was 41 years ago. In the past decade, over 15 riders from Rajasthan have medalled at the Asian Games, with many Arjuna Awardees. The sports policy exists, but we need to identify priority sports like shooting, archery, athletics, and equestrian. With the right support, we can move forward," she stated.

Shagun Chowdhary, the first Indian Olympian in clay pigeon shooting, pointed out that investment must go beyond infrastructure and focus on coaching quality. "Rajasthan has invested in infrastructure but lags in sports science and conditioning. A poor coach can instil bad habits that are hard to unlearn. Investment in good coaching is vital," she noted.

Para coach and Dronacharya Awardee Ripu Daman Singh stressed the need for infrastructure in smaller towns.

"Governments make promises, but real progress needs committed athletes and coaches. Even from my small hostel, we produced Arjuna, Khel Ratna, Padma Shri, and Padma Bhushan awardees," he said, urging more comprehensive support.

Archery world champion Rajat Chauhan and Asian Games gold medallist Divyansh Singh Panwar also highlighted the importance of grassroots engagement, the role of coaches, and family support in an athlete's journey.





FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Ryan Fernando



FOR MORE
STORIES

Debunking protein myths

Here's everything you need to know about protein supplementation, so you can make choices that **truly benefit your health.**

As a nutritionist, I've had the privilege of working with a wide range of clients — from athletes to weekend warriors and anyone just looking to feel healthier and stronger. And let me tell you — one question never fails to come up: what's the real deal with protein?

You've probably heard all kinds of myths floating around about protein supplements: "Do I really need them?" "Won't they make me bulky?" "Are they safe in the long run?" The confusion is real, and the truth often gets lost in the noise. So, let's cut through the clutter together.

In this article, I'm diving into the science, the myths, and everything you need to know about protein supplementation, so you can make choices that truly benefit your health and goals. Ready to clear up the confusion? Let's jump right into it.

Myth#1: High-protein diets are bad for kidney health

One of the most persistent myths I encounter is the idea that high-protein diets are bad for kidney health. Many believe that protein places excessive strain on the kidneys, but research has shown that for healthy individuals with no pre-existing kidney conditions, this simply isn't the case. The body can handle high protein intake just fine, especially within the recommended range of 1.2–2.0 grams per kilogram of body weight. For those with kidney issues, a lower protein intake might be advised, but for the majority of us, there's no need to worry about kidney damage.

Myth#2: Protein leads to fat gain

Another misconception is that excess protein automatically leads to fat gain. This idea often stems from the belief that protein is stored as fat when you eat too much. The truth is that any excess calories — whether from protein, carbohydrates, or fat — can contribute to weight gain if you consume more than your body needs. However, protein has a unique benefit: it

helps preserve lean muscle mass, especially during weight loss, leading to better body composition. So, protein itself isn't the problem; it's excess calories in general.

Myth#3: Plant-based diets can't provide enough protein

For those following plant-based diets, there's often concern about whether they can consume enough protein to support muscle growth and training. While plant proteins might not contain as much of certain essential amino acids as animal-based proteins, the key is variety. Research shows that vegans and vegetarians can absolutely meet their protein needs by eating a variety of plant-based foods like soy, beans, lentils, and other legumes. In fact, vegans and vegetarians may need to consume slightly more protein than those who eat animal products to meet their amino acid requirements, but with proper planning, it's very achievable.

Myth#4: Cheese and peanut butter are good protein sources

When it comes to foods like cheese and peanut butter, while they do provide some protein, they're also high in fat and shouldn't be relied upon as primary protein sources, especially if you're looking to increase protein intake without adding extra calories from fat.



Leaner protein sources such as chicken, fish, and legumes are much more efficient in helping you meet your protein goals without overloading on fats.

Myth#5: Meat consumption is always unhealthy

I also often hear concerns about the health risks of consuming meat. While it's true that processed meats have been associated with certain health risks, lean, unprocessed meats can still be part of a balanced diet. Reducing processed meat is a good strategy, but moderate consumption of lean meats like chicken, turkey, or fish — when balanced with plenty of vegetables, fruits, and whole grains — can contribute to a nutritious and well-rounded diet.

