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It was a perfect parting gift for Sophie Devine in her last assignment as the New Zealand women's T20 skipper



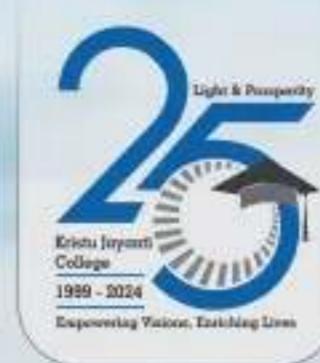


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## OFF-SIDE

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# ACRICKET FAN'S ANNUAL LOYALTY TEST

In IPL, do we support a team or hitch our allegiance to a player?  
It is a **hard choice** to make.

The connection between sports fans and their team is like an umbilical cord, and the obsession over it is almost similar to a hand-me-down family heirloom. The slightly unhealthy fixation with sport — the undying love for a club or a player — can be dictated by the choice of our parents or peers, or occasionally, we rebel and support the exact opposite.

In Kolkata, it is not unusual to find a father and son on the opposite sides of the Mohun Bagan-East Bengal divide, quietly seething over the morning tea, already in the throes of pre-Derby tension.

But once we are a fan — unlike other things in life — there's no backing out. Our social life bends around the sporting schedule. Their wins lift us, their losses gut us; our mood mimicking the fortunes of our team.

This bond grows because of the players, the athletes who throw their bodies — and sometimes their sanity — for a moment of glory that we all get to share. We are otherwise selfish, self-preserving creatures. Our routines revolve around our own needs, until suddenly, we are on the edge of our seats, living through their triumphs and heartbreaks, finally part of a larger collective.

The bond deepens over time as the same knights — give or take the odd treachery (ask the Barcelona fans about Luis Figo) — fight for our colours.

But does it stay as pure, as instinctive, if our

heroes get swapped out every couple of years like new actors in a soap opera? Can we still feel that same connection?

Are we cheering for a jersey, convincing ourselves of our loyalty while the faces underneath keep changing?

Indian Premier League (IPL) fans must be wondering yet again as another 'Mega Auction' looms, ready to throw loyalties into disarray. Our allegiance to a core group, our favourite players, is set to be tested with the creeping anxiety of them being traded to a different team. Nowhere else in the sporting world do players get shuffled around like a deck of cards so frequently.

Ostensibly all about maintaining "sporting balance", it feels more like a ploy for a few extra days of TV ratings, a bit of manufactured drama that is no longer required after 17 seasons of this sporting spectacle. Matured and profit-making, the IPL and its teams — including the two four-year-old franchises — should hardly be needing the crutches of a regular overhaul to preserve its competitiveness.

But here we are, still debating the retention strategies, preparing ourselves to cast aside the heroes we once held dear but no longer deemed suitable by the complex world of algorithms and permutations.

In IPL, do we support a team or hitch our allegiance to a player? It is a hard choice to make.

# KINETIC CHAIN

It often surprises people to learn how important it is to maintain an intact and efficient energy flow. Take, for instance, a frustrated golfer in his mid-50s who came to me with an issue with his right great toe. The great toe is essential for generating force in sporting activities, walking, or even stepping down. To appreciate this, try walking with your great toe strapped.



Human biomechanics is a marvel, and it may take decades to manifest its replication with robotics, though AI might accelerate this. Efficient Kinetic Chain usage is about precise muscle timing and joint angles. Terms like "Good Touch" or "Peak Form" reflect an athlete's optimal Kinetic Chain alignment, which requires continuous tuning.

**Practice is Key!** All aspects of the Kinetic Chain are trainable. A coach plays a crucial role in refining technique, while advanced video and sensor analysis has transformed training. Functional Muscle Training and consistent practice enhance muscle memory and performance.

*"We might name it  
"Good Timing"  
"Great Form"  
"in his Peak"  
but I would say his  
Kinetic Chain is  
whipping lashes hard"*

*-Dr. K. Santosh Sahanand*



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**What Neeraj did to win the Olympics and win World Championships – he's created an amazing string of global championships. For him to earn silver (at Paris Olympics), the level of performance he's at is worthy of a gold medal.** – Two-time Olympic gold medallist Valarie Allman on Neeraj Chopra ➤



**“It’s great to see him (Nadal) still fighting even though he’s had injuries and struggles.** – Novak Djokovic after beating Rafael Nadal in straight sets 6-2, 7-6 (5) at the “Six Kings Slam” exhibition in Saudi Arabia ➤

**16**

Dutch cyclist Harrie Lavreysen won a sixth consecutive men's sprint gold to bring his tally to a record-extending 16 world championship track titles. Lavreysen added to the men's one-kilometre time trial and team sprint gold medals won recently. Untouchable in the sprint, the five-time defending champion won the main event to hammer home his dominance on the final day of competition at Ballerup in the suburbs of Copenhagen. The

27-year-old easily beat compatriot Jeffrey Hoogland, with whom he won the team sprint, with Japan's Kaiya Ota finishing third. Earlier, Lavreysen overtook France's Arnaud Tournant's 14 world championship titles between 1997 and 2008. Lavreysen now has six world team sprint titles, six individual sprint gold, three in the keirin, and one in the one-kilometre time trial.



**38**

Former world number seven Richard Gasquet will retire after the French Open next year, the Frenchman announced, bringing the curtain down on a 22-year career. The 38-year-old is a twice Wimbledon semifinalist and a one-time U.S. Open semifinalist. His best outing at Roland Garros came in 2016, when he reached the quarterfinals. Gasquet has won 16 ATP Tour titles, with the latest coming in Auckland last year.

### FINISHING ON TOP



**Olympian Joshua Cheptegei lived up to his billing to take home the men's crown, while Alemaddis Eyayu pushed pre-race favourite Cynthia Limo behind for a surprise win in the women's race at the Delhi Half Marathon.**

The total prize purse for the Vedanta Delhi Half Marathon is USD 260,000. The podium finishers, both men and women, took home USD 27,000, USD 20,000 & USD 13,000 respectively. PICS: SHASHISHEKHARKASHYAP

# JULIETA CLOSES IN ON THE BIG LEAGUE

The Argentinian's latest victory impressed Dana White enough for him to hint at a **new atomweight division.**

Nigamanth P

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**G**od's timing is perfect." This was the caption of a picture posted by 20-year-old MMA phenom Julieta Martinez after a hard-fought split decision victory over Mexico's Leslie Hernandez in the Dana White Contender Series (DWCS). The DWCS is a mixed martial arts promotion, similar to \*Road to UFC\*, which serves as a stepping stone into the UFC.

Martinez had a shaky start to her strawweight bout against Hernandez. However, the Argentinian overcame her jitters before the second round began, continued to apply pressure,

and completely overpowered her opponent in the final 10 minutes.

Usually, after such a performance, fighters are awarded a UFC contract. However, Martinez's case was different, as she was the only grappler among the five winners not to earn one.

"Julieta, let me just say this: I cannot express how much we like you, and there is no doubt that you are incredibly talented, but you're just too young right now. You just turned 20, and you're undersized for the division," explained UFC CEO Dana White during a media interaction, as a disappointed Martinez watched from the sidelines.

Nevertheless, White was so impressed by her performance that he hinted the UFC might consider creating a new atomweight division (105 lbs), especially now that the promotion is bringing in more talent from South America and East Asia, regions that predominantly feature

smaller female athletes. Currently, the lowest weight class for women in the UFC is the strawweight division (115 lbs).

## Other side of the spectrum

After proving his mettle in the NCAA Division 1 National Wrestling Championships with an impressive 120-3 record, American Bo Nickal shifted gears to pursue a career in professional MMA.

His remarkable debut at the iKON Fighting Championship put him on the global stage, earning him a spot in Season 6 of DWCS in 2022.

Since then, Nickal has succeeded each time he has stepped into the Octagon. At UFC 285: Jones vs Gane, in his UFC debut, he defeated Jamie Pickett in under three minutes, claiming his first Performance of the Night bonus.

At UFC 300, the 28-year-old extended his undefeated record to 6-0 by defeating Val Woodburn via a first-round TKO, followed by a submission victory over Cody Brundage.

UFC stars like Sean O'Malley and Jamahal Hill emerged from DWCS. Nickal, with similar potential, faces Paul Craig at UFC 309 in November, aiming to continue his impressive rise.

**Young and hungry:** The 20-year-old Julieta (left) earned a hard-fought split decision victory. GETTY IMAGES



# A PERFECT END TO A DEVINE JOURNEY

A long-time advocate for equal pay in sports, Sophie Devine's side winning an edition where the men and women earned the **same prize money** is the perfect way to wrap up this World Cup.



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**H**ours after the 21,000-strong crowd had dispersed from the Dubai International Stadium on Sunday, the New Zealand team — barefoot and with beers in hand — walked to the central strip where they had scripted history.

Leading the group was veteran pacer Lea Tahuhu, whose 'mom energy' around the team had given way to overjoyed boisterousness. The

players first tasted the ground, feeling its tiny blades of grass, followed by some joyous dancing. There was no outdoing a thrilled Suzie Bates in this department, as she went around the huddle and pumped up the group.

Much like the Australians did (and had done for years) when they won the 2022 ODI World Cup, their cousins across the Tasman Sea sat in a circle and raised a toast to a campaign that had been nothing short of miraculous.

Everyone aims to win World Cups, but when you enter a tournament with Australia, England, and India waiting to devour you at first sight, a



knockouts finish might not be the worst 'small' ambition to have. Those little bricks of belief helped New Zealand build something special in a city that knows a thing or two about constructing wonders.

Twenty-four years ago, Emily Drumm and Debbie Hockley's White Ferns pulled off a four-wicket win over Australia to lift the ODI World title at home in 2000. It was a different era, when Australia, England, and New Zealand were the primary cricketing powers, while the likes of India were managing small acts of defiance, but nothing comprehensive enough to upset the established order.

**Jubilant scenes:** An ecstatic Sophie Devine (centre), poses with teammates Lea Tahuhu (left) and Suzie Bates (right) with the trophy. AP

Fast forward to the present, and these traditional powers now face the challenge of women's cricket improving worldwide, with margins of competition narrowing rapidly, particularly in the last five years.

#### Back to the roots

Once the Kiwi huddle was done and the victory was discussed, Amelia Kerr — the player of the final and the tournament, the first to earn



**Win for the ages:** Devine's fortune in World Cups was filled with heartbreak. New Zealand was knocked out in the group stages in all editions across two formats until the 2024 edition. AP

both awards — brought out her guitar. After a few vocal warm-ups, the White Ferns group took a few steps back to address their captain, Sophie Devine.

Amelia's sister Jess led the vocals as the group sang *'Te Iwi E'*, a Māori song that expresses pride for one's ancestors who made sacrifices for their land.

"*Rū ana te whenua whatiwhati. Hei!* (The ground shakes and quivers, yeah!)" Devine joined in, before an emotional 'thank you' left her lips, the NZ captain visibly humbled and a little embarrassed all at once.

The players and staff then queued up to give Devine a long, tight hug. Also present were family members of the White Ferns, with former New Zealand cricketer and Maddy Green's partner Liz Perry and broadcaster and Bates' partner Scotty Stevenson at the forefront of the celebrations. After the high-octane and public coronation as world champion, the group needed that private moment to pinch itself out of the shock of the occasion and realise that it had indeed conquered the world.

Cricket may not be war, but Devine

— alongside others of the old guard, Tahuhu and Bates — have been through the wringer in their own journeys in this game.

Devine is an eloquent speaker, a trait we've unfortunately seen more in New Zealand or her franchise's defeats. She is happy to bare the wounds of the game, honestly dissect fault lines, and exude positivity for the players under her care and the fans pinning their hopes on them.

On Sunday, for a change, Devine was lost for words when called upon by Mel Jones to make sense of the triumph.

"Once I get my hands on that trophy, it will sink in," she said. "I started to dream last night about what it feels like to hold the trophy with this team. I didn't want to get ahead of us. It's been a long time for this group, for Suzie and Lea, for New Zealand cricket. The great thing about this group is we know what we have been trying to achieve in the last 15, 18, 24 months. We kept taking steps in the right direction."

Losing 10 games in a row to rivals like England (home and away this season) and Australia is not the best

confidence booster in a World Cup year.

The batting order was not clicking, and questions were asked of Devine as to why, during a tournament as important as this, she wasn't pushing herself up the order to give New Zealand a better start. There was an added veil of pressure after she revealed that this would be her last tournament as the captain of the White Ferns.

"You want momentum, and we came to the World Cup on the back of 10 successive losses. But everyone starts on zero," she said early on in the tournament.

#### Glass ceiling

Devine's tenure as skipper of this group began full-time in 2020, when the world was plunged into the uncertainty of the pandemic. Her predecessor and Tahuhu's partner, Amy Satterthwaite, had taken time off to have her first child, leaving Devine in charge. It was a transitioning team for the Kiwis, with several familiar faces making way for a new generation of talents.

Devine's fortune in World Cups



**Passing the baton:** The younger players in the team have also allowed the old guard to go through the rigours of the tournament on a lighter note. AFP

was filled with heartbreak. New Zealand was knocked out in the group stages in all editions across two formats until the 2024 edition. The side's run to the semifinal involved plenty of belief in different players who stepped up in various games.

Rosemary Mair, who returned to the side after a back injury layoff, starred with the ball, particularly against India in the campaign opener and South Africa in the final. Bates and Georgia Plimmer put in a spirited shift at the top of the order.

Amelia was talismanic for the side as expected, positioning herself nicely to be a key contender for the captain's armband after Devine. In the final, she battled cramps and struck with both ball and bat to help the White Ferns make history. So many of these individual player journeys intersect with Devine and Bates and the doors they opened for the generations after them.

"I was inspired to be a White Fern watching that 2010 World Cup which Sophie was at (New Zealand agonisingly lost that final to Australia by just three runs), and from that

moment, I was at the nets with my dad, pretending I was batting with Sophie and Suzie. Being in the team so young and playing with my role models, who have been so good to me and are two of New Zealand's greatest ever cricketers...is incredible," Amelia said after the triumph, with Devine by her side.

"I don't necessarily believe you deserve things in sport, but if any two people do, it's Sophie and Suzie. And I just think back to myself as a kid who was batting with Sophie and Suzie in the nets. When I was in primary school, in creative writing, I wrote about winning a World Cup with Sophie and Suzie. So, to be here now, having done that, I think that's probably why I'm so emotional. It's so special when I think back to my younger self and then about being here now, doing this with two of New Zealand's best ever."

Devine has been at the helm of the White Ferns for over 60 T20I matches and 44 ODIs. She will lead New Zealand in the three-match ODI series against India, part of the Women's Championship, just a few days after winning the final.

The 35-year-old is well aware that her job is to prepare New Zealand for a life after the Bates-Devine-Tahuhu trifecta, and the World Cup has been a perfect way to herald a new chapter while giving the previous one a satisfying end. Performances from Plimmer, Eden Carson, Fran Jonas, and others — with almost every game seeing a new player step up to carry the side through — will be the Kiwis' biggest takeaway.

The younger players in the team have also allowed the old guard to go through the rigours of the tournament on a lighter note.

"Half the time I can't understand what they're saying, so I need a translator to be able to work out what they're saying to me," Devine quipped early on in the tournament.

"The energy that they bring, it's sort of quite refreshing for the likes of myself, Suzie, and Lea, who have been at a number of these tournaments. To see their eyes light up at different opportunities and to see just being at a World Cup and how special it is, and what an honour it is, has been really cool for us. It doesn't matter if it's your first or your



**To a better future:** The end of a two-decade wait and an unexpected triumph for the side are all nudges for the administration to keep improving the ecosystem of the island nation. AP

ninth. I think this opportunity to represent your country on the world stage is something that should be really special to every single player at this tournament," she had said then.

#### Job well done

Hours after partying well into the night, the White Ferns were up and about in Dubai, some cycling down boulevards, others still in their jerseys with medals on, soaking in the sunrise at the Marina. New Zealand and Devine, at the top, have all earned the right to let the dam break and for the tears to flow.

The end of a two-decade wait and an unexpected triumph for the side are all nudges for the administration to keep improving the ecosystem of the island nation.

But the standout image from the celebrations that followed that last ball was a long, tight hug between Bates and Devine (right), which took fans straight to memories of Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli's emotional embrace after India won the men's trophy earlier this year, beating South Africa in a nervy final.

"We've fought our way back to the top," Bates told broadcasters a few minutes later. "Devine has been so outstanding leading this team... so calm and believing in us. We'll

probably have a cuddle for even longer later because there have been some dark times that only the people in the team understand."

A day later, during the captain's photoshoot at the Dubai Marina, Devine reflected on a deeply satisfying end to her tenure as New Zealand captain.

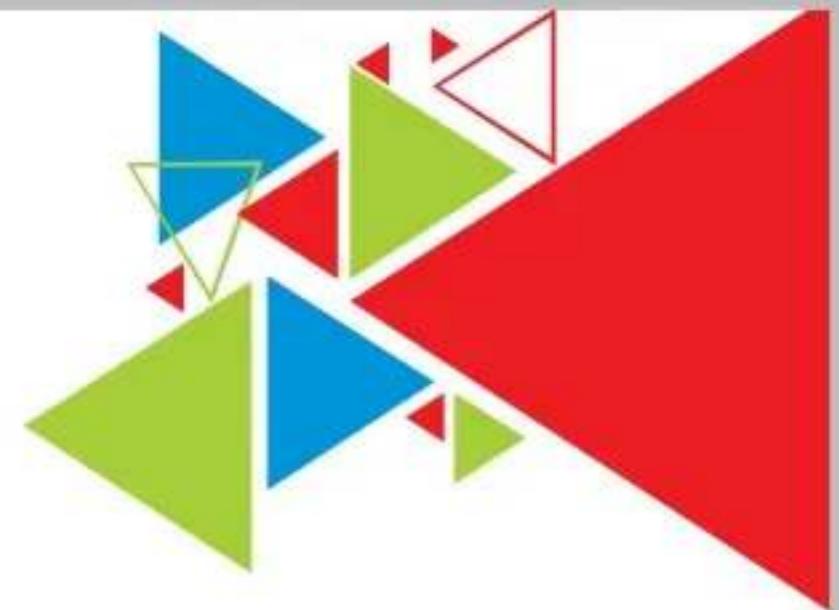
"That was probably 17-18 years' worth of emotions, of highs and lows. I think the team has seen a slightly softer side of me this trip. With the realisation that I am not going to captain anymore ... still being involved with the team and what not moving forward... but I just let them in a little bit more... As captain, you can sometimes be a little aloof. For me, it was about letting those shackles go and being a bit more cuddly. Showing that softer side is important as a leader. It's important to be vulnerable and to show your side every part. I have got that back in truckloads from this team. There's a lot of care — whether we won or not — in this unit. It makes this team special and always will."

That Devine's side, long-time advocate for equal pay in sports and champion of equal pay as board policy, won the edition where the men and women earned the same prize money is the perfect way to wrap up this World Cup.

Bates had hoped to give her old friend and comrade Devine a special send-off by reaching the semifinal. The White Ferns went on to make the final and win quite spectacularly. Some fairytales do come true!



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**Against all odds:** With ten straight defeats leading up to the World Cup, very few would have bet on New Zealand. AP

# New Zealand's 'grandmas' finally bring home T20 crown

Their fairytale journey capped off a remarkable tournament, **sparking hopes** for increased participation from Associate teams in future editions.

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FOR MORE STORIES

**T**his is a love story.” Remember that iconic frame from Phoebe Waller-Bridge’s show, *Fleabag*? If there were a documentary being made on New Zealand’s World Cup campaign, it would — and perhaps should — begin with this frame.

The White Ferns have not been the easiest team to support over the past couple of years. They are grade-A characters who can sometimes collapse and cede advantage to the opposition. With ten straight defeats leading up to the World Cup (albeit mostly against stronger teams like England, Australia, and Pakistan), very few would have bet on this side.

To then see this side ascend the podium was a lesson in the sheer power of perseverance.

Belief, however, can only take you so far. Look at South Africa. There has been a seismic shift in how the Proteas approach their cricket. In Laura Wolvaardt (**right**), they have a captain who is accomplished and data-driven, constantly seeking solutions.

Dillon du Preez, Baakier Abrahams, and Paul Adams have nurtured the team into a side that is not scared to fall and pick itself up, working not just on skills and technique, but also on composure and self-compassion.

But that’s the nature of the beast. You can desire something with all your heart, but it takes something otherworldly to achieve what the Kiwis did. “It’s 5 am in the morning back in New Zealand,” said skipper Sophie Devine, with the trophy glistening between her and deputy

Amelia Kerr. "The impact is going to take some time to sink in. After the 2000 World Cup win, it took years to see the swell in numbers and interest in cricket to grow. Fingers crossed we can do that back home too and inspire the next generation of players."

### Customised changes

It is fair to say the tournament got off to a rather sedate start. A hurried relocation and the fact that it wasn't the actual host nation are reasons cited by the Emirates Cricket Board for why they couldn't go all out with any promotional plans.

Cab journeys would acquaint you with radio adverts for the tournament, which became more frequent over the course of the tournament. Small billboards displaying the mugshots of star players alongside ticket information appeared around the peripheries of the Dubai International Stadium. A significant step up was the India vs Pakistan game, which saw around 16,000 people in attendance.

The tournament made a compelling case for why boundaries need to be pushed back in the women's game. The longer distances meant teams had no choice but to adapt and get their basics right. The inability to clear the ropes frequently, particularly with slow outfields like in Sharjah, meant that running between the wickets adeptly became even more crucial.

The same applied to the conditions. Low, slow wickets, especially in Sharjah, levelled the contest between bat and ball. Tighter fields, better catching, and bowling at the stumps gave experienced teams multiple opportunities to stay in the game. "The beauty of playing a global game is you're going to play in conditions that are different in every country you go to," Devine said of a tournament that, for much of its duration, was largely devoid of sixes. That eventually changed.

### One for the veterans

Across the board, this was a tournament where the senior pros stamped their class and led by

example. Consider Suzie Bates. She didn't have the most runs for New Zealand, but her fearless determination to keep pushing helped create a formidable opening duo alongside Georgia Plummer.

She was a gun fielder, stationed inside the circle for the most part, putting her body on the line to help the Kiwis be as economical as possible. She even came on to bowl, defending 15 runs in the final over to help the White Ferns secure a spot in the final, which they went on to win.

Alongside Lea Tahuhu and Devine, this trio of 'Grandmas,' as they call themselves, played a crucial role in the Kiwis' journey to the champion's podium.

Stafanie Taylor batting through severe pain in her left knee, Harmanpreet Kaur's two half-centuries after taking a few knocks to the head during training, Chamari Athapaththu once again shouldering the responsibility for her Sri Lankan side, and Afy Fletcher being a no-fuss lethal weapon for the Windies are all great examples.

