SPORTSTAR

SATURDAY, JANUARY 4, 2025
₹100

FOLLOW US:
SPORTSTARWEB

POSTER

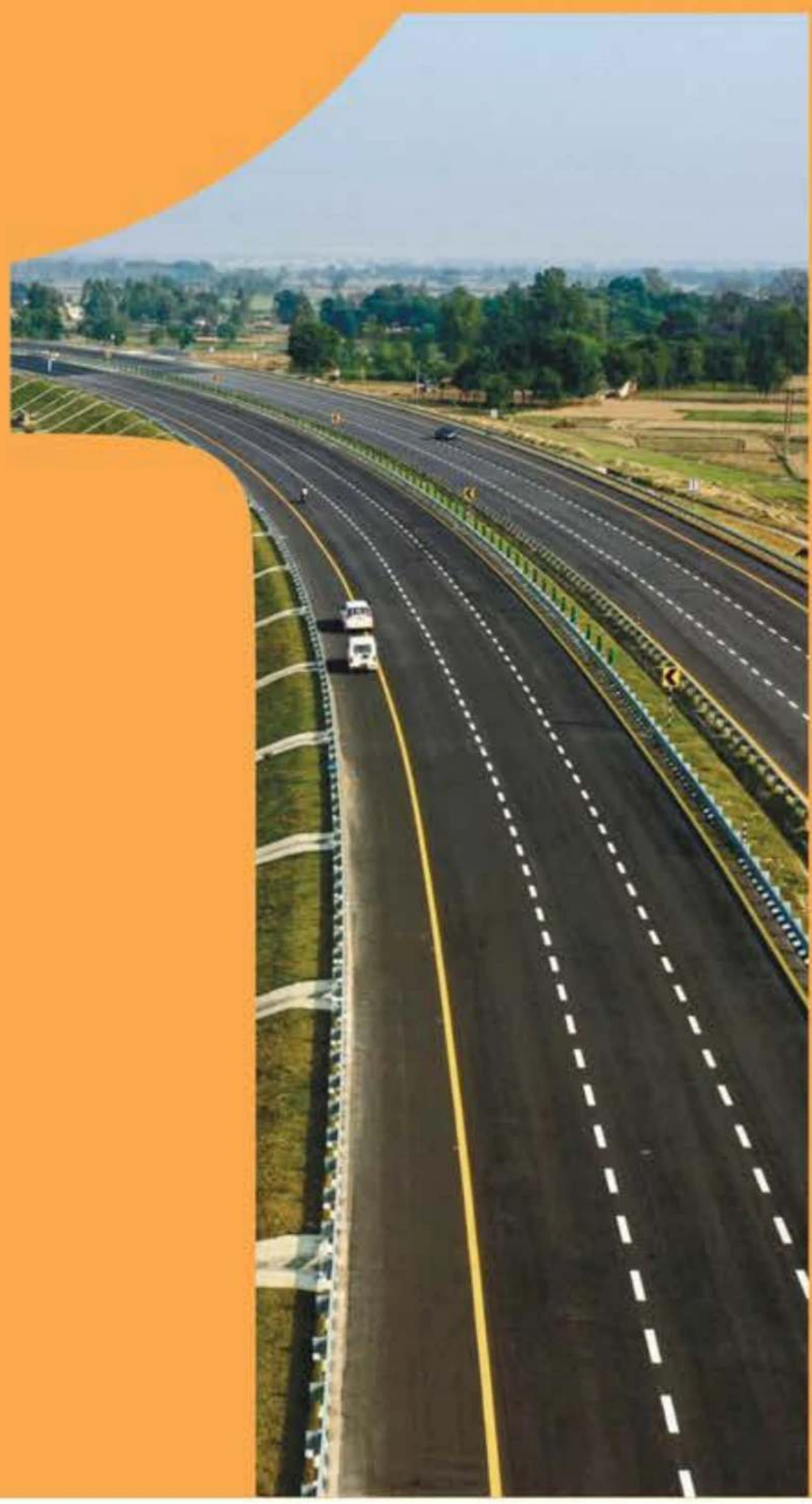
RAVICHANDRAN ASHWIN

HOCKEY INDIA LEAGUE

Long-awaited return, and a timely debut

CORONATION OF THE PRINCE

The 18-year-old belied his age to hold his nerves against defending champion Ding Liren and become the youngest-ever World champion



EXPRESSWAY STATE
UTTAR PRADESH

Maximum No. of Expressways

6 Operational, 7 Under Construction

- Purvanchal Expressway: Lucknow to Ghazipur (341 km.)
- Bundelkhand Expressway: Chitrakoot to Etawah (296 km.)
- Agra-Lucknow Expressway: Agra to Lucknow (302 km.)
- Yamuna Expressway: Greater Noida to Agra (165 km.)
- Delhi-Meerut Expressway: Meerut to Delhi (82 km.)
- Noida-Greater Noida Expressway (25 km.)

Information and Public Relations Department, U.P.

CONTENTS

Follow us: sportstarweb

Saturday, January 4, 2025
FOR THE DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 4, 2025

Volume 48 Number 1 ISSN 0971 359x 92 Pages

22

HIL – A MUCH-NEEDED SHOT IN THE ARM FOR HOCKEY IN INDIA

Features

18 **En Passant**
Viswanathan Anand on D. Gukesh's triumph

34 **Australia Tour Diary**
A warm-up done well

58 **Analysis**
The secret behind Joe Root's success

10
Cover Story
D. Gukesh

Just 18, the Indian became the 18th World champion and the youngest to do so, defeating the defending champion, Ding Liren, of China

Cover: D. Gukesh (FIDE/Eng Chin An)

Next week...

Celebrating the career of Ravichandran Ashwin

A Special Issue

Poster: Ravichandran Ashwin (Getty Images); Pages 43-50

www.sportstar.thehindu.com
mail to: sportstar@thehindu.co.in

Published by Nirmala Lakshman, Kasturi Buildings, 859, 860, Anna Salai, Chennai-600 002 and Printed by SDT Rao at Kala Jyothi Process Private Ltd, Plot no CFC-1&2, Survey No 18, E-City, SEZ & General Industrial Park, Raviryal & Srinagar (Village), Maheswaram(M), R.R.Dist, Telangana - 501359 on behalf of THG PUBLISHING PVT LTD., Chennai-600 002.

Editor: Ayon Sengupta (Editor responsible for selection of news under the PRP Act).
All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part without written permission is prohibited.

Disclaimer: Readers are requested to verify & make appropriate enquiries to satisfy themselves about the veracity of an advertisement before responding to any published in this magazine.
THG PUBLISHING PVT LTD., the Publisher & Owner of this magazine, does not vouch for the authenticity of any advertisement or advertiser or for any of the advertiser's products and/or services. In no event can the Owner, Publisher, Printer, Editor, Director/s, Employees of this magazine/company be held responsible/liable in any manner whatsoever for any claims and/or damages for advertisements in this magazine.
Air Surcharge:
Colombo ₹ 15.00 | Port Blair ₹ 10.00

Editorial Team
Editor: Ayon Sengupta
Convergence Editor: V. V. Rajasekhara Rao
Design: R. Ravikannan
Editorial Consultant: Vijay Lokapally
Sr. Assistant Editor: Shayan Acharya
Assistant Editor: Jonathan Selvaraj
Chief Sub-Editor: Karan Pillai
Sr. Sub-Editor/Sr. Reporter: Ayan Acharya, Aashin Prasad, Santadeep Dey, Lavanya Lakshmi Narayanan, Saikat Chakraborty
Sub-Editor/Reporter: Dhruva Prasad, Neeladri Bhattacharjee, Aneesh Dey, Netra V, Pranay Rajiv, Nihit Sachdeva, Abhishek Saini, Nigamanth P, Mayank, Anish P, Sahil Mathur, Joan Mathew Jacob, Rajdeep Saha, Anjali Joshi, Kavita Menon
Senior Multimedia Producer: Sivasankar A

For Subscription:
Email: customercare@thehindu.co.in
No: 18001021878

For Advertisement
National Sales Head
Satish K Mendon
Satish.mendon@thehindu.co.in

Region
Delhi – Antesh Kumar Verma
+91 9818798519
Bengaluru – Gurunatha Reddy
+91 9845529981
Chennai – Siva Kumar M
+91 9841585969

OFF-SIDE

Ayon Sengupta
sportstar@thehindu.co.in

THE PARADOX OF OLYMPIC AMBITION

In India, **until we stop** treating our coaches like background extras and start rewarding them, we are going to stay exactly where we are.

In Gujarat — most likely the potential host for the 2036 Olympics assuming India fends off competition from the likes of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey and gets the nod from the International Olympic Committee — over five thousand government primary schools, currently, don't have a playground. The State government, while answering a query at the Legislative Assembly in February 2024, admitted that 5,012 of its government primary schools don't have a playing arena. Gujarat has around 33,000 government primary schools and students in roughly one of six schools don't have a playing field.

But this isn't just a Gujarat-only issue. The State, in fact, does better than the rest of the country. Across India, according to a survey published by the Department of School Education and Literacy, Ministry of Education, Government of India, in 2022, around 3.5 lakh schools don't have playgrounds. Of the country's roughly 14.9 lakh schools, only 76 per cent provide a dedicated playing space. Among the larger states — Punjab (97.5%), Delhi (96.5%), Maharashtra (93.1%), Haryana (89.9%) — have fared well, while Bihar (50%), Odisha (64%), and West Bengal (66%) hover at or below the two-thirds mark.

It's not just the lack of playgrounds that plagues India's sporting dreams. In Tamil Nadu, earlier this year, the State government increased the number of students per Physical Education Teachers (PETs) in schools to 700 from the old ratio of one teacher per 250 to 400 students. Even with the relaxed ratio, Tamil Nadu still has around 1,300 vacancies for PE teachers, and primary schools in the State don't even have positions for PE teachers currently.

If we now pan out and look at the bigger picture — the Olympics — all this starts to feel even more distressing. Historically, host countries do quite well, finishing in the top 10 of the medals table. Though there have been outliers — Canada, at the 1976 Montreal Olympics, had the worst performance for a host nation, finishing 27th with 11 medals (five silver and six bronze). Brazil, in 2016, was in the 13th spot (seven gold, six silver, six bronze), while Greece was ranked 15th (six gold, six silver, four bronze) in 2004.

India, hoping to make an impression in 2036, would have to bridge an enormous gap. Its best-ever performance was in Tokyo, where it ended 48th, with one gold, two silver and four bronze medals. Germany's 10th place finish at the Paris Games came with a dozen golds and a tidy stack of silver (13) and bronze (8) medals.

As a nation, it's a strange kind of optimism we're banking on, hoping for a miracle without doing the groundwork: widening the base of the talent pyramid by improving the school and grassroots sports setup.

In Australia, the winner of 605 Summer Olympic medals, the PE teachers are the bulwark of the school education system. "Some of the highest-paid [teachers] in the teaching system in Australia are the physical education teachers because they alone are the ones that impact the child more than the entire teaching fraternity at an institution. They impact outcomes socially, physically, mentally, academically, and inclusion-wise. So, they are put on a pedestal in the Australian education system," says Australian John Gloster, the former conditioning coach of the Indian cricket team.

In India, until we stop treating our coaches like background extras and start rewarding them not just financially but also through education, upskilling, exposure and surrounding, we are going to stay exactly where we are, while the rest of the world sprints ahead.

ORTHO ONE®
Orthopaedic Speciality Centre

CONCUSSION

A word that has become increasingly familiar to the public, especially since Cricket, a sport historically resistant to substitution, introduced the Concussion Substitute rule. Yet, concussion has long been a persistent threat to athletes worldwide, particularly in brutal contact sports like American football, association football, boxing, etc which involves helmet-helmet or head to ball or head to fist contacts.

A concussion occurs when a forceful blow to the head or body jolts the brain, causing it to rapidly move back and forth inside the skull. While imaging tests like CT scans and MRIs often don't show visible damage, this jarring impact can damage the deep brain cells and disrupt normal function. Contrary to popular belief, losing consciousness isn't a prerequisite for a concussion; in fact, only 10% of concussion cases involve loss of consciousness.

PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS
Headache, Dizziness, Nausea Blurred Vision, Fatigue, etc

COGNITIVE SYMPTOMS
Trouble Concentrating, Confusion, Forgetfulness and Emotional Instability

WHEN CONCUSSED STOP PLAYING IMMEDIATELY

REST BOTH PHYSICALLY AND MENTALLY | MONITOR BREATHING AND PULSE

The more concussions you get, the more likely you are to suffer long-term consequences, especially if you don't give your brain enough time to heal between injuries. The best example would be the case of boxing legend Muhamad Ali, who was diagnosed with Parkinson's, chiefly due to the repeated blows that he suffered during his illustrious boxing career.

LONG TERM EFFECTS

Neurodegenerative Diseases, Cognitive impairments, Behavioral changes, etc

While advancements in medical science and equipment have mitigated the long-term effects of concussion to some extent, the risk remains a significant concern in many contact sports. While we can't alter their essence, prioritising preventive measures are crucial in safe-guarding athlete's long term brain health

Halt Sports Injuries (HSI) : ***An Ortho One Initiative which creates awareness through learning session and medical support at subsidised amount for deserving sports person.***
(Note: Donations are exempt under 80(G) and CSR Income Tax act)

ORTHO-ONE ORTHOPAEDIC SPECIALITY CENTRE, 657 & 658, TRICHY ROAD, SINGANALLUR, COIMBATORE - 05
www.ortho-one.in halt.sports.injuries@ortho-one.in 97905 51264

HALT SPORTS INJURIES

ABTP

WORLD VIEW OF THE FORTNIGHT

« It's pretty crazy. Right now I can't process it, but I guess tonight when I go to bed, I'll think about it." – Gout Gout, 16, made history by running 200m in 20.04 seconds at the Australian All Schools Athletics Championship, breaking the long-standing record of Peter Norman (20.06), set during the 1968 Olympic Games »

« I'm still aiming to get to Formula One and I think if we see a female there, we won't have a 17-year-old Max Verstappen-esque kind of entry. That's the harsh reality." – Abbi Pulling after winning the all-female F1 Academy title »

11th

American swimmer Gretchen Walsh set her 10th world record at the world short course championships with gold in the 50-metre freestyle final before adding an 11th as part of the winning U.S. team in the women's 4x100 medley relay. Walsh finished the 50 free at Budapest's Duna Arena in 22.83 seconds — 0.22 ahead of fellow American Kate Douglass in second. Walsh later extended her world record total to 11 — nine individual and two in relays — when the United States, comprised of Regan Smith, Lilly King, Walsh and Douglass, won the relay in 3 minutes, 40.41 seconds. That started with Smith's backstroke lead-off leg of 54.02 seconds, also a world record.

2nd

Shaun Norris of South Africa won the Alfred Dunhill Golf Championship at Leopard Creek Country Club after a final-round 67 gave him a 13-under-par total of 275 and a one-shot victory. It was a second win in the DP World Tour for the 42-year-old. Englishman John Parry, Ryan van Velzen from South Africa and overnight leader Marcus Kinhult finished tied for second, one shot back.

SHI ON SONG

China's Shi Yuqi blew away Denmark's Anders Antonsen to win the men's singles crown at the season-ending BWF World Tour Finals as the host swept three titles. In an all-Chinese women's singles final in Hangzhou, Wang Zhiyi fought back from a game down to defeat Han Yue 19-21, 21-19, 21-11 in 74 minutes. Shi beat Antonsen 21-18, 21-14 in 52 minutes to win the prestigious title for a second time in his career, to go with his triumph in 2018. AFP

No.1
UTTAR PRADESH

SOARING HIGH WITH CONNECTIVITY

Uttar Pradesh: Leading the Skies with

16 Operational Airports, 5 under construction

- International airports operational in Lucknow, Varanasi, Kushinagar and Ayodhya
- Under construction International Airports : Noida International Airport
- Domestic airports operational in Agra, Bareilly, Gorakhpur, Ghaziabad, Prayagraj, Kanpur, Aligarh, Azamgarh, Moradabad, Shravasti, Chitrakoot and Saharanpur
- Under construction Domestic Airports : Sonbhadra, Lalitpur, Meerut and Pallia

Pics: GETTY IMAGES

NERVES OF STEEL

Fans had their fair share of excitement, disappointment, and surprise in the year that went by, which saw **41 UFC events in total,** including 19 title fights.

Nigamanth P
nigamanth.p@thehindu.co.in

An eventful year in the Ultimate Fighting Championship came to a close on December 15, with France's Joaquin Buckley handing welterweight veteran Colby Covington his second consecutive loss.

Fans had their fair share of excitement, disappointment, and surprise in the year that went by, which saw 41 UFC events in total, including 19 title fights.

From India's own Puja Tomar's historic win to Jon Jones' victory that forced Stipe Miocic into retirement, here are the top five fights of 2024 **(clockwise)**:

Jon Jones still going strong

Jones defended his heavyweight title with a technical knockout win over Miocic midway through the third round at UFC 309 in November.

Jones, who had been sidelined due to a pectoral injury for over a year, returned to the Octagon with a strategic approach. He utilised his superior grappling and striking skills to control the pace of the fight.

Miocic, despite a three-and-a-half-year hiatus, showcased his power and resilience. The bout was competitive, with both fighters having their moments. Ultimately, Jones secured victory by technical knockout in the third round, solidifying his legacy in the heavyweight division.

Islam Makhachev continues domination

The lightweight title fight between Islam Makhachev and Dustin Poirier, which lasted almost the full quota of five rounds, was nothing short of extraordinary.

The champion wasted no time putting Poirier on the canvas early in the first round, swiftly advancing to take his back and maintaining control there for the remainder of the round.

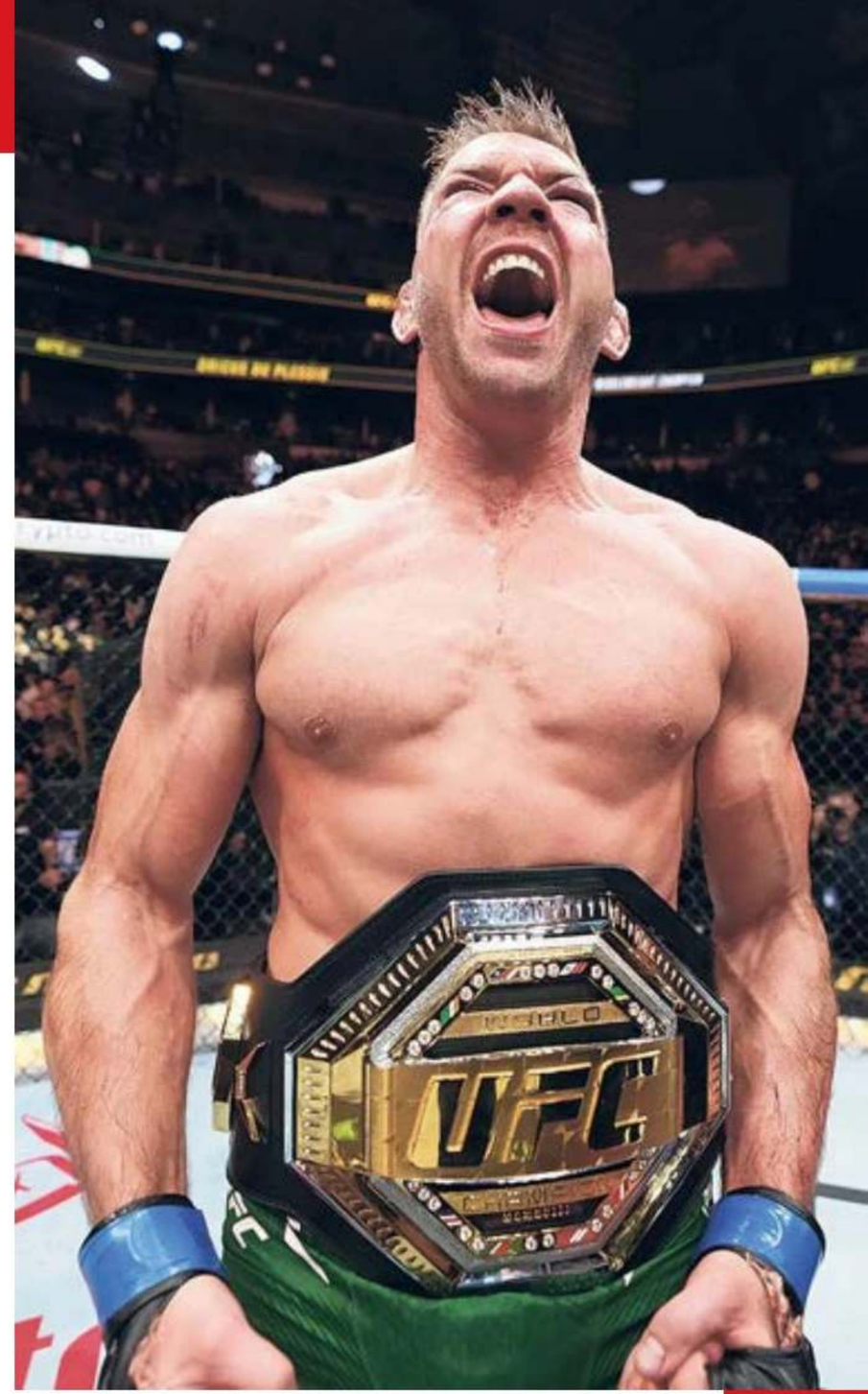
Poirier showed solid defensive skills throughout, and the rest of the fight became a gritty and competitive affair, with the challenger doing an impressive job of thwarting takedowns while Makhachev found himself drawn into the first bloody and gruelling battle of his reign as champion.

Midway through the final round, Makhachev made Poirier stumble for one last time before opting for the D'Arce choke, which forced the latter to tap out.

Max Holloway all the way

Max Holloway was crowned the latest BMF title winner (viewer discretion advised if searching for its full form). Right after Holloway's fight against Justin Gaethje ended, a person on *X* posted: "This is why the BMF belt was made." The fight was of the highest quality, with Holloway knocking out Gaethje with just one second to spare.

Until the final and fifth round, the fight was evenly poised, with both fighters trading blows at regular intervals. However, when everything pointed towards a decision win for



one of the two, Holloway gestured to Gaethje to come to the middle of the ring, which looked borderline taunting, and the latter agreed.

Holloway then saw an opening and dished out the right hand on Gaethje's jaw, knocking him out cold, with the crowd gasping in disbelief. The bout was adjudged Fight of the Night, deservedly.

Dricus du Plessis rattles haters

South Africa's Dricus du Plessis is one of the few UFC fighters to get a shot at the title pretty early in his career. He was just six fights old when he challenged for the title. 'Stillknocks' beat Sean Strickland in the first numbered event of the year.

His post-fight comments about his ethnicity sparked widespread debates across the world, and Israel Adesanya joined the party. The online feud between the two was one of the most talked-about aspects of UFC 2024 and culminated in a title fight six months later. With a point to prove, both fighters entered the ring with fire in their eyes and the middleweight title on the line.

Du Plessis started off on the back foot, receiving a lot more punches than he would've liked. However, a right hook to the side of Adesanya's head in the fourth round gave Du Plessis the much-needed impetus as he swiftly got the takedown, which forced the Nigerian-born New Zealander to tap out.

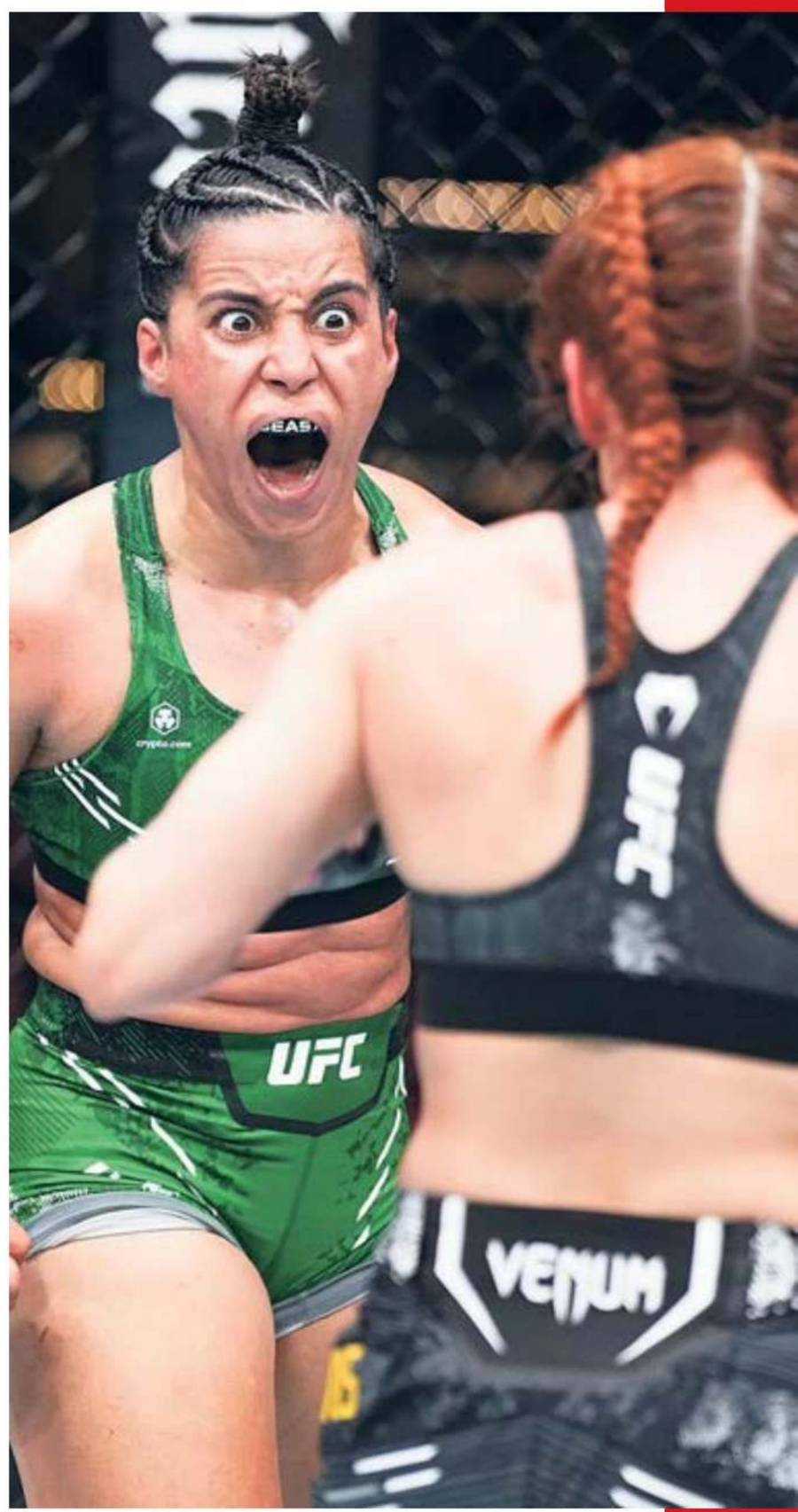
Puja Tomar: One of a kind

Uttar Pradesh's Puja Tomar created history as she became the first-ever Indian to win a fight in the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC). She defeated Rayanne Dos Santos of Brazil by a split decision of 30-27, 27-30, and 29-28 in the women's strawweight division at UFC Louisville 2024 in June.