Myth#6: Protein is only for physically active people

There's also the common belief that protein is only necessary for those who are physically active. In reality, protein is essential for everyone, regardless of activity level. It supports numerous bodily functions like immune health, tissue repair, and hormone production. For

sedentary individuals, the general recommendation is around 0.8 grams of protein per kilogram of body weight, while active individuals may need more. Regardless of your activity level, protein is a vital nutrient that helps keep your body functioning properly.

Myth#7: You need protein right after exercise

Many clients also ask if they need to consume protein right after exercise. This idea comes from the concept of the 'anabolic window', which suggests that consuming protein within an hour after a workout maximises muscle recovery. While it's true that consuming protein post exercise can be helpful, recent research indicates that total daily protein intake is much more important. Whether you eat your protein before or after exercise, as long as you're meeting your overall protein needs throughout the day, muscle growth and recovery will occur.

Myth#8: Endurance athletes don't need much protein

For endurance athletes, protein intake becomes even more

Be on the move: Protein is essential for everyone, regardless of activity level. It supports numerous bodily functions like immune health, tissue repair, and hormone production.

GETTY IMAGES

important. While carbohydrates fuel endurance exercise, protein helps repair muscles and supports immune function.

Studies suggest that endurance athletes require 1.2–1.6 grams of protein per kilogram of body weight, especially during intense training periods, to support recovery and muscle repair.

Myth#9: Protein supplements are a must

Lastly, protein supplements can be convenient, but they aren't necessary for everyone. Whole foods like lean meats, dairy, and legumes provide plenty of protein and are packed with additional nutrients your body needs. Supplements are useful if you have higher protein needs or find it difficult to get enough protein from food alone, but they should never replace whole food sources of protein.

Gimmicks not unusual in sport

Before the advent of social media and the arrival of '**influencers**' who perform culturally vital jobs, gimmicks were seen as a bit of a giggle, no more.

Suresh Menon

Sport and hustles have a long relationship. A good tennis or golf hustler works on the ego of an opponent, challenging him to put his money where his mouth is. After lulling him into a false sense of superiority, he then takes him to the cleaners. Paul Newman was nominated for an Oscar for his role in *The Hustler*, where he exaggerates his drunkenness, plays down his skill and gets the better of challengers at the pool table.

Bobby Riggs was a legendary hustler (he called his autobiography *Court Hustler*). In 1939, after he won two titles at Wimbledon, the singles and the doubles, he bet on a triple and cleared 100,000 dollars after winning the mixed doubles with Alice Marble.

In 1973, aged 55, he challenged Margaret Court, the top women's player, to a match that garnered enormous publicity after he made disparaging remarks about the women's game. He won in straight sets against an opponent 25 years younger. Billie Jean King, who had initially declined to play Riggs, now decided to — it was billed the *Battle of the Sexes* — and beat him in straight sets for the winner-take-all 100,000 dollars.

Before the advent of social media and the arrival of 'influencers' who perform culturally vital jobs, gimmicks like these were seen as a bit of a giggle, no more.

After the Netflix-sponsored 'fight' between Mike Tyson and Jake Paul, we wonder if that is a route sport might take more regularly. The money is huge (the



Publicity stunt?: After the Netflix-sponsored 'fight' between Mike Tyson and Jake Paul, we wonder if that is a route sport might take more regularly. AFP

boxers were expected to make around 100 million, the amount Floyd Mayweather is said to have received for 'fighting' a star of mixed martial arts, Conor McGregor), for one. Public interest is high, and advertisers come into homes riding on the novelty. As always, hype is its own hype.

But is it sport? Of course not. If anything, it is an insult to sport, and in the ideal world, the Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation would not have sanctioned the fight. But they wanted a bite of the pie, too.

Those arguing for the purity of sport and the way former stars push it into disrepute stand no chance of influencing anything. The real influencer here, Jake, has 32 million (by one estimate) followers on social media and an audience of 7.6 billion (yes, billion!) on his *YouTube* channel. You can't argue with those

figures, especially when these are converted into dollars.

Gimmicks are not unusual in sport, and every time one is announced, someone always recalls P. T. Barnum's line about a sucker being born every minute. Muhammad Ali 'fought' Japanese wrestler Antonio Inoki back in 1976.

Ali threw six punches in all; the 'fight' was declared a draw, and both men walked away with honour intact and income enhanced by six million dollars.

After Tyson, then 39, lost his last professional fight to Kevin McBride, he said, "I do not have the guts to be in this sport anymore. I don't want to disrespect the sport that I love." Ah well!



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