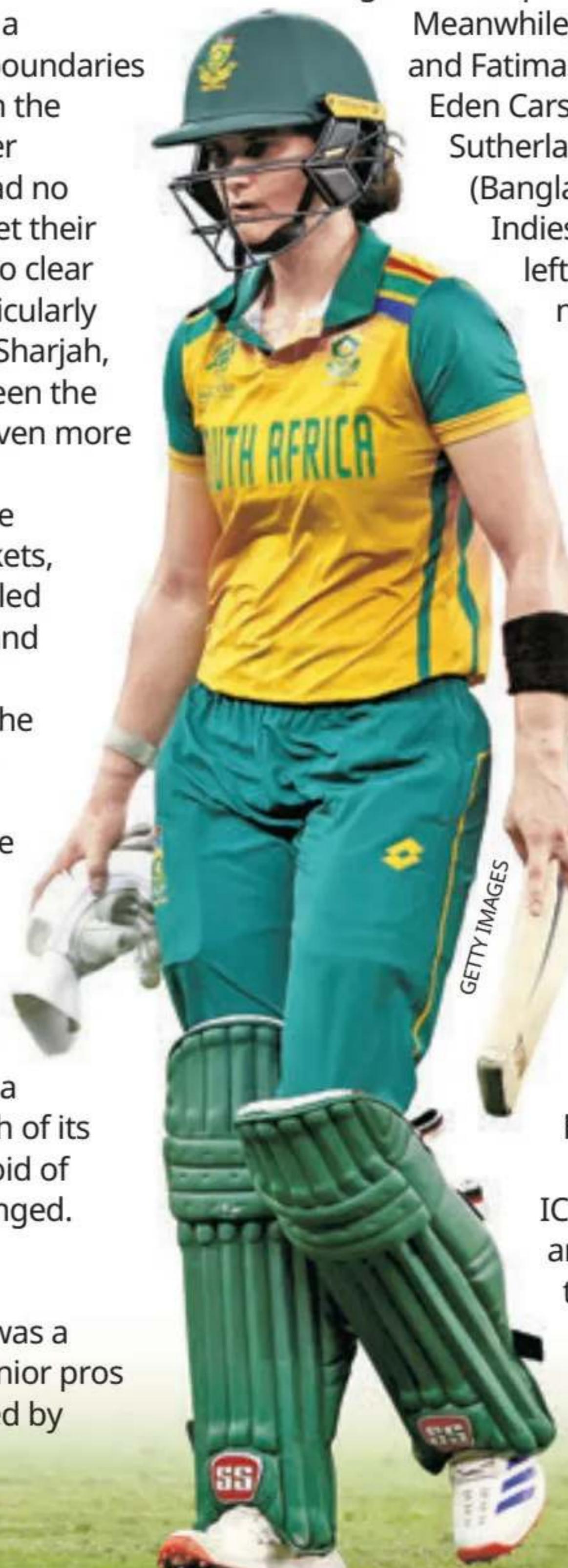
Meanwhile, young captains like Wolvaardt and Fatima Sana, and emerging talents like Eden Carson (New Zealand), Annabel Sutherland (Australia), Marufa Akter (Bangladesh), and Zaida James (West Indies) showed that while the vacuum left by the outgoing generation may not be entirely filled, the women's game does have exciting prospects for the future.

### Big picture

Wider pools, more bilateral games outside the top eight in the rankings, and better opportunities for Associates to compete with full members internationally were major topics of discussion in the UAE.

Devine, at the very start of the tournament, had bounced off the idea of a tiered system of matches within the championship to provide Associate nations with more match time against higher-ranked opponents.

At its latest Board Meeting, the ICC approved the creation of two annual T20 International tournaments between 2025 and 2028 to allow the Associates a structured pathway into an expanded pool for World Cups.





## HARMAPREET RECORD AS CAPTAIN

### T20IS

MATCHES: 122

WINS: 70

LOSSES: 46

**Most losses:** to Australia (17)

### ODIS

MATCHES: 20

WINS: 14

LOSSES: 5

**Most losses:** to Australia (4)

### TESTS

MATCHES: 3

WINS: 3

GETTY IMAGES



# What went wrong for Harmanpreet Kaur & Co.?

As India grapples with yet another **World Cup heartbreak**, there may be lingering questions about whether the middle-order could've been braver with the bat.

Lavanya Lakshmi Narayanan

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**A** World Cup in Asia without a single Asian side in the knockouts — not the best endorsement of the subcontinent's cricketing passion or the robustness of its

cricketing systems. Yet, here we are.

India is the only side from the Asian quartet to have previously reached the World Cup semifinals. Expectations were high this time, especially given India had made the knockouts five times in the previous eight editions. The positive results leading up to the T20 showpiece, combined with a carefully selected squad after extensive experimentation, only heightened those expectations. However, a group-stage exit felt like a damp, deflating end.

## New World Cup, old problems

Since the 2023 T20 World Cup in South Africa, India played 29 T20Is, with two no-results and nine losses. Preparing for a World Cup in Bangladesh, India faced Nigar Sultana's side twice. A 1-1 series draw was also played against South Africa at home in spin-friendly Chennai, anticipating similar conditions in Bangladesh. The Asia Cup final loss to Sri Lanka was unexpected. India

had cruised to the final with comfortable wins against Pakistan, UAE, and Nepal in the group stage, followed by a thumping of Bangladesh in the semifinal.

However, Sri Lanka's planning paid off. Chamari Athapaththu's side shocked India with an eight-wicket victory in front of a raucous Dambulla crowd, earning a maiden Asian crown.

India's senior team did not play an international bilateral series between the Asia Cup and the T20 World Cup, which was eventually moved to the UAE. A few players participated in franchise cricket — some in The Hundred, others in the Caribbean Premier League. For the rest, preparations largely came from two camps at the National Cricket Academy in Bengaluru: a fitness and fielding camp and a skill camp.

"It wasn't just net sessions at the skills camp; the players played almost five games in 10 days. So if you ask for game time, we've ticked that box. We played some very competitive games with different oppositions and varied skill sets," head coach Amol Muzumdar said at the time.

In hindsight, opponents and skills weren't the problem as much as adapting quickly to conditions. India faltered in its first game in Dubai against New Zealand, unable to get a grip on the proceedings. That 54-run loss to a team on a 10-match losing

streak derailed India's momentum. A hapless batting performance saw it manage just 108 in response to New Zealand's 160/4, crippling its Net Run Rate (NRR).

India bounced back to thrash Pakistan by six wickets, but again, the batters struggled on a slow, low track, taking 18.5 overs to chase 105, which did nothing to improve its NRR.

At that stage, while players echoed the usual 'focus on process' and 'seal the win' rhetoric, Shafali Verma was refreshingly candid, saying, "When you're a player for India, you don't need to be told about things like NRR. It's always on your mind."

India's best performance, an 82-run win, came against Sri Lanka. Fifties from Harmanpreet Kaur and Smriti Mandhana powered India to 172, the highest score of the competition this year. Sri Lanka fell short, with Athapaththu unable to find form when it mattered.

In India's final group game, needing a win against Australia to stay in contention, it fell short chasing 152. Once again, an age-old problem — maintaining composure in pressure situations — surfaced. Needing 14 runs from the final over, India lost four wickets, with Harmanpreet, who had kept her side in the game with an unbeaten half-century, stranded at the other end.



**Vital cog:** Pooja Vastrakar has been an important part of India's pace attack, but her staggered availability due to injury deprived the team of the benefits her aggressive pace typically provides. GETTY IMAGES

#### Great planning, poor execution

India's campaign could be encapsulated by its approach to the No. 3 batting position. In the 2023 winter fixtures against England and Australia, Richa Ghosh emerged as a potential candidate for the spot. Dayalan Hemalatha's impressive hitting in the Women's Premier League (WPL) made her another contender, while Uma Chetry and Sajeewa Sajana were also tried during the Asia Cup.

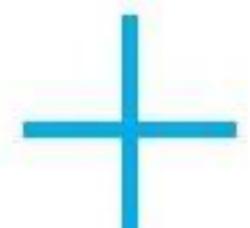
In the warm-up matches before the World Cup, Harmanpreet surprised many by coming in at No. 3. Ahead of the opener against New Zealand, coach Muzumdar cheekily said, "If you see the scorecard (from the warm-ups), you'll know who's our No. 3."

However, after the first two games, Harmanpreet returned to her usual No. 4 spot, raising questions about the management's backtracking. Jemimah Rodrigues, a versatile player willing to adapt to

any role, ended up floating in the top order, focusing on maximising runs rather than stabilising a shaky batting line-up. She was arguably better suited for in the slow conditions. Richa's poor form was evident, scoring just 19 runs across four games at an average of 6.33. Experiments with her at No. 3 long abandoned, she slotted in in her usual role as a finisher. But she couldn't deliver in the crunch game against Australia.

In this spin-friendly World Cup, seamers still thrived. Megan Schutt and Marizanne Kapp enjoyed success, complementing their teams'

spinners. For India, Renuka Singh and Arundhati Reddy took seven wickets each in four games, particularly notable in Pooja Vastrakar's absence due to injury. Asha Sobhana (five wickets for 65 runs in three games) and Shreyanka Patil (four wickets for 84 runs in four games) were crucial in the middle overs, though Deepti Sharma was expensive, taking four wickets for 113 runs across four games. Harmanpreet's six-bowler strategy left the team a batter short, and the decision to leave out Radha Yadav, a proven all-rounder, felt like a self-goal.



**A question for the future is whether India values Harmanpreet more as a captain or a power-hitter. While she has the backing of the selectors and coach, her ability to turn games around with the bat cannot be overlooked.**

### Fielding and fitness: progress?

India's bowlers were effective but faltered at key moments. Against New Zealand, 13 extras were conceded. Against Australia, India's fielding was abysmal, with five dropped catches in a must-win game.

That said, Richa took her disappointment of dropping Suzie Bates early in the New Zealand game to training, practising the right technique but the nerves behind the stumps were still evident throughout. Asha and others missed crucial chances, while Arundhati would have finished with a far higher tally of wickets if her fielders had held up their end of the bargain.

Coach Muzumdar's mantra of prioritising fitness and fielding fell flat on both counts. India was sluggish when it came to running between the wickets, but it improved in the matches against Sri Lanka and Australia, driven by the strong desire to survive.

### Harmanpreet: the batter or captain?

A question for the future is whether India values Harmanpreet more as a captain or a power-hitter. While she has the backing of the selectors and coach — evidenced by her retention as captain for the New Zealand ODI series — her ability to turn games around with the bat cannot be overlooked. Former India captain Mithali Raj has advocated for Jemimah Rodrigues to be groomed as the next to lead, preferring her over Smriti, who currently serves as vice-captain.

Smriti stepped in to lead the team when Harmanpreet sat out the second innings of the Sri Lanka game due to a neck strain, caused by a blow to the head during practice before the World Cup. Smriti's WPL triumph with Royal Challengers Bengaluru has helped smooth out some of the rough edges in her leadership, boosting her confidence in both planning and execution.

Jemimah, on the other hand, has been energising the team with her pep talks and leading huddles. Her



**All-weather player:** Jemimah Rodrigues, a versatile player willing to adapt to any role, ended up floating in the top order, focusing on maximising runs rather than stabilising a shaky batting line-ups. GETTY IMAGES

presence galvanises the field, a gap that is keenly felt when she isn't around. Additionally, she steps up to address the media candidly, particularly after disappointing losses.

"Lil J isn't Lil J anymore. This is my fourth World Cup," Jemimah remarked in an ICC interview. With the future in mind, the Indian think tank might consider giving this globe-trotting batter a spot in the leadership group, shaping her role in alignment with the team's evolving pace.

Following its early exit from the tournament, the Indian team has had time to regroup and reflect on the result. Some players, like Deepti Sharma and Yastika Bhatia, quickly returned to domestic T20 cricket. There's little time to dwell on the past. World champion New Zealand, whose captain Sophie Devine highlighted the win against India as the turning point in their campaign, will visit Ahmedabad for three ODIs in the coming days.

With a 50-over World Cup less than a year away, this Indian side has much to prove. The true test will be whether it can channel its heartbreak into hunger for success on the grandest stage, especially in front of a home crowd.



### INDIA IN T20 WORLD CUPS

**2009 in England:** Semifinal

**2010 in West Indies:** Semifinal

**2012 in Sri Lanka:** Group Stage

**2014 in Bangladesh:** Group Stage

**2016 in India:** Group Stage

**2018 in West Indies:** Semifinal

**2020 in Australia:** Runner-up

**2023 in South Africa:** Semifinal

**2024 in the UAE:** Group Stage



### BEST BATTER AND BOWLER FOR INDIA

**Best bowlers:** Arundhati Reddy and Renuka Singh - 4 games, 7 wickets each

**Best batter:** Harmanpreet Kaur, 150 runs in 4 games; Two fifties, Strike Rate: 133.92

» PHOTOLINE  
WOMEN'S T20 WORLD CUP



1st

**Cleaned up:** South Africa skipper Laura Wolvaardt is dismissed by Sophie Ecclestone of England for 42. The wicket helped England restrict the Proteas to 124. GETTY IMAGES



2nd

**Say cheese:** England captain Heather Knight obliges fans for a selfie at the Sharjah International Stadium during the encounter against South Africa. AP



3rd

**Eyes on the ball:** Nat Sciver-Brunt of England scores the winning runs against South Africa in their Group B encounter in Sharjah. GETTY IMAGES

# 4th

**Lit up:** New Zealand's Maddy Green misses her reverse hit to be castled by Annabel Sutherland of Australia. The White Ferns were bundled out for 88 with Green only scoring 1. GETTY IMAGES



# 5th

**Early strike:** Megan Schutt celebrates with Alyssa Healy after picking the wicket of New Zealand opener Georgia Plummer. The pacer was adjudged Player of the Match for her three-wicket haul. GETTY IMAGES



# 6th

**Turning point:** Alyssa Healy walks off the field after retiring hurt on 37 against Pakistan. The Australia captain missed the defending champion's last two matches in the competition. AP





## 7th

**Caught short:** Smriti Mandhana is run out by Chamari Athapaththu at the non-striker's end for 50 during the game against Sri Lanka. AP



## 8th

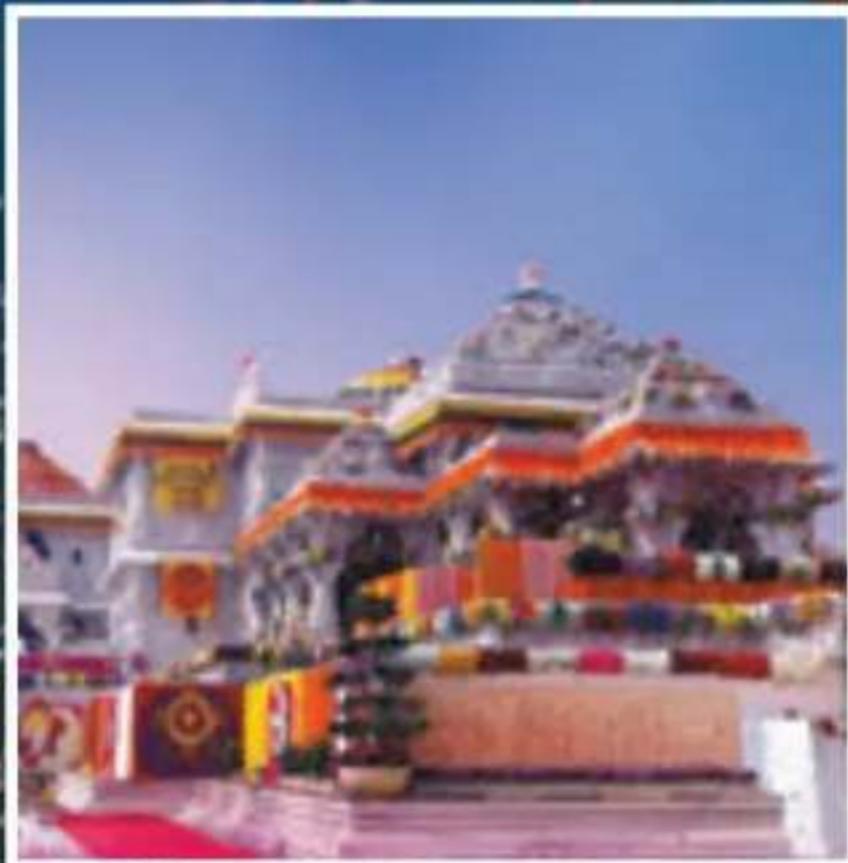
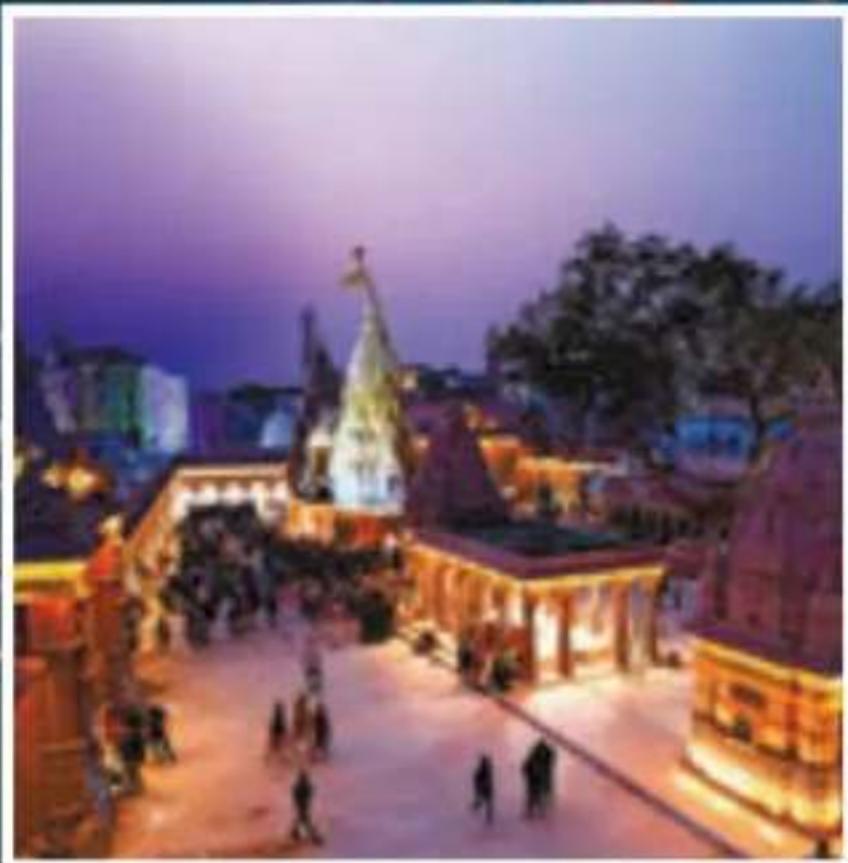
**Bottom hand power:** Harmanpreet Kaur blazed her way to a 27-ball 52, laced with eight fours and a six, against Sri Lanka to claim the Player of the Match award. GETTY IMAGES



## 9th

**Pumped up:** Renuka Singh Thakur celebrates the wicket of Harshitha Samarawickrama during India's group-stage fixture against Sri Lanka. She picked up two for 16 in her spell. GETTY IMAGES

# Celebrating Culture Uttar Pradesh Tourism Powerhouse



Uttar Pradesh holds vast potential for cultural, spiritual, and eco-tourism. Initiatives like the Central Government's Swadesh Darshan, Prasad, and the Ramayana, Krishna, and Buddhist Circuits have greatly accelerated the state's tourism development. Tourist sites across all assembly constituencies are being enhanced, boosting tourism-related businesses and generating employment for local communities.

## Tourism Growth and Development

Arrival of more than 198.08 crore tourists, including 1.26 crore foreign visitors in the last 7 years

- Construction of Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Temple in Ayodhya
- Development of Shri Kashi Vishwanath Dham Corridor
- Development of Vindhya Dham Corridor, Mirzapur
- Construction of Nath Corridor, Bareilly in progress
- An allocation of Rs. 5,176 crore for Prayagraj Mahakumbh 2025
- Cultural celebrations like Deepotsav in Ayodhya, Dev Deepawali in Kashi, and Rangotsav in Mathura
- Buddhist Conclave in Kushinagar, Shravasti, and Sankisa
- A grant of Rs. 1,00,000 for Kailash Mansarovar pilgrims
- Construction of Sant Kabir Academy in Maghar
- Development of key tourist spots like Nishadraj Sacred Tourist Spot in Shringverpur and the Maharaja Suheldev Memorial in Bahrach
- Formation of The District Tourism and Cultural Promotion Council in all districts
- Rural and Wildlife Tourism Initiatives
- Development of one tourist destination in each of 400 assembly constituencies
- 229 villages selected to develop 18 divisions as clusters for agricultural rural tourism
- Chief Minister Tourism Fellowship Scheme launched
- Uttar Pradesh continues to build its reputation as a premier tourism destination, driven by respect for its rich cultural heritage
- Major wildlife attractions include Dudhwa Tiger Reserve, Lakhimpur Kheri, Pilibhit Tiger Reserve, Ranipur Tiger Reserve, Chitrakoot, Amangarh Tiger Reserve, Bijnor and Katarniaghata Wildlife Sanctuary, Bahrach

### Supplementary Budget 2024

₹1000 crore allocated for state-of-the-art BS-6 buses for Prayagraj Kumbh

₹78.60 crore for maintenance of buildings and assets in Shri Kashi Vishwanath Dham complex

Allocation of ₹50 crore for tourist facilities development in Ayodhya, Mathura and Kashi

Arrangement of ₹50 crore for land of purchase at various tourist destinations



# 10th

**Caught and bowled:** Eden Carson completes the catch of Omaima Sohail, off her own bowling, in New Zealand's group stage encounter against Pakistan. GETTY IMAGES



# 11th

**Leading from the front:** Hayley Matthews raises her bat after scoring a fifty against England in the final group stage match. Her hundred partnership with Qiana Joseph helped the Windies qualify for the semifinal at the opponent's expense. AP



# 12th

**Streak broken:** South Africa's Anneke Bosch jumps onto Chloe Tryon after sealing the win over Australia in the semifinal, thereby ending the latter's run of seven consecutive finals. AFP





# Empowering Women A Journey towards Progress



देश ने किया नारी शक्ति को बढ़ाने वाली जी का अभिनंदन

The double-engine government in Uttar Pradesh is dedicated to enhancing the self-reliance and prosperity of women. Initiatives such as the Mukhyamantri Kanya Sumangala Yojana, safe motherhood programs, free vaccinations, free education up to graduation, increased representation in government jobs, free LPG connections and Izzatghar (toilets) have significantly improved women's lives. Ownership rights have been granted through the PM Awas Yojana and PM Svamitva Yojana. Protection against violence for women and adolescent girls have been strengthened.

- ➲ Government jobs to more than 1.50 lakh women
- ➲ Ranks first in the country in conviction rate for crimes against women and POCSO cases
- ➲ Construction of 2.75 crore toilets (Izzatghar) under Swachh Bharat Mission, more than 10 crore people benefitted
- ➲ More than 60 lakh mothers benefitted under Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana
- ➲ More than 89 lakh house ownership certificates (ghaurani) distributed under PM Svamitva Yojana
- ➲ Free LPG connections to 1.83 crore families under Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana
- ➲ Free education to girls till graduation
- ➲ Women's helpline 1090 service has resolved 99.55% of complaints
- ➲ Women's Night Escort Security Scheme : From 10 pm to 6 am, UP-112 will arrange for an escort to ensure a woman reaches a safe destination
- ➲ Monthly pension of ₹1,000 per month to 32.71 lakh destitute women
- ➲ Through the Livelihood Mission, 1 crore women have been empowered by forming 10 lakh self-help groups
- ➲ Appointment of more than 58,000 women as Banking Correspondents (BC Sakhi)
- ➲ 20.73 lakh daughters benefitted under Mukhyamantri Kanya Sumangala Yojana
- ➲ 65,132 children benefitted under Mukhyamantri Bal Seva Yojana (General and Covid)
- ➲ Formation of women PAC battalion in Budaun, Lucknow and Gorakhpur





## 13th

**Finding the gap:** New Zealand opener Suzie Bates watches the ball race to the fence after playing an acrobatic shot during the semifinal against West Indies. AFP

## 14th

**So close yet so far:** West Indies' Deandra Dottin led the fightback with a 22-ball 33 in the semifinal against New Zealand. The Windies chase faltered after she fell with three overs to spare. AFP



## 15th

**Coming up clutch:** Suzie Bates celebrates with her teammates after the semifinal victory against the West Indies. The 37-year-old bowled an excellent final over, conceding just six runs and picking up a wicket. REUTERS



## 16th

**On the grandest stage:** Amelia Kerr of New Zealand in action during the 2024 Women's T20 World Cup final against South Africa. Kerr top-scored for the White Ferns with 43 off 38 balls. REUTERS

## 17th

**Crucial blow:** New Zealand players celebrate after dismissing South Africa skipper Laura Wolvaardt for 33 off 27 balls in the final of the 2024 Women's T20 World Cup. AFP

## 18th

**Third time lucky:** New Zealand players celebrate with the ICC Women's T20 World Cup 2024 trophy after their 32-run win over South Africa in the final. GETTYIMAGES





# WHITE FERNS TAKE OVER THE DESERT

The way New Zealand team turned around a challenging year was perhaps the **best souvenir** the Diary could take back home after three testing weeks in Dubai.