Puja and Dos Santos went all three rounds: 15 minutes of gruelling, fast-paced, back-and-forth action.

Santos used her height advantage and range to dictate the action, but Tomar went kicking and screaming to the final bell, causing damage in the process.

The 'Cyclone' already has another fight in the UFC lined up. She will take on Shauna Bannon of Ireland, who is a budding talent as well. Bannon made her promotional debut in 2023 and has won one out of her two fights.



CHECKMATING HISTORY AT 18!

HERE WAS A BOY WHO FEW PEOPLE IMAGINED WOULD EVEN BE THERE FOR THE WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP MATCH. BUT D. GUKESH IS NOW THE **WORLD CHESS CHAMPION**. AT 18.

FIDE / ENG CHIN AN

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

SCAN TO WATCH

The tears would not stop.

His right hand went to his face, then the left one too.

The tears still would not stop.

He rearranged the pieces on the board, where the battle had just ended on such a stunning note, in a manner perhaps nobody could have imagined. His eyes were still wet.

Then he smiled.

The smile became broader.

Up went his arms in the air.

He must have found it hard to believe. Posterity will find it hard to believe.

But it is true. D. Gukesh is the World chess champion. At 18.

It is one of the greatest stories in sport of our time. Here was a boy who few people imagined would even be there for the World championship match. He had made it to the Candidates tournament — the qualifying event to determine the challenger for the championship — at the last minute.

For that, he had to win the Chennai Masters tournament in his hometown. For that, a tournament had to be there. It may have been arranged almost as an afterthought. But he still had to win it.

After winning the tournament a year ago, he played at the Candidates in Toronto. He wasn't the strongest of candidates in the Canadian city. In a field of eight, he was seeded sixth.

But he came out on top, ahead of such strong, experienced men like Fabiano Caruana, Hikaru Nakamura, Ian Nepomniachtchi and Alireza Firouzja. He wasn't even the highest seeded among the three Indians: that was another Chennai teenager, R. Praggnanandhaa.

But Gukesh emerged as the champion in April after drawing with Nakamura in the final round. He finished a clear first, half a point ahead of his nearest rivals — Nakamura, Nepomniachtchi and Caruana, who tied for second place.

Now, he had seven months to prepare. And what followed was preparation in the best way possible.

He was lucky on many counts.

He had a sponsor in WestBridge Capital, whose co-founder Sandeep Singhal's motto for the World championship was — as he told *Sportstar* shortly after Gukesh's triumph — "Whatever it takes." So Gukesh got the coach he wanted, the Seconds he wanted, the mental coach he wanted, and the place where he wanted to train.

Cost was not going to be a factor. Singhal was sure about it.

And Gukesh also had Viswanathan Anand as his mentor, a living legend with the experience of playing the World championship matches for two decades and being the champion five times. Grzegorz Gajewski, the man who has worked with Anand for the World championship, led the formidable support team of Gukesh. Among the Seconds were the world's top players, such as Jan-Krzysztof Duda and Vincent Keymer from overseas, and the experienced Indian P. Harikrishna.

Paddy Upton, who played a role in India winning the 2011 World Cup and the men's hockey bronze medal at the Olympics this year, was also roped in as a mental coach. That happened after Singhal had a chat with Gukesh; they wondered if there was anything else apart from chess that could give even the slightest of advantages.

Days were spent on training, on opening theory especially, and playing practice games in speed chess, which would have mattered if the match had gone to tiebreakers. And speed chess was the area Ding Liren was deemed to have an edge: he had more experience, and he was ranked much higher than Gukesh in both rapid and blitz chess.

So every base had been covered before the match kicked off in Sentosa, a small island off Singapore's southern coast. But there was a rude awakening for Gukesh. He lost in the opening game. And he had white pieces.

Of the two colours in chess, white is usually considered more favourable, and you are expected to win more with white than black. A draw with black is considered more important than with white. A win with black carries a little more weight.

And it was Ding who dealt the first

So near yet so far: A late blunder by defending champion Ding Liren enabled Gukesh to secure a dramatic last-gasp victory. FIDE/ENG CHIN AN

blow — with black pieces. Gukesh was punished for overreach; he tried to play too aggressively when the position didn't demand it, and after a capture with a wrong piece in the middle game, things became difficult for him. Ding consolidated his advantage and went on to win the first game. He did not just win the game but made a statement and answered some questions about his form and his mental shape (he had gone on record about seeking professional help).

He was also answering his critics, all those top players who had said he stood little chance against a challenger who had been in top form for the last couple of years. The defeat must have been a setback for Gukesh.

But shortly after the match was over, when *Sportstar* caught up with Gajewski and Upton, they both said that they were glad that the defeat came at the very start. "That quickly awakened him from his dream," the coach said. The mental coach said Gukesh was prepared for a bad game, and a strategy had been put in place to deal with it.

Whatever that strategy was, it worked.

After the second game was drawn, Gukesh won the third. It was a game that showed why Gukesh could be such a dangerous opponent for even the strongest of players. He could play one best possible move — even according to the strongest chess engine — after one best possible move.

Daniil Dubov, the Russian Grandmaster who was the second of Magnus Carlsen twice for the World championship, had told this writer recently that when Gukesh was at his best, he was like an engine: you may not be able to find out immediately why he made a certain move; it may not make sense at the time, but later you will realise why, after the

D. Gukesh had Viswanathan Anand as his mentor, a living legend with the experience of playing the World championship matches for two decades and being the champion five times.

sequences of moves.

After the two decisive results inside the first three days of the match, the players had their first rest day. The scores were equal. And one thing was clear: the match was going to be evenly fought. It was not going to be an 80-20 situation for Gukesh, as Nakamura said, nor even 75-25, as another top American Grandmaster, Wesley So, said, with weeks remaining for the match.

What followed was equality. Quite literally.

The next seven games were all drawn. But some of those were quite thrilling affairs. And there was one pattern: while Ding seemed happy to get into a theoretically drawn position most of the time, his young rival wasn't. Gukesh even rejected the virtual offers of a draw by refusing to make the move that would allow a threefold repetition in positions and thus a draw. That seemed like another strategy. Gajewski later admitted it was indeed part of the strategy.

The string of draws was broken by Gukesh in Game 11. He scored an easy win, capitalising on Ding's errors. And he was in the lead — for the first time in the match.

A year ago, in his World championship match against Nepomniachtchi, the only time Ding was in the lead was when he won in the tiebreaks after the classical games finished with scores level. The theme of Astana was Ding's fightback: three times he had been behind Nepomniachtchi, and three times he came back to equalise.

So it was almost inevitable that he did it at Sentosa, too. And he did, outplaying Gukesh in Game 12. It was a masterclass by Ding. It was the World champion at work.

The last rest day of the championship followed. Now just two games remained. A player needed to score 1.5 points (a win and a draw) if he wanted to win the title without going through the tiebreakers. In Game 13, Gukesh had a chance to force a win, but he missed a crucial move. Then Ding, whose defence had been incredibly strong, found the only move to save his position in severe time pressure. It wasn't the first time that Ding was successfully impersonating Houdini.

In the final game too, Ding was doing what he had been doing all along: defending. But on the 55th move, he erred, fatally, with his rook. Gukesh didn't. His rook captured Ding's. It was all over now.

Three moves later, Ding surrendered his kingdom. His king faced checkmate.

Gukesh was now the king.

And the king wept in joy.

Guiding light: Paddy Upton, one of the top mental coaches in international sport, was instrumental in D. Gukesh's World Chess Championship victory, adding to his successes with India's 2011 Cricket World Cup winning team and the 2024 Paris Olympics hockey bronze. FIDE/MARIA EMELIANOVA

Through Singapore's vignettes: Witnessing the crowning of a chess king

The Indian diaspora and global spectators witness history, marking a **triumphant moment** for Indian chess on the world stage.

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

December 12. It is a quiet evening at Hotel Equarius, the venue of the World chess championship at World Resorts Sentosa. The 14th game is heading towards an inevitable draw, and you, like everybody else, are prepared to come back on Friday for the tiebreaks, as the score is going to be 7-7 after the last of the classical games. But, in a moment, it is all over.

Ding Liren has blundered. He is in a completely lost position. Incredible as it may sound, D. Gukesh is the youngest chess champion in history, which dates back to 1886. All the reporters rush to catch the bus to the adjacent venue, a convention centre, where the press conference is held every day. It is moderated by Maurice Ashley, who made history himself by becoming the first black Grandmaster. There are still only four of them, 25 years after Ashley's feat. Both his siblings, Alicia and Devon, are World champions in boxing.

**

At the press conference, a reporter can usually ask one question. I ask Gukesh about his Seconds (players who assist in training using their vast knowledge and expertise in certain areas). One name he says takes everyone by surprise: Vincent Keymer. The friendly young man from Germany is 20, as is his World ranking. He was the World No. 12 at the beginning of the year. He himself should be nurturing ambitions of becoming the World champion one day.

**

The venue of the World championship is a small island called Sentosa, off the southern coast of mainland Singapore. It is promoted as a luxurious — read, frightfully expensive — tourist destination. To reach there, you have to get on to an underground train, get off at the Harbourfront station, then travel by monorail from the roof of a shopping mall, and after travelling up in the air for three minutes, you will have to take a shuttle bus — you can also walk, but it is not an exciting prospect in the heat and humidity — to reach Equarius Hotel.

The public transport system is excellent in Singapore and way more affordable than cabs (there is no Uber here; the business was sold to Grab six years ago). The

Gazing eyes: The spectators watch on as the World chess championship match between Ding Liren and D. Gukesh is played behind a glass wall.
P.K. AJITH KUMAR

underground system reminds you of the famous London Tube. Even the female voice on the public address system inside the train sounds similar: you almost expect her to say that the next station is Euston Square, where you used to get off every afternoon for a fortnight to cover the Global Chess League a couple of months ago.

**

The match is played behind a glass wall. You could watch the action from the spectators' area from behind that wall. You are reminded of reporting on the 2013 match in Chennai, where Viswanathan Anand was dethroned as the World champion by Magnus Carlsen. Gukesh had watched that match from the stands as a seven-year-old. Anand is his mentor at the Westbridge Anand Chess Academy. He has always wanted to be the one to bring the World title back to India.

Yes, even the schoolboy's dream could come true in sport.

**

The press conferences provide insights into the players' psyche and class. Ding displays his sense of humour often. When asked about his mother, who you will always see sitting at the back row of the press conference hall, Ding says, "She wakes me up and sometimes gives me food. So she is doing her job."

Gukesh impresses with his grace. His mental coach, Paddy Upton, reminds me how Gukesh spent the first four minutes of his press conference after his triumph talking about Ding. Gukesh, on a day he squandered a winning chance and thus weakened his hopes of clinching the title, with just one round left, wishes Anand on his 55th birthday. Earlier, he congratulated Arjun Erigaisi on becoming only the 15th player to reach 2800 Elo points in FIDE rating, making former women's World champion Susan Polgar tweet how classy he is.

**

People from different parts of the world have flown in to watch the match. But mostly the audience is made up of the Indian diaspora of Singapore. Like Aruna Rao, who heads HR of a multinational company, and her little son Surya, who catch your attention inside the spectators' area as they replay the moves of Gukesh on their small wooden chessboard — and not on the phone or the tab.

**

It is not every day as a sports journalist that you get to report on a truly historic moment. As the flight takes off from the beautiful Changi airport on a pleasant night, you reflect on Gukesh's remarkable triumph.

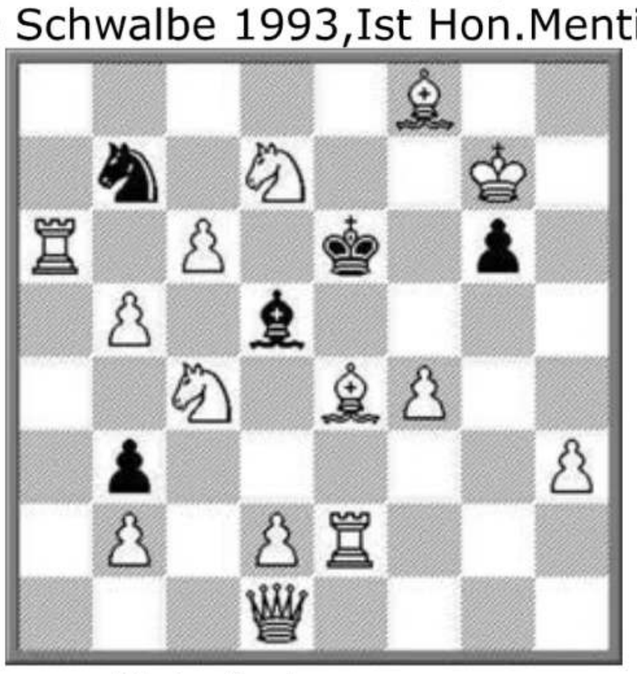
This time, you are glad to know there will not be a cyclone in Chennai. So you could land there — Gukesh would also arrive there five hours after you do — on your way back to Kozhikode. There will be no need to travel by road to another airport like Coimbatore, something you had to do to reach Singapore.

An unsung classic revisited

By C.G.S.Narayanan

Very rarely a two-mover presenting a task record combines traditional and modern themes.The problem below by a pair of Ukranian GMs combine cyclic refutation, Salazar and secondary Schiffmann. This was featured in 'Oz chess problems' an Australian website by Peter Wong with his comments.

Ian Soroka and Vasyl Dyachuk
Die Schwalbe 1993,Ist Hon.Mention



Mate in two moves

Three tries generate the cyclic refutation-After 1.Qh1? (waiting), the queen targets the potential flight on d5, 1…Bxe4 [a] 2.Qxe4, 1…Bxc4 [b] 2.Bd3, but this is defeated by 1…Bxc6! [c]. The second try 1.Sce5? [A] (waiting) adds a guard on d7, 1…Bc4 [b] 2.cxb7, 1…Bxc6 [c] (self-pin) 2.Qxb3 [C], but 1…Bxe4! [a] is unanswered. Thirdly, 1.Sd6? [B] controls f5 and threatens 2.Bf5, 1…Bxc6 [c] 2.Bxc6, 1…Bxe4 [a] (self-pin) 2.Qxb3 [C], but 1…Bc4! [b] refutes.Key **1.Qxb3!** [C]

1…Bxe4 [a](selfpin) **2.Sd6** [B], **1 …Bxc4** [b] **2.Qxc4**

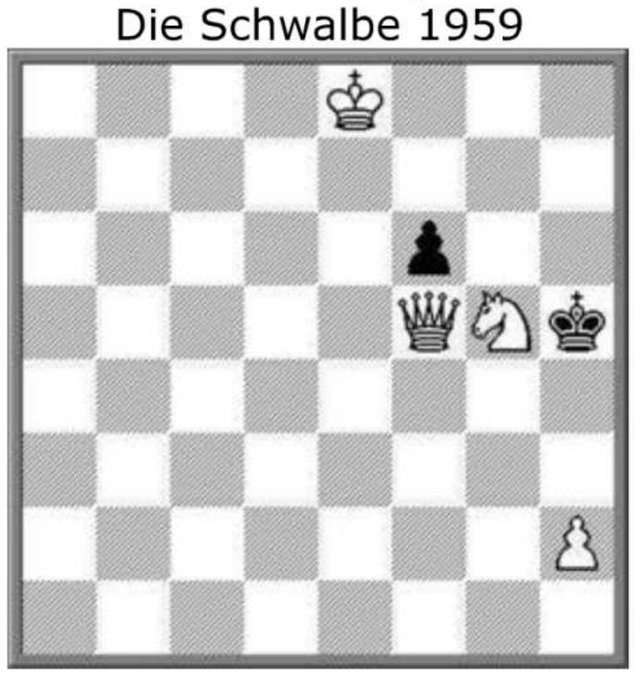
1…Bxc6 [c](selfpin) **2.Sce5** [A]

Since in the post-key play, all three mating moves against the bishop defences are changed yet again, the maximum nine distinct variations are achieved to complete a cyclic refutation.

Further two *sequence reversals* are incorporated in the full solution, as indicated by the white moves marked [A/B/C]. The try play 1.Sce5? [A] Bxc6 2.Qxb3 [C] and actual play 1.Qxb3! [C] Bxc6 2.Sce5 [A] see a reversal of White's first and second moves, against the same defence. Such a pattern, which involves the same mating picture arising from battery and non-battery play, is called the Salazar theme. A similar reversal, 1.Sd6? [B] Bxe4 2.Qxb3 [C] and 1.Qxb3! [C] Bxe4 2.Sd6 [B], means that the idea is doubled. This complex blend of cyclic and reciprocal pattern themes is enhanced by traditional effects like the three firing batteries and self-pinning defences. IM N.Shankar Ram points out a secondary Schiffmann also in this problem. I feel this classic was not appropriately honoured considering the very rich content.

A miniature cyclic refutation for solving

Nils van Dijk
Die Schwalbe 1959



Mate in two moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article' Play by the white queen': **Key:1.Qg7!** (2.Qe5+ Rxe5 3.dxe5) 1…Rxd5 2.Qg5 (3.Nf2) Rxg5 3.d5 1…Bxd5 2.Qf7 Bxf7 3.d5; 1…Qxd5 2.Qb7 (3.Qb1) Qxb7 3.d5 Three active sacrifices of White queen

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

VELAMMAL NEXUS

STUDY-SERVE-SMILE

CONGRATULATES

D. GUKESH

(VELAMMAL VIDYALAYA)

THE YOUNGEST

WORLD CHESS CHAMPION

IN HISTORY

EN PASSANT

Viswanathan Anand

IF FUTURE OF CHESS HAD A FACE, IT WOULD PROBABLY LOOK A LOT LIKE GUKESH

D. Gukesh's win in the 14th round **caught me by surprise** — mostly because of its suddenness. I think everyone was expecting the final round to end in a draw.

Today I watched a boy — and yes, I can call him that because he was not even born when I first won the world title in 2000 — win the World championship. D. Gukesh, just 18, is now the 18th World champion and if the future of chess had a face, it would probably look a lot like his — calm, sharp, and self-assured.

His win in the 14th round caught me by surprise — mostly because of its suddenness. I think everyone was expecting the final round to end in a draw. The position was not yet lost, and then suddenly, Ding Liren blundered, and boom — the match was over. It all unfolded unexpectedly, but Gukesh was rewarded for his perseverance, for his decision to keep trying and chess rewarded him for that.

Gukesh showed throughout the match that he was willing to stick to his plan, try interesting ideas every day, and always look for a fight — even when faced with setbacks. He stayed true to his guns from start to finish, and I liked his approach. He pushed, pushed, and kept pushing, refusing to back down. Full credit goes to him and his entire team. I'm also very happy that we were able to support him through the Westbridge Anand Chess Academy. He took the plan forward, overcame challenges, and made it work.

Ding, too, proved himself to be a great champion. However, today, it felt like he somehow wanted the match to end. He appeared hasty to finish things, to exchange pieces quickly, and he got punished for that.

However, throughout the 14-game finale, Ding showed tremendous preparation and

Master stroke: Grandmaster Viswanathan Anand during Gukesh's match against Ding Liren. "Gukesh was rewarded for his perseverance, for his decision to keep trying," says the author. FIDE / MARIA EMELIANOVA

class. His win in Game 12 was especially impressive, showcasing his mental and physical readiness to peak at the right moment. In the end, though, Gukesh had that extra edge — perhaps just enough luck to tip the scales in his favour.

Watching Gukesh's emotional outburst after his victory was heartwarming. We all have our unique ways of celebrating such moments, and I'm sure I did something similar in my own time. It was lovely to see his joy so openly expressed.

As for those questioning the credibility of this World championship, it is something that Gukesh will need to get used to. Once you get to where he has reached, you can't expect just one-way traffic.

There would be constant scrutiny. But the fact remains — he is the youngest World champion in history, and that is a monumental achievement. He should now try to enjoy his chess as much as possible. He's got so much of his life ahead of him, he should enjoy it all the way.

Ding, too, proved himself to be a great champion. However, today, it felt like he somehow wanted the match to end. He appeared hasty to finish things, to exchange pieces quickly, and he got punished for that.

Pics: B. VELANKANNI RAJ

WELCOMING A CHAMPION

Amidst the chaos, Gukesh graciously obliged every request for autographs and selfies, embodying **patience and humility.**

Mayank
mayank.c@thehindu.co.in

The atmosphere at the T2 international arrival gate of Chennai Airport was charged with anticipation. Fans adjusted their banners and flags, media crews fine-tuned their cameras, and the crowd paced anxiously, all awaiting the arrival of their hero, D. Gukesh. The chess prodigy, who had etched his name in history as the youngest World Chess Champion after dethroning Ding Liren of China in a gruelling 14-game match in Singapore, was returning home to a hero's welcome.

By 7:30 am, people had begun queuing to catch a glimpse of Gukesh. By 10:30, impatience had set in. Yet when the young champion finally emerged, the wait proved worthwhile. Gukesh made a grand entry, adorned with a crown, a massive garland, and wrapped in the Indian flag, proudly holding the gleaming World Championship trophy.

Just as it seemed the homecoming would go smoothly, the scene unravelled. Chaos erupted, echoing the overwhelming and borderline intrusive receptions that Gukesh and R. Praggnanandhaa had experienced following their historic Candidates and World Cup triumphs. History, it appeared, was repeating itself.

The combined efforts of airport management, local police, members of the Sports Development Authority of Tamil Nadu (SDAT), and the All India Chess Federation (AICF) proved insufficient to control the frenzied crowd eager to catch a glimpse of their hero. The local press stood out, notorious for pushing boundaries in their quest for an elusive soundbite or photo from their celebrity subject.

At first glance, the scene resembled the aftermath of a stampede. People rushed in all directions, with bracelets, slippers, and shoes littering the floor — tangible evidence of utter chaos, with no one seemingly in control.

At the centre of it all stood Gukesh, one of the most humble athletes — not just in chess, but across any sport. Despite the bedlam, he graciously obliged every request for autographs and selfies, embodying patience and humility.

Amid the pandemonium, one striking image stood out: Gukesh's father, Dr Rajnikanth, desperately trying to assist his son but unable to navigate the commotion.

Gukesh could have arrived in quieter circumstances. Knowing his humility, he would have patiently answered every question, posed for every selfie, and signed every autograph. Yet inside the airport, where *Sportstar* managed to steal a glimpse, the chaos was no different — another telling moment of how we celebrate our heroes.

Amid the hysteria, there was also a heartwarming side to the story. Among the hundreds of fans, there was Gomathi, an athletics coach with SDAT, who led a group of 30 boys and nearly as many girls from various sports disciplines under SDAT's banner.

"We're extremely proud of Gukesh's achievement. He hasn't just won the World Championship but has also become the youngest to do so. It feels as though one of our own dreams has come true. This victory feels very personal," said Gomathi, reflecting on the historic moment.

She added, "Today, we celebrate one Gukesh, but I hope to see many more 'Gukeshs' in the future. This victory can serve as a stepping stone."

Rahul Kamble from Karnataka travelled nearly 850 kilometres from Belgaum to Chennai to see his champion.

"I came here to meet Gukesh. He shook hands with me, and that moment was worth everything. I've been on the road cycling since November 25, supporting Gukesh. Along the way, I visited several chess academies. My dream is to take a photo with Gukesh and my cycle. From here, I plan to travel across Tamil Nadu," shared Rahul, whose journey paralleled Gukesh's World Championship campaign.

A chess trainer at a private school in his hometown, Rahul's commitment to his journey cost him his job. His school management denied him permission for his cycling tour, but he chose to quit and pursue it anyway.

"I travelled up north to Goa and then towards Mumbai during the Candidates Tournament, and Gukesh won that. A friend told me I had to continue my journey to bring Gukesh luck, so I quit my job. Hopefully, I'll get the chance to tell him my story."

« Adorned with a crown, a garland, and wrapped in the Tricolour, Gukesh made a grand entry »

A LONG-AWAITED RETURN, AND A TIMELY DEBUT

While the men's competition is set to make a **comeback after 2017,** the women are set to feature in the league for the very first time.

Aashin Prasad and Santadeep Dey
aashin.p@thehindu.co.in, santadeep.dey@thehindu.co.in

K. MURALI KUMAR

The murmurs surrounding its return grew louder with the men's team bagging two successive Olympic bronze medals. Five months since the podium finish in Paris, the revamped Hockey India League (HIL) will finally see the light of day.

The men's competition is set to make a comeback, the last season having been played in 2017, while the women are set to feature in the franchise league for the very first time. Nevertheless, it is a much-needed shot in the arm for the sport in the country.

Before the first iteration of the competition in 2013, India was

ranked the 11th-best team in the world and the third-best in the continent. Its last Olympic medal came back in 1980. The HIL played its part in providing a platform and bringing together the core of Indian players who would eventually go on to medal at the Summer Games in 2021 and 2024.

Mandeep Singh, Manpreet Singh, Harmanpreet Singh, Amit Rohidas, PR Sreejesh, Gurjant Singh, Hardik Singh, Lalit Upadhyay, and Vivek Prasad are double Olympic medallists who made use of the HIL as a testing platform before becoming mainstays at the international level. Currently, India is ranked fifth in the world and the best in Asia over the last few years.

Experts and former coaches have often cited India's lack of club culture as the primary reason behind its decline in hockey at the international stage, but the HIL, despite its short window, helped bridge that gap in its formative years.

Familiar territory: Kalinga Lancers won the last edition of the Hockey India League back in 2017. It is the only team from the previous version of the tournament that will be returning for HIL 2.0. AKHILESH KUMAR

"Look how good the European league structure is, and when players from around the world go and play there, the respective country's level also goes up," says India midfielder Manpreet, who featured for the Ranchi Rhinos franchise between 2013 and 2017. "You get the opportunity to play world-class hockey and learn so many things from there. If you play with good players, your confidence goes up."

While Manpreet had a couple of years of international experience before he joined the HIL, defender Amit credits the tournament for being the initial launchpad and later the turning point in his career. He still remembers the amount of money paid to him in the 2013 auction. "I was bought for 29,000 USD by Ranchi," says Amit, who is regarded among the world's finest first-rushers.

After his international debut in 2013, Amit was out of the national team picture for three years. "I had a dream, and that was to play in the HIL and return to the Indian team once again," says Amit. In the following three seasons, Amit went on to win the title twice with Ranchi Rays (2015) and Kalinga Lancers (2017), including a runner-up finish with the latter in 2016.

"After 2017, I came to the senior team and have remained here since. In the senior nationals that we play, it's not possible to show the kind of talent you have. HIL is a platform that gives chances to players who don't get the opportunity to make it to the national team but have the potential."

HIL 2.0 instils the belief that it will continue to provide the feeder line for both the men's and women's teams. The launch of the women's league couldn't have come at a better time. After narrowly missing out on a bronze medal in Tokyo, the Indian team failed to qualify for the Paris Olympics. The team bounced back from the setback by winning the women's Asian Champions Trophy recently. The national team is ranked ninth in the world.

Feeder line: The HIL played its part in providing a platform and bringing together the core of Indian players who would eventually go on to medal at the Summer Games in 2021 and 2024. GETTY IMAGES

Learning from the best: Ishika Chaudhary will feature for the Odisha Warriors, along with FIH women's Player of the Year and Netherlands' Olympic gold medallist Yibbi Jansen.

R. V. MOORTHY

"It's a new phase, I would say," says defender Ishika Chaudhary of Odisha Warriors. "The timing is impeccable in the sense that the very moment women's hockey saw a dip (Paris 2024 non-selection), HIL decided to come along and give us hope. We'll get the experience of playing with foreign players who have good experience of featuring in the Olympics. We get a look into the mentality of those who have been world champions. It wasn't so good for us when we didn't qualify."

Ishika will be learning from the best when she teams up with the FIH women's Player of the Year and Netherlands' Olympic gold medallist Yibbi Jansen come January, like Amit did in 2013. "They were all big players. Double Olympic winners like Moritz Furste of Germany were in my team. I learnt a lot about playing as a defender from them. They taught you about positioning, tackling and passing. Even if you were making mistakes, they wouldn't scold you. They used to cover for our mistakes and help push the level of the team high by instilling confidence," remembers Amit.

The auction dynamics in 2024 also hint at India's overbearing presence on the global map of hockey. In the 2013 auction, the marquee set was dominated by overseas players, with three foreigners earning more than Sandeep Singh and Sardar Singh. This time around, the top three bids in the men's auction have all gone to Indians.

In 2016, then-18-year-old midfielder Hardik was picked up by Jaypee Punjab Warriors for over ₹33 lakh. In 2024, he commanded a price of ₹70 lakh — the third-most expensive bid in the auction.

Manpreet **(below)**, who signed for Team Gonasika for ₹42 lakh, feels, "Franchises have seen the success that the Indian team has had in recent years and have decided to invest in whichever good Indian players are there. All the experienced and even young players have got good money this time. Before, there was a lot of dependency on foreign players, but this time, they have decided to bank on Indian players."

In the women's auction too, four of the top five went to Indians, with defender Udita **(facing page, below)** coming out on top with ₹32 lakh. Udita feels that the platform, which will attract plenty of eyeballs, is a good start for the women's game. "More often than not, we tend to focus on the national teams. Other players get sidelined automatically. During the Nationals, as a lot of international players feature, much of the focus is on them, and we don't take a look at the up-and-coming talent who will shape the future of the sport in the country," she says. It was mandated by the HIL organising committee that four of the 24 players in a squad needed to be juniors.

Salima Tete will be part of the Soorma Hockey Club, one of the four women's teams, as opposed to the eight-team league in the men's competition. The midfielder is hopeful that the addition of more teams in the next edition will increase the competitive level of the league. "We are only a four-team league now, and by the next edition,

K. MURALI KUMAR

two more teams are set to join (the Hyderabad Toofans and BC Jindal Group Mumbai).

"The thrill right now is ample, but only maybe when two more teams join, we will get the wholehearted feel of HIL-W being a tournament. It will get interesting because many of us will end up in different teams, and the competitiveness of the entire group will kick in," says Tete.

Apart from rubbing shoulders with world-class players, the Indians will also get the opportunity to learn new ideas and tactics from coaching staff coming in from around the world. Ten of the total 12 teams have head coaches who are from overseas.

"I think this is a boosting period for young players to learn lessons about themselves... 'Where am I as a player? What are the next steps that I need to take?'

And now, in that mix, you throw in international coaches, who have maybe a different view of things; so whether it's better or not, sometimes a different view helps you learn about new elements and new tactics," says Pasha Gademan, who will coach the Toofans (men).

R, V. MOORTHY

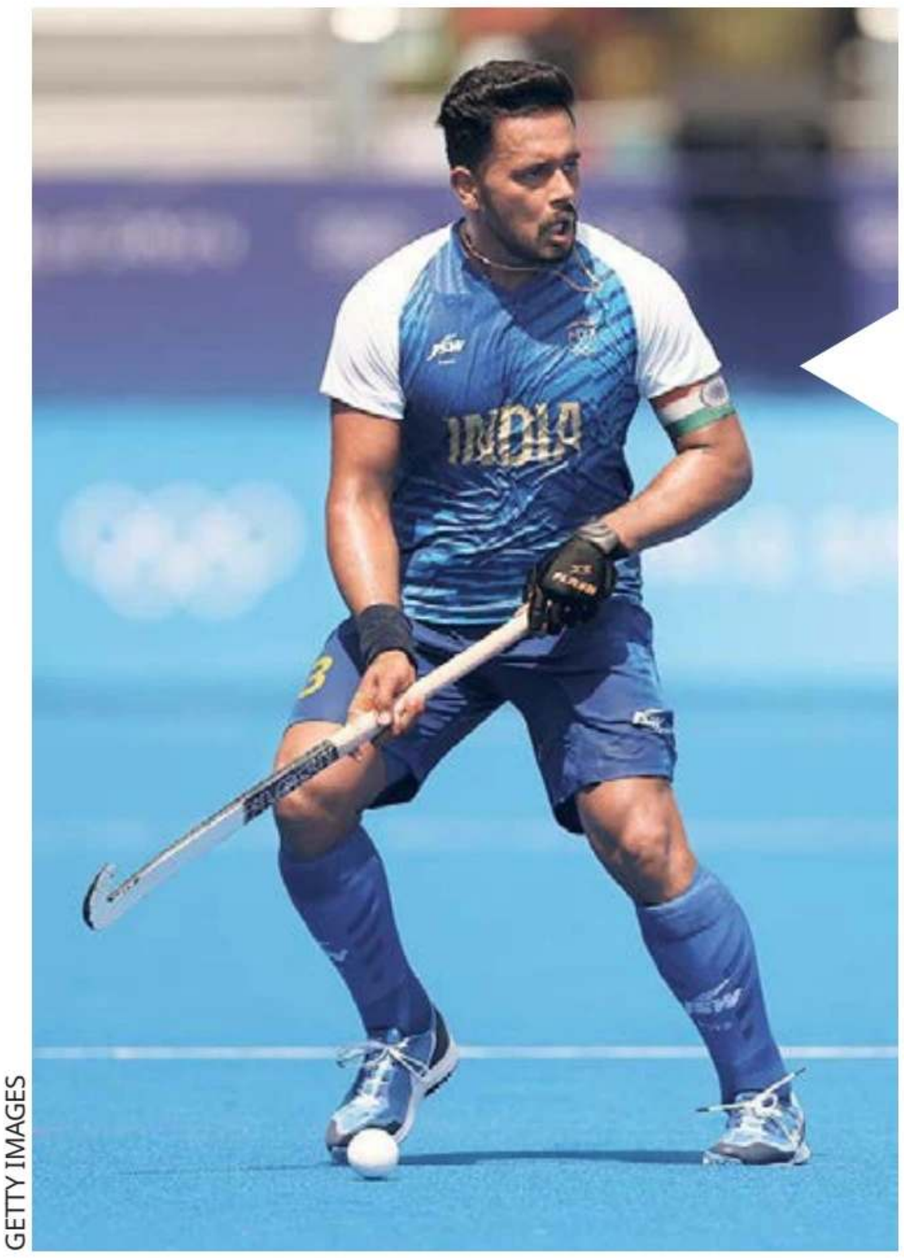
Fresh perspectives: Apart from rubbing shoulders with world-class players, the Indians will also get the opportunity to learn new ideas and tactics from coaching staff coming in from around the world. R. V. MOORTHY

UP Rudras technical director Cedric D'Souza, who previously coached the Indian national team and the now-defunct Delhi Waveriders, has a wish.

"I hope to see the men's team win the Olympics gold in 2028 and the women's team in 2032." Much like Cedric, several Indian men's and women's players of the current and upcoming generation harbour similar ambitions. The revival of the HIL seems to be a step in the right direction.

BATTLEGROUND HIL

THE MEN'S HOCKEY INDIA LEAGUE IS BACK AFTER SEVEN YEARS, WITH EIGHT TEAMS COMPETING TO TAKE HOME THE CROWN. THIS IS HOW THE TEAMS AND THEIR KEY PLAYERS LOOK LIKE AHEAD OF THE SEASON OPENER ON DECEMBER 28.



GETTY IMAGES

Key player – Harmanpreet Singh

₹78 lakh

Soorma Hockey Club

Soorma Hockey Club, based in Punjab, went big on defenders, spending ₹1.6 crore — the most by any team at the auction. Indian skipper Harmanpreet Singh fetched top money and will bring plenty of goals to the team with his ace drag flicking skills.

Soorma has experience throughout its core, with Vincent Vanasch, Harmanpreet, Vivek Sagar Prasad, Victor Wegnez, Jonas de Geus and Gurjant Singh. Belgian Jeroen Baart, who previously coached his country's U-21 boys and in the top division of the Dutch league, has been tasked with coaching duties.

Key player – Abhishek Nain

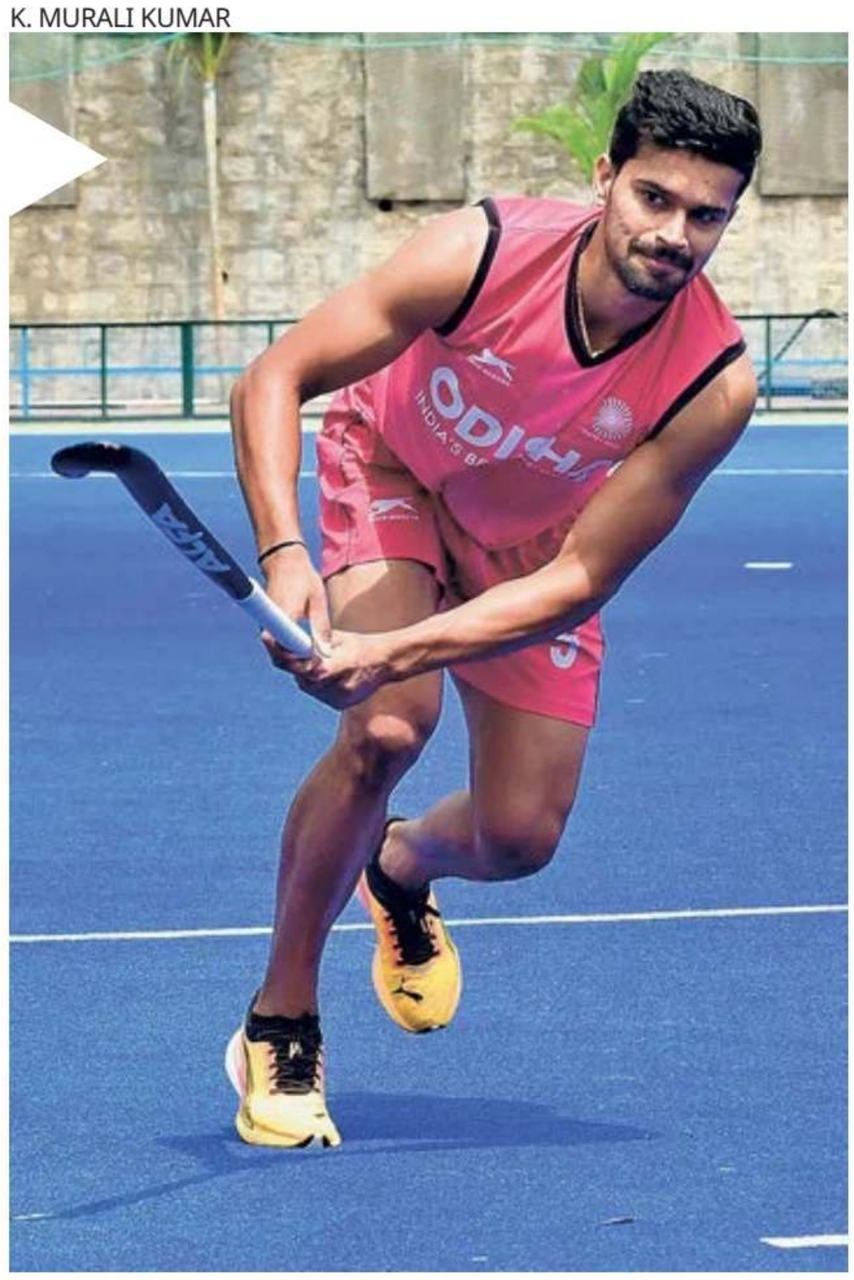
₹72 lakh

Rarh Bengal Tigers

While most teams spent big on drag flickers, the Bengal Tigers made India forward Abhishek Nain its top pick. Colin Batch, who has coached Australia to international success, will helm the coaching reins. The team was dealt a cruel blow when goalkeeper and Paris Olympic gold medallist Pirmin Blaak withdrew from the tournament due to injury. The management shelled out a premium on drag flicker Jugraj Singh and Rupinder Pal Singh (₹12.5 lakh), with the latter having retired from internationals in 2021.

The 34-year-old has been playing club hockey in the Netherlands and will be keen to show people back home that he's still got it. They also have top international stars Sam Lane (New Zealand), another penalty corner expert, and Belgians Florent van Aubel and Gauthier Boccard, along with Sukhjeet Singh.

K. MURALI KUMAR



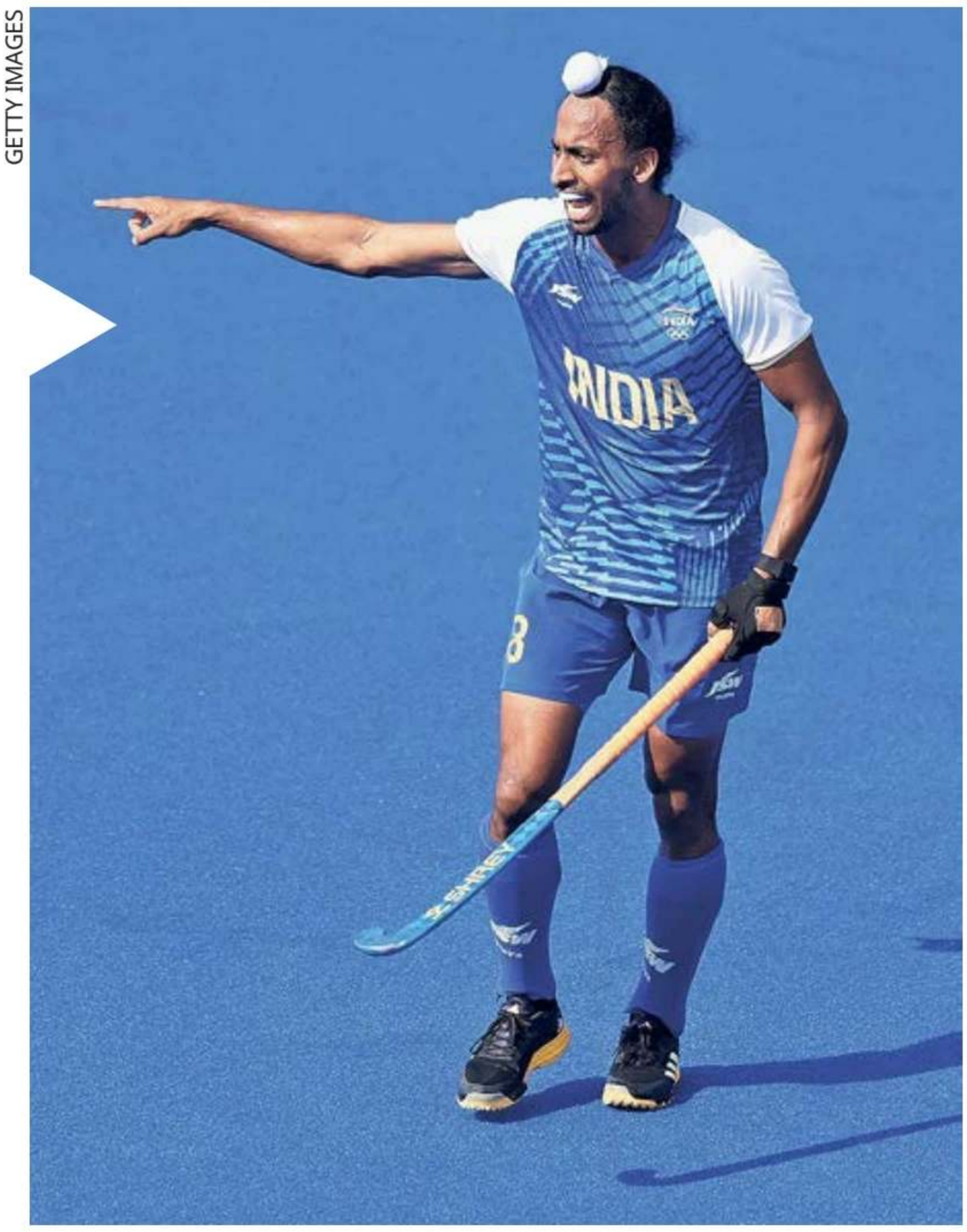
Key player – **Hardik Singh**

₹70 lakh

UP Rudras

UP Rudras boasts a Netherlands-heavy core strengthened with Paris Olympics gold medallists, with the women's team coach Paul Van Ass overseeing the tactics. While Lars Balk and Floris Wortelboer were acquired through the auction, Dutch midfielder Seve Van Ass has withdrawn, replaced by Great Britain's James Albery. The attack will be led by GB's Sam Ward, Belgium's Tanguy Cosyns and India's Lalit Upadhyay. The midfield is also strong with the likes of India's Hardik Singh and Akashdeep Singh, alongside New Zealand's Kane Russell.

GETTY IMAGES



Key player – **Gonzalo Peillat**

₹68 lakh

GETTY IMAGES

Hyderabad Toofans

Hyderabad outbid the Pipers and Lancers to secure Germany's Gonzalo Peillat for ₹68 lakh, making the drag flick expert the most expensive overseas player this edition.

Head coach Pasha Gademan, Germany's assistant coach during its 2023 World Cup triumph and silver medal finish at the Paris Olympics, believes Peillat's experience and skill will be key to holding the team together both on and off the pitch.

The team has made smart acquisitions, including Arthur De Sloover, Nilakanta Sharma, Sumit Walmiki, Nic Woods, Zachary Wallace, and Dominic Dixon.

GETTY IMAGES

Key player – Jip Janssen

₹54 lakh

Tamil Nadu Dragons

Tamil Nadu Dragons has assembled a star-studded team, with Jip Janssen, Amit Rohidas, Thomas Sorsby, Tom Craig and Blake Govers being the standout players. India forward Selvam Karthi adds local flair to the team, with Australia's Nathan Ephraums complementing him in attack. The Dragons have three world-class drag flick options in Janssen, Rohidas and Govers, acquired for a combined ₹1.29 crore.

Rohidas is also regarded as one of the world's finest first-rushers in penalty corner defence. Head coach Rein van Eijk believes the HIL be a valuable stepping stone for Karthi in his career. Van Eijk has also earmarked defender Anand Y and midfielder Chandan Yadav from the Indian junior team to make an impact.

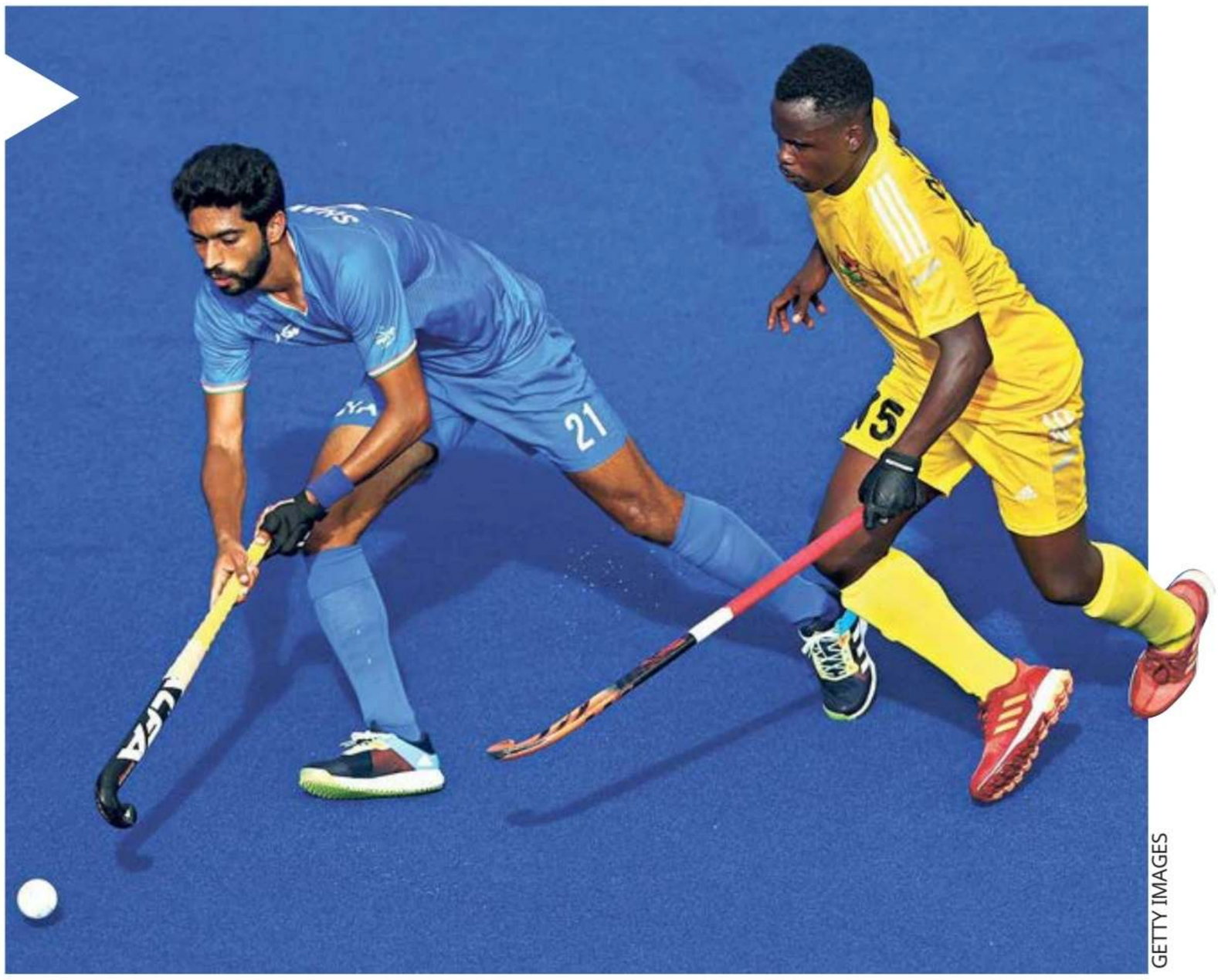
Key player – Shamsher Singh

₹42 lakh

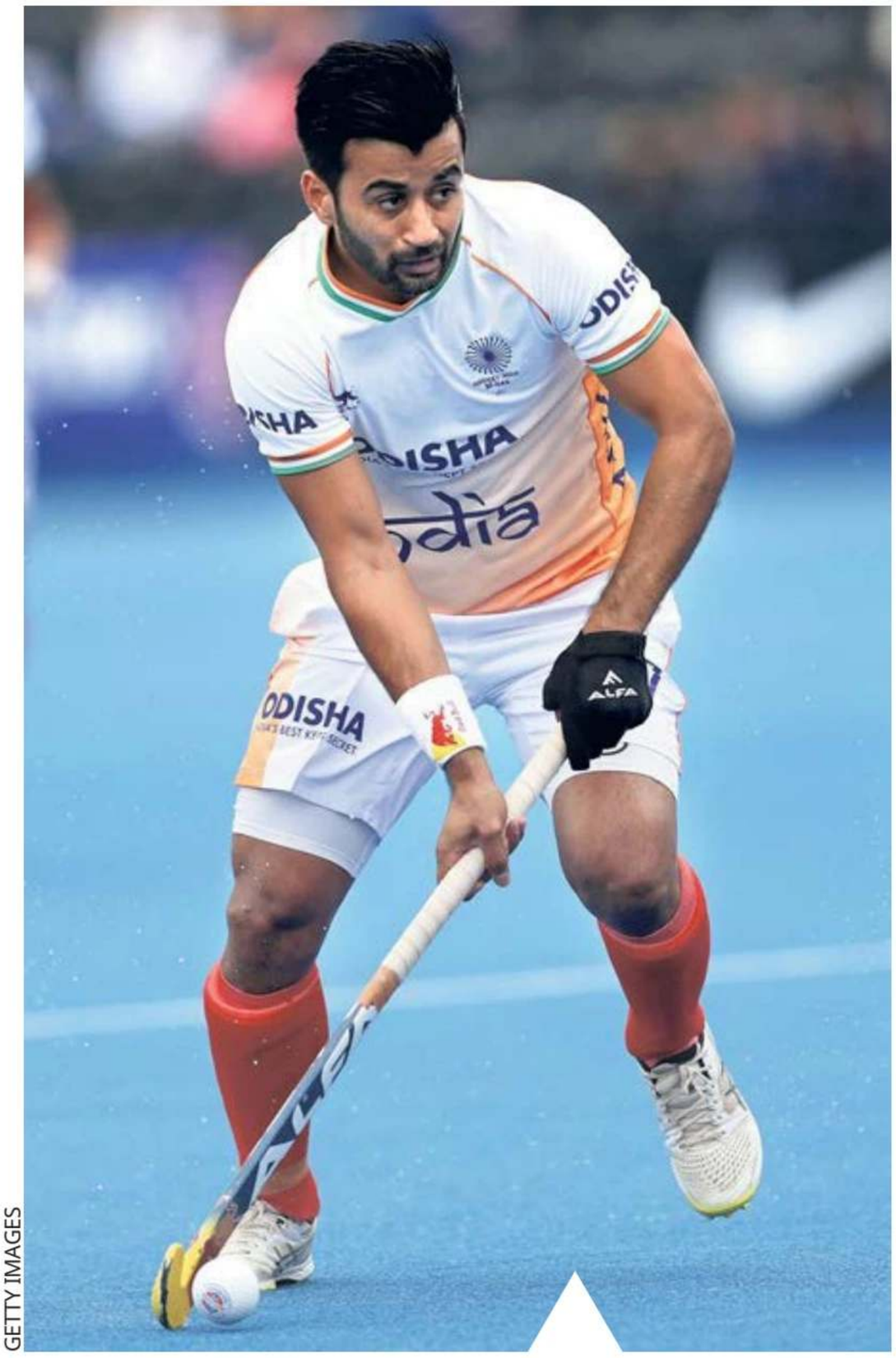
Delhi SG Pipers

Delhi SG Pipers has assembled a solid team with the addition of Indian stars Shamsher Singh, Jarmanpreet Singh, Raj Kumar Pal and Varun Kumar. However, the standout pick at the auction was Rohit, the Indian men's junior team defender, who fetched ₹40 lakh — just two lakhs less than Shamsher. The 20-year-old Rohit is a fearless first-rusher in penalty corners and a powerful drag flicker, poised to take the league by storm.