Lavanya Lakshmi Narayanan

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**C**ricket brings the subcontinent together like nothing else. In Dubai, India's win against Pakistan in the Women's T20 World Cup suddenly became a magical icebreaker of sorts. On the night of that game, the Diary stepped into the lift after a long day of some honestly frustrating cricket, hoping to scurry up and get some shut eye. Two others, Pakistani nationals, in the elevator took one look at the Diary's media accreditation and said, "Oh, you guys beat us! You must be happy. *Ab jeet lo World Cup, isse kum nahin* (Win the World Cup now, nothing less)."

Even taxi drivers were intrigued by the World Cup and a chance for India to win it. Towards the end of the group stage, Bangladesh was long out of contention, as was Sri Lanka. When New Zealand snuck through, the Diary's taxi driver the next morning — a young gentleman from Bangladesh — was disappointed.

"Someone should be there from Asia. What's the point of saying we're cricket nations?" he asked.

An acquaintance's chauffeur, Khaliq — a Pakistani national from Rawalpindi making a living in the UAE — was determined to feed us well before we got home for a night of writing. Hot *tadka dal*, *roti*, chicken *tikka masala*, and some classic Arabian spicy *shawarmas* were savoured. But the standout was a Pakistani *chai* that Khaliq *bhai* assured would give me a taste of Pakistan. It was gulped down in under a minute.

A week of knockouts followed. New Zealand sent India packing while beating Pakistan. The West Indies knocked England out in the group stage. From a distraught Katherine Sciver-Brunt wincing and offering tips at every poor passage of play, to a casual and composed Ian Bishop

**Dubai revelry:** Scenes from the ICC Women's T20 World Cup 2024. Pics: LAVANYA LAKSHMINARAYANAN

on the other side, both ends of this match provided experiences to bookmark for posterity.

However, the biggest upset of the tournament, if it can be called that, was the smooth takedown of the defending champion and six-time T20 World Cup winner Australia, in the semifinal by Laura Wolvaardt's South Africa. Alyssa Healy, who had sustained serious injuries to her feet and was walking with crutches, could only watch in silence from the sidelines.

New Zealand was the underdog in the other semifinal against the extravagantly big-hitting West Indies. The team relied on the no-glam mantra of back-breaking hard work to hinder its opponent's bid for a second world crown in the humidity of Sharjah.

Sitting beside the Diary was a colleague who had chosen to wear a black T-shirt with white fern leaves on it.

Wearing that shirt had brought New Zealand luck in the matches against India and the West Indies, it felt. Naturally, plans were made to immediately wash it for the final.

The Diary and its colleagues had spent much of their time oscillating between the stadium, the ICC Academy (where teams trained and held media sessions), and their cosy Airbnb. With the semifinals out of the way, the panic of not being a good enough tourist set in. Plans were made with full vigour, but an interview would come through, or a press conference would be scheduled, washing the fun out of our calendars.

The ICC's Hall of Fame dinner was a way to make up for some of that. White wine, rosé, sushi, sweet chicken satay, and other finger



foods made their way around the ballroom of the Hilton Dubai Al Habtoor City as Alastair Cook and Neetu David (**facing page, fourth pic**), along with AB de Villiers (not in attendance) were inducted.

Captains Sophie Devine and Laura Wolvaardt, who had a final to play in less than 24 hours, were involved as volunteers for an illusionist's set.

Quick Style, a Norwegian hip-hop group that went viral for their choreography of the famous Bollywood number *Kaala Chashma*, enthralled with their moves.

Visiting the Burj Khalifa (albeit from the bottom) was also ticked off the list. A humid night in Dubai saw plenty of clouds hugging the top tiers of the tallest structure in the world. The Diary did not understand why the planners of this part of town would crowd the area around the Burj with tall buildings, taking away much of the charm of such an architectural feat.

The neighbourhood gave the Diary a crash course on the class system of taxis in Dubai. The modest-looking Careem taxis with yellow beam lights on top were not permitted to come down the runway to the popular fountain area and viewing deck. However, if you were an electric cab owner, with a Lexus or a Tesla, you could come straight through.

The Diary reconnected with an old college roommate who was building a career for herself in the city. From

cooking Indian meals in the chilly university rooms in Birmingham to sharing a lavish Egyptian breakfast plate at a quaint Arabic café on Jumeirah Beach, along with several existential conversations about joy and the lack thereof in life, we had come a long way.

The next destination was Souk Madinat Jumeirah, where the Diary sourced a set of Sheikh salt and pepper shakers — which shall take pride of place in the souvenirs cupboard at home. The afternoon was enjoyed with a drive past some of the city's most iconic landmarks, including the Burj Al Arab, the Atlantis, and the Palm Jumeirah.

A few hours later, nearly 22,000 people gathered at the Dubai International Stadium for the coronation of a new world champion. The Diary's colleague in the press box was a happy soul. It seems the washed 'good luck' shirt for the White Ferns, which was draped over a seat, did the trick after all.

The team sang Māori songs and danced late into the night, barefoot on the pitch where they made history. Suzie Bates, Sophie Devine, Lea Tahuhu, and their young teammates turned around a challenging year with the one win that mattered the most.

Perhaps that's the best souvenir we could take back home after three testing yet satisfying weeks of World Cup cricket in the desert.



## ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar



FOR MORE  
STORIES

# SPORTS FITNESS DOESN'T DEPEND ON SLIM WAISTS ALONE

Two players, with waists that even their most ardent admirers wouldn't call super slim, had a rollicking partnership of 177, which saved India from the **blushes of an innings defeat** against New Zealand.

If ever proof was required that in sports there cannot be one standard of fitness, it was provided in the first Test match against New Zealand in Bengaluru. Two players, with waists that even their most ardent admirers wouldn't call super slim, had a rollicking partnership of 177, which saved India from the blushes of an innings defeat. That their heroics went in vain, as the batters who followed them simply didn't have the technique or temperament to deal with a pitch that was different from the low-bounce ones where they dominate, only added to the frustration.

If anything, the way the Indian batting has struggled in Chennai — where again there was some bounce — and now in Bengaluru, does make one anxious about what lies in store in Australia. Even the flattest of pitches there have more bounce than the usual Indian surfaces. That said, the Kookaburra ball should be an ally of the batters, as once a dozen overs or so have passed, the seam movement is almost negligible and batting becomes a lot easier.

Sarfraz Khan has been denied a place in the Indian team for some years now, despite scoring runs by the hundreds in domestic cricket. This was largely because those in a position to make decisions believed he didn't have the slim waist they deemed necessary for international cricket. Sarfaraz's returns on the

field with the bat were even more prodigious than his waistline. Sadly, Indian cricket has had too many decision-makers with ideas that are hard to fathom.

Way back during my playing days, Karsan Ghavri was not picked for the twin tours of New Zealand and the West Indies, apparently because he chewed paan, which wasn't considered appropriate by a highly volatile selector who, throughout his life, only sought to impress his friends at Lord's. It's not just him — many people in India have this strange notion that a slim waist signifies a fit person. How often have we heard someone look at a slim-waisted individual and say how fit they are? Sports fitness doesn't depend on slim waists alone. If the mind is strong, then physical fitness can largely be controlled by it.

In any case, what sort of fitness are we discussing in the modern day, where bowlers have a drink waiting for them at the boundary edge after bowling an over, and sometimes even receive a quick shoulder massage between deliveries from the other end? What fitness are we talking about when batters get drinks after every other over, with the reserve player running in, ostensibly for a change of gloves? Not just the batter but even his partner at the other end gets a drink, even if he has just come in to bat a few deliveries earlier. Umpires turn a blind eye to this, feeling that as long as the game isn't delayed, players can

**Impressive counterattack:** Sarfaraz Khan's maiden international hundred and 99 from wicketkeeper Rishabh Pant helped India to 462 in its second innings to give the home bowlers a small total to defend. K. MURALIKUMAR

have their refreshments. The TV broadcasters don't mind either, as they can slip in another commercial — so everybody is happy except the spectators, who, at the end of almost every Test match day, don't get to see the 90 overs they should.

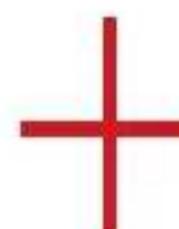
Rishabh Pant is another player who doesn't possess the slim waist that these fitness purists seem to want, but what an impact player he is. Let's not forget that he also keeps wickets all day, which not only requires getting up and down for around six hours of play but also running to the stumps to gather the throws. So, please discard these *yoyo-toyo* tests and instead assess how strong a player is mentally. That will be a true indicator of a player's fitness. **If a player can bat the whole day or bowl 20 overs in a day, he is match-fit, regardless of how slim or not his waist is.**

Even as India plays the current series against New Zealand, some of our players are competing in the Emerging Players Asia Cup. The Ranji Trophy season has begun, and if players are being taken away to play in events like this, then the national tournament is being greatly devalued. As it is, the top international players are unavailable for the Ranji Trophy due to their international commitments, and even if a window is available, there's always the workload factor for these slim-waisted, fit players. Isn't there? So, unless they need some practice or want to get back in form, they couldn't be bothered about playing for the States from where they took their first steps in Indian cricket.

Next month, there's a needless four-match T20 series in South Africa before the tour to Australia. There will also be an 'A' team touring Australia next month, so effectively about 50 to 60 players will not be available for their State teams in the premier national tournament, the



Ranji Trophy. No other major country treats its national tournament as cavalierly as India does. Have you ever seen England or Australia hold 'A' tours or participate in meaningless events during their domestic seasons? Their domestic seasons are sacrosanct. **But ever since the IPL came along, the Ranji Trophy has sadly receded into the background.** Hopefully, this will change from the next season — or is that hoping for too much?



**How often have we heard someone look at a slim-waisted individual and say how fit they are? Sports fitness doesn't depend on slim waists alone. If the mind is strong, then physical fitness can largely be controlled by it.**

» BENGALURU TEST PHOTOLINE  
INDIA-NEW ZEALAND



1st

**Washed away:** Persistent rain, with only a brief moment of hope in between, ultimately forced the umpires to call off the opening day in Bengaluru. K. MURALIKUMAR



2nd

**Horror morning:** After choosing to bat under heavy cloud cover, India was left stunned as New Zealand bowled the home side out for just 46 — its lowest-ever Test total at home and third-lowest overall — in just 32 overs. Matt Henry, with figures of 5/15, became the second-fastest Kiwi bowler to reach 100 Test wickets.

K. MURALIKUMAR





## 3rd

**Paving the way:** Devon Conway, through his assured strokeplay and different variants of sweeps, gave New Zealand a solid start, scoring 91 off 105 balls, which included 11 fours and three sixes. K. MURALIKUMAR



## 4th

**Holding the fort:** After India looked to gain control with quick wickets on the third day, Rachin Ravindra and Tim Southee combined to add 137 runs off 132 balls for the eighth wicket. Ravindra became the first Kiwi batter to score a Test century in India since 2012 as New Zealand took a 356-run lead. K. MURALIKUMAR



## 5th

**Golden arm:** Glenn Phillips got Virat Kohli to nick behind off the final ball of day three, halting India's fightback and leaving it trailing by 125 runs at stumps. PTI



## 6th

**Ramping up:** After adding 136 runs with Virat Kohli the day before, Sarfaraz Khan forged a 177-run alliance with Rishabh Pant on the fourth morning as India erased New Zealand's lead. Sarfaraz, who scored his maiden Test ton, was eventually dismissed for 150. K. MURALIKUMAR



## 7th

**Heartbreak:** For the seventh time in his Test career, Rishabh Pant was left stranded in the 90s, as William O'Rourke bowled him on 99, with the second new ball deflecting off his bat onto the stumps. Pant's 105-ball innings featured nine fours and five sixes, including a massive 107m slog sweep off Tim Southee that cleared the M. Chinnaswamy Stadium. K. MURALIKUMAR



## 8th

**Completing formalities:** As India mounted a final fight on the fifth morning to defend a 107-run target, Will Young remained composed, ensuring no further surprises. Young, along with Ravindra, put together an unbeaten 75-run partnership for the fourth wicket, guiding New Zealand to its first Test win on Indian soil in 36 years. K. MURALIKUMAR

» T20I PHOTOLINE  
INDIA-BANGLADESH

# 1st

**Speedy Singh:** Arshdeep Singh put Bangladesh on backfoot early, removing both openers—Parvez Hossain Emon and Litton Das—inside PowerPlay. He later picked up one more wicket, finishing with figures of 3/14 as India bowled the visitor out for 127. EMMANUAL YOGINI



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IMAGES



# 2nd

**Swagger:** Hardik Pandya's quickfire 39 off 16, filled with flair and no-look hits, helped India finish the chase inside 12 overs and take a 1-0 lead over Bangladesh.

EMMANUAL YOGINI



## 3rd

### Reddy, set, go: Nitish

Kumar Reddy scored a rapid 74 runs off just 34 balls, hitting seven sixes and four fours. He partnered with Rinku Singh to add 108 runs for the fourth wicket in just 49 balls as India finished on 221/9 after being asked to bat. In response, Bangladesh managed only 135/9. R.V. MOORTHY

## 4th

**Fireworks:** Sanju Samson smashed a 40-ball hundred — the second-fastest T20I ton by an Indian. He added 173 runs in 70 balls with Suryakumar Yadav for the second wicket, during which India also recorded its joint-highest PowerPlay total of 81. K.R. DEEPAK





## 5th

**No respite:** After the Samson-Suryakumar show, Riyan Parag and Hardik Pandya added 70 runs in 26 balls as India finished the innings three short of 300 — highest T20I score by a Test playing nation. Bangladesh fell short of the 298-run target by 133 runs. K. R. DEEPAK

## 6th

**Young guns:** At the presentation ceremony, captain Suryakumar Yadav passed on the trophy to the two debutants — Mayank Yadav and Nitish Kumar Reddy — as India clean swept the series 3-0. K. R. DEEPAK



## » STATSMAN MOHANDAS MENON

# An Indian first by Nitish

**0 }** The number of Indian players, before the start of the T20I series against Bangladesh, to perform the all-round feat of scoring 70-plus runs and claim two wickets in the same T20I match. In the second T20I in Delhi, Nitish Reddy became the first Indian player to do so. This happened in only the second match of his career.

**Players achieving the feat of 70+ runs and 2+ wickets in a T20I match**

*Among players from top cricketing nations*

Runs	Bowl	Player	For	Opp	Venue	Date	Result
88*	2/21	David Hussey	Aus	SA	Johannesburg	27 Mar 2009	L
71	4/10	Mohd Hafeez	Pak	Zim	Harare	16 Sep 2011	W
72	3/34	Shane Watson	Aus	Ind	Colombo RPS	28 Sep 2012	W
70	2/29	Shane Watson	Aus	SA	Colombo RPS	30 Sep 2012	W
86	3/25	Mohd Hafeez	Pak	SA	Centurion	3 Mar 2013	W
82*	2/17	Corey Anderson	NZ	Pak	Wellington WTS	22 Jan 2016	W
103*	3/10	Glenn Maxwell	Aus	Eng	Hobart (BO)	7 Feb 2018	W
75	3/24	Mitchell Marsh	Aus	WI	Gros Islet	14 Jul 2021	W
87	2/16	Liam Livingstone	Eng	Aus	Cardiff	13 Sep 2024	W
74	2/23	Nitish K. Reddy	Ind	Ban	Delhi	9 Oct 2024	W

**87 }** The number of T20I wickets claimed by India's left-arm pacer Arshdeep Singh after playing in 56 matches so far in his career. He last played in the second match of the series in Delhi on 9 October 2024. His wickets tally is the highest by any pace bowler in the history of T20I cricket after the first 56 games of their career. Additionally, his bowling strike-rate of less than 14 is the best among the pacers listed below.

**Pace bowlers with most T20I wickets after their first 56 games**

Wkts	Bowler (for)	Balls	Runs	Ave.	S/R	R/O
87	Arshdeep Singh (Ind)	1156	1597	18.36	13.29	8.29
82	Mustafizur Rahman (Ban)	1227	1542	18.80	14.96	7.54
80	Umar Gul (Pak)	1331	1340	16.75	14.14	7.11
80	K. C. Karan (Nepal)	1125	1445	18.06	14.06	7.71
76	Bilal Khan (Oman)	1195	1277	16.80	15.72	6.41
75	Mark Adair (Ire)	1181	1490	19.87	15.75	7.57
74	Trent Boult (NZ)	1281	1696	22.92	17.31	7.94

**82 }** The number of runs scored by Indian batters during the first six overs of the match against Bangladesh in Hyderabad. This is India's joint-highest PowerPlay score in T20Is.

**Highest T20I PowerPlay scores for India**

PP	Total (Ov)	Opponent	Venue	Date	Result	Batting
82/2	89/2 (6.3)	Scotland	Dubai	5 Nov 2021	Won	2nd
82/1	297/6 (20)	Bangladesh	Hyderabad	12 Oct 2024	Won	1st
78/2	203/5 (20)	South Africa	Johannesburg	18 Feb 2018	Won	1st
77/1	235/4 (20)	Australia	Trivandrum	26 Nov 2023	Won	1st
76/1	180/9 (20)	New Zealand	Johannesburg	16 Sep 2007	Lost	2nd



India's Nitish Kumar Reddy.

R.V. MOORTHY



India's Arshdeep Singh.

EMMANUAL YOGINI

### India clean sweeping opponents by a margin of 3-0 or more in a T20I series

#	Series	Opponent	Venue	Season	Series dates
1.	3-0	Australia	Australia	2015/16	26-31 Jan 2016
2.	3-0	Sri Lanka	India	2017/18	20-24 Dec 2017
3.	3-0	West Indies	India	2018/19	4-11 Nov 2018
4.	3-0	West Indies	USA/West Indies	2019	3-6 Aug 2019
5.	5-0++	India	New Zealand	2019/20	24 Jan-2 Feb 2020
6.	3-0	New Zealand	India	2021/22	17-21 Nov 2021
7.	3-0	West Indies	India	2021/22	16-20 Feb 2022
8.	3-0	Sri Lanka	India	2021/22	24-27 Feb 2022
9.	3-0+	Afghanistan	India	2023/24	11-17 Jan 2024
10.	3-0+	Sri Lanka	Sri Lanka	2024	27-30 Jul 2024
11.	3-0	Bangladesh	India	2024/25	6-12 Oct 2024

5-0++ includes two tied games, 3-0+ includes one tied game

**11}** The number of occasions India has managed to win all the games in a bilateral T20I series of three or more matches. Among all the 100-odd sides playing T20 internationals worldwide, India is the only country to inflict 10 or more clean sweeps against its opponents.

### Clean sweeping the opposition in T20Is on most occasions (min 3 matches in a series)

Series Wins	Team	Number of Series
11	India	35
8	Pakistan	32
6	Afghanistan	16
5	Australia	25
4	England	26

**10}** The number of consecutive victories for India in its recent T20I games. Interestingly, Team India's (the current World Cup champion) recent form has been so good that it has lost just one game in its last 23 matches. Its only loss occurred in Harare to Zimbabwe on 6 Jul 2024.

### India's most successive T20I victories

M	From	To	Home	Away
12	3 Nov 2021	27 Feb 2022	9	3
12	14 Dec 2023	29 Jun 2024	3	9
10*	7 Jul 2024	12 Oct 2024	3	7
9	7 Jan 2020	6 Dec 2020	2	7

\*winning sequence in progress

### India's most successive T20I victories at home

M	From	To
11	18 Mar 2021	27 Feb 2022
8*	1 Dec 2023	12 Oct 2024
7	7 Nov 2017	11 Nov 2018

\*winning sequence in progress

**33}** The number of T20I matches Ravi Bishnoi took to reach the 50th wicket of his career, in Hyderabad against Bangladesh on 12 October 2024. This is now the joint second-quickest by an Indian bowler to achieve the landmark and fourth quickest among leg-spinners of top cricketing nations.

### Quickest to reach 50 T20I wickets for India

M	Bowler	Achieved on	Balls	Runs	Wkts	Ave.	S/R	E/R
30	Kuldeep Yadav	8 Aug 2023	639	714	50	14.28	12.78	6.70
33	Arshdeep Singh	20 Aug 2023	671	949	50	18.98	13.42	8.49
33	Ravi Bishnoi	12 Oct 2024	772	940	51	18.43	15.14	7.31
34	Yuzvinder Chahal	10 Nov 2019	801	1067	50	21.34	16.02	7.99

### Quickest to reach 50 T20I wickets among right-arm leg-spinners

#### Among players from top cricketing nations

M	Bowler	Achieved on	Balls	Runs	Wkts	Ave.	S/R	E/R
31	Imran Tahir	17 Feb 2017	695	740	54	13.70	12.87	6.39
31	Rashid Khan	3 Jun 2018	702	706	52	13.58	13.50	6.03
32	Wanindu Hasaranga	1 Nov 2021	664	694	50	13.88	13.28	6.27
33	Ravi Bishnoi	12 Oct 2024	772	940	51	18.43	15.14	7.31
34	Yuzvinder Chahal	10 Nov 2019	801	1067	50	21.34	16.02	7.99

**297}** India's total against Bangladesh in Hyderabad on 12 Oct 2024. This is now the highest in any T20I match involving two Test-playing nations. The previous highest was 278/3 by Afghanistan against Ireland, which also came at an Indian ground, in Dehradun. Overall, Nepal's total of 314/3 against Mongolia in the 2024 Asian Games in China, remains the highest in all T20s.

### Highest team totals in T20s

Total	For	Opponent	Venue	Date	Series/tournament
314/3	Nepal	Mongolia	Hangzhou	27 Sep 2023	Asian Games (T20I)
297/6	India	Bangladesh	Hyderabad	12 Oct 2024	Bilateral T20I
287/3	Sunrisers Hyderabad	Royal Challengers Bangalore	Bengaluru	15 Apr 2024	IPL (T20)
278/3	Afghanistan	Ireland	Dehradun	23 Feb 2019	Bilateral T20I
278/4	Czech Republic	Turkey	Ilfov County	30 Aug 2019	Bilateral T20I



India's Ravi Bishnoi.

K. R. DEEPAK

All records are correct and updated until 19 Oct 2024.



**State-of-the-art facility:** A cutting-edge indoor cricket academy in Raipur offers players a world-class training environment designed to elevate their game to the next level. MAYANK

# THE BARABANKI SENSATION AND TAPPING INTO THE NEXT GENERATION

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

**Mayank and Anish Pathiyil**  
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**W**hen a 14-year-old girl at the Under-15 selection trials at the Chhattisgarh State Cricket Sangh (CSCS) Indoor Cricket Academy in the heart of Raipur brings to mind Paul Adams and his "frog in a blender" bowling

action, you can't help but acknowledge the depth of cricketing talent in the state.

Her run-up starts like that of a typical spinner — short and slow. But as she reaches the crease, she contorts her body dramatically, releasing the ball from the back of her hand with her head tilted upwards, much like Karnataka's Shivil Kaushik, whose claim to fame came in

the Indian Premier League in 2016. Chhattisgarh is home to many other promising talents, as the state steadily establishes itself on the cricketing map.

The Shaheed Veer Narayan Singh International Cricket Stadium, Raipur's cricketing hub, has a story of its own. With a capacity of 65,000, it's a colossal venue that leaves spectators in awe of its size.

Yet, the stadium's biggest flaw lies in its accessibility. Located 30 kilometres south east of the town centre in the newly planned greenfield town of Nava Raipur, the journey to the venue is far from convenient for players, officials, and spectators alike. What should be an extraordinary cricketing experience is often marred by the logistical challenges of simply getting there.

#### Modern vibe

While India's premier domestic tournament — the Ranji Trophy — and its camps are still being held at the stadium, the grassroots cricketing ecosystem needed a more accessible alternative. Recognising these challenges, the CSCS sought a solution for nurturing young talent, resulting in the development of a state-of-the-art indoor cricket academy, seven kilometres away from the town centre.

This modern facility boasts eight full-sized net pitches equipped with bowling machines, a two-floor gym, a recovery room, and a sauna, providing players with a top-class environment to train, regardless of the stadium's logistical issues. Additionally, the academy features a 60-metre ground, fully functional for age-group cricket.

The academy hosts marquee tournaments like the U-14 Raj Singh Dungarpur Trophy, alongside selection trials for all age groups and across genders. Despite only becoming a full member of the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) in February 2016, the CSCS has been laying the groundwork to compete with long-established cricketing states.

"We have around 8,600 players registered with our association and

employ 52 coaches, 10 physios, 15 strength and conditioning trainers, and 16 selectors," said Ajay Kumar, a member of the CSCS, to *Sportstar*, underscoring the significant strides the state has made in developing cricketing infrastructure and talent.

#### Leggie's charm

Lucknow, the city of Nawabs and a haven for succulent, appetising non-vegetarian delicacies, embraced a new flavour during the opening round of Ranji Trophy fixtures at the Ekana Stadium.

Making his First-Class debut in the match against Bengal was young leg-spinner Vipraj Nigam (**below**). The 20-year-old, from Barabanki, just across the Faizabad highway, had the locals ecstatic after an incisive spell on the first evening.



SANDEEP SAXENA

Bengal, thanks to a hundred from opener Sudip Chatterjee, had raced to 212 for one when Nigam managed to dismiss Sudip Gharami for 90, finding the edge as he attempted a drive through cover. In the next 15 minutes or so, the leggie had breached the defences of captain Anustup Majumdar and trapped Wriddhiman Saha lbw with two googlies. A quick pick-up and throw from him also caught Abishek Porel short of his crease.

Early the next morning, as the diary trudged towards the ground to observe the warm-up session, the security guard at the entrance to the outfield struck up a conversation. "He's from our Barabanki," he exulted, raving about Nigam's exploits the previous evening. A similar sentiment echoed in the media box, where the scorer too seemed in awe of the youngster's spell.

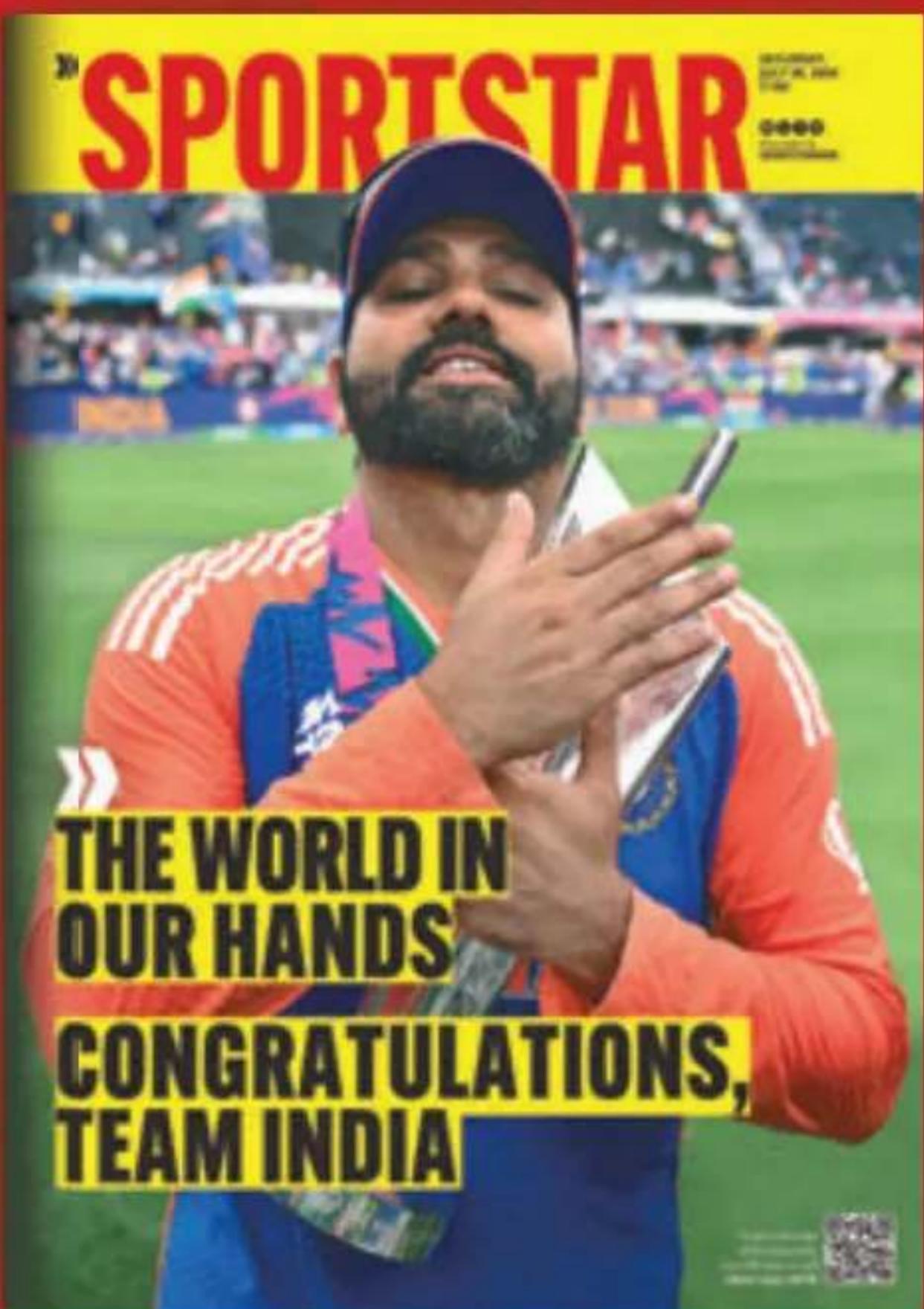
Despite gaining only one point from the encounter, Uttar Pradesh could take positives from the performances of Nigam and the other two debutants, Swastik Chikara and Siddarth Yadav, who played two stroke-filled knocks in the first innings.

"Very, very happy with their performance," said skipper Aryan Juyal post-match. "When you take such risks, it comes with repercussions. Agar aise nahi hua toh aap pochte ki maine aisa kyun kiya (If it had not paid off, you would have asked me why I made that decision)," he added with a smirk.

#### Trip down memory lane

Former India Under-19 captain Priyam Garg found himself in an amusing moment on the field after he dived forward at cover to stop a ball, only to land awkwardly and bang his knee on the turf.

As the physio tended to the superficial wound with antiseptic, Garg winced in pain, requiring a couple of teammates to hold him down. It was a scene that many who've experienced the sharp sting of a scraped knee during a street-cricket game could easily relate to.



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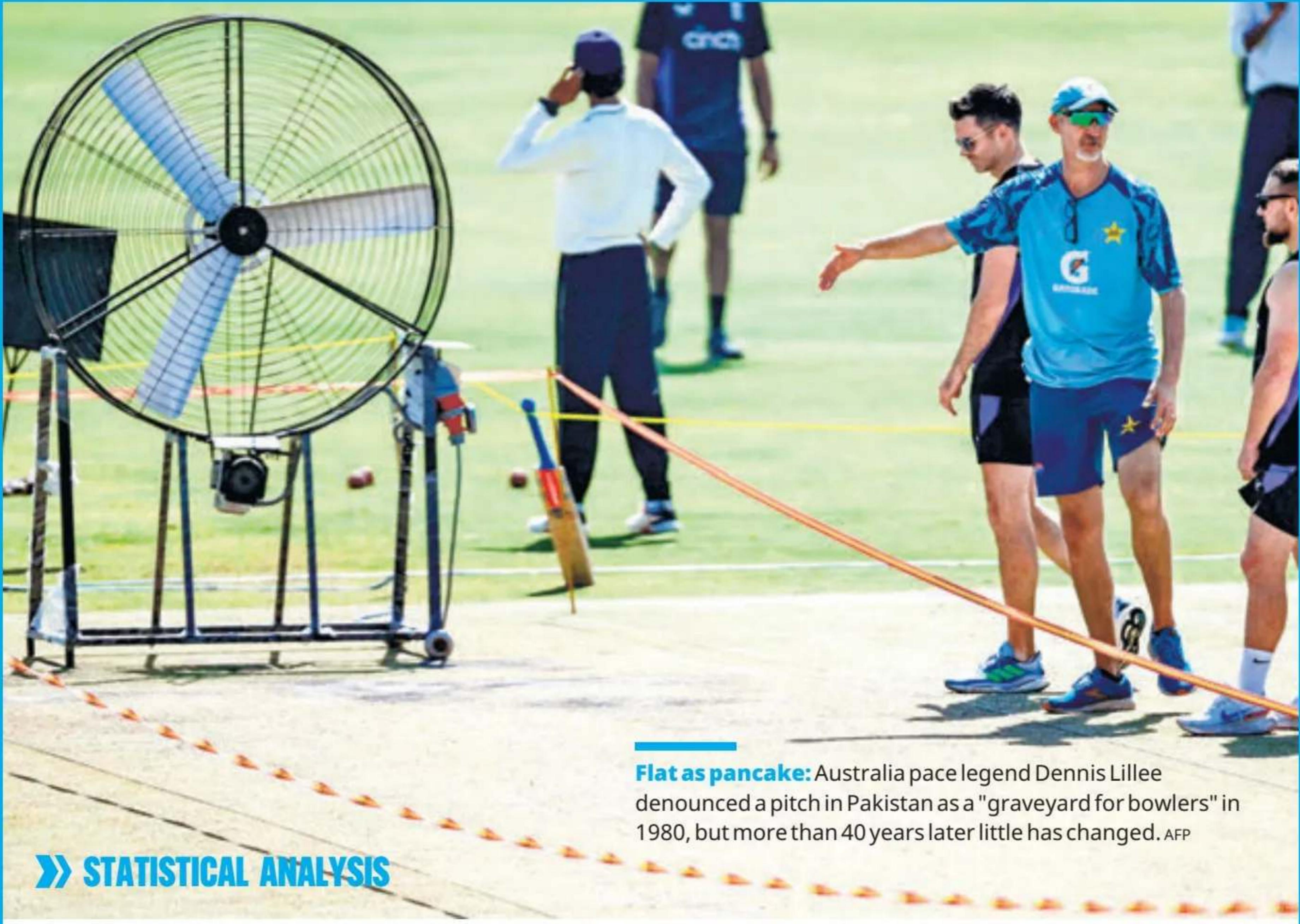
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**Flat as pancake:** Australia pace legend Dennis Lillee denounced a pitch in Pakistan as a "graveyard for bowlers" in 1980, but more than 40 years later little has changed. AFP

## » STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

# PITCH IMPERFECT!

A statistical exploration of the patterns of runs scored and the results of Test matches that have turned pitches in Pakistan into a **bowler's nightmare**.

**Shayan Acharya and Pranay Rajiv**  
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**P**akistan needed a used Multan pitch and a spin-confounded England batting unit to break its remarkable 11-game winless streak at home in Test cricket.

Pakistan's out-of-the-box idea of reusing the surface stemmed from a humiliating innings defeat in the first Test against England, despite scoring 556 runs in the first innings.

The Multan win also marked a significant departure from Pakistan's

home Test strategy in the last five years, which had heavily favoured batters.

Since 2019, when Test cricket returned to Pakistan after a decade-long break due to the Lahore terror attack, batters have averaged 38.03 runs per dismissal in the country — the highest among all Test-playing nations during this period.

Both home and away batters have capitalised on the pliant, flat Pakistani pitches, swelling their aggregates. In the 17 Tests Pakistan has hosted in this period, batters have accumulated 48 centuries, the second-most in any country, behind

only England, which has seen 59 tons.

However, when it comes to centuries per game, Pakistan tops the chart by a significant margin — 2.82 hundreds per game, with Sri Lanka's 2.26 a distant second.

The rise in individual hundreds has also translated into teams consistently tallying huge totals. In the last five years, there have been eight 500+ innings totals in Test cricket in Pakistan, the joint-highest among all countries, alongside Australia.

With run-scoring becoming easier and bowling subsequently more difficult, Pakistan has seen a larger

share of matches drifting into draws. Over 29 per cent of Tests in Pakistan in the last five years have ended in draws. Only West Indies has produced a larger share of draws in this period. To put this into context, this has happened in an era where Test cricket has been at its best in terms of producing results.

Despite the tailor-made pitches aimed at harnessing its strengths, Pakistan has struggled to win at home in Test cricket over the last five years. It has won only five of its 17 matches, with a win-loss ratio of 0.714 at home — the third-lowest among all nations, ahead of only Bangladesh and Zimbabwe.

"The change in pitches started ahead of the Australia series back in early 2022," says Bazid Khan, a former Pakistan international and noted commentator. Having followed the game closely, Khan believes it was a conscious decision by the Pakistan Cricket Board to change the nature of the wickets in a bid to nullify Australia's fast-bowling attack.

"The nature of the wicket in Rawalpindi was changed, and there was no moisture on the wicket. Then it became hard. Since they left the wicket hard for all the days, there was hardly anything for the bowlers. A similar thing happened when England toured later, as wickets were flat," Khan says.

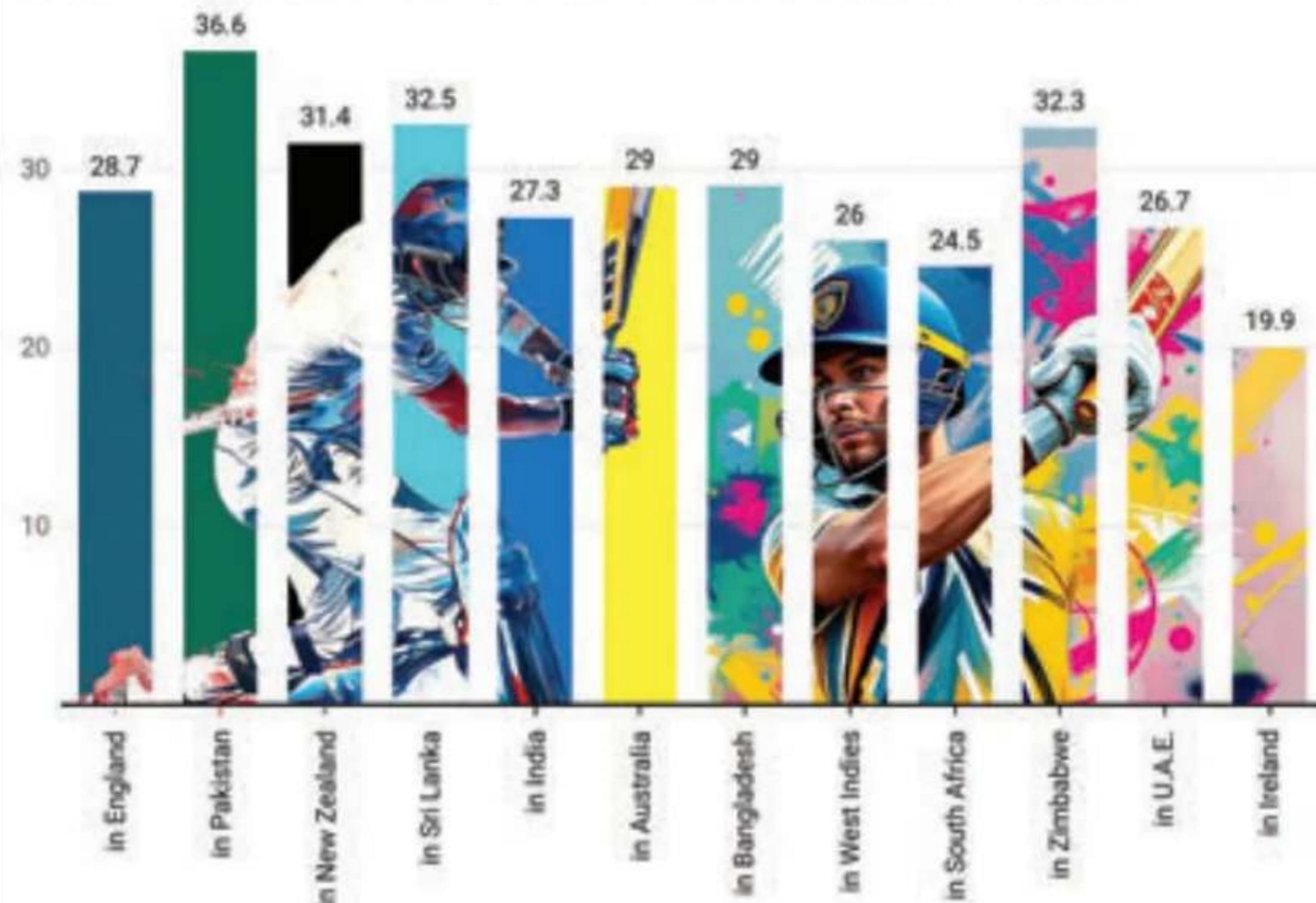
The move backfired, as England claimed the series 3-0. But Pakistan's woes did not end there. As the flat wickets persisted, Pakistan's top-tier fast bowlers — Shaheen Afridi and Naseem Shah — struggled, and soon, the hosts found themselves trapped by their own plan.

"Test cricket gets so exciting to watch when you have pitches that slightly favour the bowlers instead of just flat lifeless ones," points out former coach Mickey Arthur.

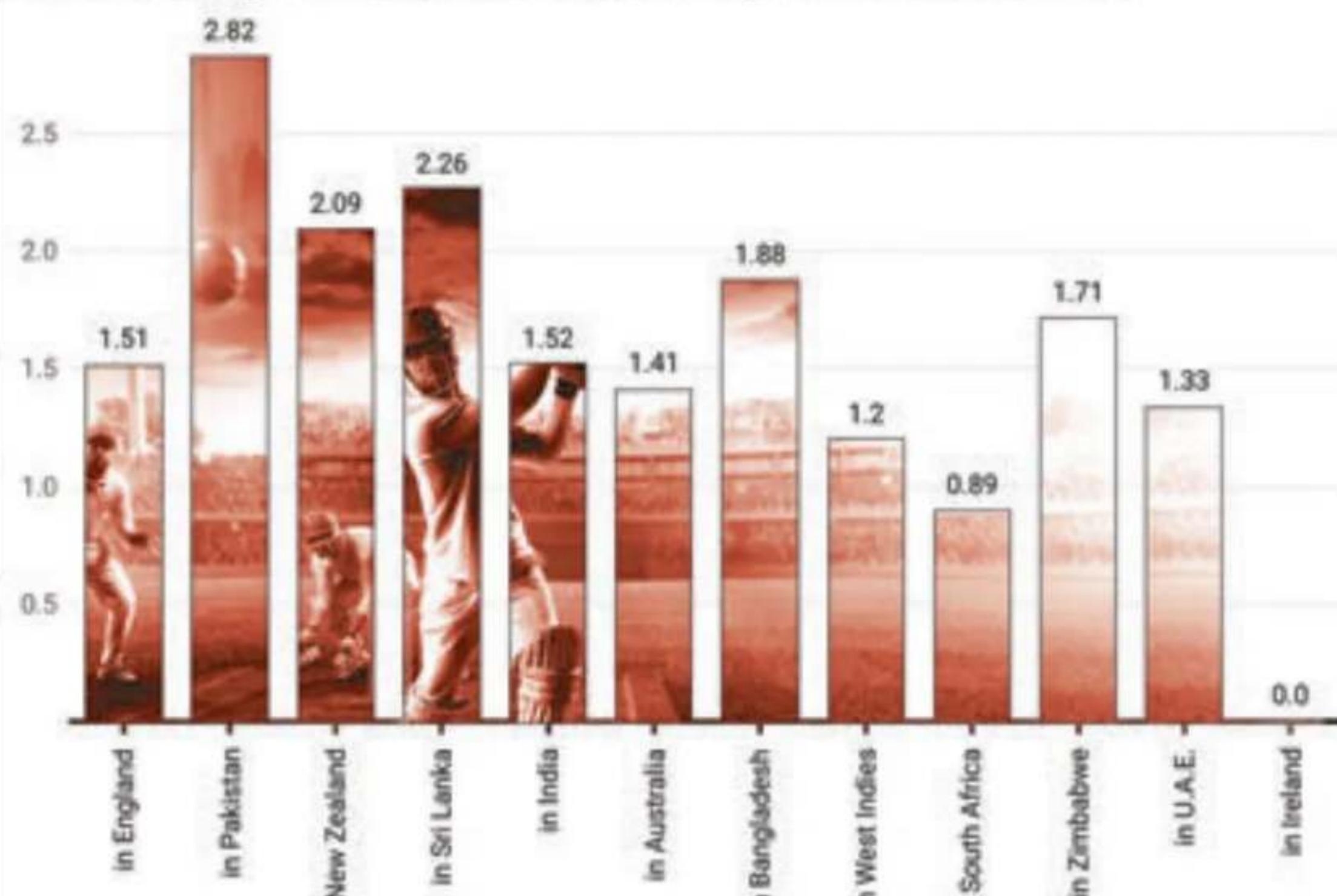
A major reason for Pakistan's inability to convert home advantage into wins was also its underperforming batting unit, best embodied by the out-of-form Babar Azam, who was rested for the team's win against England in Multan.

In the last five years, away batters have averaged 39.02 in Pakistan,

### Test batting average in each country since Jan 2019



### Centuries per Test in each country since Jan 2019



while their home counterparts have managed just 37.13 runs per wicket.

Additionally, the flat nature of Pakistani pitches has also taken the spinners largely out of the equation, which has particularly benefited non-subcontinental teams.

"Traditionally, pitches in Pakistan didn't offer you much, but at least they were better than the lifeless ones being laid out at the moment," says Khan, adding, "Every area has its natural pitches, and in an effort to negate the opposition's bowling attack, we have destroyed our

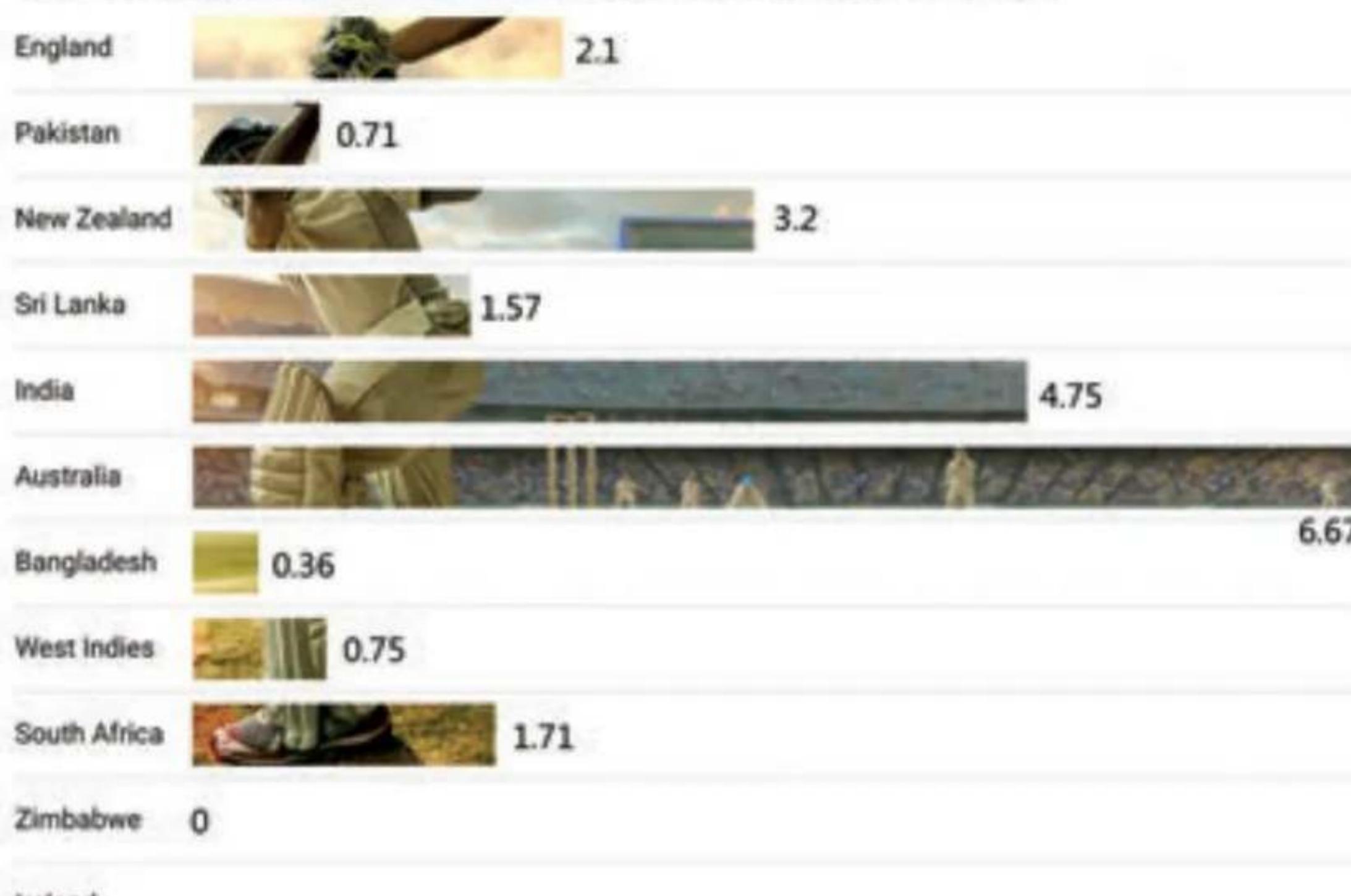
wickets, and now we are struggling to make them beneficial for us."