Former Indian men's team coach Graham Reid will be at the helm, with recently retired PR Sreejesh named as mentor.


GETTY IMAGES

GETTY IMAGES



GETTY IMAGES

Key player – **Manpreet Singh**

₹42 lakh

Team Gonasika

Team Gonasika has a strong Indian core in midfielder Manpreet Singh, forward Mandeep Singh, defender Birender Lakra, and goalkeeper Suraj Karkera. Forward Tom Boon's withdrawal will sting but the team has roped in exciting French forward Timothee Clement as his replacement.

Gonasika has as many as five players from the United Kingdom in its squad with Ollie Payne being a strong candidate for the goalkeeping spot.

The team has invested heavily in next generation of Indian stars, acquiring junior men's hockey team captain Amir Ali (₹34 lakh), forward Araijeet Singh Hundal (₹42 lakh), midfielder Vishnukant Singh (₹20 lakh), and defender Anmol Ekka (₹9.2 lakh), for a total outlay of ₹1.05 crore.

Key player – **Thierry Brinkman**

₹38 lakh

Kalinga Lancers

Defending champion Lancers is the only club returning from the previous iteration of the HIL. The squad is studded with international captains, including Australia's Aran Zalewski, the Netherlands' Thierry Brinkman, and Belgium's Arthur Van Doren.

The core is heavily European, featuring Brinkman, Enrique Gonzalez, and the Belgian trio of Van Doren, Antoine Kina, and Alexander Hendrickx. India goalkeeper Krishan Pathak provides security at the back, while Hendrickx will pose a big threat with his drag flicks. The Mark Hager-coached side will be a top contender for the title.

Aashin Prasad

FRANCHISES CASH IN ON INDIA'S HOT STREAK

In an era of Indian sports where franchise competitions dominate mainstream sports, and with the Indian men's team's performances in successive Olympics, it was a **no-brainer** for corporates to give HIL another go.

Aashin Prasad
aashin.p@thehindu.co.in

With the Hockey India League (HIL) returning in a fresh avatar after seven years, Hockey India (HI) will want to ensure that its second coming is smooth sailing.

For many years, former Indian players have spoken about the need for a robust domestic competition to aid the development of domestic talents. The announcement has been met with unanimous support from various quarters of the hockey community. "We have been waiting for so long for HIL to return," said India international Amit Rohidas, who had his breakthrough in 2013 with the league.

In 2024, none of the older corporates or owners is back, with seven new teams introduced in the men's league, except for Kalinga Lancers, which has been revived by Vedanta Limited. Four women's teams will compete in the newly launched women's HIL.

When the HIL initially folded in 2017, it was mired in issues, with teams facing financial burdens resulting in salary defaults for players and staff and scheduling conflicts with the international calendar being the primary ones.

Between 2013 and 2017, the HIL was played in a home-and-away format in Mumbai, Lucknow, Delhi, Ranchi and Chandigarh. However, the 2024-25 men's and women's competitions will be played in Rourkela and Ranchi, respectively. Bhola Nath Singh, HI's secretary general and HIL governing committee member, pointed out that the biggest lesson for the league from HIL 1.0 was to adopt a sustainable approach, which is reflected in the decision to adopt two centralised venues for the relaunch.

The centralised venues with world-class infrastructure will help capitalise on the popularity of the sport, feels Divyanshu Singh, COO of JSW Sports, which owns Soorma Hockey Club men's and women's teams. The league recently announced it will offer free tickets for all the matches in both venues. "The first edition (2024-25) is happening in Rourkela and Ranchi, which have state-of-the-art stadiums, and hockey is very popular there. Hockey is not popular in urban India. I think that was the mistake that happened last time, where you had franchises from urban India, but you were not seeing the kind of response, be it in ticketing or the buzz from the fans," said Divyanshu.

Madhav Krishna Singhania, who owns UP Rudras, backed the current model of the HIL. "I feel what happened maybe in the past was seeing the success of the Indian Premier League (IPL), one tried to build costs as per the IPL. However, the revenues in viewership maybe did not come as per the IPL. So, for any league to become big, you start by having lesser costs. When there is more viewership, there is more revenue coming from broadcasting or sponsorship. Suddenly, you see the players' purses also increase," said Singhania.

The HIL is a unique competition unlike any other in the hockey calendar. The top European male players ply their trade in their storied domestic leagues back home. The Belgian, German and Dutch top-division leagues, which operate over nine months, have a history of over 100, 100 and 50 years, respectively. Each league has 12 teams, with 22 matches played in a

Past imperfect: When the HIL initially folded in 2017, it was mired in issues, with teams facing financial burdens resulting in salary defaults for players and staff, and scheduling conflicts with the international calendar being the primary ones. GETTY IMAGES

round-robin system with promotion and relegation. The women's league of the Olympic champion Netherlands mirrors their men's league, with its first season dating back to 1981.

In comparison, India doesn't offer a professional league system. The recent Senior Nationals lasted just 13 days. The upcoming HIL, similar to the 2013-17 version, will see each team play 10 league games, followed by the knockouts in the men's league. In the W-HIL, each team will play six pool fixtures.

Germany's Pasha Gademan, who will coach the Hyderabad Toofans, felt India did not have to replicate the European model while pointing out that the infrastructure is built for a shorter league.

"I doubt, in this setup [it's possible]. I would say that the two things are very different. I think calling it a league is interesting because it sounds more like a 'Hockey India tournament,' but 'league' sounds a lot better, so I support the name. But it's a bit more of a tournament, and the league in Europe is stretched out over a very long period," said Gademan, who was the assistant coach for the German men's national team during the 2023 World Cup win.

He added, "I'd rather see it stay like a compact league and have a high boost or an exciting period in the year instead of a regular league because a regular league has its pros and cons. I've been a coach of a top team for the last four seasons in Germany, yet the first 20 matches are almost boring in the sense that we know we're going to win everything until the very end. And so you've got three quarters of a year where it's not that exciting, and the last quarter of the year is super exciting."

Top Europeans pull out

The scheduling issue, while not a roadblock, continues to be a thorn for HIL, leading to several overseas stars pulling out. The HIL was provided with a window by the International Hockey Federation from December 28 till the first week of February.

As many as 29 players from both the men's and women's leagues withdrew after the auction. Top European names like Seve Van Ass (UP Rudras), Tom Boon (Team Gonasika), Christopher Ruhr (Delhi SG Pipers), Tom Grambusch (Rarh Bengal Tigers), Jean-Paul Danneberg (Hyderabad Toofans), Nike Lorenz and Anna Toman (Soorma Hockey Club), etc., are giving the tournament a miss this year.

Reduced salaries, injuries and scheduling are among the prime factors cited for the withdrawals. While the competition offers a hefty payday for a short duration, the HIL falls during what would typically be their winter break from domestic leagues back home.

Problems aplenty: The scheduling issue, while not a roadblock, continues to be a thorn for HIL, leading to several overseas stars like Christopher Ruhr (extreme left) pulling out. GETTY IMAGES

"A lot of the guys who have to be at home for Christmas, once they realised that the dates coincide with that, said they need to be with their families. I think that's where issues came from. Hats off to the guys who are coming to India despite Christmas. They're missing out on a big festival [Christmas] to be here. So, my respect for them as well," said Singhania, whose team will also miss the services of Spain's Alvaro Iglesias.

On the timing of the league, Sai Prakash Komireddi, CEO of Hyderabad Toofans, said, "The league will learn lessons from this. That's the way it starts. And there are bound to be a few problems when you start a league."

While the 2024 auction brought riches to Indian talents, it wasn't as lucrative for the overseas stars. Olympic gold medallist and World Cup winner Boon, signed for Team Gonasika for Rs. 27 lakh (€30,300), much less than 20-year-old Araijeet Singh Hundal (Rs. 42 lakh), an Indian junior team player. Germany's Ruhr, one of the top buys in the 2016 auction for Rs. 63 lakh, had his final bid set at Rs. 18 lakh this year.

Pirmin Blaak, the Netherlands' shootout hero in the Paris Olympics final, said he earned more in the 2013 edition of the HIL. "Back then, the pay was better," Blaak told *RTL Nederland* after the auction. Blaak, picked up by Bengal Tigers for Rs. 25 lakh, two lakh less than his 2013 price, will not feature in this edition.

The 2024 auction format, in which the Indian Paris Olympic men's team went under the hammer first, with a salary cap of Rs. 4 crore for each team, meant some foreign players were undervalued.

"In the last edition of HIL, overseas players were paid more than the Indians. This time, however, the tables have turned, and it seems a few international stars may not entirely agree with the shift. What they fail to grasp is that Harmanpreet Singh isn't just one of the world's best drag-flickers — he's a brand in his own right. Everyone knows him as our beloved 'Sarpanch Sahab', and that star power is precisely why franchises kept bidding for him, even with a limited purse of just ₹4 crore," said Bhola Nath.

Only Gonzalo Peillat (Rs. 69 lakh), Jip Janssen (Rs. 55 lakh), and Jeremy Hayward (Rs. 42 lakh) were among the overseas players bought for over Rs. 40 lakh, largely due to the demand for penalty corner experts.

The HI secretary general also ensured tight measures are in place in the event of non-payment issues. "In the rare event that a franchise is unable to fulfil these commitments within 45 days of the season's conclusion, the League reserves the right to temporarily suspend their participation until the dues are cleared. During this period, the franchise would also forego its share of the Central Rights Income. If payments remain outstanding beyond 60 days, HIL may consider further action, including the possibility of terminating the agreement after providing due notice," said Bhola Nath.

Fight for second place

In an era of Indian sports where franchise competitions dominate mainstream sports, and with the Indian men's team's performances in successive Olympics, it was a no-brainer for corporates to give HIL another go.

"Cricket is right up there as the top sport in India. But next to cricket, looking at which sport is going to be second to cricket, that has to be hockey because it has the ingredients for it," said Toofans' Komireddi. The HIL window will mean fewer clashes with domestic competitions for TV ratings. The Pro Kabaddi League (PKL) wraps up on December 29, but there is the ISL, and the Indian men's cricket team has four white-ball matches scheduled during the business end of the HIL.

However, apart from the IPL, and

to a lesser extent PKL, Indian franchises continue to bleed money in other leagues. Rahul Todi of Shrachi Rarh (Bengal Tigers owner) felt the digital penetration in India and the bronze medals in Tokyo and Paris will help HIL 2.0 strike the right chord. Apart from the reduced cost due to the centralised venues, Todi also commended HI's decision to market the product by broadcasting the HIL on both Doordarshan and Sony Sports Network. The league will also be streamed on Prasar Bharati's OTT platform, Waves.

Apart from the centralised venues, broadcast strategy was another takeaway for the HIL governing committee. "The previous editions highlighted how a strong broadcast presence could significantly influence audience engagement and brand value. This time, the league aims to go beyond standard telecast practices, integrating advanced technology, expert analysis, and strategic marketing to enhance viewer experience and broaden reach," said Bhola Nath.

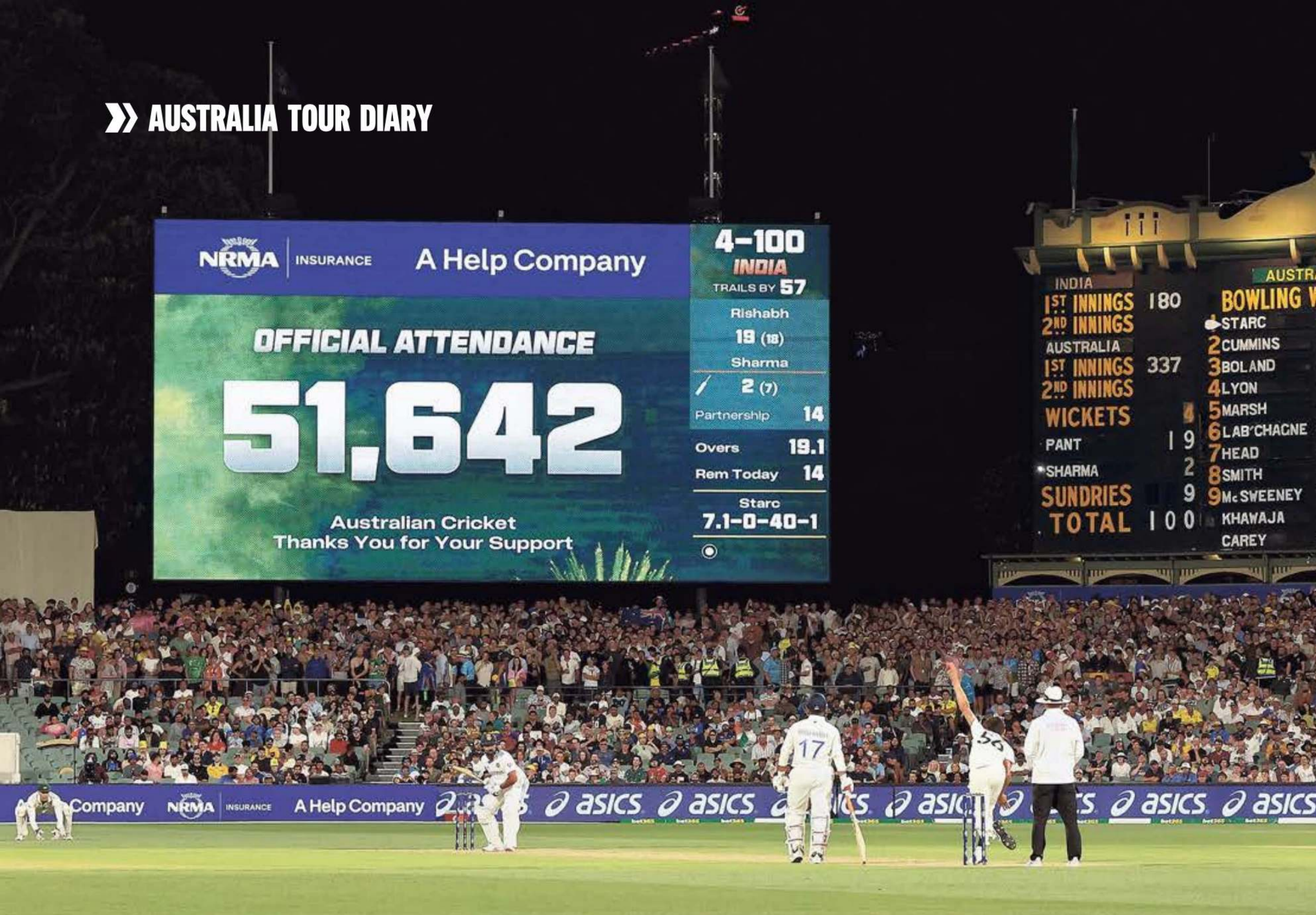
He also confirmed there will be 16 cameras deployed at each stadium and elaborated on the cutting-edge telecast experience that will be in place. "Advanced graphics will provide detailed insights into gameplay, such as goal breakdowns, player movements, passing speeds, angles, and the time taken by goalkeepers to make saves. Additionally, features like drag-flick and penalty stroke speed will be showcased, giving viewers a deeper understanding of the game's technical nuances."

Sony Sports Network, which came on board earlier this month as a broadcast partner, is optimistic about a boost in viewership due to India's recent success with both the men's and women's teams. "The interest in hockey has seen a rise since the Indian team won the bronze at the Olympic Games Tokyo 2020, which was their first Olympic medal in 40 years," said Rajesh Kaul, Sony Sports Network India's Chief Revenue Officer. "Hockey does not get the kind of viewership that cricket brings. However, with the sport being on the rise, we are ahead of the curve with the broadcasting of hockey in India."

Divyanshu praised the broadcast model with DD and Sony Sports, saying it offers the opportunity to penetrate both rural and urban markets. He added, "Like it happens in all the leagues, there's a split between all the franchises and all the leagues. So that will happen. Currently, I'm not in a position to disclose all the numbers, because we also haven't received communication in terms of the media rights numbers."

Todi, who also co-owns the Indian Super League (ISL) club Mohammedan SC, said, "I think hockey will receive much more support centrally also. And I think it's very expensive because of the cost factor if you compare ISL costs and the ISL structure. I think that's where I would credit Hockey India for their cost structures. We find some of the things in ISL a little exaggerated in terms of what is practical for India. So I think HIL has been very mindful of this." While centralised venues mean lower costs, franchises can't tap into the fans' support in their home cities like Kolkata, Chennai, Haryana and Punjab. Only Odisha-based Kalinga Lancers will find itself at home in Rourkela, while the Rourkela-based women's team Odisha Warriors will play only one of its six matches in the city. "There are pluses and minuses [to the centralised venue]. In the long term, the home-and-away format is needed to build that sort of local connection and a local fan base to come and follow the sport. There's no dearth of people wanting to come and watch hockey. The only challenge is having the right atmosphere and moment for them to come and enjoy the sport. So, the sooner we can move to the home-and-away format, the better it would be for the league and the sport," said Singhania.

The right ingredients are in place for the HIL to recommence and have a successful first outing, but Hockey India will be keen to ensure it is more than just a one-hit wonder.



A WARM-UP DONE WELL

There is a **charm to Adelaide** that is about long pauses, deep breaths, and the slow life.

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

Canberra is a capital with a twin shade. Seat of power, yes; a sleepy rural vibe, yes again! And on December 1, finally, a game gets underway at the Manuka Oval. The warm-up fixture between the Indians and the Prime Minister's XI becomes a limited-overs affair, and Rohit Sharma's men prevail by six wickets.

Young Sam Konstas catches the eye with a 107, while India chases 240 but stretches to 257 for an extended batting stint. Shubman Gill, returning from injury, scores a 50, while Rohit, after a paternity break, departs cheaply.

But he is in good spirits as he gets the trophy and flexes it towards his team-mates.

The interlude is over, and it is time to head to Adelaide as the Border-Gavaskar Trophy series wends towards the second Test. Scott Boland is on the flight — a tall but silent presence. At Adelaide airport, he gets a cab, piles in his baggage and cricket kitbag. No fuss, just another bloke on an official trip.

The easy vibe

There is a charm to Adelaide that is about long pauses, deep breaths, and the slow life. The mood sets in as the flight circles around the sea. Bharat Sundaresan, an Indian cricket writer now settled Down Under, invites a few to his abode in the hills. A ride up through the twisting roads past vineyards is soothing to the eye. A night of banter and a slow dinner ensues while Sunil Gavaskar and Ravi

Grand stage: At the picturesque Adelaide Oval, Australia defeated India by 10 wickets, levelling the series 1-1. GETTY IMAGES

Shastri dish out anecdotes, and warm laughter ripples through the cold air.

One of India's training sessions is thrown open to the public. More than 3,000 turn up, and it is disconcerting for the players. Some fans get close to Rohit **(right)** to say hello; he requests them to move towards the far corner and watch. Days later, the Indian captain says: "If they want to see us, let them come to the Test matches!"

The runs of K.L. Rahul and the return of Rohit create a piquant situation. The skipper, though, is quick to sort the issue: "KL will open, and I will bat somewhere in the middle order. Personally, a tough choice, but this is what the team needs."

The second Test is all about local hero Travis Head, and his 140 deflates India while Mitchell Starc and skipper Pat Cummins strike with the ball. The host wins by 10 wickets, and the series is level at 1-1. Spice too is evident as Head and Mohammed Siraj exchange words, and the ICC steps in with the penalties.

The Adelaide Oval is familiar territory for Nathan Lyon, having worked here as the ground staff more than a decade ago. "It is one of the finest wickets in the world, the best perhaps," Lyon tells the media. The current head curator, Damian Hough, has fond memories of the off-spinner's tryst with soil and grass. "Unbelievable story, isn't it? He worked hard, always had that cheeky humour, and we remain close," Hough says.

During the Test (December 6 to 8), the Indian scribes think they have seen an oasis as *daal* fry and chicken curry are sighted at lunch one day. Just that it proves to be a mirage as there is no accompaniment of rice. Buns are used to mop up the curries — not ideal, but a rumbling stomach has the last word! The unanimous verdict is that there is nothing like Indian hospitality back home.

It is time to wake up early and catch a morning flight to Brisbane. This time around, Alex Carey is a co-passenger. Upon landing, he waits patiently for his luggage, nods to people who recognise him, speaks to the lone television reporter, and then gets into a cab and heads to the team hotel.

Pastoral and arboreal

There is humour that is entirely wicked and pure Australian. A billboard on one of the roads proclaims this about a specific hotel: "Worst vegetarian hotel in Brisbane." The tongue-in-cheek subtext, which is never said, is perhaps: 'Mate, if you are a carnivore, feel at home!'

A bunch of scribes retire to their country home. Trees abound, crickets lend a rhythmic acoustic beat, and at night, a pair of friendly eyes emerges within the foliage. Cat, a large squirrel — what is it? A close-up is sought, the shy animal obliges for a few seconds and then leaps onto the roof. Google is searched for assistance — it turns out to be an arboreal visitor called the common brushtail possum.

Ahead of the third Test at the Gabba, an accidental verbal duel crops up. Cummins speaks about replicating the short-ball strategy against India. Shubman Gill later retorts: "What is he talking about? They (at Adelaide) got tailenders and just one batter!"

AFP

1st

Opening up: Mitchell Starc started the pink-ball Test in sensational fashion, claiming a wicket with the very first delivery. He squared up opener Yashasvi Jaiswal and trapped him plumb in front. AFP

FOR MORE IMAGES

2nd

Lone battle: Mitchell Starc delivered a fiery spell, but Nitish Kumar Reddy fought back with a counterattacking 42, smashing three sixes and three fours. However, Starc eventually dismissed Nitish, finishing with career-best figures of 6/48 to bowl India out for 180. AFP

3rd

Twilight saga: India bowled under lights, and the pink ball proved effective in unsettling the host. Opener Usman Khawaja succumbed to Jasprit Bumrah's precision, edging a delivery to the slips. AFP

4th

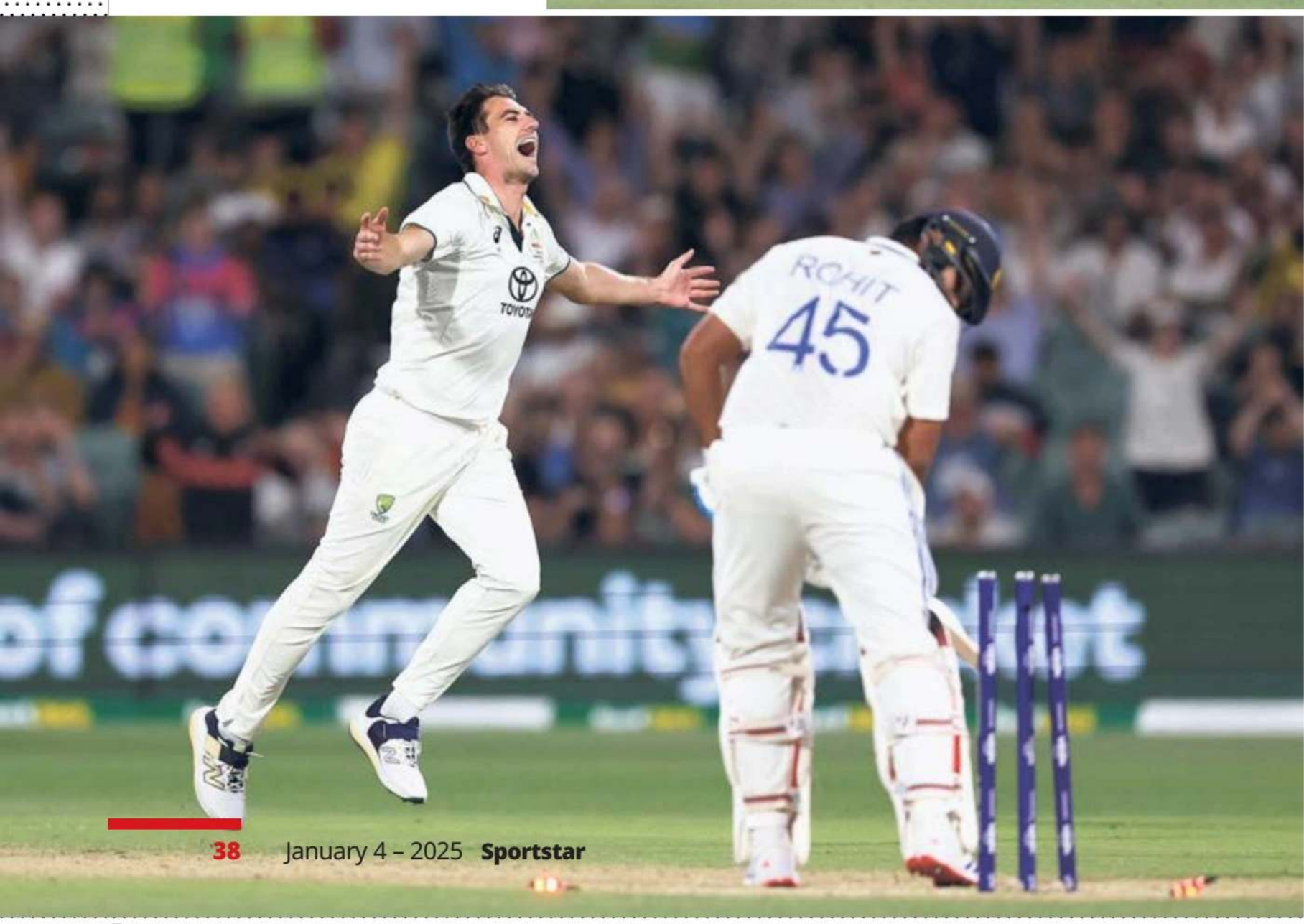
Revival: Marnus Labuschagne survived the first day's twilight period and reaped the rewards of better batting conditions on the second day. He struck a patient fifty to best his poor form in the run-up to the second Test. GETTY IMAGES

5th

Local hero: Back in his city, Travis Head once again stood out against a familiar rival, hitting an aggressive century — 140 off 141 balls — to take the game away from India in Adelaide. GETTY IMAGES

6th

Heating up: Centurion Travis Head and Mohammed Siraj had a war of words after the latter cleaned the batter up with a yorker and gave him a send-off. India bowled out Australia for 337 but conceded a 157-run lead. AP



7th

Jubilation: Pat Cummins was the wrecker-in-chief in the second innings, claiming a five-for to bundle out the visiting side for 175. Australia then chased down a 19-run target to level the series 1-1. GETTY IMAGES

1st

Start-stop: At the Gabba, clouds loomed not just on the first day but throughout all five days. Rain delays, a damp outfield, and poor light caused at least 22 interruptions, disrupting play both during and between innings. AP

2nd

Return of the trigger: Steve Smith brought back his exaggerated shuffle across off-stump; a change that ended his 13-innings century drought in Tests. It was also Smith's 10th Test ton against India and 33rd overall. AP

3rd

Headache: Travis Head slammed another hundred (152 off 160 balls) and added 241 runs with Steve Smith for the fourth wicket. This was Australia's first 200-plus stand in a Test since the WTC final 2023. It was the same pair of Head and Smith which put together a 285-run partnership against India. AFP

4th

One-man army: Jasprit Bumrah delivered another stellar performance with the ball, claiming his fourth six-wicket haul in Tests to dismiss Australia for 445. In the process, he became only the second Indian bowler after Kapil Dev to reach 50 Test wickets in Australia.

REUTERS

5th

Soft hands, deep impact: Opening the batting, K. L. Rahul once again emerged as India's most dependable batter in the series, scoring a vital 84 off 139 balls. Later, Ravindra Jadeja's 77-run knock, combined with contributions from the lower order, helped India avoid the follow-on. AFP

6th

Blinder: After dropping K. L. Rahul on the first ball of day four, Steve Smith redeemed himself with a stunning one-handed catch at first slip to dismiss the same batter. Rahul attempted a backfoot cut against Nathan Lyon, but Smith read the play perfectly and executed a brilliant catch. AFP

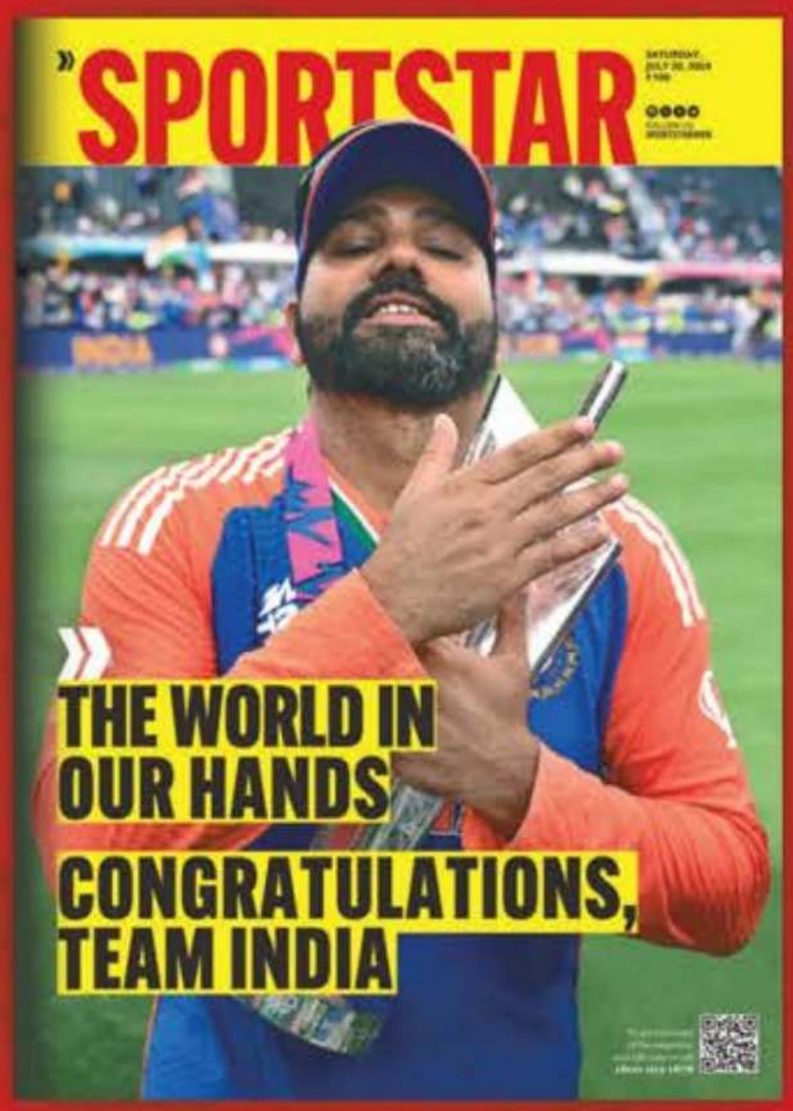
7th

Final flourish: After bowling India out for 260, Australia aimed to extend its lead of 185 runs. The batters adopted an aggressive approach, which resulted in the loss of several wickets. Eventually, Australia declared at 89 for seven, setting a lead of 274. AFP

8th

Levelled: After just 13 balls into the 275-run chase, the rain played a decisive role in the match's outcome as dark clouds gathered over the stadium. This forced both teams to shake hands and settle for a draw. AFP

THE HINDU GROUP



GET A RINGSIDE VIEW TO THE WORLD OF SPORTS

SUBSCRIPTION WITH DISCOUNT

Periodicity	Price
3 months	₹499
6 months	₹799
1 Year	₹1399
2 Years	₹2199

SUBSCRIPTION ORDER FORM

SPORTSTAR

To subscribe, visit:
https://bit.ly/3PeVMlf
or Scan QR code

❍ **New Subscription** ❍ **Renewal (Subscription No.)**

For Subscription, please fill the form, sign and send it to Circulation Department, The Hindu, Kasturi Buildings, 859 & 860, Anna Salai, Chennai - 600 002. E-mail: customercare@thehindu.co.in Toll-Free No.: 1800 102 1878

Name: _____

Mailing Address: _____

_____ City: _____

Pin: _____ District: _____ State: _____

Landline: _____ Mobile: _____ E-mail: _____

I am remitting ₹ _____ *(Rupees in words.....)* towards annual subscription.

Please furnish remittance details: Bank UTR No..... Subscription No .....

By ❍ DD/Cheque Number - **in favour of THG Publishing Private Limited.,** (Add ₹ 10 for non-Chennai cheque

DD/Cheque Number: ..... Amount: ₹ ..... Date: .....

Bank: .....

Branch: ..... **Signature with date:** .....

THE HINDU GROUP

This festive season,
give your child
The Gift of Knowledge

THE HINDU on Sunday IN SCHOOL
An Exclusive Weekender For Children

Ideal for ages
11 to 17

Subscribe Now!
Visit www.thehindu.com/thseweekend
or scan

Free School Bag
with an Annual Subscription

THE HINDU
Educate | Engage | Enlighten

*Terms & Conditions apply

ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar

FOR MORE STORIES

BAFFLING THAT INDIAN BOWLERS HARDLY USED THE BOUNCER AGAINST TRAVIS HEAD

This is Head's fourth century against India in the last 18 months or so and not once has he been tested by the short delivery early on.

What a Headache this Travis is turning out to be for India.

Every time he comes out to bat against India, the situation is a bit tricky for Australia. He then simply takes the attack by the scruff of its neck and squeezes the life out of it so much so that the shoulders and heads drop visibly.

When Steven Smith was scoring all those hundreds, every bowling unit in the world was trying to find a way to stop him. His exaggerated back-and-across movement, just as the bowler was about to release the ball, made some people believe he would be vulnerable to the one that nips back in.

Some thought he could be bowled around his legs; some felt a leg-slip could get him out glancing because of that across-the-crease movement. Nothing worked. Yes, he did get out leg-before-wicket or caught down the leg-side, but more often after he had got a big score, and he was a bit late with the bat coming down, perhaps due to weariness of the long hours spent at the crease.

The Kiwi fast bowler Neil Wagner tried the bouncer trap, and it worked to some extent. The thing is that bowlers tried, and there were some successes.

Against Travis Head in Brisbane, despite even the former Aussie players suggesting that the bouncer at the start of his innings was a vulnerable area, the Indian bowlers have just not employed the tactic. There was video evidence of it too, being played before the Gabba Test began. Yet, the Indian bowlers hardly ever tried this line of attack. It's been incredibly baffling that no one, including Jasprit Bumrah, has tried this.

Bumrah has one of the best bouncers in the game, one that comes at the helmet like a rocket. Mohammed Shami, among Indian quicks, has the best bouncer, but he is not here in Australia, and Mohammed Siraj, Harshit Rana and Akash Deep have not bowled it as accurately to cause any problems.

Most crucially, there were hardly any bouncers bowled to Head in his first 30 deliveries when he was trying to settle in. This is his fourth century against India in the last 18

months or so, and not once has he been tested by the short delivery early on.

With a South African fast bowler, Morne Morkel, as the bowling coach, who used the bouncer very well, one would have thought that the bouncer would be a weapon unleashed at Head.

The first day's play being restricted because of rain also brought to attention the fact that the covers need to be used for the entire ground and not just the square where the pitch is. Once the covers are used for the ground, then play can resume pretty quickly after the rain stops.

Yes, there may be some time taken to remove the entire ground cover, but that is better than having play abandoned because of a wet outfield. That is unfair to the crowds who pay good money to come and watch some cricket.

That first day in Brisbane, with play being abandoned before 15 overs were completed, meant that the crowd got a refund of its money, so wouldn't the ground authorities like for play to resume as quickly as possible so they don't have to issue any refunds?

Covering the entire ground in today's day and age is absolutely necessary because, even the broadcasters, who pay humongous amounts to acquire the rights, also want more play to happen and not resort to showing highlights of old games again and again.

There's of course the cost factor for the cricket associations, but with the funds that are now available to them, investing in full ground covers is a must.

The Indian top-order has found it heavy going against this top-class, varied Australian attack. On these Australian pitches, it is never easy while the ball is hard and new, and that's why they have to be a little circumspect, at least at the start of their innings.

If they can take a leaf out of the way Smith, who was out of form, bided his time before unfurling his repertoire of shots, then they also will be able to get runs against this quartet, who have more than 500 wickets between them.

A missed opportunity: Hardly any bouncers were bowled to Travis Head during his first 30 deliveries in Brisbane while he was trying to settle in. GETTY IMAGES

Lots of patience and self-belief are needed, and some shots need to be put in cold storage till the batter is well set. Easier said than done, of course, but try it, and maybe you will find it can be done.

The first day's play in Brisbane being restricted because of rain also brought to attention the fact that the covers need to be used for the entire ground and not just the square where the pitch is.

Mitchell Starc on target

2 The number of bowlers who have the distinction of claiming a wicket off the very first ball of a Test match on three separate occasions. In the recent Test match in Adelaide, Australia's Mitchell Starc matched the achievement of West Indian left-arm pacer Pedro Collins. Overall, 27 bowlers, on 35 occasions, have taken a wicket off the first ball of a Test match. Additionally, four other bowlers have accomplished this feat on two occasions. The first table lists those bowlers who have achieved this multiple times. The latest batter to lose his wicket off the first ball of a Test match is India's Yashasvi Jaiswal, thus making him the 31st batter to fall victim to this occurrence for the 35th time. Jaiswal became the seventh Indian opener on this unwanted list, for the ninth time. Notably, two batters — India's Sunil Gavaskar and Bangladesh's Hannan Sarkar — hold the dubious record of being dismissed off the first ball three times. In contrast, no other batter has been dismissed in this manner more than once.

Australia's Mitchell Starc.
GETTY IMAGES

Bowlers claiming a wicket off the very first ball of a Test match on multiple occasions

Dism	Bowler	For	Opp (Victim, mode of dism)	Venue	Date	Result
3	Pedro Collins	WI	Ban (Hannan Sarkar, bld)	Dhaka	8 Dec 2002	Won
			Ban (Hannan Sarkar, lbw)	Gros Islet	28 May 2004	Drawn
			Ban (Hannan Sarkar, lbw)	Kingston	4 Jun 2004	Won
3	Mitchell Starc	Aus	SL (Dimuth Karunaratne, ct)	Galle	4 Aug 2016	Lost
			Eng (Rory Burns, bld)	Brisbane	8 Dec 2021	Won
			Ind (Yashasvi Jaiswal, lbw)	Adelaide	6 Dec 2024	Won
2	Geoff Arnold	Eng	NZ (John Morrison, ct)	Christchurch, LP	28 Feb 1975	Drawn
			Ind (Sunil Gavaskar, ctWK)	Birmingham	4 Jul 1974	Won
2	Richard Hadlee	NZ	Aus (Keith Stackpole, ct)	Auckland	23 Mar 1974	Lost
			Ind (W. V. Raman, lbw)	Napier	9 Feb 1990	Drawn
2	Kapil Dev	Ind	Pak (Mohsin Khan, lbw)	Jalandhar	24 Sep 1983	Drawn
			SA (Jimmy Cook, ct)	Durban	13 Nov 1992	Drawn
2	Suranga Lakmal	SL	WI (Chris Gayle, lbw)	Pallekele	1 Dec 2010	Drawn
			Ind (K. L. Rahul, ctWK)	Kolkata	16 Nov 2017	Drawn

Indian openers dismissed off the first ball of a Test match

Batter	Against	(bowler, mode of dism)	Venue	Date	Result
Sunil Gavaskar (1)	England	(Geoff Arnold, ctWK)	Birmingham	4 Jul 1974	Lost
Sudhir Naik	West Indies	(Andy Roberts, ctWK)	Kolkata	27 Dec 1974	Won
Sunil Gavaskar (2)	West Indies	(Malcolm Marshall, ctWK)	Kolkata	10 Dec 1983	Lost
Sunil Gavaskar (3)	Pakistan	(Imran Khan, ct)	Jaipur	21 Feb 1987	Drawn
W. V. Raman	N Zealand	(Richard Hadlee, lbw)	Napier	9 Feb 1990	Drawn
Shiv Sundar Das	West Indies	(Merv Dillon, bld)	Bridgetown	2 May 2002	Lost
Wasim Jaffer	Bangladesh	(Mashrafe Mortaza, bld)	Chittagong Divn	18 May 2007	Drawn
K. L. Rahul	Sri Lanka	(Suranga Lakmal, ctWK)	Kolkata	16 Nov 2017	Drawn
Yashasvi Jaiswal	Australia	(Mitchell Starc, lbw)	Adelaide	6 Dec 2024	Lost

*Notes: *Jaiswal was the first to be dismissed in a day-night Test match; *Jimmy Cook was on his Test debut; *Jalandhar and Jaipur hosted their only ever Test match*

4 The number of occasions when two Indian pace bowlers have claimed four or more wickets in the same innings of a Test match on Australian soil. In the recent Test at the Adelaide Oval, Jasprit Bumrah and Mohammed Siraj accomplished this feat in the first innings, although India ultimately lost the match. Notably, Kapil Dev and Siraj are the only bowlers in this context to have achieved this on two separate occasions.

Indian pace bowlers hunting in a pair in Tests in Australia

Figures	Bowler	Venue	Month, Year	Result
5/97	Kapil Dev	Sydney	January 1981	Lost
5/107	Karsan Ghavri			
5/97	Kapil Dev	Melbourne	December 1991	Lost
4/84	Manoj Prabhakar			
5/73	Mohd Siraj	Brisbane	January 1021	Won
4/61	Shardul Thakur			
4/61	Jasprit Bumrah	Adelaide	December 2024	Lost
4/98	Mohd Siraj			

Note: The occurrence in Brisbane was in the second innings

4 The number of times captain Rohit Sharma was dismissed by his opposing captain during his Test career. Pat Cummins has got Rohit out three times, while England's Ben Stokes has done so once. Notably, Rohit joins South African Dean Elgar as the only player to be dismissed three times by Cummins while leading their respective sides. The other captains Cummins has dismissed more than once are Kiwi Tim Southee, West Indian Kraigg Brathwaite, and Ben Stokes. Incidentally, Pat Cummins has so far taken 14 wickets of his opposing captains during his Test career as an Aussie skipper. Interestingly, Rohit Sharma's dismissal in the second innings in Adelaide marks only the second time an Australian captain has claimed the wicket of an Indian captain in a Test match played in Australia. The first instance occurred in January 1968, nearly 57 years ago, when Bob Simpson dismissed M. A. K. Pataudi during a Test in Melbourne.

1031 The number of balls/overs delivered in the Adelaide Test is the fewest in any 109 Test matches played between India and Australia since the inaugural Test on 1 January 1948 at the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG). However, it should be noted that one other Test match was played at Feroze Shah Kotla in Delhi in September 1986, a rain-affected drawn game. This match only witnessed 610 balls (101.4 overs) of play, with no play possible on the first three days because of rain.

Note: Both the Adelaide Tests in 2020 and 2024 were day-night games

Rohit Sharma's Test dismissals by the opponent captain

#	Opponent Captain-bowler	Mode of dismissal	Runs	Venue	Month, year	Result (for Rohit)
1.	Pat Cummins (Aus)	bowled	120	Nagpur	Feb 2023	Won
2.	Pat Cummins (Aus)	lbw	15	The Oval	Jun 2023	Lost
3.	Ben Stokes (Eng)	bowled	103	Dharamsala	Mar 2024	Won
4.	Pat Cummins (Aus)	bowled	6	Adelaide	Dec 2024	Lost

Shortest Test matches between India & Australia in terms of fewest balls delivered (excluding drawn Tests)

Balls	Overs	R/O	Runs/Wkts	Venue	Month, year	won by
1031	171.5	4.14	711/30	Adelaide	Dec 2024	Aus by 10 wkts
1135	189.1	2.89	547/31	Indore	Mar 2023	Aus by 9 wkts
1200	200.0	3.51	701/30	Perth WACA	Jan 2012	Aus by inns & 37 runs
1213	202.1	2.99	605/40	Mumbai WS	Nov 2004	Ind by 13 runs
1246	207.4	2.72	564/31	Adelaide	Dec 2020	Aus by 8 wkts

4.14 The run-rate in the Adelaide Test is now the highest for any Tests played between India and Australia since inception. Only on two occasions has the run-rate of 4 or more been surpassed in any Tests between these two sides. The previous occasion came in Brisbane during the 2014/15 series.

Test matches between India & Australia that produced the highest run-rates (R/O)

R/O	Balls	Overs	Runs/Wkts	Venue	Month, year	won by
4.14	1031	171.5	711/30	Adelaide	Dec 2024	Aus by 10 wkts
4.13	1842	307.0	1267/36	Brisbane	Dec 2014	Aus by 4 wkts
3.99	2357	392.5	1566/32	Adelaide	Dec 2014	Aus by 48 runs
3.95	2656	442.4	1747/25	Sydney	Jan 2004	Drawn
3.94	1658	276.2	1089/25	Brisbane	Dec 2003	Drawn

All records are correct and updated until 13 December 2024.

Note: India's (355 runs in 81 overs) run-rate of 4.38 in Adelaide is the first time it had exceeded an R/R of 4 runs per over in any Test in Australia. Its previous best was the 3.97 (916 runs in 230.5 overs) in Sydney in January 2004

FOR MORE STORIES

TIMING OF SYED MUSHTAQ ALI TROPHY A DISSERVICE TO THE PLAYERS

With the 2025 IPL auction completed just two days into SMAT, grand performances in this tournament **went without reward.**

Effort in vain: MP captain Rajat Patidar's unbeaten 40-ball 81 couldn't stop Mumbai's charge towards the title.

K. MURALI KUMAR

Ashwin Achal
achal.ashwin@thehindu.co.in

The Mumbai line-up for the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy (SMAT) wore an intimidating look. No less than six players had represented India, and new, hungry match-winners stood tall when called into action.

And who said you cannot teach an old dog new tricks? At 36, Mumbai opener Ajinkya Rahane was in prime form. With 469 runs at a strike rate of 164.56, Rahane emerged as the highest run-scorer of the tournament. His breathtaking attacking style in the PowerPlay played a major part in Mumbai claiming its second SMAT title.

Rahane's prime position was challenged by Madhya Pradesh's Rajat Patidar. Patidar looked a cut above the rest, as he flourished on a spongy M. Chinnaswamy Stadium pitch while his teammates struggled. Patidar's big-match temperament was on display in the final against Mumbai, when he struck an unbeaten 81 to single-handedly keep MP in contention.

Patidar, who was retained by Royal Challengers Bengaluru (RCB), took in the applause of the crowd. His grand showing in this tournament no doubt augurs well for RCB in IPL 2025.

With Prithvi Shaw, captain Shreyas Iyer, Rahane, and Suryakumar Yadav in the top order, Mumbai had star power aplenty. But it was the unheralded Suryansh

Crowning moment: The victorious Mumbai team with the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy after sealing a 175-run chase against Madhya Pradesh with 13 balls to spare. K. MURALI KUMAR

KOLKATA KNIGHT RIDERS WILL BE A HAPPY BUNCH. HAVING GONE UNSIGNED IN THE FIRST ROUND, AJINKYA RAHANE – NAMED THE PLAYER OF THE SERIES – WAS A TERRIFIC VALUE FOR MONEY PICK AT RS 1.5 CRORE

Shedge who stole the show in the summit clash. The 21-year-old walked in to bat when Mumbai felt the heat. Shedge, however, went about his business like a veteran finisher, carting the attack to all parts for an unbeaten 15-ball 36.

The timing of the tournament was a disservice to the players. With the 2025 IPL auction completed just two days into SMAT, grand performances in this tournament went without reward. Take the case of Chandigarh fast bowler Jagjit Singh, the highest wicket-taker. The 27-year-old got the ball to move around and hit the right lengths to trouble all batters. And yet, he remains without an IPL contract.

MP spinner Kumar Kartikeya is only slightly better off. With 17 wickets, he stood behind Jagjit in the wickets chart. A wrist spinner with plenty of variations, Kartikeya had the established Mumbai batters on the ropes. If the IPL auction was held later this month, Kartikeya could have fetched a far better deal than the base price of Rs 30 lakh he received from Rajasthan Royals.

Kolkata Knight Riders (KKR) will be a happy bunch. Having gone unsigned in the first round, Rahane — named the Player Of The Series — was a terrific value for money pick at Rs 1.5 crore. Rahane is sure to play a big part in KKR's IPL 2025 campaign.

The final at the M. Chinnaswamy Stadium witnessed a massive turnout. This is quite rare for a domestic match at this venue, which usually only sees a handful of passionate supporters seated in a far corner.

This time around, the stadium was more than half full, which made for an electric atmosphere. The Karnataka State Cricket Association (KSCA) made the right decision to open nearly all gates to accommodate the constant inflow of enthusiastic spectators.

Patidar gained the maximum support, but there was plenty of cheer for the big names from Mumbai as well.

Shreyas was surprised to see the large number of fans fill the seats. "Whenever we play at the M. Chinnaswamy Stadium, the crowds are electrifying. The way they came in huge numbers today — it was out of this world. I was not expecting it. I initially saw one stand fully packed at the start of the match. But later on, once the match picked up pace, the numbers increased, and it went bonkers. We know how much the people of Bengaluru love their RCB players, but I'm happy that they supported us as well," Shreyas said.

GETTY IMAGES

ANALYSIS

THE ROOT OF JOE'S RUNAWAY RENAISSANCE

The England batter's recent exploits have not only elevated him to the **realm of all-time greats** but have also left his contemporaries in the dust.

Pranay Rajiv
pranay.rajiv@thehindu.co.in

The England men's cricket team is scheduled to play 22 Tests over the next 26 months, a figure indicative of how well the longest format is thriving.

However, if you are a fan of a certain 5'5" Mumbai-born retired cricketer, this 22-Test figure might have an ominous ring.

This glut of Tests for the Three Lions provides a perfect launchpad for leading English batter Joe Root to aim for, and potentially claim, at least a few records currently held by Sachin Tendulkar.

Root has been amassing runs at a furious pace in recent years, surpassing several stalwarts in the overall Test runs tally. Since January 1, 2020, he has accumulated 5,527 runs — 2,529 more than the second-best batter, Marnus Labuschagne.

The 33-year-old Root currently has 12,886 runs in the format, placing him fifth among all-time Test run-scorers. Given his relatively injury-free career, it wouldn't be unfathomable to expect him to continue for another five years or maybe even more.

If Root maintains his career average (50.93), he would require just under 60 innings to surpass Tendulkar's Test run tally.

Also under threat from Root's run accumulation is Tendulkar's record

Root currently has 12,886 runs in the format, placing him fifth among all-time Test run-scorers.

for the most Test hundreds. Over the last four years, the Yorkshire-born batter has more than doubled his century count. Root needs only three centuries per year for the next five years to overtake Sachin's ton tally.

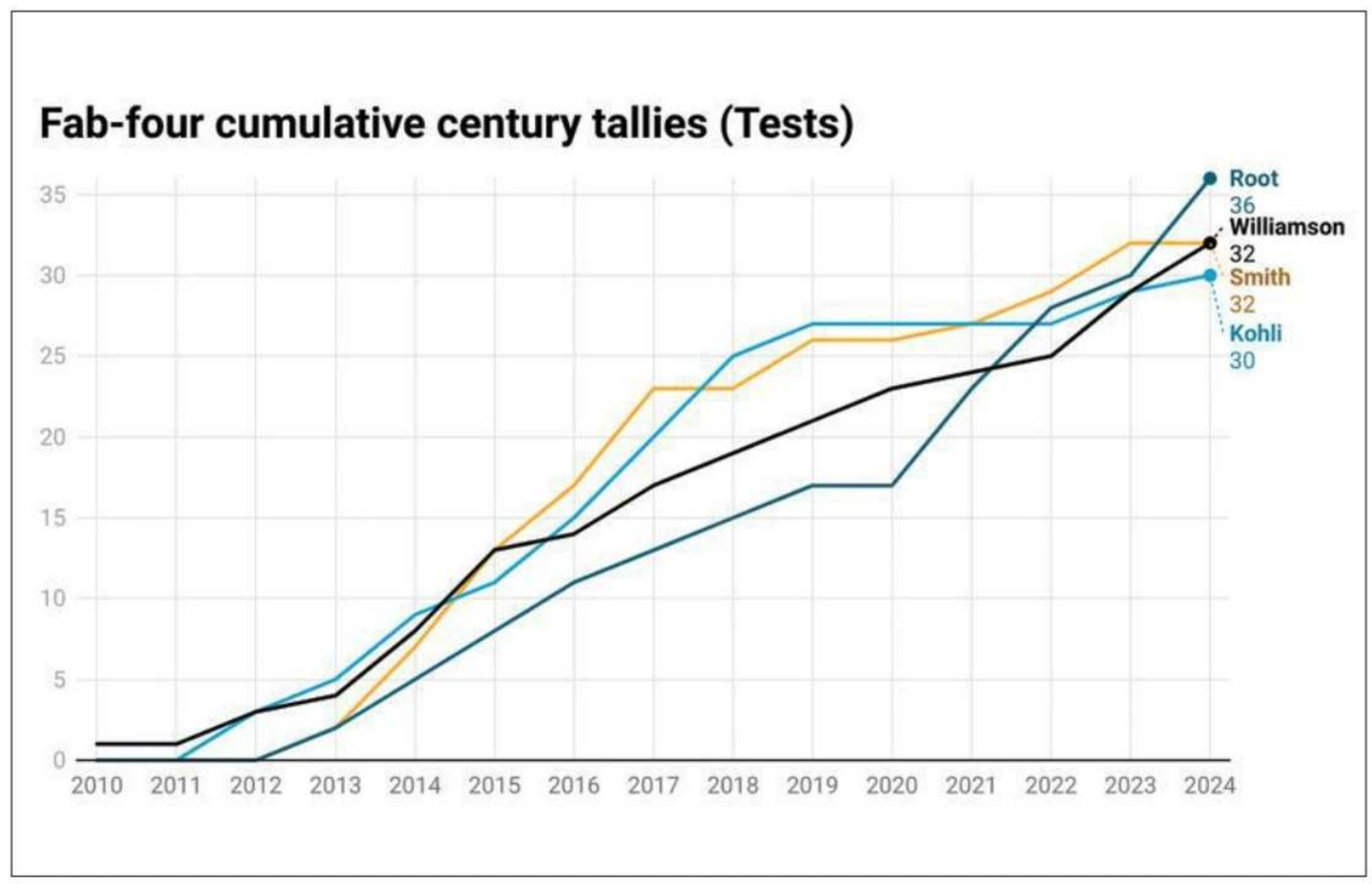
Root's recent exploits have not only elevated him to the realm of all-time greats but have also left his contemporaries in the dust.