After the first Test against England, Pakistan's assistant coach Azhar Mahmood claimed that the team management had a clear plan for the pitches in the series against Bangladesh and England. "Our approach was pace wickets against Bangladesh and spin pitches against England. Our instruction to the curator for the first Test was that the ball should spin after the second day. But the pitch didn't take turn until even the fifth day," Mahmood said.



**No country for bowlers:** In the last five years, there have been eight 500+ innings totals in Test cricket in Pakistan, the joint-highest among all countries, alongside Australia. GETTY IMAGES

#### Win-loss ratio at home in Tests since Jan 2019



Ireland played just one Test at home during this period and won it.

However, things didn't go as expected. Leg-spinner Abrar Ahmed was the only specialist spinner in the XI, with Pakistan fielding Naseem, Shaheen, and Aamer Jamal to lead the attack. However, with England piling up 823 for 7 — the highest score Pakistan has ever conceded — the plan boomeranged, and as Khan points out, the "team seemed clueless about how to claim ten wickets in those placid conditions."

In the Multan Test, Pakistan shifted from its pace-centric approach, relying instead on the spin duo of Sajid Khan and Noman Ali. The strategy worked, as all 20 English wickets in the second Test were shared between the two Pakistani spinners, guiding the host to a breakthrough win.

**(All stats updated till second Pakistan vs England Test)**



# Alastair Cook, Neetu David, and A. B. de Villiers honoured

1

They are the 113th, 114th, and 115th inductees into the **ICC Hall of Fame** as part of the Class of 2024.

Alastair Cook and Neetu David (**pic, above**), alongwith A. B. de Villiers, were named as the latest inductees into the ICC Hall of Fame as part of the Class of 2024. Cook, England's highest

run-scorer and century-maker in Test matches before being overtaken by Joe Root, joins the list alongside Neetu, the first Indian woman to claim 100 One-Day Internationals (ODIs),

and de Villiers, who amassed over 20,000 international runs and set multiple ODI records for the fastest fifties, hundreds, and 150s. They are the 113th, 114th, and 115th inductees.



2

Sri Lanka bounced back from defeat to secure its first T20I series win against the West Indies. In the opening game, the visitor comfortably chased down Sri Lanka's 179-run total, thanks to a 107-run opening partnership between Brandon King (63) and Evin Lewis (50).

Pathum Nissanka's half-century and Duniwell Wellalage's three-wicket haul were key to Sri Lanka's series-levelling 73-run victory. The host then overhauled a 163-run target in the decider with nine wickets to spare.



3

Ruturaj Gaikwad has been appointed captain of India A for the first two first-class matches against Australia A in Mackay and Melbourne. Following these matches, the team will participate in a three-day intra-squad practice game against the senior Indian men's team in Perth at the WACA. Abhimanyu Easwaran has been named vice-captain.

EMMANUEL YOGINI



4

The first two Tests of the three-match series between Pakistan and England saw several records shattered. England claimed the opening Test after Harry Brook's triple century and Joe Root's 262 eclipsed the host's first-innings total of 556. Pakistan was then dismissed for 220, becoming the first team to lose by an innings after scoring 500 or more in its first innings. However, Pakistan's spinners took all 20 wickets in the second Test, securing a 152-run victory.



5

Five-time Indian Premier League (IPL) champion Mumbai Indians (MI) has reappointed Mahela Jayawardene as head coach. He had previously served in the same role from 2017 to 2022, guiding MI to titles in 2017, 2019, and 2020-21. Jayawardene replaces Mark Boucher, who had a two-year stint as MI's head coach. The team endured a poor run this year, finishing last with only four wins from 14 matches.

AFP

# HIL RETURNS IN A NEW AVATAR



**Cap's the word:** Soormas HC was willing to break the bank for the Indian captain, Harmanpreet Singh. GETTY IMAGES

The auction for the new-look Hockey India League threw up some **interesting combinations**, with some teams looking stronger and better balanced, at least on paper.

**Uthra Ganesan**

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**T**he seven-year itch proved too strong for the Hockey India League, but returning in a new avatar later this year, HIL 2.0 is set to be a completely different affair.

Scheduled to begin on December 28, it will feature new teams, new faces, new management, a revised format that restricts play to just two venues — at least for the first year — and the addition of a whole new women's league, making it an exciting watch from the moment its revival was officially announced.

While the excitement remains, the three days of auctions for men and women, along with certain issues surrounding them, have tempered it somewhat, adding a dose of realism to its hype of being the 'best hockey league in the world.'

A franchise withdrawing from the men's field, hastily replaced by another on the morning of the auction, the reduction of the women's field from six to four teams less than 24 hours prior, a modest purse of Rs. 4 crore for the men — half of that for the women — and concerns over the availability of overseas players, especially those who were acquired cheaply, around what is traditionally a holiday period, have been considered non-issues for the time being.

For now, all the teams insist they are happy with their combinations, though some undeniably appear stronger and better balanced, at least on paper. Here's how they stack up:

## THE UPCOMING EDITION OF THE HIL FEATURES A WOMEN'S TOURNAMENT FOR THE FIRST TIME IN ITS HISTORY

the only weapon; Australian Jeremy Hayward is equally potent with drag-flicks and boasts an equally intimidating conversion record.

Their midfield is a mixed bag, though, with Belgian Victor Wegnez key to their chances, and an opportunity for former junior India captain Harjeet Singh to return to national prominence after falling off the radar in recent years.

The forwards lack firepower, so the team will be counting on Harmanpreet and Hayward to do the bulk of its scoring. Meanwhile, Vincent Vanasch, the only man to win the FIH Goalkeeper of the Year award thrice, will be a perfect mentor for Mohit H. S. in goal.

**Women:** This side, on paper, has no apparent weakness, apart from high expectations. Current national captain Salima Tete will be central to its attacking efforts, while veteran Savita Punia will be crucial in goal. The midfield pairing of Nike Lorenz and Maria Verschoor will be key to managing the team and with Rani Rampal on the coaching staff, also doubling up as the mentor, it will be an interesting reunion that can end up being either spectacularly

successful or disastrous.

### Team Gonasika

**Men:** Every team has its big/small players and good/bad players, but there is only one Tom Boon. He has led the scoring charts an incredible 12 times in competitions involving three or more teams and has 291 goals in 354 international matches, scoring them in every way possible — be it drag-flicks, field goals, simple tap-ins or from acute angles.

Getting him for Rs. 26 lakhs was a steal for Team Gonasika — especially considering he was the costliest player in HIL 1.0 back in 2014, fetching 103,000 USD, equivalent to over Rs. 80 lakhs today. The side will be hoping the Belgian legend leads it to the knockouts.

Star Dutch forward Jeroen Hertzberger will join him upfront, but while the rest of the team is competent, it doesn't excite. There is a strong Indian core, including Mandeep Singh, Manpreet Singh, Amir Ali, Suraj Karkera, and Vishnukant Singh, as well as returning veterans Nikkin Thimmaiah, S. K. Uthappa, and S. V. Sunil.

**The Boon edge:** Tom Boon has been the leading scorer an incredible 12 times in competitions featuring three or more teams through his career.

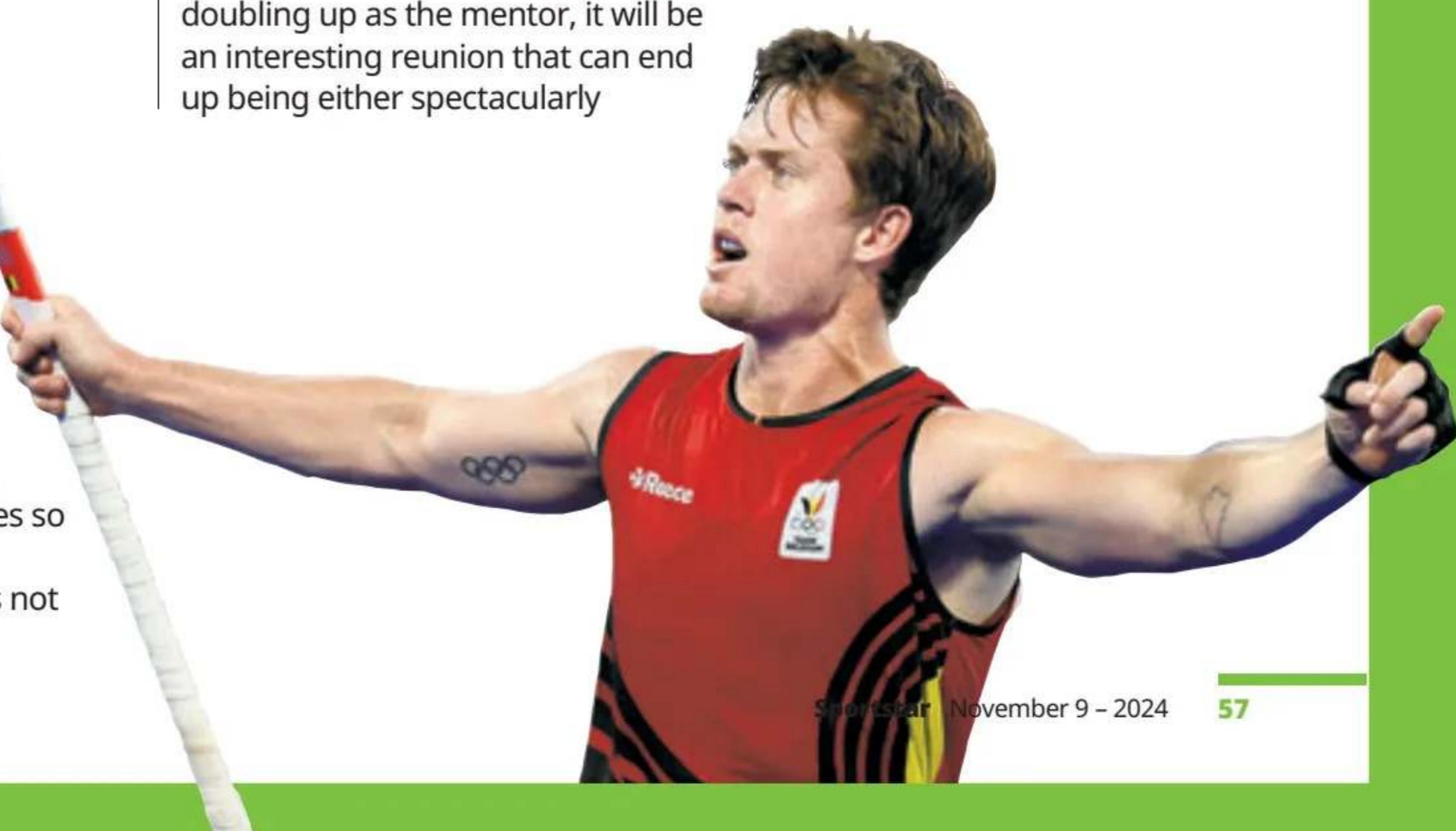
GETTY IMAGES

### Soorma HC

**Men:** The JSW-owned Soormas were determined to land the country's biggest name at the moment, Harmanpreet Singh, and succeeded by not scrimping on the purse, even willing to break the bank for the Indian captain.

They also have a shrewd tactician in former Indian midfielder Arjun Halappa as technical director, and a brilliant reader of the game in Sardar Singh as the mentor. It is a combination that worked wonders on the field before, and the team will hope it does so again off it.

However, Harmanpreet is not





**Force to reckon with:** Delhi SG Pipers boasts a formidable attacking line-up that includes India's best striker Sangita Kumari (front). GETTYIMAGES

#### Delhi SG Pipers

**Men:** The team pulled off the biggest heist, not during the auctions but before, by appointing P. R. Sreejesh as its Director of Hockey. The recently-retired Indian goalkeeper not only brought the latest insights and knowledge of the players up for auction but also played a part in assembling a strong support team, with Graham Reid and Shivendra Singh as coaches. This is reflected in the balance of Indian and

foreign players in the side, and the combination of senior and junior players.

The star player will be Germany's Christopher Ruhr, a player who can not only create goals for others but also step up to score himself when needed.

With two Olympic medals, junior and senior World Cup titles, and still

only 30, Ruhr will be the fulcrum around which the team revolves. Alongside him, Australia's Flynn Ogilvie and Ky Willot, Dutchman Jorrit Croon, Shamsher Singh, and Raj Kumar Pal make up the best midfield in the competition.

The defence is a mixed bag, but the main concern is upfront. The team has put its faith in juniors — Dilraj Singh, Aditya Lalage, Sourabh Kushwaha — to score the goals, a gamble that could either pay off spectacularly, with spillover effects for the national team, or prove disastrous. Sreejesh will be hoping for the former.

**Women:** Delhi splurged on 17-year-old Sunelita Toppo and boasts a formidable attacking lineup that includes India's best striker in Sangita Kumari.

The team is effectively split into a foreign defence and an Indian attack featuring drag-flicker Deepika, Navneet Kaur, and Ishika, with Charlotte Watson as the sole overseas player in the forward line.

The defence is where the experience lies, with Stephanie De Groof, Brits Giselle Ansley and Elizabeth Ann Neal, Australian Miri Maroney, and goalkeeper Elodie Picard.

Interestingly, national team analytical coach Dave Smolenaars will be in charge of the team, and it remains to be seen if his expertise translates into an advantage for the girls.

#### UP Rudras

**Men:** Like the Soormas, the Rudras had a clear focus: secure Hardik Singh and build the team around him. The Indian midfield maestro, with the uncanny ability to run circles around the opposition, find gaps where none seem to exist, down the shutters at the back, and surge forward — all in the same

**Former national goalkeeper P. R. Sreejesh is the Director of Hockey at Delhi SG Pipers**

match — will be key to its fortunes and the difference between finishing in the top or bottom half of the competition.

Barring Hardik, the team is heavily reliant on its foreign stars in all areas: Lars Balk and Kane Russell in defence, the latter doubling up as a drag-flicker, Seve van Ass partnering Hardik in the middle, and Alvaro Iglesias and Tanguy Cosyns upfront.

There are also seasoned players like Lalit Upadhyay, along with Surender Kumar, Akashdeep Singh and Simranjeet Singh. Even though the last three are hoping to impress enough to get another shot at the national team, they lack the X-factor needed to inspire confidence.

### Tamil Nadu Dragons

**Men:** This is another team heavy on overseas players, with Dutchman Jip Janssen being the standout one. Deadly with drag-flicks and possibly one of the few with a better conversion rate than Harmanpreet, the Paris Olympics gold medallist will be crucial to the Chennai side's hopes of advancing to the knockouts. Along with Amit Rohidas, the Dragons has a solid defence rivalled only by its attacking prowess.

The Australian trio of Blake Govers, Tom Craig, and Nathan Ephraums lead the forward line, with the Netherlands' Duco Telgenkamp joining in, and talented Indian youngsters Selvam Karthi and Bharan Sudev adding excitement on the field, making it a selection headache for coach Rein van Eijk. Expect them to score goals from all angles and hope Irish legend David Harte saves a lot at the back.

### Hyderabad Toofans

**Men:** Hyderabad secured Gonzalo Peillat, and while it has other big names in its ranks, the team's fortunes will largely depend on the Argentine-turned-German, who continues to be a nightmare for teams with both his lethal drag-flicks and rock-solid defence. With the experienced Matthew Dawson in defence and Zachary Wallace and Maico Casella in midfield, the attack remains iffy.



Jean-Paul Danneberg, though low on experience, delivers high results and will man the post. However, Hyderabad's Indian roster remains its weakest link. The team is banking on little-known yet hardworking youngsters, hoping that the collective effort outweighs individual limitations.

### Shrachi Rarh Bengal Tigers

**Men:** This is the one team that best personifies the thin line between confusion and combination, genius and cluelessness. It has roped in Australian Colin Batch as the chief coach, who, despite his astute understanding of hockey, was absent during the auctions and doesn't inspire much confidence given recent

**Dominating presence:** Deadly with the drag-flick and perhaps one of the few in the world with a better conversion record than Harmanpreet, Dutchman Jip Janssen will be the key for Tamil Nadu Dragons. GETTY IMAGES

results. The individual brilliance of some of the Aussies from their national side has managed to gloss over the obvious concerns, and that kind of reflects in the team that has been put together here.

On paper, it's a solid setup: Jugraj Singh, Hayden Beltz, Gauthier Boccard, and Tom Grambusch in defence; Lachlan Sharp and Sean Findlay in midfield; Abhishek Nain, Sukheet Singh, Florent Van Aubel, and Sam Lane leading the attack,



## SHRACHI RARH BENGAL TIGERS WENT ALL OUT TO SECURE UDITA DUHAN, MAKING HER THE HIGHEST-PAID PLAYER AT THE AUCTIONS

**Leading the charge:** Current Indian national captain Salima Tete (front) will be central to Soorma's attacking efforts, while veteran Savita Punia will be crucial in goal. GETTY IMAGES

along with the retired Rupinder Pal Singh. These are all undisputed talents, but their consistency remains in question. This team is perhaps the most diverse in terms of players' nationalities, and there is hope that the various styles and temperaments will mesh well, and quickly. Pirmin Blaak, guarding the goal, will be the standout star.

**Women:** Surprisingly, despite having a triple-Olympic champion and bona fide legend like Eva de Goede, Indian defender Udita Duhan is the most talked-about player on the team. Kolkata went all out to secure Udita, making her the highest-paid player at the auctions, and hopes the gamble pays off.

While her calibre is undeniable, it meant compromising elsewhere, particularly in foreign player bids. Nonetheless, Bengal managed to sign Belgian striker Ambre Ballenghien and Dutch playmaker Eva. Between Eva and Sushila Chanu, there is enough experience in

midfield, while Vandana Katariya, Lalremsiami, and Beauty Dung Dung will be crucial upfront.

### Kalinga Lancers

**Men:** The team secured its star player at dirt cheap price. Belgium's Alexander Hendrickx, a world-class drag-flicker, defender, and leader, is expected to score the bulk of goals for the only team remaining from the previous version of the league, even retaining its support staff but under new ownership.

Another key player is his national teammate Arthur van Doren, perhaps the only player to win both the Rising Star and Player of the Year in the same year (2017). Their partnership in defence will play a big role in keeping other teams at bay. It will also be a chance for Krishan Pathak to finally step out of Sreejesh's shadow against world-class attacks.

### Odisha Warriors

**Women:** Former India coach Janneke Schopman's familiarity with Indian and European players was evident as she persisted in acquiring Yibbi Jansen.

The Dutch drag-flicker was the top scorer at the Paris Olympics and a key reason for Netherlands' gold medal win.

Schopman would hope she does the same here. Her knowledge of Indian players means she went big on youngsters including Rituja Pisal, Annu, and Anjali Barwa, without neglecting experience, bringing in Freeke Moes and Neha Goyal to create one of the most balanced sides.

» FROM THE  
WORLD OF FOOTBALL



**Top notch:** Barcelona has outscored its La Liga opponents 33-10 this season and look to be in fine tune ahead of the El Clasico in the coming gameweek. AFP

## BLAUGRANA ON THE BULL RUN

While Barcelona **continued its dominant form** in La Liga, Liverpool edged out Chelsea in a thriller at home.

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**R**obert Lewandowski and Pablo Torres scored a brace each in league-leader Barcelona's 5-1 thrashing of Sevilla, with Pedri also getting on the scoresheet. This victory meant that Hansi Flick's men have outscored their La Liga opponents 33-10 this season and look to be in fine tune ahead of the El Clasico in the coming gameweek. Its arch-rival Real Madrid also secured a victory, albeit not as comprehensively, edging Celta Vigo 2-1. Kylian Mbappe (right) scored a long-range strike to



AFP



## JOHN STONES' LATE HEADER HELPED MANCHESTER CITY GAIN THREE POINTS AGAINST WOLVERHAMPTON WANDERERS

give Madrid the lead in the 20th minute before Williot Swedburg equalised in the 51st. A draw could have hurt Madrid's morale, especially with its next fixture being the Clasico.

Ballon d'Or favourite Vinicius Junior saved the blushes for Carlo Ancelotti's men by netting a 66th-minute winner.

Diego Simeone's Atletico Madrid found itself trailing against Leganes after Yvan Neyou scored in the 34th minute.

However, it launched a second-half comeback to clinch a 3-1 win and secure all three points. Alexander Sorloth scored the equaliser in the 69th minute, followed by a late winner from Antoine Griezmann in the 81st minute.

Any hopes of a Leganes equaliser were quashed by Sorloth, who scored again in second-half stoppage

time to complete his brace.

Villarreal dropped points after a 1-1 draw with Getafe but retained its place in the top four.

After matchday ten, Barcelona leads the standings with 27 points, with Real Madrid second on 24. Atletico Madrid and Villarreal are third and fourth, with 20 and 18 points respectively.

### Premier League

It was another week in English football where Erling Haaland failed to score, but Manchester City did just enough to scrape a 2-1 win against Wolverhampton Wanderers.

Playing at Molineux, Wolves got off to an excellent start, with Jorgen Strand Larsen finding the net in the seventh minute.

However, the English champion is rarely known to crumble under pressure and had to wait until the

**Slotting it right:** Liverpool's home clash with Chelsea was the highlight fixture, with the Reds winning 2-1 at Anfield. REUTERS

33rd minute for the equaliser. With City's intricate play failing to break the Wolves' defence, Josko Gvardiol unleashed a superb curling effort from distance to score.

While a point against City would have been a favourable result for Wolves, John Stones spoiled the Molineux party as he towered over everyone to convert a corner in the fifth minute of second-half stoppage time, stealing three points for the defending champion.

Liverpool's clash with Chelsea was the highlight fixture of the Premier League gameweek, with high-flying coach Arne Slot facing his first test against Enzo Maresca, a manager who has been lauded for restoring the winning culture at Stamford Bridge.

Touted as a 50-50 fixture, it was



the Reds who had the last laugh at their hallowed Anfield, with the winner coming from an unlikely source — Curtis Jones, in the 51st minute.

Earlier, Mohamed Salah converted from the penalty spot for the opener, which was cancelled out in the 48th minute by a strike from Nicolas Jackson.