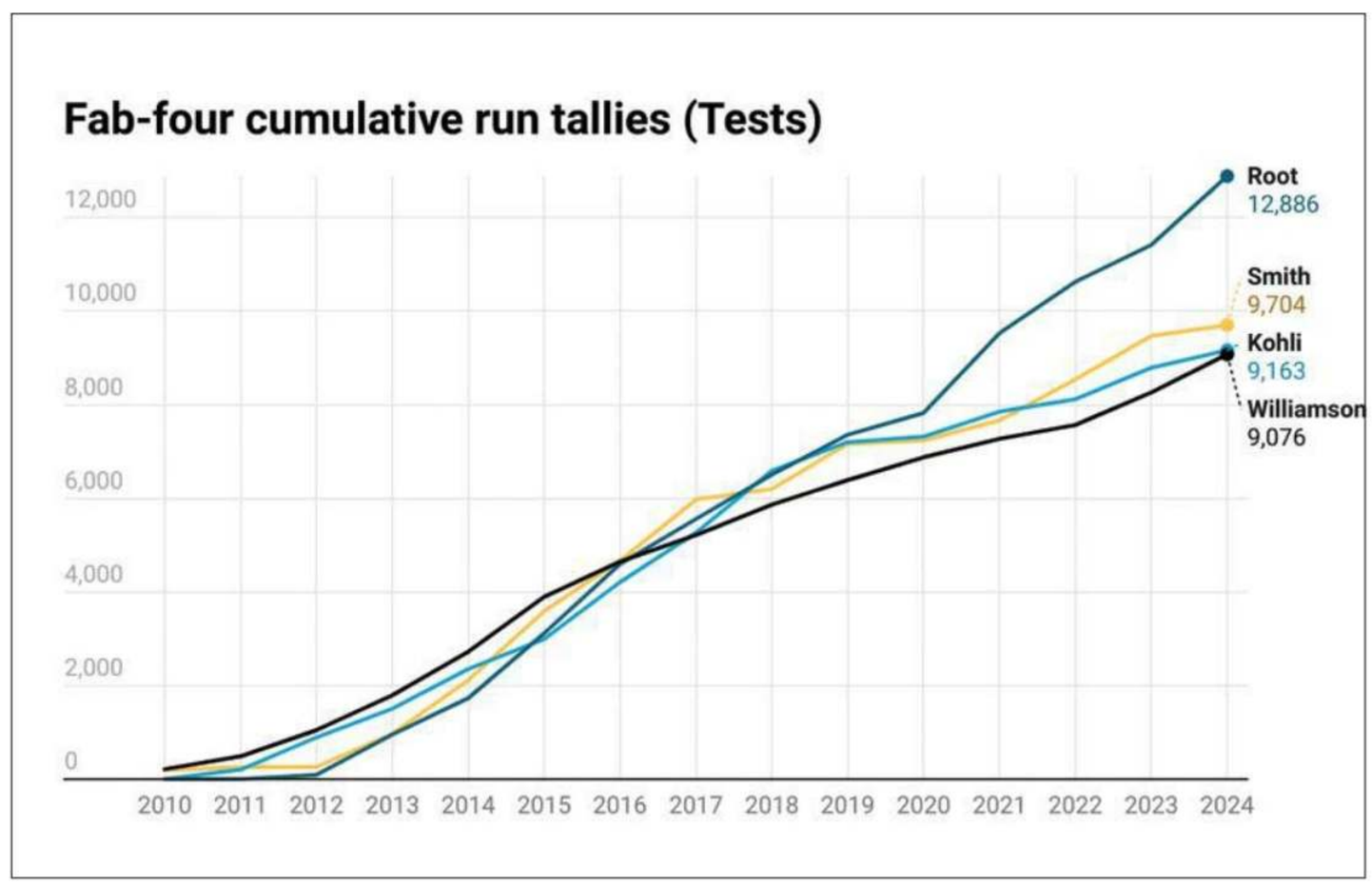
In the wake of Tendulkar's retirement in 2013, a vacuum emerged in Test cricket, soon filled by a clutch of batters who came to be known as the Fab Four – Steve Smith, Kane Williamson, Virat Kohli, and Root.

The Fab Four (a term coined by Kiwi legend Martin Crowe in 2014) have dominated world cricket over the past decade. However, in the group's early years, Root's inclusion often seemed like an afterthought, as he struggled to match the feats of the other three.

Until 2020, the four were largely neck-and-neck in the race to the 10k Test run tally. In terms of Test centuries, Root had the fewest among the four at the start of the decade, trailing Kohli by 10.

But Root has shattered this narrative over the last five years, outpacing the other three in almost every Test-related metric. His rise has been aided by the rest of the quartet grappling with the vagaries of poor form and injuries.





ALL TIME RECORD

	Sachin Tendulkar (INDIA)	Ricky Ponting (AUSTRALIA)	Jacques Kallis (ICC/SA)	Rahul Dravid (ICC/INDIA)	Joe Root (ENGLAND)
	1989-2013	1995-2012	1995-2013	1996-2012	2012-2024*
MATCHES	200	168	166	164	151
RUNS	15921	13378	13289	13288	12886
HS.	248*	257	224	270	262
AVG.	53.78	51.85	55.37	52.31	50.93
CENTURIES	51	41	45	36	36

**Root is still an active player; All numbers until December 12, 2024.*

ENGLAND'S TEST SCHEDULE

May 2025
Zimbabwe (Home, 1 Test)
June-August 2025
India (Home, 5 Tests)
November 2025-January 2026
Australia (Away, 5 Tests)
June 2026
New Zealand (Home, 3 Tests)
August-September 2026
Pakistan (Home, 3 Tests)
December 2026-February 2027
South Africa (Away, 3 Tests)
February 2027
Bangladesh (Away, 2 Tests)

AFP

ENGLAND'S NEW BATTING APPROACH UNDER MCCULLUM AND STOKES IS SO ALL-PERVADING THAT IT HAS MANAGED TO PERMEATE ROOT'S CLOAK OF TEXTBOOK BATTING

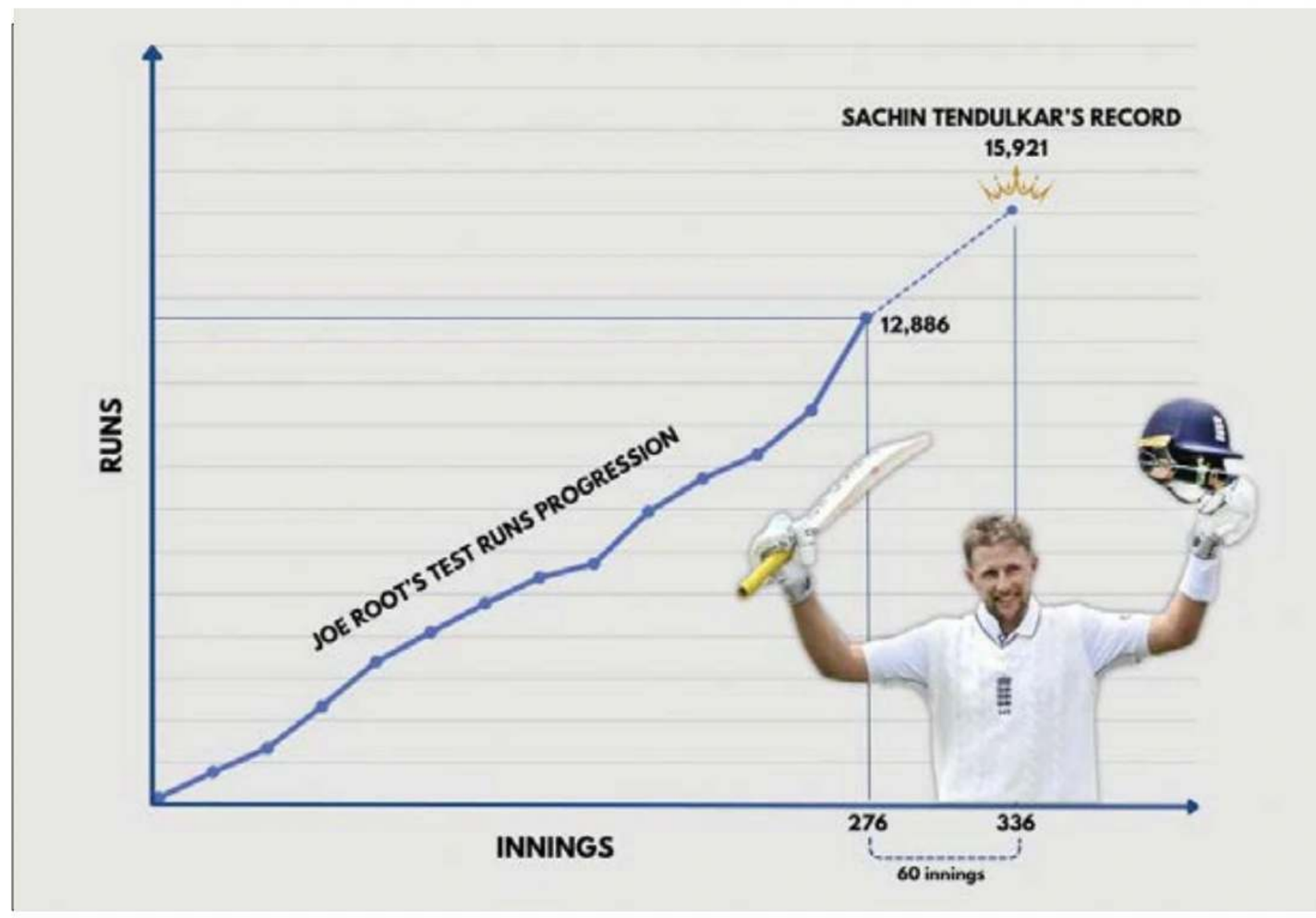
Kohli is now a shadow of the dominant batter he was around 2016. Smith's idiosyncratic style no longer delivers the Bradmanesque run tallies of the past. Williamson has been plagued by relentless injuries, preventing him from enjoying a sustained period of run-scoring.

All the while, Root has moved steadily forward, aided significantly by the 'Bazball' phenomenon. The arrival of Brendon McCullum as England's Test coach, combined with the proactive captaincy of Ben Stokes, has seen England bat at an unprecedented tempo in Test cricket.

This sense of batting urgency was so all-pervading that it even managed to permeate Root's cloak of textbook batting. This is best evidenced by the right-handed batter's recent tendency to take on pacers using the outrageous reverse scoop over slips.

Since McCullum's appointment, Root has scored at a strike rate of 68.61, compared to a measly 54.65 in the preceding decade.

England's renewed fascination with Test cricket has offered Root the perfect runway to launch himself towards the summit of cricket's statistical Mt. Everest. With innovative shots in his repertoire and buoyant form under his wings, it will hardly surprise anyone if he topples Sachin and co. from their perch at the pinnacle of the game.



1st

Debut delight: Australia's Georgia Voll finished as the highest run-getter in the ODI series against India Women with 173 runs across three innings. The opener scored an unbeaten 46 on debut in the first ODI before going on to hit her maiden hundred in the second. GETTY IMAGES

2nd

Striking early: New-ball bowler Megan Schutt finished as the highest wicket-taker in Australia Women's ODI series win against India with eight scalps, which included a five-wicket haul in the first ODI in Brisbane. GETTY IMAGES

3rd

A series to remember: Aussie all-rounder Annabel Sutherland was adjudged the Player of the Series. The 23-year-old picked six wickets in three matches and scored 122 runs, including a hundred in the third ODI at the WACA. GETTY IMAGES

4th

Record-breaking: Arundhati Reddy broke the back of the Australia Women innings in the third ODI in Perth registering figures of 4/26 in 10 overs, the best returns for an Indian bowler Down Under in Women's ODIs. GETTY IMAGES

5th

Classy: India Women's Smriti Mandhana scored a hundred during the third ODI against Australia Women in Perth. This was the southpaw's second century in four innings following a hundred against New Zealand in Ahmedabad, recently. GETTY IMAGES

6th

Perth perfection: Ashleigh Gardner scored a 64-ball 50 in the third ODI against India at the WACA to take her team to 298/6 in its fifty overs. Gardner then picked five wickets to spin her team to an 83-run win. GETTY IMAGES

7th

Clean sweep: The triumphant Australian women's team at the end of a 3-0 ODI series win over India. This was the second consecutive series win with the same scoreline between the two after Australia's trip to the sub-continent in late December 2023. GETTY IMAGES

K. BHAGYA PRAKASH

Ashwin calls it a day

1 "As a cricketer, I'll just stop and I might go on to be involved with the game because this is a game that has given me everything," the **legendary spinner** said.

A legend bowed out of the game in a matter-of-fact way at the Gabba on the evening of December 18. Shortly after the third Test concluded in a draw, R. Ashwin accompanied his skipper, Rohit Sharma, to the press conference hall. Soon the ace spinner made it obvious why he was there as he announced his retirement from international cricket with immediate effect.

His statement is as follows: "I really didn't want to make this about myself. Honestly, I think it would have been better if (Jasprit) Bumrah or Akash Deep were here. But Rohit (Sharma) is unfortunate to have me along his side. I am not going to take too much of your time. This will be my last day as an Indian cricketer in all formats at the international level. I do feel there is a bit of punch left in me as a cricketer, but I would like to expose and probably showcase that in club-level cricket, but this will be the last day."

"I have had a lot of fun. I must say I have created a lot of memories alongside Rohit and several of my other teammates, even though I have lost some of them over the last few years. We are the last bunch of OGs. Obviously there are a lot of people to thank, but I would be failing in my duties if I didn't thank the BCCI and the fellow teammates. I want to name a few of them. All the coaches who have been a part of the journey, most importantly Rohit, Virat (Kohli), Ajinkya (Rahane) and (Cheteshwar) Pujara, who have taken those splendid catches to give me the number of wickets I have managed to get over the years."

"Also a big thank you to the Australian cricket team, who have been very fierce competitors. I have enjoyed my time playing against them. I think it is already getting long. I wouldn't be taking any questions. But it is truly a very emotional moment. I don't think I am in a position where I would be answering the questions in the right way. So please pardon me for that. Once again, that is my time. Thanks for being the journalists that you have been, writing good things and, of course, writing nasty things on occasions."

"That's a relationship I think we would maintain forever, and I hope the cricketers to come in the future will also get the same amount of love. Once again, thank you all, and yeah, see you all soon. As a cricketer, I'll just stop, and I might go on to be involved with the game because this is a game that has given me everything."

K. C. Vijaya Kumar

AP

Zimbabwe clinched only its third-ever win over Pakistan in T20Is, but it was too little, too late for the host, as the Salman Agha-led side took the series 2-1. Left-arm wrist-spinner Sufiyan Muqeem **(above)** starred for Pakistan, picking up nine wickets in three games and ensuring the batters didn't have to do the heavy lifting. Muqeem and leg-spinner Abrar Ahmed claimed three wickets each in the first T20I to restrict Zimbabwe to 108 in a 166-run chase. Muqeem's five-wicket haul in the second match skittled Zimbabwe for 57, which Pakistan's openers overhauled inside the PowerPlay to claim the series with a match to spare.

EMMANUAL YOGINI

Indian national team players struggled to find buyers, while the uncapped ones struck gold in the Women's Premier League mini-auction. Sneh Rana, Poonam Yadav, Shubha Satheesh, Mansi Joshi, and Tejal Hasabnis didn't find bidders, even as the likes of Simran Shaikh, G. Kamalini, and Prema Rawat fetched large sums. All-rounder Simran **(in pic)** received the highest bid of Rs 1.90 crore from Gujarat Giants. Kamalini was bought by Mumbai Indians for Rs 1.60 crore. The 16-year-old from Tamil Nadu was the second-highest scorer in the Under-19 Women's T20 Trophy, which TN won in October. Meanwhile, Royal Challengers Bengaluru signed Prema Rawat for Rs 1.20 crore.

AP

South Africa continued its march towards a maiden World Test Championship final berth with a 2-0 sweep of Sri Lanka at home. It wrapped up the second Test with a 109-run victory as Sri Lanka lost its last five wickets for just 19 runs while chasing 348. Skipper Temba Bavuma, who starred in the Proteas' 233-run win in the first Test, continued his rich vein of form, scoring two fifties in the second Test and finishing the series with a whopping 327 runs. Though Sri Lanka put up a much-improved show with the bat in the second Test, Dane Paterson and Keshav Maharaj's five-wicket hauls in the first and second innings, respectively, curtailed the visitor's resistance.

AFP

Bangladesh secured its first Test triumph in the West Indies since 2009 by winning the second Test by 101 runs and levelling the series 1-1. After taking a narrow 18-run first-innings lead, thanks to pacer Nahid Rana's five-wicket haul, Bangladesh rode on Jaker Ali's 91 in the second innings to set the host a 287-run target. In response, West Indies could only manage 185, with left-arm spinner Taijul Islam **(above)** picking up a five-for. However, West Indies bounced back in the ODI leg, sweeping the series 3-0, courtesy of debutant Amir Jangoo's hundred in the final game.

6

AP

New Zealand gave Tim Southee, who played his last match in the format, a fitting farewell with a thumping 423-run consolation win in the third and final Test, even as England secured the series 2-1. Mitchell Santner's all-round brilliance, which included scores of 76 and 49 with the bat and seven wickets in the match, ensured England didn't complete a clean sweep. However, a 323-run victory in the second Test, powered by centuries from Harry Brook and Joe Root, helped the visitor take an unassailable lead in the series following its eight-wicket win in the opener.

7

GETTY IMAGES

The England women's team rode on opener Tammy Beaumont and wicketkeeper Amy Jones' unbeaten 90-run partnership for the fifth wicket to win the rain-curtailed third ODI against South Africa by six wickets (DLS method) and clinch the series 2-1. Interestingly, all three matches in the series were won by an identical margin of six wickets. South Africa's successful chase of 187 in the first ODI was enabled by skipper Laura Wolvaardt's unbeaten 59, after Marizanne Kapp's three for 24 with the ball. England levelled the series by overhauling the target in the second game, as Player of the Series Charlie Dean's **(above)** four-for restricted the Proteas to 135.

8

GETTY IMAGES

Afghanistan overcame a 0-1 deficit to win the three-match T20I series against Zimbabwe 2-1. All-rounder Azmatullah Omarzai **(in pic)** shone in Afghanistan's series-clinching three-wicket win in the third T20I, picking up two wickets and top-scoring with 34 runs in his team's successful 128-run chase. Pacer Naveen-ul-Haq, who was named Player of the Series, nabbed three key wickets, and Darwish Rasooli's 42-ball 58 helped Afghanistan draw parity by winning the second T20I. Zimbabwe's nervy four-wicket win in the series opener was set up by pacer Richard Ngarava's three-wicket haul and opener Brian Bennett's run-a-ball 49.

9

AP

South Africa won a T20I bilateral series for the first time in more than two years as it beat Pakistan 2-0 after the third and final match was abandoned without a ball being bowled due to rain. Reeza Hendricks' **(above)** maiden T20I century helped the Proteas chase down the 207-run target in the second T20I and claim the series with a game to spare. South Africa had taken a 1-0 lead in the series after David Miller's blistering 40-ball 82 in the first T20I helped his side to a match-winning 183. Pakistan skipper Mohammad Rizwan played a lone hand with the bat in that game, but his 62-ball 74 wasn't enough to take his team over the line, as it fell 11 runs short.

Key figure: Arguably one of the most gifted Indian midfielders in recent years, Ashique Kuruniyan (centre) proved his merit once again in the match between Mohun Bagan Super Giant and Kerala Blasters FC. PICS: FSDL

ASHIQUE'S DAY OUT

The **versatile midfielder** changed the complexion of the game despite arriving in the dying minutes.

Arriving in the 80th minute of the action and becoming the player of the match may sound extraordinary to a football aficionado.

But that is precisely what happened in the Indian Super League as Mohun Bagan Super Giant overhauled Kerala Blasters FC's challenge 3-2 with two goals in the final nine minutes.

Those tasked with determining the player of the match award had no doubt that it was Ashique Kuruniyan, the versatile midfielder who changed the complexion of the game despite arriving in the dying minutes of the action.

Ashique spent almost a year recovering from an ACL injury in his knee, sustained in September 2023, to reclaim his place in the team (Mohun Bagan SG) and the esteem of head coach José Molina.

"It is a big fight out there, and we really have to work hard to secure a place in the side," said Ashique, who was presented to the media before Mohun Bagan's away match against NorthEast United FC.

The talented footballer spent much of his time on the bench, making brief appearances as a substitute. However, the real opportunity to return to the starting line-up came when Mohun Bagan saw two of its key defenders — Alberto Rodriguez and Subhasish Bose — suspended before the crucial match against NorthEast.

Molina entrusted Ashique with the task of manning the defence as a left-back. It was not his usual position, but he did his job with sincerity as Mohun Bagan emerged a 2-0 winner in Guwahati.

With Molina seemingly determined not to alter his chosen line-up, Mohun Bagan ran into serious trouble against

Kerala Blasters in the next match, trailing 1-2 by the 77th minute.

Kuruniyan proved his worth once again after Molina turned to him to salvage the situation as an 80th-minute substitute.

The transformation was immediate. Ashique galvanised the flanks with his incisive runs and assisted Australian forward Jason Cummings to score the equaliser in the 86th minute (2-2).

With Mohun Bagan now finding its way back into the attacking third, thanks to Ashique's influence, the winning goal was all but inevitable. Mohun Bagan found the winner in injury time through a Rodriguez **(left, below)** pile-driver, completing Ashique's comeback mission.

The 27-year-old express winger is now waiting for national coach Manolo Márquez to recall him to the Indian team.

Amitabha Das Sharma

Back to old habits

The Kerala Blasters is known for firing coaches midway through the season. The latest in the line is Swede Mikael Stahre who was sacked the other day after the Blasters' poor run. The team had lost six of its last seven games and was down in the 10th spot with 11 points from 12 games when the Blasters management decided it was time for a change.

Stahre joins a long line of Blasters coaches who had to leave midway through the season, a list that includes Peter Taylor, Rene Meulensteen, David James, Kibu Vicuna. This time, the Blasters let go of their assistant coaches Bjorn Wesstrom and Frederico Pereira Morais too.

In their last game against Mohun Bagan, the current leader of the Indian Super League table, the Blasters let slip a 2-1 lead. Throwing away leads and losing games have often been the Blasters story this season. And Stahre was made to pay the price.

But Manjappada, the Blasters' famed fan club which has stood with the team through thick and thin, feels the move is unfair.

"Rather than taking responsibility for their own failures, they've chosen to make a scapegoat of a coach who has given his all for the team," said Manjappada on its *X* handle.

"This move reeks of cowardice and a lack of accountability. The management's inept handling of the team's affairs, including poor transfers, and a lack of clear vision, are the real reasons behind our team's struggles."

By the way, the Blasters have the biggest fan base in the ISL. The fans pack the stadium during games in Kochi, which gives the KBFC a huge edge during home matches.

Until the new coach is announced, Tomasz Tchorz, the Blasters reserve team's head coach and head of youth development, and assistant coach T.G. Purushothaman will take over the responsibility of managing the first team. Incidentally, Ivan Vukomanovic, the previous coach, had stayed on for three years and had helped the team to the playoffs every year, even making the final in his first season with the club.

And the Serb was a big hit with the fans, being as popular as the team's biggest star during his stay in Kochi.

Stan Rayan

Home blues for Chennaiyin

East Bengal was already up against history ahead of its ISL away match against Chennaiyin FC. The Red and Gold Brigade had never defeated Chennaiyin at the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium in the ISL.

Also, East Bengal's lacklustre start to the ISL season saw Carles Cuadrat's exit, and new coach Oscar Bruzon was under pressure to deliver results.

The circumstances were not too kind for Coyle either. Yet to win a home game this season, Chennaiyin was on a two-match losing streak. The stage was perfectly set leading up to the match.

As the Diary settled in the media tribune inside the Nehru Stadium, he could see a cluster of fans adorned in Red and Gold who had made the journey to Chennai.

Famed for its away support, it was no surprise that the small section of East Bengal fans was louder than the home crowd, which sounded meek at best.

Right from kick-off, Coyle's plan to isolate forward Dimitrios Diamantakos was evident, as the Greek striker was left stranded up top. On the other side, Chennaiyin's Daniel Chima Chukwu had a couple of chances but failed to capitalise against his former side. The first half saw the net remain undisturbed, and it was time for the managers to earn their money with their half-time team talks.

And it was Bruzon who won the tactical battle in the second 45. East Bengal opened the scoring against the run of play, with PV Vishnu finding the net in the 54th minute.

Jeakson Singh **(below)** thwarted any hopes of a Chennaiyin comeback with a screamer in the 84th minute to seal all three points.

Aneesh Dey

GAME OF TWISTS AND TURNS

While United piled on the misery for City in a thrilling Manchester derby, Leganes handed Barcelona a **shock defeat** in La Liga.

Aneesh Dey
aneesh.dey@thehindu.co.in

With just one win in 10 matches across all competitions, it would be an understatement to say every game is crucial for Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola. And with a Premier League derby against city rival Manchester United, it was the perfect chance for the defending English champion to bounce back and secure a much-needed win for momentum.

With City winning eight of its last 11 Manchester derbies since the start of 2021, the momentum was with Guardiola's men despite the poor run of results. Ruben Amorim, who had beaten Guardiola in his penultimate game as Sporting

FOR MORE STORIES

MARC CUCURELLA (BLUE) SAW A RED CARD IN THE EIGHTH MINUTE OF SECOND-HALF STOPPAGE TIME DURING CHELSEA'S 2-1 WIN AGAINST BRENTFORD

Down to the wire: Lisandro Martinez (left) scored the winner as Amorim's men scored two goals in two minutes to script a brilliant comeback win. GETTY IMAGES

manager (4-1 in the Champions League), had his task cut out and turned heads after deciding to drop Marcus Rashford and Alejandro Garnacho from the starting line-up.

City, playing in front of home support at the Etihad, got the crowd in a celebratory mood with Joško Gvardiol opening the scoring in the 36th minute with a well-taken header. While United did not look rudderless with its off-the-ball movement, the Red Devils could not take their chances, and time was running out. Minutes away from a win, the Etihad crowd was silenced by a late collapse.

Matheus Nunes, who gave the ball away cheaply in the final third, brought down Amad Diallo in the box in a bid to win it back and ended up bringing down the United forward. Referee Anthony Taylor quickly pointed to the penalty spot, and Guardiola had his hands on his head. Bruno Fernandes stepped up to take the spot-kick and never looked in doubt as he sent Ederson the wrong way for the equaliser in the 88th minute.

Considering the circumstances, a draw would have been a good result for both teams, but City had more disappointment in store. Lisandro Martínez spotted Diallo's forward run and found him with an excellent lofted through ball. The Ivory Coast international lifted the ball past an onrushing Ederson with immaculate precision and slotted it into the net from a tight angle. United had scored two goals in two minutes to script a brilliant comeback win in the derby.

Liverpool, which looks on course to win their 20th league title, was left frustrated by a 2-2 draw against Fulham, but manager Arne Slot praised his team's resilience in

Big impact: A solitary goal by Sergio Gonzalez (extreme right) was enough for Leganes to script an unexpected win against topper Barcelona. REUTERS

coming back twice after being a goal down, with Cody Gakpo and Diogo Jota finding the net.

Mikel Arteta's Arsenal failed to collect all three points after playing out a goalless draw against Everton. On the other hand, Chelsea stayed in the title race with a 2-1 win against Brentford, but it was not a perfect outing for the Blues as Marc Cucurella saw a red card in the eighth minute of second-half stoppage time.

Tottenham Hotspur blew away Southampton with a 5-0 win in a dominant display of football, and Nottingham Forest continued to impress with a 2-1 comeback win against Aston Villa.

After matchday 16, Liverpool tops the standings with 36 points. Chelsea, Arsenal and Nottingham Forest occupy second, third and fourth with 34, 30 and 28 points, respectively, with all having played a game more than Liverpool. Man City stays fifth with 27 points and Man United are 13th with 22 points.

La Liga

It was a frustrating week for the big two of Spanish top-flight football.

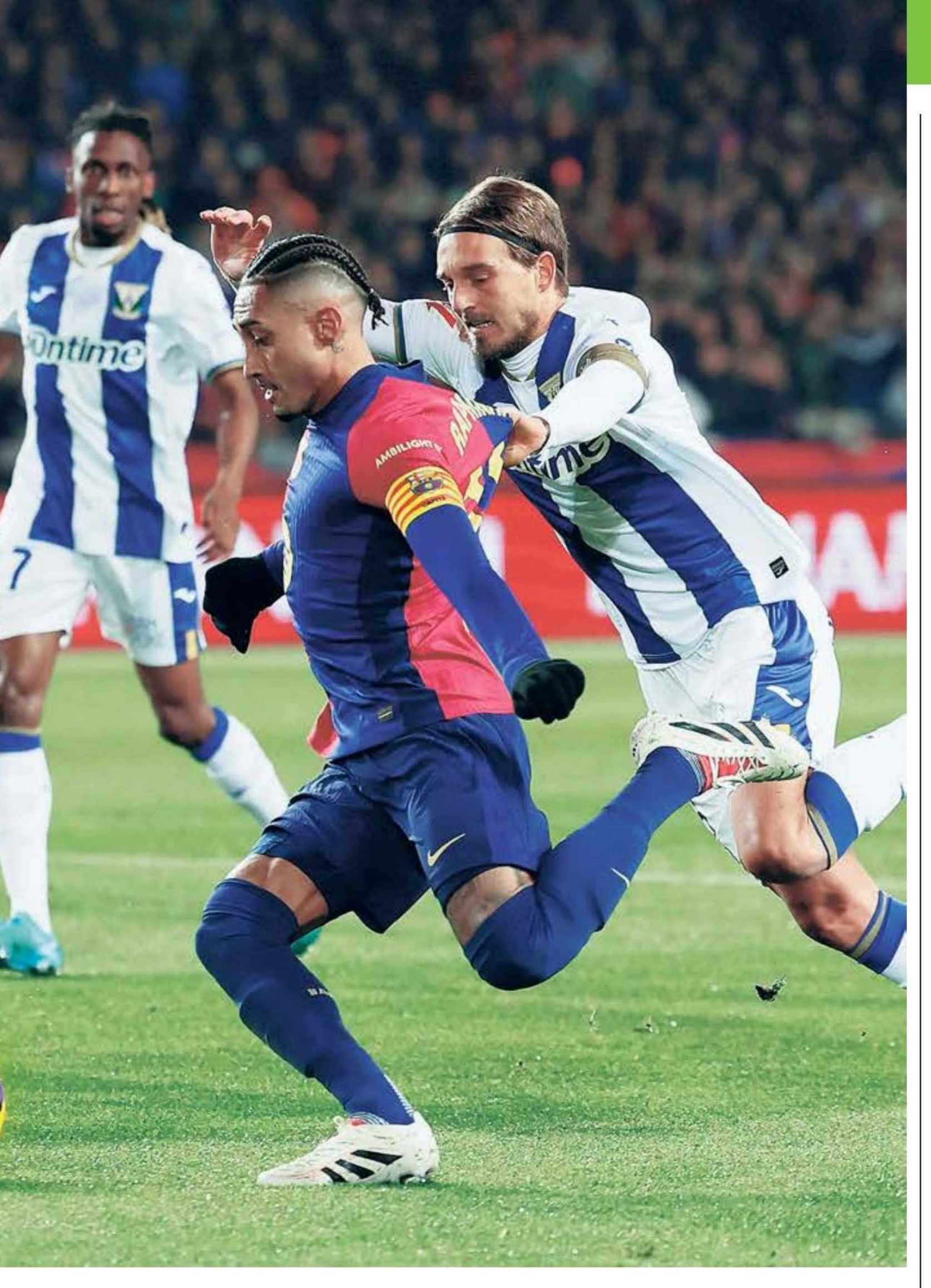
Real Madrid, chasing Barcelona in the title race, lost some momentum after playing out a 3-3 draw against Rayo Vallecano. Unai López and Abdul Mumin put Vallecano 2-0 up, but Los Blancos returned strongly courtesy of a long-distance screamer from Federico Valverde **(right)** and a strike from Jude Bellingham. Ancelotti's men took the lead in the 56th minute through Rodrygo but could not hold on to it, with Isi Palazón scoring the equaliser for Vallecano in the 64th minute.

AP

Barcelona had the perfect chance to capitalise on Madrid dropping points, and facing a lowly Leganés side, the equation seemed simple enough for Hansi Flick's men. But in one of the upsets of the season, Leganés edged a 1-0 win with Sergio González finding the net in the fourth minute.

Barca dominated the proceedings with 20 shots (four on target) and 81 per cent of the ball. Flick's men had an xG (expected goals) of 2.90 compared to Leganés' 0.3, but keeper Marko Dmitrović made multiple saves to maintain his team's slender lead.

It was not the most dominant



display from Atlético Madrid, but Diego Simeone's men did enough to clinch a 1-0 win against Getafe courtesy of a 69th-minute strike from Alexander Sorloth.

Athletic Bilbao played out a 1-1 draw against Alavés.

After matchday 17, Barcelona tops the table with 38 points. Atlético leapfrogged city rival Real Madrid to occupy second place. It also has 38 points, but Barca stays ahead courtesy of a better goal difference.

However, it should be noted that Atlético has played one match less than Barcelona. Real Madrid is third with 37 points, with Athletic in fourth with 33.

Serie A

Atalanta continued its bid to win its first-ever Scudetto after a 1-0 win against Cagliari. In a hard-fought match, Nicolò Zaniolo **(left)** was the only goalscorer.

Napoli stayed on Atalanta's heels with a 3-1 win against Udinese, but it was a disappointing week for Juventus, which drew 2-2 against last-placed Venezia.

It was a frustrating week for AC Milan after it played out a goalless draw against Monza, while Fiorentina went down 1-0 to Bologna. Fiorentina received some positive news after midfielder Edoardo Bove was discharged from hospital following a surgery to implant a heart starter device after his collapse during a Serie A match against Inter Milan.

After matchday 16, Atalanta tops the standings with 37 points, with Napoli in second place with 35 points. Inter and Fiorentina are third and fourth, with both teams on 31 points. Juventus is sixth with 28 points, and AC Milan is eighth with 23 points.

Bundesliga

German top-flight football saw an upset as Bayern Munich lost 2-1 to Mainz – Vincent Kompany's first league loss as Bayern manager. Lee Jae-sung scored a brace, and while Leroy Sané pulled one back for the Bavarians in the 87th minute, Mainz held on.

Defending champion Bayer Leverkusen cruised to a 2-0 win against Augsburg.

Borussia Dortmund played out a 1-1 draw against Hoffenheim, and RB Leipzig, who exited the Champions League, won 2-1

GETTY IMAGES

Convincing win: PSG cliched a 3-1 win against Lyon with goals from Ousmane Dembélé (in blue), Vitinha and Goncalo Ramos. AFP

against Eintracht Frankfurt.

However, the news that made the headlines came from the match between Union Berlin and VfL Bochum, which finished in a 1-1 draw. Bochum keeper Patrick Drewes **(left)** was hit by an object resembling a cigarette lighter when he was preparing to take a goal kick at 1-1 in added time.

The referee suspended the game and led both teams off the field. Nearly half an hour later, the game resumed, and Drewes was replaced by striker Philipp Hofmann. With about three minutes left, both teams passed the ball around while waiting for the referee to declare the game over. After matchday 14, Bayern top the standings with 33 points, with Leverkusen in second with 29. Frankfurt and Leipzig are third and fourth, with both teams on 27.

Ligue 1

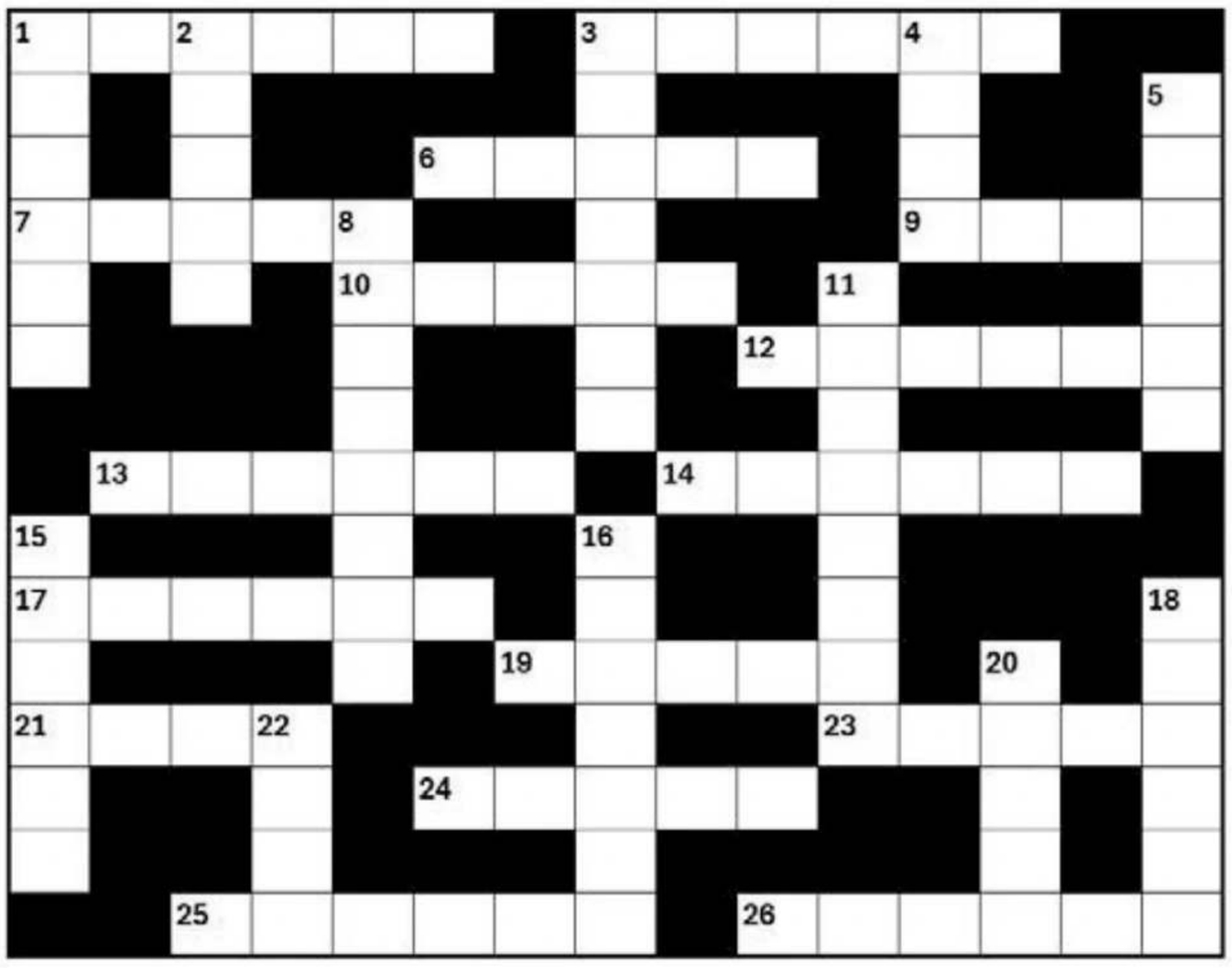
PSG's clash against Lyon was the headline fixture of matchday 15 of French top-flight football, and it did not disappoint, with PSG clinching a 3-1 win with goals from Ousmane Dembélé, Vitinha and Goncalo Ramos.

Marseille played out a 1-1 draw with LOSC Lille. Quentin Merlin put Marseille ahead in the 17th minute, and his goal was almost enough for the win, but Bafodé Diakité scored an 87th-minute equaliser to clinch a point for Lille. Monaco was held to a goalless draw by Reims.

Defending champion PSG marches towards the title as it stays atop with 37 points from 15 matches. Marseille and Monaco are second and third, with both on 30 points. Lille is fourth with 27 points.

League positions updated as of December 16, 2024.

CROSSWORD
N. SOORYA PRAKASH



SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

ACROSS

1 Who took 11 wickets in the first Test played between South Africa and Sri Lanka in Durban? (6)

3 & 19 Who won the player of the match award in the first Test held between New Zealand and England in Christchurch? (6,5)

7 Who is the current president of Hockey India? (5)

9 Who is the only Formula 1 driver of Haas-Ferrari team to have driven all 24 races of the 2024 season and finished 11th in the overall Drivers Championship? (4)

12 Who won the women's doubles event partnering Gayatri Gopichand at the Syed Modi International Badminton event recently? (6)

13 Who scored a hat-trick for Bayer Leverkusen in their Bundesliga match against 1.FC Heidenheim in November 2024? (6)

14 Who won the player of the match award in the second Test between the West Indies and Bangladesh in Kingston recently? (6)

17 Who ended as the runner-up in the season-ending ATP Tour Final in Turin? (6)

21 Who is the bowling coach of Rajasthan Royals? (4)

23 Who is the captain of the South African Test team? (5)

24 Which Alpine Team driver finished overall 10th in the Formula 1 Drivers Championship for the 2024 season which concluded recently? (5)

25 & 10 Who won the player of the series award for Bangladesh in the recent two-Test series versus West Indies? (6,5)

26 Who won both Blitz and Rapid categories in the men's section of this year's Tata Steel India chess tournament? (6)

DOWN

1 Recently, in which city did the mega auction for IPL take place? (6)

2 Which Australian Davis Cup legend passed away on December 2, 2024? (5)

3 Who won the player of the match award in the third T20 International between Zimbabwe and Pakistan in Bulawayo on December 5, 2024? (7)

4 Which Formula 1 driver did Team Alpine release before the season-ending Abu Dhabi GP? (4)

5 Which Formula 1 driver replaced 4-down above for the same race? (6)

8 Who won the player of the match award in the second Test between South Africa and Sri Lanka in Gqeberha? (8)

11 & Across 6 Who won the player of the tournament award in the recently-concluded Junior Asia Cup hockey? (8,5)

15 Who top-scored for South Africa in their second innings of the first Test versus Sri Lanka in Durban? (6)

16 Who became the most expensive player ever retained in IPL history in November 2024? (7)

18 Who won the player of the series award for West Indies in the recently-concluded two-Test series versus Bangladesh? (6)

20 Who led India in the recently-held Under-19 Asia Cup cricket tournament? (5)

22 Identify this Indian Olympic gymnast, who announced her retirement in October 2024? (4)

Top brass: Amlan Borgohain (centre) competes with Animesh Kujur (left) and Gurindervir Singh (right) in the 100m event at the 63rd National Inter State Senior Athletics Championship in Panchkula. RITU RAJ KONWAR

BREACHING THE 10S BARRIER

With the four runners — all in their early 20s and capable of running in the **10.2-second** range — training together, coaches believe the next breakthrough could happen soon.

India's four fastest runners – Gurindervir Singh, Manikanta Hoblidhar, Animesh Kujur and Amlan Borgohain – are training at Reliance Foundation's High Performance Centre in Mumbai.

Jonathan Selvaraj
jonathan.selvaraj@thehindu.co.in

Manikanta Hoblidhar thought he had it. Having set the national 100m record of 10.23 seconds just a few months earlier at the 2023 Open National Championships, he felt well-positioned to improve on that mark even further. Running in the final of the men's 100m at the National Games in Goa, the then 21-year-old had begun perfectly. As he surged towards the finish line, he stormed to a lead that had stretched, by his estimate, to some four metres ahead of the rest of the field.

That's when he felt a twinge in his right hamstring. His momentum all but vanished, and Manikanta eventually limped over the finish line in fourth place. "I still clocked 10.42 seconds after the injury. If I had been able to run all the way through to the finish line, I'm sure I'd have run in less than 10.20 seconds," he says.

As it stands, 10.23 seconds remains the Indian record in men's 100m. (This year, the fastest time clocked by an Indian was 10.27 seconds, recorded by Animesh Kujur.)

It's a mark that few are satisfied with. "The 100m is the most important event in international athletics. It's the one race that everyone watches. There's no reason the best time in India should be as high as it is," says Kujur. There's good reason for this. Manikanta's national record places him 1427th among 100m sprinters. Among all track and field events, India's men's 100m record ranks as the lowest.

It's a fact that has surprised Martin Owens, head coach of the Reliance Foundation Youth Sport High Performance Centre in Odisha, when he first examined the figures. "I would say that running in India is underdeveloped in comparison with the technical events. So if you take events like the long jump, triple jump, or javelin throw, the national records in India are world-class. The same is not true for the running events, particularly the sprints. You would think it would be the other way around. When I saw that, it didn't make sense to me. I thought, there must be some running talent in India, there must be!" he says.

The genes argument

While there's an argument that genetic limitations perhaps explain India's lack of success in the sprints, not all sports scientists

agree. "Everybody used to believe that you had to have West African genes or come from the Caribbean to be a world-class sprinter. Obviously, the last decade has shown us that's not necessarily true. We had, in Usain Bolt, an athlete who, according to conventional wisdom, had the wrong shape to be a sprinter (Bolt was far taller than most of his compatriots). We had a Chinese sprinter in the 100m finals in Tokyo. The Chinese 4x100m team also won an Olympic medal in Tokyo. I think people are starting to realise that the genetic argument only goes so far in explaining sprint success," says Christopher Pedra, who has worked for several years in India as a sports scientist.

Pedra notes that Indians don't even have to look as far as China for inspiration to dismiss the genetic excuse. Just a couple of years ago, Sri Lanka's Yupun Abeykoon clocked a time of 9.96 seconds, becoming the first South Asian to break the 10-second barrier in the 100m — considered one of the gold standards of track excellence.

So why haven't Indians come anywhere near that mark? And just what will it take for the first Indian to breach that barrier?

According to Gurindervir Singh, who himself clocked 10.27 seconds in 2021 –- the fifth-fastest time ever recorded by an Indian — the problem starts with a lack of self-belief. "No one really believes that Indians can be good sprinters, not even our coaches. I started my athletics career when I was in Class 7. At that time, I was inspired by Usain Bolt. But so many coaches told me that Indians can't do well in the 100m. They told me that if I wanted to make a career for myself, I should shift to the 400m. We had many Asian Games medals in the 400m but none in the 100m. But I always wanted to change that mentality," says the 24-year-old.

While Gurindervir says he was always adamant about being a sprinter, he admits that things didn't get much easier for him. His personal best came three years ago, but since then he has faced two years of recurring injuries. He has only recently started putting together some consistent performances, clocking a time of 10.32 seconds at the National Championships in June this year.

According to Gurindervir Singh, who himself clocked 10.27 seconds in 2021 – the fifth-fastest time ever recorded by an Indian – the problem starts with a lack of self-belief.

Some of this is inevitable. "The sprint is just violence. The faster you have to run, the more force your body has to generate. And the more force you have to generate, the more force your body has to tolerate. If you are talking about running a 10-second 100m, you are talking about the fastest people in the world. So, you've got these people producing the most amount of force, probably more than any other athlete in the world. As they hit the ground, they have to generate force

RITU RAJ KONWAR

in what we call triple extension — extending the ankles, knees, and glutes simultaneously. Your foot hits the ground, and the ground pushes back with an equal and opposite force. We need athletes to be seriously strong. It's all well and good saying an athlete is genetically amazing, the coaching is incredible, and they are psychologically strong. But if they're not able to get to the start line due to injury, none of that matters," he says.

According to Gurindervir, the injury challenge has been a significant limitation.

"I think you need a lot of support, especially if you are trying to be a sprinter, and that wasn't really available in India. I started my training in Jalandhar and then at the national camp in Patiala. For a long time, the workouts I followed were the same ones that had been taught by Russian coaches who came to India 20 years ago. I didn't have any facilities or a physio.

I wouldn't even dare to push myself in training because I wasn't sure if my warm-up routine was

SUDHAKARA JAIN

TNE NATIONAL RECORD SET BY MANIKANTA HOBLIDHAR (CENTRE) PLACES HIM 1427TH AMONG 100M SPRINTERS. AMONG ALL TRACK AND FIELD EVENTS, INDIA'S MEN'S 100M RECORD RANKS AS THE LOWEST

good enough, and I was always afraid I'd get injured.

Team effort

Gurindervir is far more optimistic about his prospects now. Over the past year, he has been training at the Reliance High Performance Institute in Mumbai. "Right now, I'm training much more systematically. I have a dedicated physio and strength & conditioning advisors working with me. That gives me a lot more confidence," he says.

There's more good news. Gurindervir is no longer training alone. In Mumbai, he is training alongside Manikanta, Animesh (PB 10.27), and 200m national record holder Amlan Borgohain (PB 10.25). This marks the first time in Indian track history that the four fastest runners are training together at the same facility.

"It's a huge help," says Gurindervir. "When I was in Jalandhar, I didn't have any runners at the same level as me. I was often training with kids from Class 10 or 12. When you have someone like Manikanta, Animesh, and Amlan, there's a sense of competition. You get that feeling *ki sabse accha karna hai* (you have to do better than the others). That's a really good place to be in. When we compete together, it will push each one of us even harder," he says.

With the four runners — all in their early 20s and capable of running in the 10.2-second range — training together, coaches believe the next breakthrough could happen soon, triggering collective improvement across the board.

"I think you are going to see a major improvement in 2025," says James Hillier, who coaches Gurindervir, Amlan, and Manikanta in Mumbai. "We're waiting for the first guy to break 10.2. Once that happens, another will break it very

quickly afterwards. The next step will be sub-10.1, and then, of course, the magic 10-second barrier. It seems very far away, but that's where we want to get to," says Hillier, who previously coached Jyothi Yarraji to a national record and an Asian Games silver medal in the women's 100m hurdles.

Hillier believes all four are already capable of much faster times than their personal bests. "I don't think it's even about ability. I think it's a matter of belief. One of them has to do it first. Once one achieves it, they all will. They should have done it this year, to be honest. They're capable of it; they just don't know how to execute it. That's what I'm trying to help them do," he says.

While the gap between 10.2 seconds and the low 10-second range might seem vast, athletes and coaches agree it's not an insurmountable challenge.

"When you actually measure it, there isn't a significant difference in the top speed (approximately 37kmph) of an Indian runner clocking 10.25 seconds for the 100m and someone running sub-10 seconds. The difference is that the elite runner reaches that top speed much earlier," Hillier explains.

Gurindervir goes even further. "There's actually not that much difference between a 10.2-second and a 9.8-second race. The difference is decided at the start of the race — your reaction time and what happens in the first six strides. The frequency of your feet turning over is critical. That's what really sets up the rest of your race," he says.

This, of course, isn't exactly the same situation for all of India's top sprinters. "Each of them is built differently and has distinct running patterns. Gurindervir and Manikanta are very good starters. Animesh and Amlan, on the other hand, are taller so they will never have as strong a start. However, they have the ability to make a lot of ground towards the second half of the race," says Hillier.

Lofty goals

Hillier is particularly optimistic about 21-year-old Animesh, citing the Trofeo de Atletismo Ciudad de Salamanca Memorial race in Spain earlier this June. Kujur competed against two Cuban runners — Shainer Reginfo and Reynaldo Espinosa — both of whom clocked sub-10-second times (Shainer at 9.90 and Reynaldo at 9.96). "Animesh started poorly and was trailing by five or six metres within the first 20 metres of the race. But he was closing in on them at the end. That showed his top speed was probably faster than those two guys who ran 9.90. He just hasn't figured out how to structure his race yet. Once he does, he will run seriously fast," Hillier says.

It is with this optimism that all four sprinters are heading into the 2025 season. One of Hillier's targets for them is a medal at the 2025 Asian Championships. "The 4x100m relay is one event where the team can really go and get a medal. That would give these four guys some real confidence in their individual abilities," he says.

Hillier says he isn't putting a number as a goal just yet. "We talk about the 10-second barrier, but it's just an arbitrary number, isn't it? We give it importance because it's a nice, round figure and put pressure on ourselves to beat it. But there's no real reason to care about it more than, say, 9.9 or 10.2," he says.

Arbitrary or not, it's a number all four sprinters admit is always on their minds. "Sometimes, I dream of running exactly 10 seconds at a major competition," says Manikanta, who aims to clock under 10.20 seconds at the National Games in January 2025 and push close to 10.1 at the Asian Championships.

He doesn't see the task as daunting as it once was.

"There was a time when people thought Indians couldn't do well in javelin either. It was so hard for an Indian to even cross 80m. Now, so many are achieving it. I think it will be the same for the 100m as well," he says.

Prime form: Animesh Kujur clocked the fastest time by an Indian in 2024 — 10.27 seconds. K. R. DEEPAK

« I want to help Patna Pirates win a fourth title »

DEVANK DALAL

Saikat Chakraborty
saikat.chakraborty@thehindu.co.in

In every sport, there occasionally comes a performance that disrupts its status quo. This is even more captivating in team sports when an athlete does something so spectacular that it changes the perception of the entire team.

In this season of the Pro Kabaddi League, Patna Pirates' Devank Dalal has been that player, whose brilliance has almost single-handedly elevated the team's standing.

Playing only his eighth game in the PKL, the young raider from Singhpura Khurd village in the Rohtak district of Haryana had the Hyderabad crowd chanting his name when he single-handedly led the Patna Pirates to an improbable victory against the Tamil Thalaivas on October 25.

It was the Pirates' first win of the season, and Devank scored a staggering 25 points as his team pulled off a comeback victory.