In the modern Premier League era, where the slightest hiccup can hamper title chances, Arsenal suffered a significant setback, succumbing to a shock 2-0 defeat against Bournemouth.

As if the loss wasn't enough, the Gunners are set to lose French centre-back William Saliba for three matches after he was shown a red card following a VAR check.

It was a memorable night for Ryan Christie and Justin Kluivert, whose goals revitalised the Vitality Stadium.

When Ethan Pinnock scored for Brentford late in the first half, it seemed like another evening of woe for the Old Trafford faithful, with

Manchester United manager Erik Ten Hag sporting a glum look on the touchline.

However, the Red Devils showed character in the second half through their attitude and quality of play, as Alejandro Garnacho and Rasmus Hojlund found the net to guide United to a 2-1 comeback victory — its first in four matches.

It was a comfortable day at the office for Tottenham Hotspur as it cruised to a 4-1 win against West Ham, with Dejan Kulusevski, Yves Bissouma and Son Heung-min finding the back of the net. An own goal by Alphonse Areola and Mohammed Kudus' red card added salt to West Ham's wounds.

After matchday eight, Liverpool stays at the top with 21 points. City is second, just a point behind, while Arsenal and Aston Villa occupy third and fourth place with 17 points each. Chelsea sits sixth, while United languishes in the bottom half of the table, in 11th, with the same number of points.

**Point to prove:** Alejandro Garnacho (in pic) and Rasmus Hojlund found the net to guide Manchester United to a 2-1 victory against Brentford — its first in four matches. REUTERS

#### Bundesliga

Bayern Munich seemed determined to reclaim its status as Germany's best and took a step in that direction by cruising to a 4-0 win against VfB Stuttgart.

The win was made sweeter by a Harry Kane hat-trick, with head coach Vincent Kompany praising his star forward in the post-match press conference. Kingsley Coman added the fourth goal for the Bavarians.

Defending champion Bayer Leverkusen was made to work for three points in its 2-1 comeback win against Eintracht Frankfurt.

Omar Marmoush gave Frankfurt the lead with a 16th-minute penalty, but Robert Andrich brought Xabi Alonso's men back on track with a 25th-minute equaliser.



Leverkusen had to wait a while, but the winner did come in the 71st minute, courtesy of Victor Boniface.

Borussia Dortmund manager Nuri Sahin, who urged fans not to panic despite the team's slow start to the season, was a relieved man as his team scraped through with a 2-1 win against St Pauli.

Ramy Bensebaini opened the scoring for the Ruhr club, only for Eric Smith to equalise for Pauli in the 78th minute.

However, Serhou Guirassy struck five minutes later to ensure three points for Dortmund, much to the delight of the home fans who, as usual, cheered their lungs out.

**Stuttgart's bane:** Bayern Munich's win against VfB Stuttgart was made sweeter with a hat-trick by Harry Kane.

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RB Leipzig enjoyed a comfortable week, winning 2-0 against Mainz, with Xavi Simons and Willi Orban scoring the goals.

SC Freiburg continued its positive run of results with a 3-1 victory over Augsburg.

After matchday seven, Bayern and Leipzig occupy the top two positions with 17 points, separated by goal difference. SC Freiburg is third with 15 points, while Leverkusen is fourth with 14.

#### Serie A

Lautaro Martinez's 60th-minute strike was enough for Inter Milan to

**« Serhou Guirassy's goal ensured three points for Borussia Dortmund »**



clinch a narrow 1-0 win against Roma, which arguably had the better statistics at the end but couldn't find the all-important goal.

Milan endured a nervy day at the office because, despite its 1-0 win against Udinese, it played the majority of the match with 10 men after Tijjani Reijnders was sent off in the 29th minute. Samuel Chukwueze's goal in the 13th minute proved enough for Paulo Fonseca's men.

Thiago Motta and Juventus had a fortunate gameweek. Playing against Lazio, Motta's side thought they had an advantage when Alessio Romagnoli was sent off in the 24th minute.

However, Lazio showed resolve, holding on with 10 men in its away fixture. But an 85th-minute own goal by Mario Gila, in an bid to clear the ball, gifted Juventus three points.

Khvicha Kvaratskhelia converted a 63rd-minute penalty to guide Napoli to a 1-0 victory over Empoli.

After matchday eight, Napoli tops the standings with 19 points, with Inter second on 17. Juventus and Milan occupy third and fourth positions with 16 and 14 points respectively.

## Ligue 1

Defending French champion Paris

**No stopping him:** With Inter Miami winning the MLS Supporters' Shield, Lionel Messi lifted a record-extending 46th career trophy. AP

Saint-Germain secured a 4-2 win against Strasbourg to maintain its position at the top.

Monaco and LOSC played out a goalless draw, while Marseille bagged a thumping 5-0 victory against Montpellier.

After matchday eight, PSG and Monaco occupy the top two positions with 20 points each. Marseille is third with 17 points, while LOSC is fourth with 14.

## MLS

Lionel Messi bagged an 11-minute hat-trick for Inter Miami in a Major League Soccer match against New England Revolution, powering his team to a 6-2 victory.

The win enabled the Eastern Conference topper to reach 74 points at the end of the league phase, setting a new MLS record by surpassing the previous tally of 73 by New England Revolution in 2021.

With Miami winning the MLS Supporters' Shield, awarded to the team with the most points in the regular season, Messi lifted a record-extending 46th career trophy.



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STORIES

« Steven Gerrard made me see a different side of football »

# GREG STEWART

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**M**ohun Bagan Super Giant was struggling to get going after three games in the Indian Super League (ISL) this season, with four points marking its worst start.

However, Greg Stewart turned the tide, assisting twice and scoring once as the Mariners defeated Mohammedan Sporting 3-0 in the first Kolkata derby of the ISL season.

He followed up this performance with a Player of the Match display against East Bengal, creating three chances, two of which resulted in goals.

Stewart, a two-time ISL Shield winner with two different teams, joined Mohun Bagan this summer and appears to have cemented his position as an inside forward in the squad.

He is fourth on the all-time list of most assists in the ISL, with 24 across three seasons.

There was a time, however, when the Scotsman considered giving up football.

"When you grow up playing on the streets of Scotland, then go into a team and reach a good level, and then the rejection at Hearts (happens)," Stewart told *Sportstar* in an exclusive interview. Hearts, or Heart of Midlothian Football Club, is a football club in Scotland.

"It hurt me a lot. I was actually at Rangers before Hearts and got released by Rangers at 14 and by Hearts at 16. At that point, I thought this game was not for me."

Stewart, who grew up idolising Rangers legends Paul Gascoigne and Ally McCoist, chose to step away from the game temporarily. He started working full-time at the Grangemouth Oil Refinery, practising twice a week and hoping that someday, he might get a shot at redemption.

"It was a great learning curve, something I don't want to go back to," Stewart laughed.

"I just went back and played with my mates, just a local team. Then I joined a really good amateur team before Cowdenbeath (a semi-professional side) signed me

up when I was 19. So, between 16 and 19, I could have just walked away. But because I love the game so much, I was never obviously going to give up," he added.

## Way to the top

Stewart's stint at Cowdenbeath (40 goals, 19 assists) attracted interest from Scottish Premiership side Dundee United, which signed him ahead of the 2014-15 season.

"They (my family) were ecstatic. I gave up my day job to play full-time. So, all that hard work paid off, and the dream of playing football (professionally) became a reality," he said.

Stewart contributed to 59 goals (32 goals, 27 assists) for Dundee before moving to Birmingham City, where he trained alongside a budding Jude Bellingham.

"The ability he had — it was just about him getting on the pitch. He wouldn't care who he's playing against. He would play as if he's in a bout, or in a fight," Stewart recalled.

"He was 15, and I think Manchester City was trying to sign



him. They were trying to give him so much money, to afford a big house for his family.

But he turned it down because he was a Birmingham fan. He wanted to play for Birmingham before anything else."

In 2019, Stewart returned to Rangers, the club that had released him as a boy. He helped the team win its first league title in 10 years, securing his first major silverware.

"I think whenever you get knocked down, don't give up," Stewart said.

The 34-year-old scored thrice and provided seven assists for the club. One of his touchstones there was Liverpool legend and then-Rangers manager, Steven Gerrard.

"Steven was massive, coming in as a manager. He made me see a

different side of football and made me realise and understand it from a coach's perspective — the details he gave when he was on the training field were second to none," he said.

"He was a winner himself and had that desire. He would join (us at the) training ground, and you could see how good he was."

#### Eyeing a hat-trick

Stewart is a force in league matches for ISL sides. In 76 games, he has only lost four.

"It's good for (my) confidence and (can be) massive for the team if we can go on a winning run, so we gain confidence and believe in each other," Stewart said.

However, his eyes are set on the ultimate measure of success in football — silverware. "I have won

**Chasing glory:** Greg Stewart's eyes are set on the ultimate measure of success in football — silverware. The 34-year-old aims to win his third ISL Shield title, this time with Mohun Bagan. GETTY IMAGES

two (ISL Shield) titles, with Jamshedpur FC and Mumbai City. Hopefully, I can make it three with Mohun Bagan," he said.

Once rejected by Hearts, Stewart has learned to win many hearts over the years and continues to do so in India. "I feel I have done well in my career. I've managed to support my family, which is always good. I still feel I've got plenty of years left in me. I still feel young. So, I'm going to play as long as possible until my legs give up," he said.



## » ISL DIARY

**Two to tango:** Jamie Maclaren and Dimitrios Petratos (centre) scored in the first and second halves, respectively, to seal the win for the Mariners. PTI

# MOHUN BAGAN FULFILLS GIANT EXPECTATIONS

The Kolkata club **triumphed over** East Bengal, leaving the latter without a single point from its first five outings.

**T**he City of Joy is truly a sight to behold on the day of the Kolkata Derby. Despite the repetition of age-old routines involving fan banter on the road and the smearing of the fabled Red-Gold and Green-Maroon colours in the air, these rituals have stood the test of time and have not succumbed to monotony. On the contrary, it is what the metropolis celebrates every time with pomp.

As the Diary cruised past the Eastern

Metropolitan Bypass — a long stretch of road leading to the Salt Lake Stadium — the pre-match rituals were a welcome sight for sore eyes, with the Diary having missed the Kolkata Derby for the past few years.

While the Bagan fan chants boomed through the speakers atop vehicles, East Bengal's fans seemed comparatively subdued, given their team's torrid start to the Indian Super League 2024-25 season.

As kick-off neared, the respective fanbases

waged their own battles from the stands by unfurling tifos and taking digs at each other. While Bagan's fans exuded confidence in their demeanour, loyalists of the Red and Gold Brigade hoped for a twist.

However, the script did not deliver a surprise. Bagan triumphed over its arch-rival by a 2-0 scoreline, leaving East Bengal without a single point from its first five outings.

Prabhsukhan Gill spared the blushes for the home team with a couple of excellent saves but eventually crumbled under the pressure exerted by Australians Jamie McLaren and Dimitrios Petratos, who scored in the first and second halves, respectively, to seal the win for the Mariners, the better team on the night.

East Bengal's new head coach Oscar Bruzon, who stayed in the dugout despite arriving in the wee hours of Derby Day, said his immediate priority is to get the team in shape and set realistic goals for the rest of the season.

**Aneesh Dey**

#### **Goa looking for a turnaround**

Beaches, music, booze, and football — Goa has it all. Football has long been a staple among Goans, though in recent times, interest in the sport has been waning. Dempo SC, Churchill Brothers and Salgaocar SC, once powerhouses in Indian football, have been pushed to the wayside.

The ISL gave birth to FC Goa, which has done all the right things and strived hard to fly the flag high for football in the state.

In the glitzy inaugural marquee season of 2014, FC Goa's lowest attendance was close to 16,000 at the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium. However, in 2024, despite having established itself as one of the premier football clubs in the country, it is struggling to pull in the same numbers, even for its highest recorded attendance.

Match-going fans are a crucial part of any sports team, capable of uplifting its players. "Since coronavirus, not many people come for matches here," explains Trevor,

a retired policeman, sitting on a cement slab next to a tea shop facing the stadium.

Before the pandemic, Goa averaged between 16,000 and 17,000 spectators during the Sergio Lobera years from 2017 to 2020. Lobera's Goa was the team to watch: free-flowing, breakneck-speed football, with Ahmed Jahouh and Hugo Boumous pulling off the unthinkable, and Ferran Corominas scoring for fun.

But even that didn't intrigue Trevor, though. "I have never watched a football game. I am a cricket fan. If they play cricket, I will go and watch," he chuckles. The closed-door matches during the pandemic from 2020 to 2022 hurt not just Goa but other ISL clubs too.

But Goa's failures on the pitch have also played a part. When the goals and points dried up, the gate receipts dwindled as well.

When the experienced Manolo Márquez arrived in 2023, there was renewed hope. But things have not improved this season. With five points from as many games, this is Goa's worst start to a campaign since 2016.

For its part, the club slashed ticket prices for the much-anticipated clash against Mumbai City FC. The lowest ticket price was set at ₹49, nearly five times less than the original price.

This comes as the club has announced it cannot afford the

stadium's rental fee. Earlier last week, FC Goa CEO Ravi Puskar disclosed that the club had to shell out a whopping INR 45 lakh to host a game and sought assistance from the government.

"We may have to shift to smaller venues because we may not be able to afford it anymore. If the ground and operating charges come down, which can happen if we have the support of the entire support system, we can make the ground accessible to everyone. It is not our intention to price out the fans," said Puskar.

Yet, on a sultry late-evening clash — a respite from the incessant monsoon showers in the region — the club managed a season-high attendance of only 11,824.

"For me, it's the team that has to show some things...then the crowd will come to the stadium. I feel this team will soon be a very competitive one," Márquez promised before the game.

But on the pitch, there weren't many moments that elicited cheers from the stands. It was the handful of Mumbai City faithful who had the last laugh as Goa lost its second home game of the season.

**Aashin Prasad**

**Desperate times:** Despite being one of the premier football clubs in the country, FC Goa is struggling to attract a solid attendance for its matches. FSDL



# MORE CONTENDERS, BIGGER CHALLENGES AS INDIAN SHOOTERS HEAD INTO 2028 OLYMPIC CYCLE

As the Los Angeles 2028 Olympic cycle begins, Indian shooters are **aiming for improvement** while facing challenges in preparation and selection.

#### Clear plan of action:

According to Jaspal Rana, double Olympic medallist Manu Bhaker's coach, there needs to be a systematic timeline set for athletes. "You can't prepare for an exam if you don't know when it's supposed to be held," he said.

RITU RAJ KONWAR



**Jonathan Selvaraj**

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**W**hen Anantjeet Singh Naruka's Olympic journey ended in Châteauroux, he headed to Paris to try to distract himself from what had just happened. Partnering with Maheshwari Chauhan, he had fallen agonisingly short, missing the podium in the skeet mixed team event by just one point.

Far from finding any relief, Naruka found his mood only soured in the French capital. "I had these big tears in my eyes. I had come so close to a medal, but ultimately I had to go back with nothing. I'd constantly be thinking about which shots I could have made," he reflects.

While other Indian shooters who competed at the Olympics took a break upon returning home, Naruka couldn't stay away from his home range in Jaipur, as thoughts of the Olympics followed him to the ISSF World Cup Final in

New Delhi. Despite winning a bronze in the men's individual skeet, defeating former Olympic medallists Jesper Hansen and Lee Meng Yuan, Naruka says memories of Châteauroux keep haunting him. "I'll be preparing to take a shot, and suddenly it will cross my mind that the moment is almost the same as one of the moments in the bronze medal match in Châteauroux where I missed a shot I should have made. It's not going to change until the Los Angeles Olympics, where I will actually have a chance to make things right," he says.

Indeed, just months after Paris 2024, Naruka is already setting his sights on the 2028 Games. He's not the only shooter with this mindset.

Although their motivations may differ from Naruka's — driven by a sense of redemption — Deepali Deshpande, former chief coach of the Indian team, asserts that the goal for every shooter remains the Los Angeles Games.

"Realistically, we are in the 2028 Olympic cycle. For some shooters, this has already begun with the 2024 ISSF World Cup Final. For others, the cycle will start with the National Championships in November and December. Even for some shooters who aren't competing in either — double Olympic medallist Manu Bhaker plans to return to action next year — the focus will be on Los Angeles. They are taking their time to complete their rehabilitation, which they probably won't have the chance to do closer to the Olympics."

There is much to be optimistic about. After years of underperformance at the Olympics, Indian shooting delivered its best performance, winning three medals at the 2024 Games. The bench strength in shooting has also been steadily growing, with participation in National Championships increasing significantly. Last year's shooting Nationals saw a surge, with 4,343





**A podium finish:** Anantjeet Singh Naruka celebrates after winning the bronze medal in the skeet men's final at the ISSF World Cup Final in New Delhi. PTI

shooters taking part in the Olympic pistol and rifle events, compared to 2,622 at the 2019 edition. This trend is expected to continue at the Nationals in New Delhi/Bhopal.

However, challenges remain. "If not properly planned, these numbers won't mean much. *Mela lagane mein aur ladai karne mein farak hai* (there's a difference between just getting numbers and preparing for a battle)," says Jaspal Rana, Manu's coach. According to Rana, there needs to be a systematic timeline set for athletes. "You can't prepare for an exam if you don't know when it's supposed to be held. I would like to see the schedule for the selection trials announced well in advance and

not changed once it's decided," he states.

The National Rifle Association of India (NRAI), for its part, asserts that it will provide a detailed selection policy and schedule, along with a review of the previous Olympic cycle. "We may have had our best Olympic cycle, but we are conducting a systematic review of how we prepared for the Paris Games. There are areas for improvement, and we will be making a report on that," says Kalikesh Deo, president of the NRAI. However, he notes that drafting a selection policy will be more challenging since the ISSF

(International Shooting Sport Federation) has announced that it will likely change the format of multiple events. ISSF president Luciano Rossi informed Sportstar that this process would be completed ahead of the 2026 World Championships — the first selection competition for the 2028 Olympics. "It would make sense to draft a selection process for the Olympics only once we know what the competition format looks like," Deo explains.

Rana hopes that greater freedom will be accorded to individual shooters to determine their own training systems. "During the current

**After years of underperformance at the Olympics, Indian shooting excelled in Paris with three medals**



Olympic cycle, several decisions were made that didn't align with Manu's training cycle. After the selection trials for the Olympics, the team was entered to compete at the Shooting World Cup in Munich, which wasn't part of her training plan at all. She eventually went but didn't compete. I believe going forward, shooters need to be trusted more to know what works for them.

Shooting can't be treated like hockey, where the team needs to train and compete together. Ultimately, the only one responsible for a shooter's success or failure is the shooter themselves," he says.

Rana insists his ideas are equally valid for any shooter bidding for a place in the Indian team for the Los Angeles Olympics.

Indeed, coaches feel that with nearly four years until the 2028 Games, there's no guarantee that the same shooters who competed in Châteauroux will be present in Los

Angeles.

"I think this makes this cycle a bit more challenging. The Olympic cycle for the Paris Games was much shorter than what we have now. There were just three years between the Tokyo Games and Paris. When we really look at it, even 2022 was a COVID-impacted year," says Deshpande. "This meant that last time, we mostly saw the same shooters who were part of the core group in Tokyo competing for the 2024 Olympics. I think, with the exception of Sift Kaur Samra (in the women's 50m three-position event), nearly everyone in the 2024 squad was on the edge of selection in 2021. The Olympic cycle really started in March 2022 for most shooters because only the core group trained continuously through the COVID years. We lost a batch of shooters due to that. Many were just starting to peak in 2023 and 2024, but because of the selection policy, their

**Silver lining:** India's Vivaan Kapoor celebrates after winning silver in the men's Trap final at the ISSF World Cup Final in New Delhi. PTI

scores came too late for inclusion in the Olympic selection trials. If the Olympics had been postponed by just six months, I'm sure we would have seen a very different set of shooters at the selection trials," she adds. "While that setback was significant, we didn't have to think too much about planning for 2024. There was almost no time for distraction because we had major competitions back-to-back. This time around, it's very likely we will see a very different group of shooters in the squad for Los Angeles," she notes.

However, this situation comes with its own set of problems. "I think because we're going to have so many shooters pushing each other at the



very top, it won't be easy for any shooter to get the exposure they need to gauge the level of international competition and develop some consistency there. That's something we will need to figure out," she says.

Rana concurs that it may indeed be more difficult for India's Olympic medallists to ensure their names feature in the squad for the 2028 Games. "Winning an Olympic medal is hard, but it's even harder to win two. No one has done it in shooting, and only a few Indians have medalled twice in an individual sport. Suddenly, there are many more demands placed on you. What matters is whether you have the

hunger to stay focused," he states.

For now, Deshpande, who coaches Swapnil Kusale, and Rana feel their shooters' hunger has not diminished. "At least in Manu's case, she genuinely enjoys shooting. She has no option but to participate in many events because that's what you have to do as an Olympic medallist, but she's started to return to training. That hunger hasn't gone anywhere," he asserts. The same is true for Kusale.

"He started training a few days ago. He's happy he has the medal, but he knows he didn't shoot nearly as well as he should have in the final. He keeps revisiting some of the bad shots he made. That shows he's not

**Heartbreaking moment:** Arjun Babuta finished fourth in the men's air rifle Paris Olympics final after being in medal contention throughout.

RITU RAJ KONWAR

satisfied with his performance," Deshpande notes.

While the medal winners may be motivated by the possibility of doing better, those who missed out — both in making the team and during the Games themselves — find ample inspiration as well.

Naruka, however, adds that while he is driven by the desire to perform at the Olympics, he cannot focus solely on the end point of the Olympic cycle. "I think one of the mistakes I made during this Olympic cycle was concentrating only on that. I think I got a little burnt out just before the Olympics after the selection trials. I believe it's important to pace myself a little more," he reflects.

Vivaan Kapoor, who won a silver in the men's trap event at the ISSF World Cup Final in New Delhi, agrees. "I think it's important to set smaller goals leading up to the Olympics. Rather than solely focusing on the Olympics, it's crucial to check off smaller milestones like the Asian Games," says Kapoor, whose Olympic ambitions were cut short after a knee injury last year.

This approach may be particularly beneficial for younger shooters. Deshpande gives the example of Arjun Babuta, who suffered a heartbreaking fourth-place finish in the men's 10m air rifle competition in Châteauroux. "Arjun is still very young. The Olympics has been the most important competition of his career thus far. He hadn't previously competed at the Asian Games or World Championships. I believe he would have been much more composed at the Olympics had he had the opportunity to shoot at another major competition."

"This will be critical for some of these youngsters. It's essential they remain motivated. Four years may seem like a long time, but you won't even realise when it's over," she concludes.

# An unplanned fairytale farewell

**A**t the break, I was running the plays in my head. I knew she (Canada's Ana Godinez in the 2022 CWG final) was slowing down and I was going to get an opportunity to attack. That's exactly what happened. I blocked her and saw an opening. It was a very small window. As a wrestler you understand when your opponent is standing still for a fraction of a second too long. You notice when her arm is not going down fast enough to block your attack. It's just something that you observe instinctively. It's like when you are driving down a busy road and you know exactly when and how much to turn the steering wheel when you see a gap in the traffic.

She didn't make any obvious mistake. It was just that I had grabbed her left hand with my right, and in doing so, controlled her movement. In desi kushti, we call that a dasti. And because she was slowing down, she didn't get her right hand down in time to defend. Her left foot stayed in place for just that little while longer than it should have. I used that moment to do a single-leg takedown.

It was one of the first techniques I'd learned in my akhara in Rohtak, and I'd been practising it nearly every day for nearly two decades. Shoot low, get your hand to the back of your opponent's knee and pull up while pushing your head into her chest.

As she collapsed underneath me, my hand went from the back of her leg to trap her right arm behind her. I

knew I couldn't let her escape. I knew that if she somehow got out of this position, there was no guarantee I'd be able to catch her a second time. But there was no way she could have. I had all my weight on her and with her right arm trapped, she had just the one free arm with which to push me off.