"It was all about the team, and I thought someone had to step up. I never thought, even in my wildest dreams, that I'd score 25 points. It was my day. On another day, another player will step up. But it is important for us to play together, and that's how we can win games," Devank told *Sportstar.*

Since that breakthrough performance, Devank has become the star of the season. Leading the scoring charts with 233 raid points from 18 matches at an average of 12.94 points per match, the 24-year-old has been front and centre of the Pirates' bid for a spot in the playoffs (as of December 16).

"Currently, I have three stars on my shirt this year. But when we play next year, I want to have four stars. I want to help Patna win a fourth title," he added.

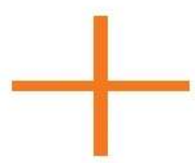
Devank defies the conventional mould of a raider. His understated approach belies a multifaceted skill set and an uncanny game sense. He possesses a potent blend of power, height, speed, and deceptive agility.

Born into a farming family in Rohtak, Haryana — a region known to produce prolific kabaddi players — the sport initially served as an escape from studies for Devank, who began training seriously in 2018.

"I never had the patience to sit and study, and when I saw my friends hardly attending classes because of their sports engagements, I thought I too could do the same if I started playing kabaddi after my 10th standard exams."

Two years later, Devank made his way into the Indian Army team through their sports programme, impressing in the trials. He subsequently participated in an inter-services tournament. F

ollowing another strong showing, Devank caught the attention of PKL scouts and was drafted into the Jaipur Pink Panthers through the NYP (New Young Player) programme for the ninth season of



The Pirates have been the most successful raiding team this season, accumulating 438 raid points at an average of 24.33 points with an average of 18.5 successful raids per match.

PKL

the PKL.

Despite his rapid growth, transitioning into a professional set-up proved challenging. He got limited game time in the season which saw the Panthers clinch their second title. The following season was a major setback, as a fractured skull sustained during training forced him to miss the entire campaign.

Hurdles aside, Devank only cherishes his stint with the Jaipur franchise. Not only did he make his PKL debut, but he was also able to share the dressing room with stars like Rahul Chaudhari, Sunil Kumar, and Arjun Deshwal, among others.

"It was a surreal experience. I made my debut, and my team won the title. All the legends advised me to keep practising and be patient. They said that my time will also come and I have to be ready for that," he explained.

Undeterred by challenges, he consistently honed his fitness and skills. His impressive raiding performances in the Services and Inter-Services tournaments caught the eye of Pirates coach Narender Redu, who secured him at the auction for Rs. 20 lakhs.

The most successful franchise in PKL history took a gamble on a young raiding unit, a move that always carries risks but can also have rewarding payoffs if it goes well.

"Every player is a newcomer once; they should perform to earn a name. Devank is a hard-working individual, and his progress has been tremendous. I had a belief that he'll do well, but he's exceeded even my expectations," said the coach.

The Pirates have been the most successful raiding team this season, accumulating 438 raid points at an average of 24.33 points with an average of 18.5 successful raids per match.

"My coach and teammates give me the confidence to go and attack and get the points. I have received a lot of support from the team management, and I want to make every opportunity count," the towering raider added.

Born on April 1, 2000, Devank acknowledges that he's a relatively late bloomer in PKL terms but is determined to improve every year. He is the first in his family to take up the sport, and now two of his younger siblings have followed in his footsteps.

"I want to try my best to ensure that my family has a good future. They've seen a lot of hardship, and now it's my turn to give back and help them live a happier life. They have done a lot for me, and I want to do something meaningful for them," he concluded.

WRAPPING IT UP IN STYLE

Taking the chequered flag for the fourth and final time this year was Lando Norris, who executed McLaren's mission to reclaim the Constructors' Championship **after 26 years.**

Kavita Menon
kavita.menon@thehindu.co.in

The Abu Dhabi Grand Prix was more than just another season-finale race. As the ceremonial fireworks lit up the Yas Marina Circuit's main straight, they marked the culmination of intense rivalries, heartfelt farewells, and moments of triumph.

The paddock buzzed with emotions, from celebrating a long-awaited championship to the quiet reflections of those preparing for new challenges and bittersweet goodbyes. The 2024 Formula One season, a 24-race spectacle that reignited competitiveness and brought back on-track excitement and off-track drama, had come to an end.

Mega win for McLaren

Taking the chequered flag for the fourth and final time this year was Lando Norris, who executed McLaren's mission to reclaim the Constructors' Championship after 26 years with a near-perfect race. Despite starting on the back foot, the team found its footing and, from there on, charged ahead and never looked back.

The 666 points McLaren collected over the nine-odd months represented more than just the six race wins, 21 podium finishes, and eight fastest-lap points. The Woking-based unit managed to score every weekend, with second-placed Norris (374) leading the way and his teammate Oscar Piastri just behind (292).

The Australian, in only his second full season, proved to be the consistency factor McLaren needed. He finished outside the top 10 only once but completed every single lap — all 1,444 of them — becoming only the fourth driver ever to do so. While Norris' ambition of stealing the crown from eventual champion Max Verstappen fell through, his team's coronation more than compensated for it. McLaren took 17 rounds — after the Azerbaijan Grand Prix — to leapfrog Red Bull, which struggled

Decisive: Lando Norris (in black) proved to be the consistency factor McLaren needed. GETTY IMAGES

with only one performing car: that of frontrunner Verstappen. Even a resurgent Ferrari couldn't dampen its dream of reclaiming the accolade last won in 1998, despite the Italian team fighting to the very end.

Fighting Ferrari

A deficit of 21 points proved to be a few too many for Ferrari, but both its drivers, Carlos Sainz and Charles Leclerc, pushed until the final lap before settling for a runner-up spot. They rounded off the podium spots in second and third place, respectively, a comparatively strong result considering their shaky start.

Leclerc drove a brilliant race, arguably one of his best, making a staggering 16 moves from 19th place to finish P3. Ahead of him was Sainz, who couldn't keep up with the more competitive car of Norris but ensured he would bid farewell to the Prancing Horse in fitting fashion — on the podium for them one last time.

The Spaniard was already seen in the Williams the very next day for post-season testing, putting in laps ahead of his new journey. While some will exit the paddock, Sainz is among a few who are switching garages, including seven-time World Champion Lewis Hamilton **(below)**, who took fourth after coming through from 16th. Passing the other Mercedes on the final lap, Hamilton had his last hurrah with the Silver Arrows as he prepares to get behind the wheel of the Ferrari in 2025.

SAINZ AND LECLERC ROUNDED OFF THE PODIUM SPOTS IN SECOND AND THIRD PLACE, RESPECTIVELY, A COMPARATIVELY STRONG RESULT CONSIDERING THEIR SHAKY START

One last 'Hammer' time

After 12 years with Mercedes, which saw Hamilton win six titles and the team eight, he begins a new chapter in his historic Formula One career with one of its fiercest competitors. It was the end of a brilliant partnership that witnessed a period of domination during which the Brit broke numerous records en route to taking the team to the top.

However, after the heartbreaking 2021 season, the Brackley-based unit hasn't been the same. It couldn't deliver a competitive car, causing its drivers, Hamilton and George Russell, to struggle in the midfield. A lone win for the latter in 2022 was the only major achievement during a tough two-year spell. But 2024 saw glimpses of hope for both the team — with four P1 finishes — and Hamilton, who stood atop the podium after a 945-day wait.

To win at Silverstone, in his backyard, for a record ninth time could have been the best moment for Hamilton to rediscover his groove, but his car didn't cooperate. Another victory was handed to him in Belgium after his teammate's disqualification, but it wasn't enough for the 39-year-old to hold on for another year, hoping for positive changes as new regulations come into play in 2026.

Opting to wear scarlet red next year, Hamilton will be in search of an eighth world title in a field that unleashed its true potential this time around — there were seven different race winners, each securing at least two victories for the first time in the sport's history. Adding to Hamilton's challenges will be the entry of a handful of rookie drivers, including Kimi Andrea Antonelli, who will take his seat.

Up for new challenges

If the season provided any insight into what's in store for next year, it is that defending champions Verstappen and McLaren will have their task cut out. The Dutchman, who was undoubtedly the best of the lot, claiming his fourth successive title, will once again find a few familiar faces and some new ones in his rear-view mirror. McLaren, too, will be well aware of the battles ahead. All 10 teams will have one last chance to make the most of the current rules before they start from scratch in 2026, with significant alterations to be made to the cars and possibly the grid itself (Cadillac reached an agreement "in principle" to enter the grid in 2026).

A great deal is set to change in the upcoming calendar year and the one that follows, but one enduring constant remains: the long three-month wait before the next season is flagged off.

GETTY IMAGES

VROOMING IN VAGATOR

The two-day extravaganza brought together riders and enthusiasts from biking communities around the world.

Kavita Menon
kavita.menon@thehindu.co.in

The coastal town of Vagator, Goa, known for its striking red cliffs and beach sunsets, was transformed into a motorcycling haven on December 6-7, as the fourth edition of TVS MotoSoul roared to life under the blazing sun.

The annual carnival celebrated another year of TVS' journey in the two-wheeler industry. Featuring a medley of races, obstacle courses, stunt performances, and a display of the latest engineering breakthroughs, the two-day extravaganza brought together riders and enthusiasts from biking communities around the world.

The distant roar of engines revving beyond the walkthrough exhibits created a constant backdrop for the event, as motorbikes raced across the red-soil mud tracks. The event united the minds behind the machinery and the riders who drove it to victory, stirring up dust clouds as they competed for top honours in their respective classes.

Among those sharing their journeys were Jagan Kumar, an 11-time Indian National Motorcycle Racing Championship (INMRC) champion, and Aishwarya Pissay, India's first motorsport world champion with her 2019 Bajas World Cup victory.

Products of TVS Racing (India's first factory racing team, established in 2016), both were joined by many young and successful riders who have made their way to the top of the podium. "With TVS Racing coming out with many grassroots-level projects for more enthusiasts and youngsters, it has created more opportunities," said Aishwarya.

"Through initiatives like the Apache Racing Experience (AREGP) programme, the Apache Pro Performance (APP) series, and the recently launched TVS Ronin Drift R School in Pune, we are giving young, talented riders the opportunity to hone their skills and compete at the highest levels," said Vimal Sumbly, Head Business — Premium, TVS Motor Company.

Among the innovations on display, without which countless achievements wouldn't have materialised, TVS unveiled its new RT-XD4 engine platform, inspired by decades of racing heritage. It also launched the new 2025 TVS Ronin, designed in collaboration with Smoked Garage (Indonesia) and the TVS Motor Factory Team (India).

Syed Asif Ali and Shamin Khan — who entered the Asia Book of Records after completing a record-breaking 6,300-kilometre ride on the Golden Quadrilateral atop the TVS NTORQ — were felicitated.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, everyone gathered for Goa's electric nightlife, where a host of popular singers and DJs made the revellers dance to their beats, capping two very eventful days.

[The reporter was at the event on invitation by TVS Racing]

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

High Performance Centre for badminton at Kalinga Stadium

'Shuttle by Dalmia Bharat' — a badminton High Performance Centre (HPC) - was inaugurated at the Kalinga Stadium Complex. This is a result of a collaboration between three parties, which was first initiated back in 2018.

If one goes to Jayadev Vihar in Bhubaneswar, signs that the 2023 Men's Hockey World Cup was held there will welcome them, including a mural of India captain Harmanpreet Singh.

In the vast Complex in the Odisha capital, there are centres dedicated to numerous sports in every direction. Now, badminton has got one of its own inside. The Dalmia Bharat Group, the Pullela Gopichand Badminton Academy, and the Government of Odisha signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) five years back. The Covid-19 pandemic delayed the progress of the project, which has now culminated into the Dalmia Bharat Pullela Gopichand Badminton Academy.

"It's just not a beautiful building, but an aspiration for a lot of youngsters, to thousands across the country. It's a symbol of the badminton court and the shuttlecock that will help build champions," Gopichand, who is the current chief India coach, said at the inauguration ceremony.

Puneet Dalmia, Managing Director, Dalmia Bharat, spoke about India's impending bid for the 2036 Olympics and made a bold prediction. "I promise you that in the 2036 Olympics, one player from this academy will get one gold medal," Dalmia addressed Himanta Biswa Sarma, President, Badminton Association of India.

Sarma, who is also the Chief Minister of Assam, asked for more support for his shuttlers. "Every sport like football and hockey gets support from the governments and the public. But our [badminton] players, despite the glory they bring, haven't got the sponsors and support they deserve. Badminton has a lot of potential. Like Odisha government is promoting hockey, I hope it also promotes badminton."

Also in attendance was Mohan Charan Majhi, the Chief Minister of Odisha. The 'Shuttle by Dalmia Bharat' is a seven-storey building which houses eight badminton courts, a seating arena around these courts which can accommodate 400 people, lodging facilities for 50 students, and a 360-degree view of the city and the Kalinga Stadium Complex from the seventh floor. The topmost floor also holds the lights, which when switched on after sunset, complete the building's shuttlecock-esque look. Moreover, the building has been made in a sustainable manner as low-carbon cement was used during construction. Rainwater harvesting for recharging groundwater is another feature of the structure that helps the environment.

Rajdeep Saha

Inauguration of the badminton High Performance Centre at the Kalinga Stadium in Bhubaneswar. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

SPORTOON

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Ryan Fernando

FOR MORE STORIES

Should chess players invest in their diet?

Chess isn't just about strategy; it's a **mental marathon.** And like any marathon, your performance depends on what you're feeding your body and mind.

Imagine this: you're at the final move of a chess championship. The crowd holds its breath as you hover over your rook. Your brain is firing on all cylinders, but then — a split-second fog. What went wrong? For many chess players, the answer lies in what fuels the brain: their diet.

At 18, Gukesh Dommaraju is dominating global chess with unmatched focus and endurance. While his secrets remain private, one truth stands out: a sharp mind starts with the right fuel. For stars like Gukesh, smart choices off the board mean smarter moves on it.

Chess isn't just about strategy; it's a mental marathon. And like any marathon, your performance depends on what you're feeding your body and mind.

Ever heard the wild claim that chess players burn 6,000 calories a day during tournaments? It's a fun headline, but it doesn't add up. While intense mental activity does burn more energy than resting, it's far less dramatic than the myth suggests.

Studies reveal that prolonged mental exertion increases energy expenditure by 20-30 per cent, adding roughly 200-300 extra calories per day — not 6,000.

So, unless you're snacking like a linebacker, overeating based on this misconception can leave you sluggish or distracted when you need to focus most.

Why diet is the secret weapon for chess players

Your brain might only weigh about 1.4 kilograms, but it's a calorie-guzzling machine, using 20 per cent of your daily energy.

To perform optimally, it needs the right fuel — and no, energy drinks and sugary snacks don't count.

Here's how nutrition directly impacts chess performance:

1. Sharper memory and decision-making: Foods like dark chocolate, blueberries, and green tea contain polyphenols that enhance memory and decision-making — skills every chess player needs.

Ryan's Tip: Opt for dark chocolate with 70 per cent cocoa for brain benefits. Replace chai with green tea and a dash of lemon; add tulsi for an Indian twist. Pair with two small squares (25g) of dark chocolate for a smart snack.

2. Steady focus: High-glycemic foods (like candy) might give a quick boost but lead to crashes. Low-GI foods, like oats and lentils, provide slow-releasing energy, keeping you sharp for longer.

Ryan's Tip: Start your day with masala oats (30 g) for sustained energy.

3. Calm under pressure: Magnesium, found in nuts and spinach, helps reduce stress and improve composure — a must for handling nerve-wracking endgames.

Ryan's Tip: Add 10-12 almonds (25g) daily or blend spinach (50g), banana, and coconut water for a calming drink.

Fun fact: Magnus Carlsen's fuel

Speaking of champions, did you know that Magnus Carlsen prefers eating light and avoids sugar during matches?

He's been spotted munching on nuts and sipping water — a stark contrast to the myth of chess players indulging in junk food.

Turns out, even the world's best know that clean eating equals clear thinking.

Brain food: Building a winning mindset

The brain is a fatty organ — literally. About 60 per cent of its structure is fat, which means good fats are essential for keeping it running smoothly. Omega-3 fatty acids, especially DHA, are the brain's MVP. They're critical for memory, focus, and reaction speed.

Where to find Omega-3:

✪ Fatty fish: Salmon, sardines, and mackerel.

✪ Plant-based sources: Chia seeds, flax seeds, and walnuts.

✪ Fortified foods: Omega-3-enriched eggs and dairy are great add-ons.

Omega-3s also combat inflammation, which can make you feel mentally sluggish. Think of these fats as oiling the gears of your mental machine.

What to avoid:

✪ Sugary energy drinks: They cause spikes and crashes.

✪ Processed snacks: High in trans fats, they impair brain function.

✪ Alcohol: Even small amounts can disrupt focus and sleep.

Research shows that diets high in sugar can lower levels of brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), a protein essential for memory. Meanwhile, trans fats in processed foods can slow down brain communication, leaving you struggling to calculate your next move.

Nutrition trends chess players should know about

1. Intermittent fasting: Trending among cognitive athletes, intermittent fasting promotes mental clarity and focus. By giving the brain more access to ketones, it may improve endurance during tournaments.

2. Nootropic foods: Curcumin (from turmeric), walnuts, and matcha are gaining attention for their brain-enhancing benefits. Turmeric lattes before a game, anyone?

3. Hydration matters: Even mild dehydration can impair cognitive performance. Keep sipping water or try green tea for its hydrating and antioxidant benefits.

Genetics: Cracking the code of peak performance

Here's where things get fascinating. What if your genes could tell you exactly what your brain needs to thrive during a chess match? Welcome to the world of nutrigenomics — the science of how food interacts with your DNA.

For instance, some people metabolise caffeine quickly, benefiting from a mental boost. Others process it slower, leading to jitters and focus issues. Likewise, genetic variants may affect how well your body absorbs Omega-3 or processes glucose, directly impacting brain performance.

Take Magnus Carlsen for example, who reportedly avoids high-carb meals before matches because they make him sluggish. What if you knew, down to your DNA, how to tailor your meals for ultimate focus?

Genetic testing can offer personalised insights, allowing chess players to fine-tune their diets and eliminate guesswork. It's not about "hacking" your brain; it's about understanding it better.

Tournament-day nutrition hacks

1. Breakfast like a pro: Start your day with a mix of protein, healthy fats, and complex carbs. Eggs with avocado and whole-grain toast can sustain energy.

2. Snack strategically: Dark chocolate, nuts, and berries are great mid-game snacks to keep your brain fuelled.

3. Stay hydrated: Aim for at least 2-3 litres of water daily. Add a squeeze of lemon or a pinch of Himalayan salt for electrolytes.

4. Avoid the crash: Skip heavy, greasy meals before matches. Instead, go for something light, like a quinoa salad with lean protein and olive oil.

Silent stress: The wild claim that chess players burn 6,000 calories a day during tournaments is a fun headline, but it doesn't add up. While intense mental activity does burn more energy than resting, it's far less dramatic than the myth suggests. FIDE / ENG CHIN AN

Conclusion

Chess is more than a game; it's a test of endurance, focus, and mental agility. And while practice and strategy are non-negotiable, the right diet could be your ultimate secret weapon. From smashing calorie myths to exploring the cutting-edge role of genetics, it's clear that nutrition isn't just about fuelling your body — it's about sharpening your mind.

So, the next time you sit down at the board, ask yourself: is your brain getting the checkmate-worthy fuel it deserves? Remember, the board may be static, but your brain — your most important piece — never stops moving. Make every bite count.

Triumph of a system

The chess structure in **India may be the best in the world.** It's a lesson for other sports. There was an inevitability about an Indian becoming world champion.

Suresh Menon

The last seven minutes tell us a lot. Watch it on *YouTube*. It is as exciting and character-revealing as a shootout in football.

The ordinariness of the action cannot detract from its import. It is move 55 and Ding Liren makes his fatal error. Gukesh does not spot it immediately. He adjusts himself on the chair, looks again, leans forward, swings back, brings his hands together, swallows, raises a hesitant fist to his lips, then strokes his face with his hands. There is disbelief in his manner.

Can it be? Is this the end of one part of his life and the start of another? He sips water, places a hand on his chest as if trying to calm his beating heart. Now both hands are on the head and he looks again. Let's not rush things, he seems to say, meditates for a moment, looks up and captures the rook. A series of captures and he goes for a walk. The young boy who went for a walk returns a man. Calm, assured, self-possessed now.

Then for the first time he smiles. A shy, self-conscious smile as if embarrassed that he should be troubling a world champion. "Gukesh's face told me I had made a blunder," Ding was to say later. In an interview to *Straits Times* he had said that those born after 2000, "play fearlessly and are willing to try strategies previous generations might not have." Fearlessness is an important element in any champion's make-up.

When Ding shakes his hand and leaves, the emotions gush out and you realise this is only a boy after all. Still seated, still emotional, Gukesh finds the time and focus to rearrange the pieces on the board, both on his side and his opponent's. Upbringing will tell. At the press conference he pays generous tributes to his opponent.

Top of the game: D. Gukesh is clearly a champion we can be proud of. PTI

This is clearly a champion we can be proud of.

The nation is bound to go overboard, with different elements wanting different pieces of him. After the win, news channels told us we had beaten China, suggesting our neighbours had better fear our strengths elsewhere now. Luckily, Gukesh has five-time champion Viswanathan Anand in his corner. Anand knows all about the oscillating emotions of his countrymen.

It is a triumph of a system. India has 85 Grandmasters, products of a system that has worked from the schools and clubs to coaches. And overseen by supportive parents. The chess structure in India maybe the best in the world. It's a lesson for other sports. There was an inevitability about an Indian becoming world champion.

Gukesh's parents played chess. His father told *New York Times*, "The schools, teachers, and coaches started to tell us, 'This kid is talented, you should pursue more'." And they did exactly that, sacrificing time and money and being the first people in his corner.

Sports Person of the Year? Certainly. Perhaps more. Gukesh is Person of the Year, world champion in a sport played by 201 countries and millions of people.

No.1
UTTAR PRADESH

FROM SELF-EMPLOYMENT TO SELF-RELIANCE

Supporting 18 Lakh+ Street Vendors with

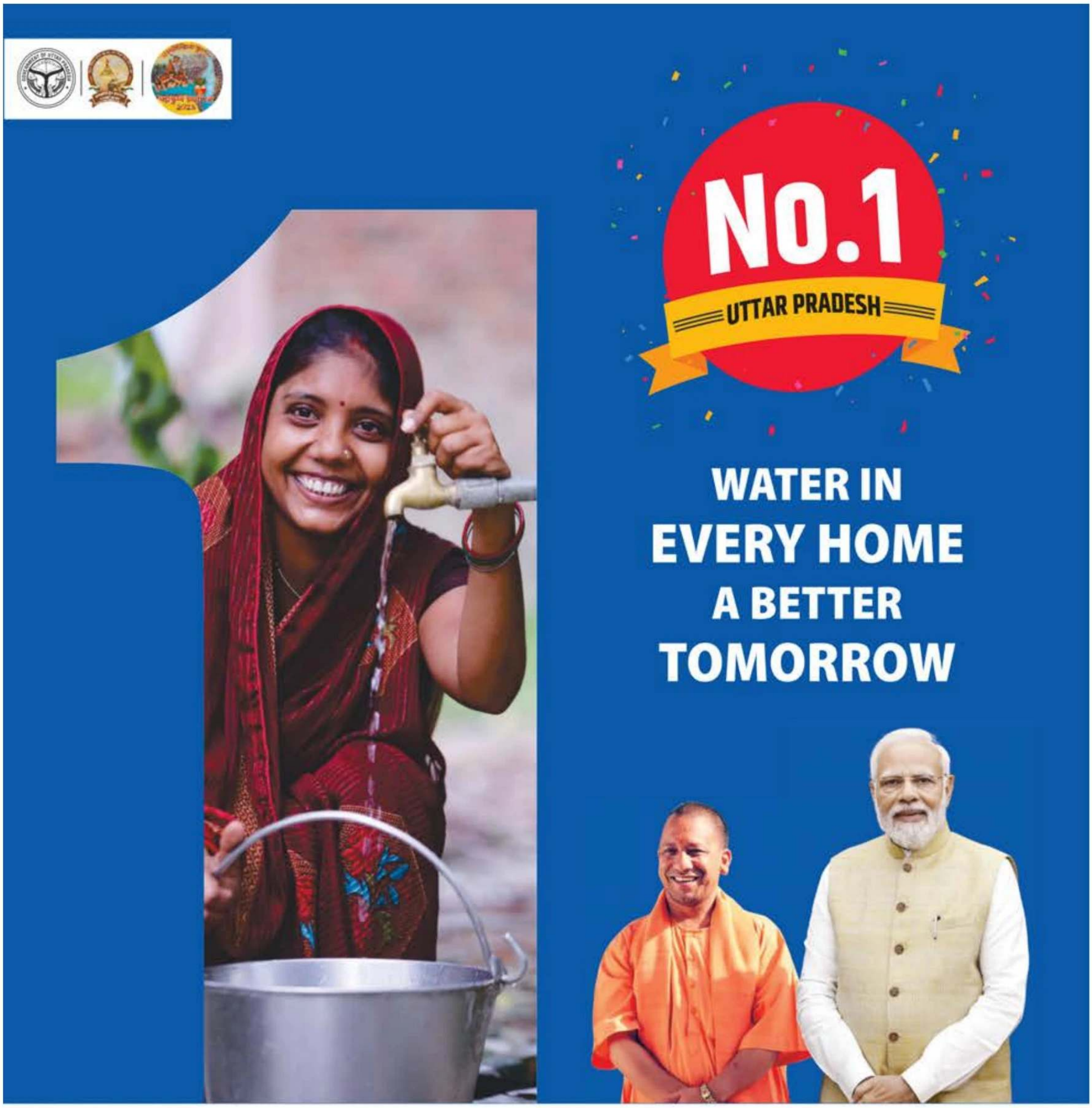
₹3,000+ Crore

through PM SVANidhi Yojana

PM SVANidhi

- Security-free loans of up to ₹10,000 to boost business
- Benefit of 7% interest subsidy on timely payments
- Cashback of up to ₹1,200 per year on digital transactions, promoting a cashless economy
- Receive bigger loans for next venture, ensuring growth with timely repayments

Published on alternate Sundays. RNP No: HQ/SD/505/2023-25, RNI No. 30513/1978.
Postal subn. copies : if undelivered please return to SPORTSTAR, Kasturi Buildings, 859 & 860, Anna Salai, Chennai-600002



Drinking water facilities now reach every home

Tap Connections to More than

2.28 Crore+ Families

Har Ghar Jal
Jal Jeevan Mission

- Youth in Bundelkhand receive technical training under the Jal Jeevan Mission
- Empowering women in Bundelkhand with training in water testing using field test kits as part of the Jal Jeevan Mission
- Achieved 98% control of water-borne diseases and complete eradication of Japanese fever
- Successfully provided clean drinking water to every household in Bundelkhand and the Vindhya region
- More than 85% of rural houses in Uttar Pradesh now have tap water facilities

Information and Public Relations Department, U.P.