I'd been in similar situations before. I knew what she was going through. There's a moment of shock when you know you have been caught in a bad position. You try to fight it but you know very quickly that you aren't going to be able to. Then your muscles relax, as I felt hers did, just that fraction of a second, telling me that she had given up, just before the referee slapped the mat to let everyone else know that I had secured the pin.

That was it. I had won the one medal that I wanted.

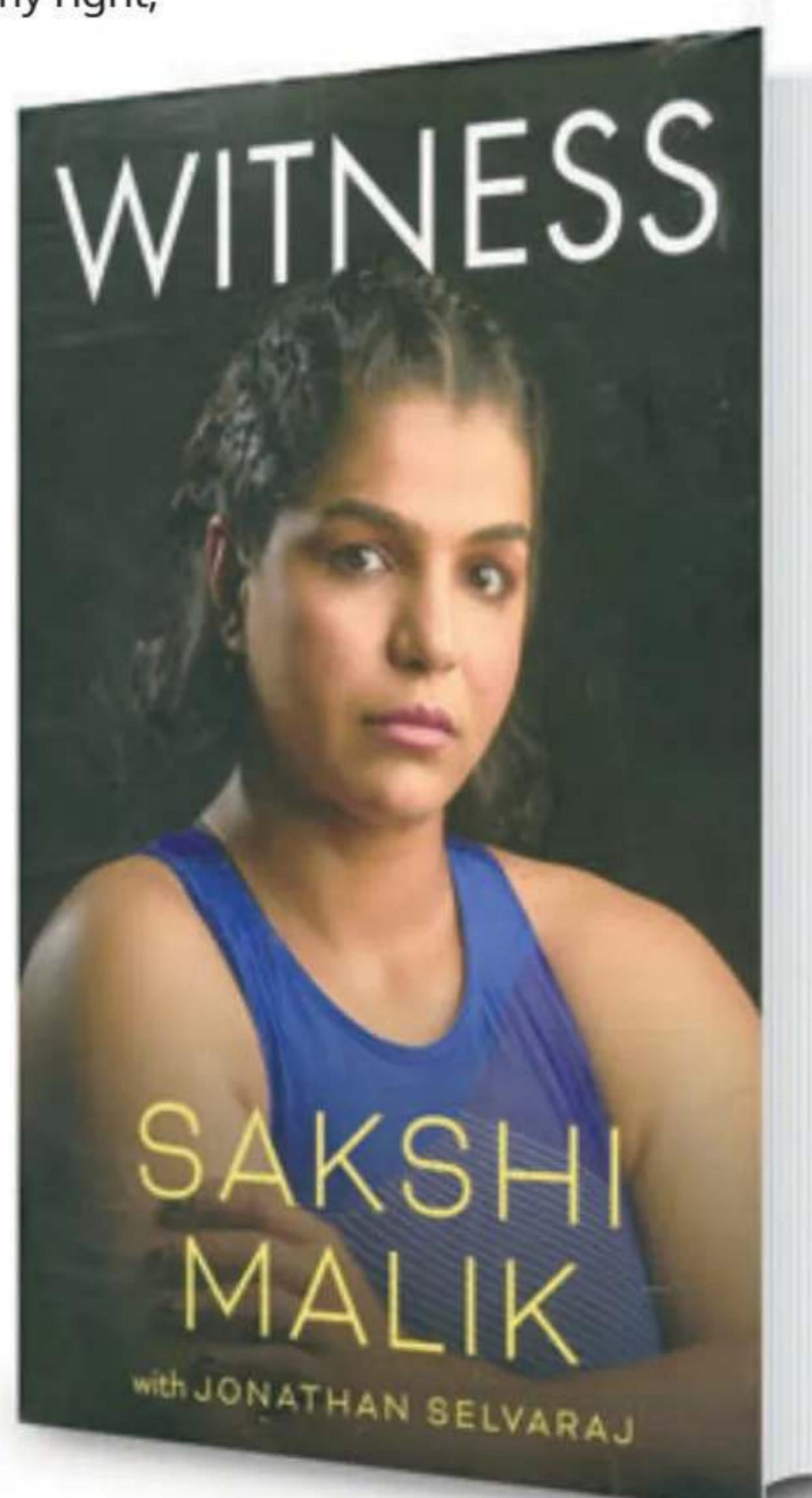
I called my family. Satyawart had been watching the match in his akhara in Rohtak, and when I was 0-4 down he had walked away from the TV because he couldn't bear to see me lose. He had only come in a couple of minutes later, after the shouts and cheers from inside the akhara told him how the match had concluded.

As we talked on the phone, both of us were thinking ahead.

I was thinking I was back in the game, and planning ahead for the Asian Games. If I did well there, I would be able to go to the Olympics and maybe even hope for a medal there. Little did I know that I'd just wrestled for the last time in my career.

*An extract from ace wrestler Sakshi Malik's memoir*

Published by: Juggernaut Books,  
Pages 300; Price: ₹ 799



» CHEQUERED FLAG



# AUSTIN BLEEDS RED

Ferrari's Charles Leclerc and Carlos Sainz clinched a **thrilling 1-2 finish**, while Max Verstappen strengthened his lead at the top.

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**A**fter navigating a handful of twists and turns, much like cars on a racetrack, the excitement was building for the remaining six races — and quite understandably so. There were new race winners, new championship leaders, and, for the first time in a long while, a thrilling fight for the title, with six races and three sprints left before the curtain falls on the 2024 season.

The unfamiliar four-week autumn break had cooled things down, but there were still plenty of discussions in the paddock, including the departure of eight-time race winner Daniel Ricciardo and the scrapping of the fastest lap point from 2025. Despite a lot of off-track chatter, F1 headed to Austin for the United States Grand Prix, the first stop of the triple-header, with all eyes on the battle ahead, as a maximum of 36 points were up for grabs.

It might have felt nostalgic for Max Verstappen to clinch pole position after a 109-day gap, breaking free from a winless streak in his otherwise dominant Red Bull. The defending champion steadily pulled ahead of the pack during the sprint race, finishing atop the podium, most importantly ahead of Lando Norris. There was plenty of on-track action during the 19-lap sprint, setting the stage for a thrilling race on Sunday.

Such is the nature of the Circuit of the Americas, which allows cars to go side-by-side through its wide corners, that it provides numerous opportunities for overtaking. Four teams almost matched each other in pace. Three of them — McLaren, Mercedes, and Red Bull — brought upgrade packages, while Ferrari arrived at the weekend with an unchanged car.

Perhaps all the Italian team needed was a change of scenery and a chance to rise to the occasion, as the Ferrari duo of Charles Leclerc and Carlos Sainz left their competitors in the dust, securing a 1-2 finish after nearly seven months. The last time

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**Picturesque:** Charles Leclerc after winning the US Grand Prix. GETTY IMAGES

**Fight to the finish:** The drama between Max Verstappen (front) and Lando Norris (back) continues at the top. GETTY IMAGES

they ascended the top two steps was in Australia, but that time their positions were reversed. At Austin, it was Leclerc who stole the show.

Behind them, a gripping edge-of-the-seat duel unfolded, bringing the race to life in the closing stages. Norris, who had started from pole, lost a couple of positions on the first lap and did not appear to be hunting down the scarlet cars. Instead, he was on a mission to pass Verstappen in third, no matter the cost. Lap after lap, he chipped away at the six-second gap following the mandatory pit stop, with the racing becoming so aggressive that track limits were exceeded. It was then that Norris moved ahead of Verstappen.

However, it wasn't meant to be, as the British driver was handed a five-second penalty, which dropped him to fourth place and ended McLaren's 14-race streak of podium finishes. In the end, it was Ferrari that had the final say, joining the two-way battle between Red Bull and McLaren and refusing to throw in the towel just yet.

While the updates brought by the leading teams didn't yield dividends, Mercedes' performance told a different story. George Russell seemed to benefit significantly, crossing the line in sixth despite starting from the pit lane after crashing in qualifying.

However his teammate, Lewis Hamilton, had a forgettable outing. The Brit looked strong, and made up several places on the opening lap, only to beach his car in the gravel on the third lap after a huge spin that closely resembled Russell's incident.

While the weekend in Austin had plenty to offer, the upcoming back-to-back races in Mexico and Brazil may determine whether the drivers' title is indeed a foregone conclusion, as Norris' gap to Verstappen has widened to 57 points. Needless to say, the Dutch driver is being pushed to his limits this season, with Norris keeping his foot on the pedal in pursuit of the crown.



## MotoGP



### Jorge charges ahead

Championship leader Jorge Martin extended his lead over rival Francesco Bagnaia following a decent haul at the Australian Grand Prix. Martin cruised to a dominant victory in the sprint race but was outpaced by Marc Marquez on Sunday in a thrilling finish.

Marquez, who started second, lost several positions on the opening lap due to an unfortunate incident caused by his visor tearing off. The massive wheelspin dropped him to 13th, but he immediately set about making a recovery. The six-time MotoGP champion did so in quick time and was soon on the tail of race leader Martin. It took Marquez two attempts to pass him and ease to victory by nearly a full second, moving into a clear third place in the drivers' championship. Bagnaia, who managed third and fourth-place finishes this weekend, finds himself 20 points adrift of Martin.



» TABLE TENNIS  
ASIAN CHAMPIONSHIPS REVIEW



**Stamping authority:** Ahyika and Sutirtha Mukherjee won the bronze medal in the women's doubles event at the recently concluded Asian Table Tennis Championships. GETTY IMAGES

# PLENTY OF POSITIVES AND A HISTORIC FIRST

India's third consecutive Asian Championships bronze in the men's team event, alongside the women's second bronze and the **maiden medal** for Ayhika Mukherjee and Sutirtha Mukherjee, is remarkable.

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In recent years, Indian table tennis players have gained significant attention by consistently defeating challengers from outside the Commonwealth nations. From age-group competitions to senior levels, their impressive performances

have boosted India's standing in the global table tennis community.

Table tennis is among the few sporting disciplines where Asian nations dominate major competitions. China, Japan, the two Koreas, and Chinese Taipei have consistently produced talents,

helping the continent maintain its lead over opposition from the west.

In this context, India's third successive Asian Championships bronze medal in the men's team event, along with the second continental bronze by the women's team and the maiden medal for the

**Stepping up:** In the last few years, with G. Sathiyan struggling, Harmeet Desai has won some key matches in the team events. M. VEDHAN



rising pair of Ayhika Mukherjee and Sutirtha Mukherjee, is nothing short of remarkable.

Amid this success, the Indian women's stunning 3-2 victory over second-seed Korea was somewhat overshadowed. This victory came after World No. 90 Ayhika Mukherjee stunned World No. 9 Shin Yubin 3-2 in the opening clash and later secured the tie with a 3-1 win over Jeon Jihee.

It is worth remembering that at the World Championships earlier this year, Ayhika also stunned World No. 1 Sun Yingsha. Together, in the quarterfinals, World No. 15 pair of Ayhika and Sutirtha overcame Korea's Kim Nayeong and Lee Eunhye 3-1, ensuring a historic first bronze in the women's paired event. However, in the semifinals, the Japanese duo of Miwa Harimoto and Miyuu Kihara, the eventual silver medallists, proved too strong for the Indians.

Ayhika and Sutirtha, gradually gaining rankings and respect, announced their arrival by shocking Chinese World Champions and then World No. 2 Wang Yidi and Chen Meng in the quarterfinals of the Asian Games last year. This stunned the partisan home crowd in Hangzhou.

Following the Indian men's and women's teams qualifying for the Olympics for the first time in Paris this year, these twin-team medals reinforce the notion that the current crop of players has the potential to excel, particularly in team events.

Until 2018, India's triumphs

primarily came from the Commonwealth Games and the Commonwealth Championship, where the decline of Singapore, England, and Hong Kong coincided with the steady rise in India's performance levels.

The mixed doubles bronze for Sharath Kamal and Manika Batra in the 2018 Asian Games, the women's doubles bronze at the 2022 Asian Games, and the recent Asian bronze by the gallant Ayhika-Sutirtha duo have forced the competition to take India's challenge more seriously in paired events.

Team golds at the Commonwealth

**« The UTT has been crucial in allowing Indian players to compete against top players across categories »**



**Major role:** Manav Thakkar had a huge part to play in the Indian men's team's third straight bronze medal at the Asian Championships. M. VEDHAN

level and three men's team bronze medals from the Asian Championships in Doha (Qatar, 2021), Pyeongchang (South Korea, 2023), and Astana (Kazakhstan, 2024) have all contributed to India's newfound identity and respect among the world's best.

Though the domestic structure, comprising the National Championship, Inter-Institutional Championship, and five National Ranking tournaments, is considered adequate by those governing the sport, overseas participation has increased significantly due to individual initiatives.

The introduction of the Ultimate Table Tennis League has also played a key role in helping Indian players test their skills against some of the top 25 ranked players in both categories. Training as teammates with these higher-ranked overseas players for their respective franchises has enabled Indians to shed self-doubts in their preparations for international competitions.

At the 2024 Astana Championship,

where withdrawals and upsets in individual events raised several eyebrows, Japan won three gold, two silver, and three bronze medals to top the tally, ahead of China (two gold, two silver, and a bronze), DPR Korea (a gold, a silver, and a bronze), and South Korea (a gold and three bronzes).

India returned with three bronze medals, matching its previous best (bronze in the men's team and two in men's doubles in 2021) since 1972, when the competition was renamed. From 1952 to 1970, the continental championship was organised by the Table Tennis Federation of Asia before the Asian Table Tennis Union took over. India's first bronze came in the women's team event in the 1960 edition.

The format of the continental team championship places the top six teams from the previous edition in the Champions Division. These teams await two teams from the First Division League in the knockout phase, starting from the quarterfinals.

The Indian men's team, by virtue of finishing fifth in Yogyakarta (Indonesia, 2019), has remained in the Champion Division by making the semifinals since then. The losing semifinalists are awarded bronze

medals. This time, India faced host Kazakhstan for a place in the semifinals. The presence of World No. 40 Kirill Gerassimenko gave Kazakhstan an edge, but India's overall strength proved decisive.

**Manav Thakkar and Harmeet Desai, ranked 59 and 87 respectively, defeated Gerassimenko in the first and fourth singles, offsetting Sharath's defeat to Aidos Kenzhigulov.** In the second match, Harmeet comfortably beat Alan Kurmangaliyev 3-0 to give India a commanding 2-0 lead.

In the crucial fourth singles, Harmeet twice came back from a deficit to overcome Gerassimenko, ending Kazakhstan's medal hopes. Over the past few years, with G. Sathiyan struggling, Harmeet has delivered in key matches. Once again, he did not let his teammates down.

India's 0-3 defeat to a formidable Chinese Taipei in the semifinals – mirroring the result of their 2023 encounter at the same stage – left India celebrating a hat-trick of men's team bronze medals from the Asian Championships.

Overall, despite some disappointments in individual events, there were several joyous moments and positive takeaways for India.

## Self-pin as black defence

By C.G.S.Narayanan

Pins are deadly weapons in chess armoury. In games we come across chessmen which either pin or get pinned. It can be an 'absolute pin' when the king is involved or 'relative pin' where the removal of the pinned piece leads to capture of the rear piece of higher value. In problem chess paradoxically an apparently suicidal 'self-pin' is used as black defence. A few of the different motives for such self-pins could be i) to capture the mate threatening white piece ii) to remove the white guard in BK's field to set up potential escape squares iii) to get pinned to get unpinned later by the threat. Special types of self-pins like Nietvelt and Schiffmann fall under this category. Ultimately these self-pins lead to attractive pin mates which constitute the crux of the problem.

S.C.Dutt

The Hindu 1955



Mate in two moves

In the problem above there are seven arrival self-pins, three on c7 which remove the mate threatening white rook and four on e6 which remove the additional guard of d7, leading to pin mates. The key is **1.fxe5!** (2.Rc6) with following variations: 1....Rxc7 2.Nb7; 1...Bxc7 2.Rb6; 1...Nxc7 2.e8N; 1...Bxe6 2.Nf7; 1..Nxe6

2.Rd3; 1...Rxe6 2.Ne4 and 1...Qxe6 2.Nf5.

In the second example self pins are created by moving the black king into the pin. Here the BQ gets pinned four times. After key **1.Qd8!** threatening (2.Qxd4) the variations are 1...Kd2 2.Nc4; 1...Ke4 2.Ng6; 1...Kf4 2.Nd3; 1Kf2 2.Nxg4; 1...Qxa7 2.Ng2

G.Cristofannini

I prize, Grantham Journal 1931



Mate in two moves

In the problem given below for solving after the check provoking key there are three self-pins, two on b6 and the third on c3.

G.Dobbs

Good Companions 1919



Mate in two moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article 'The white battery':

Set: 1...Rc3+ 2.2.Rc5; 1...Rf7+ 2.Rd7; 1...Be5+ 2.Rd6    Key    **1.Kxb6!**  
(2.Nc5) 1....Rb3+ 2.Rb5; 1...Rf6+ 2.Rd6;  
1....Bd4+ 2.Rc5

Readers may send in their queries to  
[cgsnarayanan@hotmail.com](mailto:cgsnarayanan@hotmail.com)

## » GLOBAL CHESS LEAGUE REVIEW



**Dominant show:** For the second time in two seasons, the Triveni Continental Kings claimed the Global Chess League title. GLOBAL CHESS LEAGUE

# STEPPING INTO UNCHARTED TERRITORY AND THRIVING

The second season of Global Chess League, a franchise-based tournament, established itself as a key event in international chess, introducing innovative ideas to make the game **more appealing to a broader global audience**, beyond just serious followers.



**Embroiled in controversy:** Five-time world champion Magnus Carlsen alleged that Indian prodigy Nihal Sarin made "several illegal moves" against Carlsen's teammate Daniel Dardha in the Global Chess League. However, the tournament's appeals committee ruled that the draw result will stand. GLOBAL CHESS LEAGUE

**P. K. Ajith Kumar**  
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**A**t Friends House in central London on an overcast October afternoon, there is a large number of children, some with their chessboards, others with autograph books. There is no prize for guessing which player they are most eager to meet.

Magnus Carlsen has undoubtedly been the Virat Kohli of chess for over a decade. The World No.1 from Norway headlined a stellar cast for Season 2 of the Tech Mahindra Global Chess League, which moved to London after the inaugural edition in Dubai.

The world's first franchise-based chess league, a joint venture between FIDE and Tech Mahindra,

got bigger this time with the addition of two of the biggest names in world chess — World No. 2 Hikaru Nakamura and Alireza Firouzja, who Carlsen has described as the world's finest among young talents.

Another major attraction was the presence of seven of the 10 members of the history-making Indian contingent at the Chess Olympiad, which had ended a week earlier in Budapest. Arjun Erigaisi, R. Praggnanandhaa, Vidit Gujrathi, Dronavalli Harika, and R. Vaishali all

played, while Tania Sachdev was a commentator, and Vantika Agrawal was a brand ambassador for the league and also doubled up as a reserve player.

Interestingly, the champion side had no Indian presence. Triveni Continental Kings, which retained the title after beating PBG Alaskan Knights in the final, was well served by Firouzja, who was a last-minute replacement for the Russian Ian Nepomniachtchi. He was in top form on the Icon board as he took on the

**« The world's first franchise-based chess league expanded with the addition of two major stars — Hikaru Nakamura and Alireza Firouzja »**



**Fan-favourite:** Alireza Firouzja played a pivotal role in Triveni Continental Kings' title victory this year. Here, he is seen surrounded by enthusiastic fans.

GLOBAL CHESS LEAGUE

best players in the league.

The award for the best Player of the Tournament, however, went to Nihal Sarin. On the Prodigy board, the 20-year-old from Kerala lived up to his reputation as an exceptional player in speed chess. It should do a world of good for his confidence too.

The others among the fabulous four of Indian chess — D. Gukesh, Erigaisi and Praggnanandhaa — had all moved a little ahead of him, but he showed what a tremendous talent he is. Admittedly, this was not classical chess — a format in which he needs to work harder.

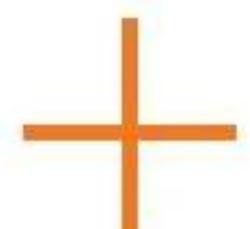
Sarin, though, was involved in a controversy: he had claimed a draw in his game against Daniel Dardha of Alpine SG Pipers, and the arbiter had allowed it. However, the Pipers

lodged a complaint, and the Icon board player Carlsen tweeted, alleging that Sarin had made several illegal moves. The appeals committee, chaired by FIDE delegate Victor Bologan, ruled that the result would stay, although it felt the arbiter should have intervened earlier.

At the heart of the matter was a new rule regarding time control introduced for this edition. Normally, in competitive chess, you get an increment of time for every move you make. However, to cater to

television and ensure games finished on schedule while also increasing excitement, the organisers came up with this innovative idea.

Most of the players felt that the lack of an increment was an excellent idea, especially from a spectator's point of view, though it may have been tough on the players at times. For instance, Sarin was in a completely winning position against Dardha but had no time. He at least claimed a draw, but Carlsen was beaten by the clock, not so much by Firouzja, despite the five-time World



**The award for the best Player of the Tournament went to Nihal Sarin. On the Prodigy board, the 20-year-old from Kerala lived up to his reputation as an exceptional player in speed chess.**



Champion being just a few moves away from delivering a checkmate.

Nakamura was quite vocal about the relevance of the increment rule. "I know some people are unhappy with the time control, but I don't really have a problem with that," he told *Sportstar*. "And the concept of a tournament like this is to take chess to a global audience, to the casual follower."

The casual follower is who the league has been targeting. Its CEO, Sameer Pathak, says the idea behind the league is to take chess to a wider audience by making it more attractive and fun to watch.

"That is why we brought in ideas like the coin toss (borrowing from cricket) and, of course, the lack of an increment for this season," says Pathak. "We also employed the television production house that has handled major international sporting events across different disciplines."

The players appreciate the efforts the organisers have put in. "I understand what the league is based

on, being a cricket fan," says Peter Svidler, the Russian Grandmaster who made his league debut for Upgrad Mumba after being a commentator last year. "I don't know if it is going to be as big a hit as the IPL, but if that happens, it will be fantastic for chess. The calendar is quite busy, but this will be a very prominent part of it. It has a carnival feel to it while also being incredibly strong. This is a combination that has proven successful in other sports."

Svidler's team didn't have a great tournament, though. Mumba finished fifth among the six franchises; only Ganges Grandmasters was below it.

In the double round-robin league phase, Anish Giri's Alaskan Knights finished as the clear leader, scoring six match points more than Continental Kings and SG Pipers (the former's superior game points took it to the final). Nakamura's American Gambits, of which cricketer R. Ashwin is a co-owner, placed fourth.

**Summit clash:** Alexandra Kosteniuk (left) locks horns with Tan Zhongyi.  
GLOBAL CHESS LEAGUE

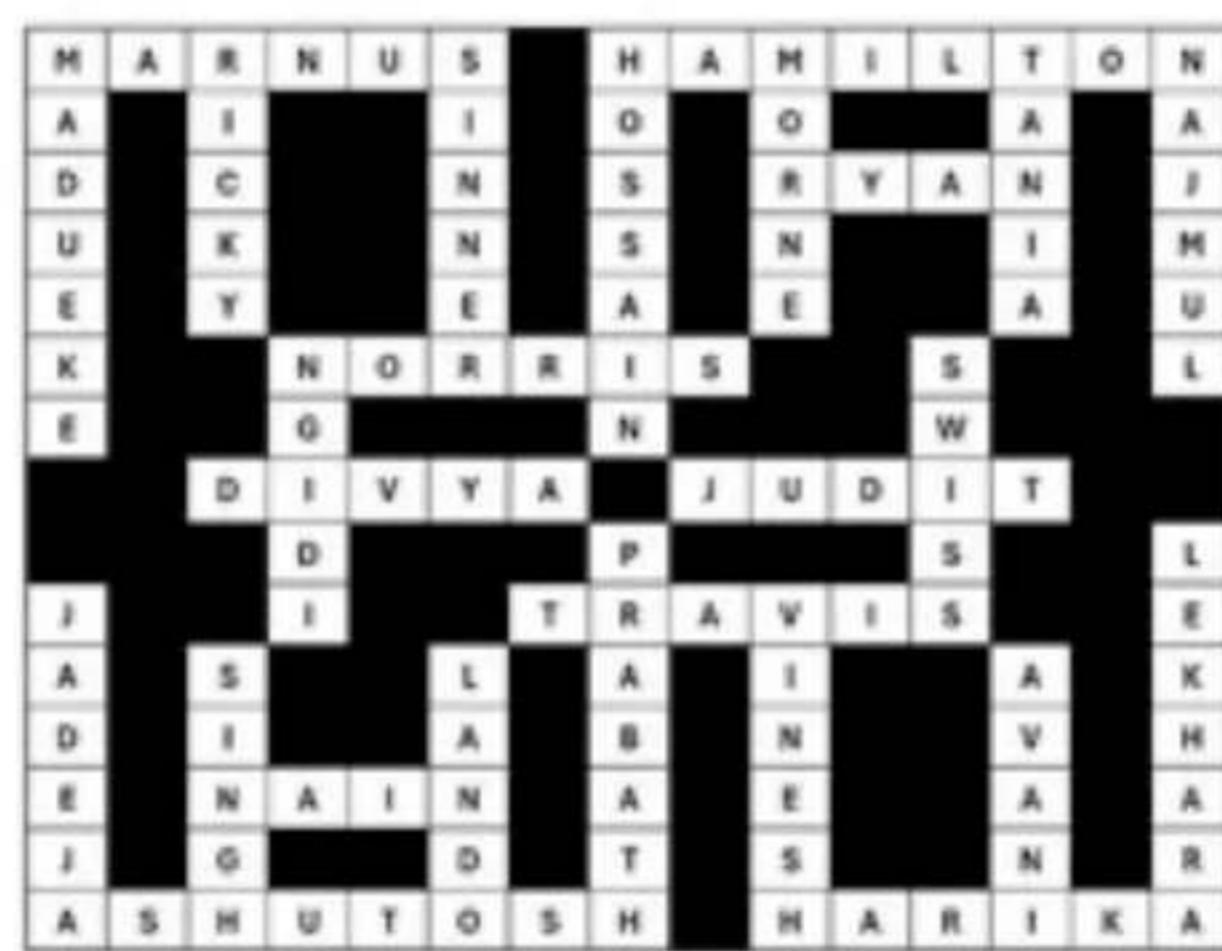
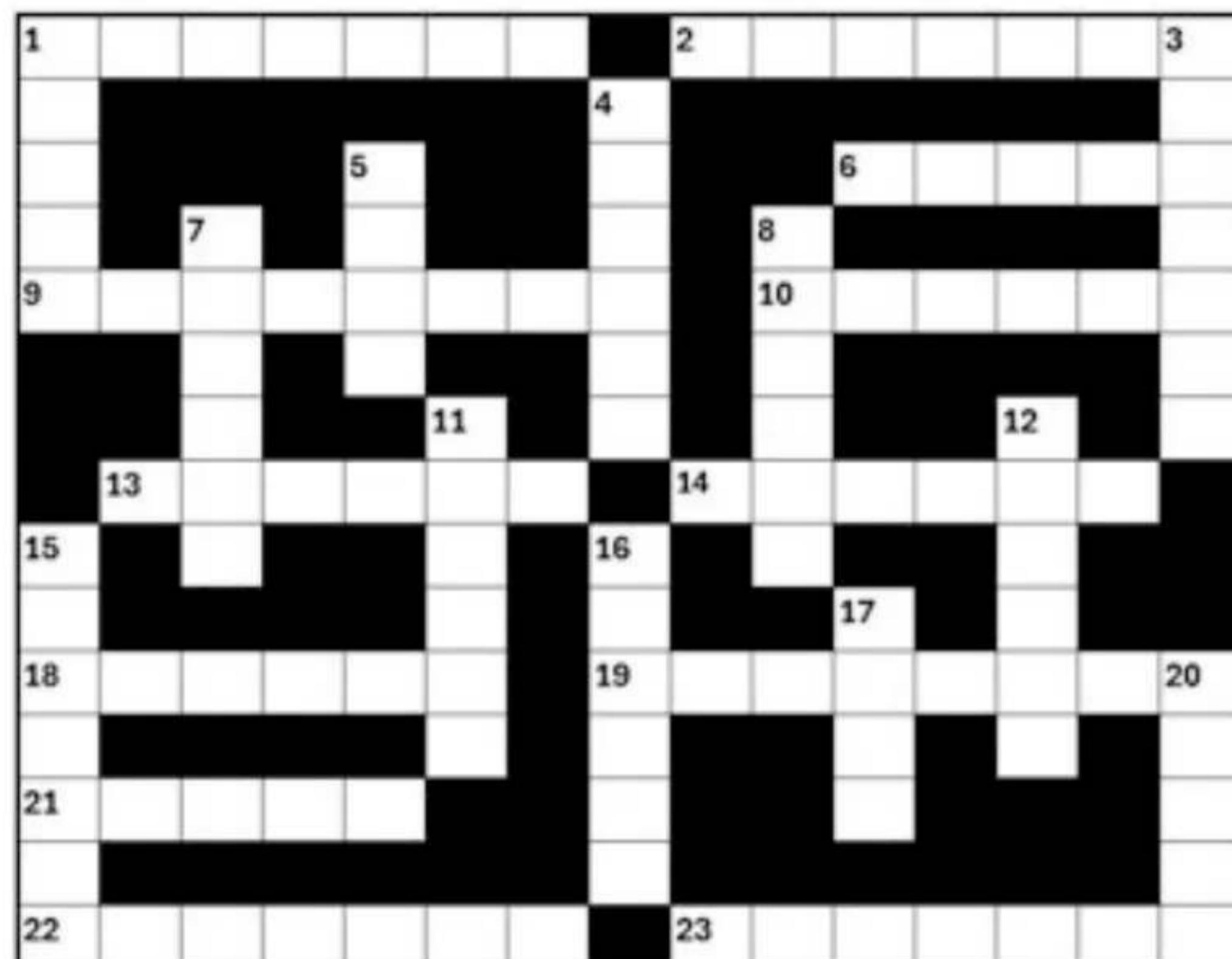
The Continental Kings were in a must-win situation against Alaskan Knights in what was the last match of the league. They won 9-7 to set up the final against the defending champion. The final didn't go the distance, with the Continental Kings needing only two matches, which they won 9-7 and 13-7. It was a close encounter, though. Alexandra Kosteniuk was the star. The former World Champion, who has played for Russia and Switzerland, won both her matches against Tan Zhongyi, the former World Champion from China.

Kosteniuk held her nerves, and her speed proved decisive. She played the queen's role perfectly in the Kings' campaign.

*(The correspondent was in London at the invitation of Tech Mahindra)*

## » CROSSWORD

### N. SOORYA PRAKASH



SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

#### ACROSS

- 1** Who scored a hat-trick, the first in this season's ISL, for Goa against East Bengal, on 27th September 2024? (7)
- 9 & 2** Who was adjudged the Player of the Match in the second Test held between India and Bangladesh in Kanpur? (8,7)
- 10** Who recently became the first Indian player to score 70+ runs and take two wickets in the same T20 international match? (6)
- 13** Which bowler picked up nine wickets in his debut Test for Sri Lanka versus New Zealand? (6)
- 14** Which is the only ISL team that will play all its home matches in Delhi this season? (6)
- 19** Who was adjudged the Player of the Match in the first T20I held between India and Bangladesh in Gwalior? (8)
- 21** Which Spanish tennis legend announced his retirement recently? (5)

**22** Which Indian city hosted the Irani Trophy 2024 held between Mumbai and Rest of India from October 1-5? (7)

**23** Which Spanish Football legend and a World Cup winner announced his retirement recently? (7)

#### DOWN

**1 & Across 6** Who scored a triple hundred in the first Test held between Pakistan and England in Multan? (5,5)

**3** Who is the only Indian selected as a Match Referee for the recent Women's T20 World Cup? (7)

**4** Who won the Player of the Match award in the Women's T20 World Cup match between India and New Zealand? (6)

**5** Who returned with best individual bowling figures in an innings for New Zealand in its two-Test series versus Sri Lanka? (4)

**7** Who won the Player of the Series award in the recently concluded

two-Test series between India and Bangladesh? (6)

**8** Who won the Player of the Series award in the recently concluded Duleep Trophy? (6)

**11** Who opened the bowling for Bangladesh in its third T20I against India? (6)

**12** Who became the first footballer in Premier League history to score four goals in the first-half of a match? (6)

**15** Who is the only Bangladesh player to score a century in its two-Test series against India? (7)

**16** Which West Indian legendary all-rounder and multiple World Cup winner recently announced his retirement from all forms of the game? (6)

**17 & Across 18** Who is the captain of the Pakistan Test side? (4,6)

**20** Who opened the bowling for India in its first match of the recent Women's T20 World Cup? (5)



## RSPB reclaims crown



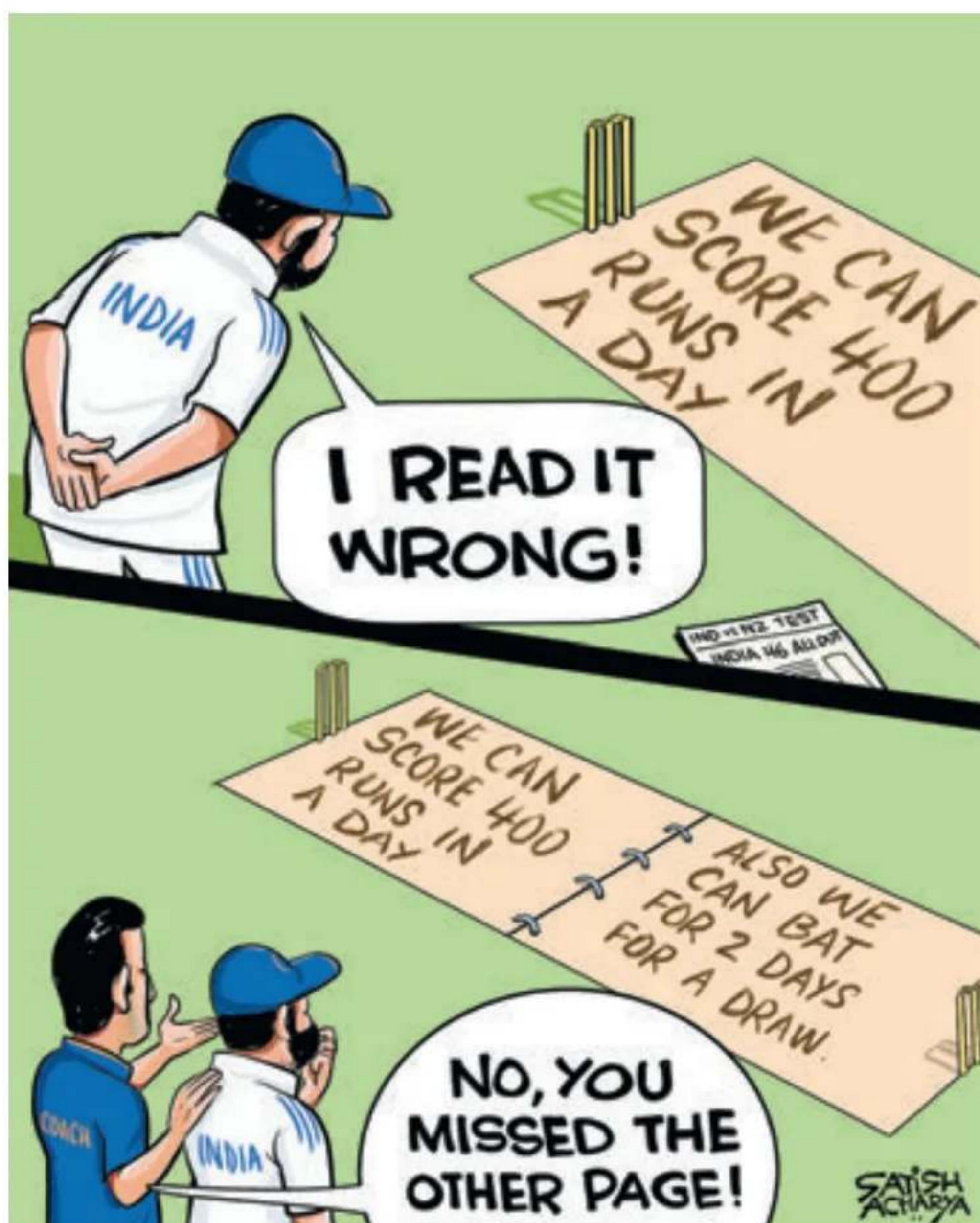
Railway Sports Promotion Board (RSPB) reclaimed the crown with a 3-1 win against Indian Oil Corporation Limited at the fourth Hockey India Women's Inter-Departmental National Championships, avenging its defeat last year.

With the cream of Indian women's hockey in action and Railways desperate to prove its dominance in a grudge match, the final was expected to be an exciting affair, and the two teams did not disappoint. Defending champion IOCL, after a first quarter of tentativeness, took the lead through Deepika but could sustain the lead for less than a minute, Vandana Katariya bringing all her 300-plus international match experience to level scores immediately. Just when it looked like the game would go into a shootout, like last year, Navneet Kaur put Railways ahead with a powerful shot in the 43rd minute, and Salima Tete (**pic, above**) doubled the lead six minutes later. Despite its control in the game, however, Railways did not push further, wiser after the 2023 final when, leading by a similar margin, it ended up conceding twice in the final minutes. This time, however, there was no mistake. Salima was adjudged the Player of the Match.

UTHRA GANESAN

## » INDIAN PLAYGROUND

### SPORTOON



**1** India will host the Asian Women's Handball Championship for the first time in New Delhi from December 1 to 10, 2024. The 20th edition of the tournament was originally set to take place in Almaty, Kazakhstan, but unforeseen circumstances led to its relocation — presenting India with a golden opportunity. Alongside India, the competition will witness continental heavyweights, Iran, South Korea, China, Japan, Kazakhstan, Hong Kong, and Singapore in action. The championship is scheduled to take place at the Indira Gandhi Indoor Stadium.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

**2** The second edition of the Chennai Grand Masters chess tournament will take place in the city from November 5 to November 11. With an official average rating of 2711 Elo, last year's inaugural edition was the strongest classical chess tournament ever held in India. In the previous tournament, D. Gukesh and Arjun Erigaisi finished tied for first place, but Gukesh emerged victorious based on his superior tiebreaks. This victory was pivotal for Gukesh, as it earned him important FIDE circuit points and secured his entry into the FIDE Candidates tournament, where he ultimately became the champion.

TEAM SPORTSTAR



## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Ryan Fernando



FOR MORE  
STORIES

# The impact of menstrual cycle on female athletes

Understanding the impact of the menstrual cycle on performance is crucial for providing **meaningful support** to female athletes.

Unlike male athletes, whose bodies follow a stable, daily rhythm, women navigate a complex, fluctuating hormonal landscape over the course of a month. These natural changes can influence everything from energy levels to endurance, mood, and even pain tolerance. For many of the athletes I work with, this unpredictability presents real challenges, especially in high-stakes sports like cricket. They've shared their struggles with unbearable cramps, overwhelming fatigue, and mood swings that make even the simplest tasks feel like climbing a mountain. Yet, they push through, often resorting to painkillers while silently battling deeper fears — the possibility of menstrual leakage during a match, staining their uniforms in front of an audience, etc. This can be paralysing and distracting, undermining their focus and performance when they need it the most. On top of this mental strain, physical symptoms such as bloating or cramps can sap their stamina and endurance, making it an uphill battle just to stay in the game. Often, women follow generic fitness and diet plans without considering the fluctuations in hormones that affect energy levels, endurance, pain

tolerance, and mood throughout the month. By tailoring workouts and nutrition to different phases of the menstrual cycle, women can enhance their performance, improve recovery, and achieve better results. It is time to embrace cycle-based training and eating as a fundamental approach to women's health and fitness.

### Impact on athletic performance

#### 1. Menstrual Phase (Days 1-5):

During this time, I often notice athletes feel more fatigued and struggle with endurance due to low hormone levels. I recommend focusing on recovery with lighter workouts and ensuring they eat iron-rich foods like spinach and magnesium-rich nuts to support energy levels.

**2. Follicular Phase (Days 6-14):** As oestrogen rises, I see a noticeable increase in energy and focus. This is when I encourage high-intensity training and strength-building. I always advise fuelling these sessions with complex carbs like quinoa and sweet potatoes, and adding plenty of protein to aid recovery.

**3. Ovulatory Phase (Days 15-17):** Energy and performance peak here. I have found this phase to be the best time for athletes to push through high-intensity, power-based exercises

or competitions. I suggest meals rich in lean proteins and healthy fats to sustain this energy.

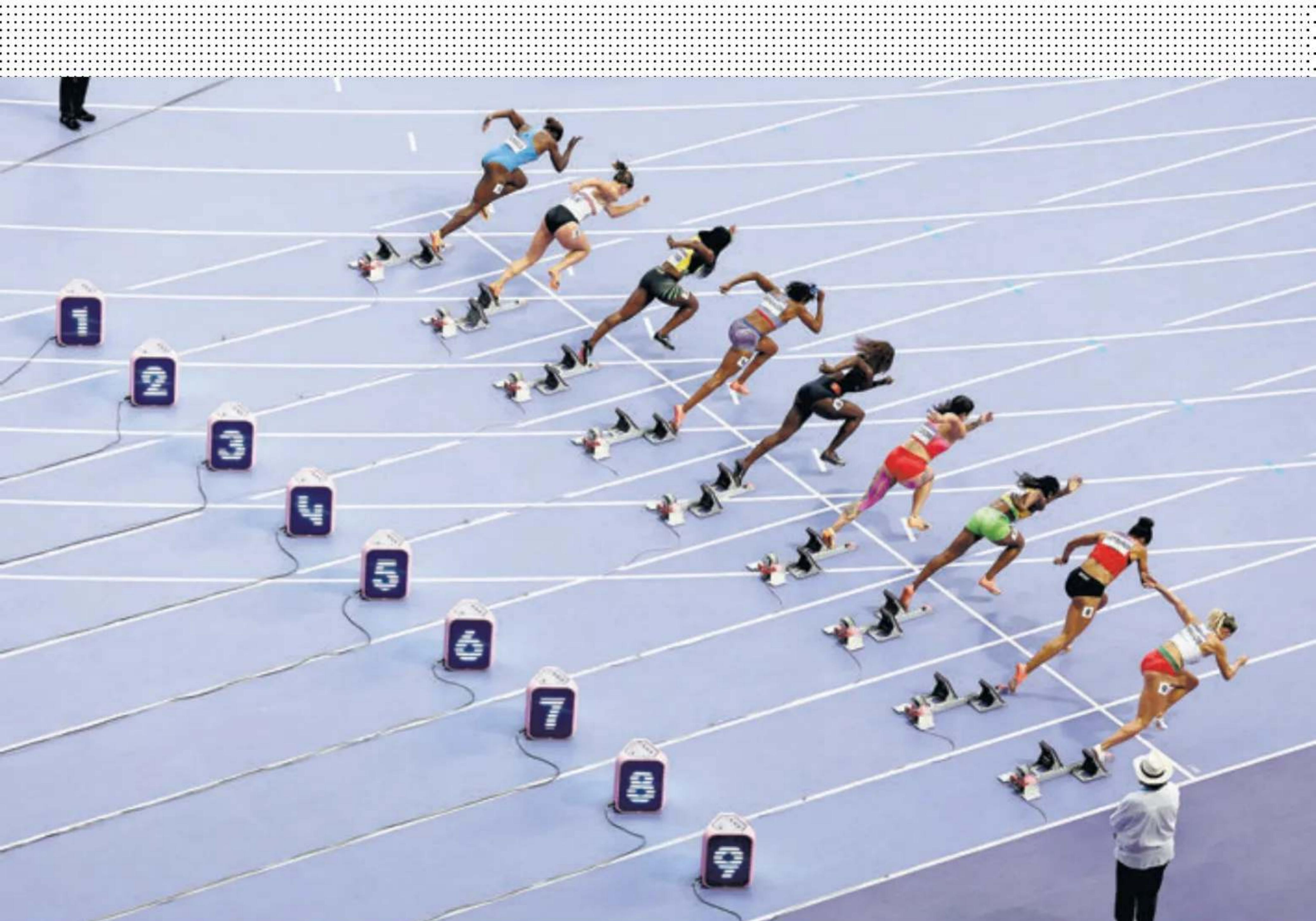
**4. Luteal Phase (Days 18-28):** With the rise in progesterone, athletes often report feeling more fatigued and moodier. I recommend scaling back to moderate-intensity workouts and including more recovery days. Foods rich in magnesium and Omega-3s, like nuts and fatty fish, help manage inflammation and muscle function during this phase.

### Managing nutrient deficiencies

In my experience, managing nutrient intake is crucial for athletes, especially during the menstrual cycle when deficiencies can impact performance.

**1. Iron and Magnesium:** I often see female athletes becoming iron-deficient during menstruation, which can limit oxygen delivery to muscles, leading to fatigue and decreased endurance. Magnesium, vital for muscle function, is also depleted during this phase. To support recovery and maintain energy, I recommend supplementing with iron and magnesium during menstruation.

Iron-rich foods: Spinach, lean meats, fortified cereals (best absorbed with Vitamin C).



⦿ Magnesium sources: Nuts, seeds, dark chocolate (best taken before bed for muscle recovery).

#### 2. Omega-3s and Calcium:

Omega-3s and calcium are essential for reducing inflammation and supporting bone health, particularly during the high-intensity phases such as ovulation.

⦿ Omega-3 sources: Fatty fish, chia seeds and walnuts.

⦿ Calcium sources: Dairy products, tofu and leafy greens (best consumed in the morning or evening).

#### Bonus tips

##### 1. Add red clover tea to your diet:

Red clover contains isoflavones, which may help relieve menstrual symptoms like hot flashes and night sweats.

⦿ Pre-cycle: Start drinking red clover tea 1-2 weeks before your period to ease premenstrual symptoms like bloating, mood swings, and breast tenderness.

⦿ Post-cycle: Continue drinking it throughout your cycle if beneficial.

⦿ How to prepare: Steep 1-2 teaspoons of dried red clover flowers in hot water for 5-7 minutes. Strain and enjoy, hot or cold. Add honey for sweetness.

⦿ 2. Include Vitamin E-rich foods:

Vitamin E can reduce period pain, limit blood loss, and regulate your cycle.

⦿ A study showed that Vitamin E supplements eased painful cramps within two months.

⦿ Sources: Almonds, avocados, broccoli, and spinach are great options for women.

Understanding the impact of the menstrual cycle on performance is crucial for providing meaningful support to female athletes. Unlike men, women experience hormonal fluctuations throughout the month that can significantly affect both their physical and mental states. Some days, your daughter, sister, or athlete may feel unstoppable, while on others, she might struggle with fatigue, discomfort, or even pain.

Recognising these natural

**Customised brilliance:** By tailoring workouts and nutrition to the different phases of the menstrual cycle, women can enhance their performance, improve recovery, and achieve better results. GETTYIMAGES

fluctuations and offering both emotional and practical support can make a profound difference in her athletic journey. Encourage her to listen to her body, adjust her training accordingly, and focus on nutrition that supports her through each phase of the cycle. Whether it's being there when she's feeling low during her menstrual phase or cheering her on when her energy peaks during ovulation, your understanding and compassion can give her the extra boost she needs to thrive.

By acknowledging the unique needs of female athletes, we can create an environment where they not only excel but feel supported in every aspect of their journey.

# Exercise, a choice

Girolamo Mercuriale, an Italian physician, says: Just because one can exercise, it doesn't mean one should. **Millions have taken this seriously.**

Suresh Menon

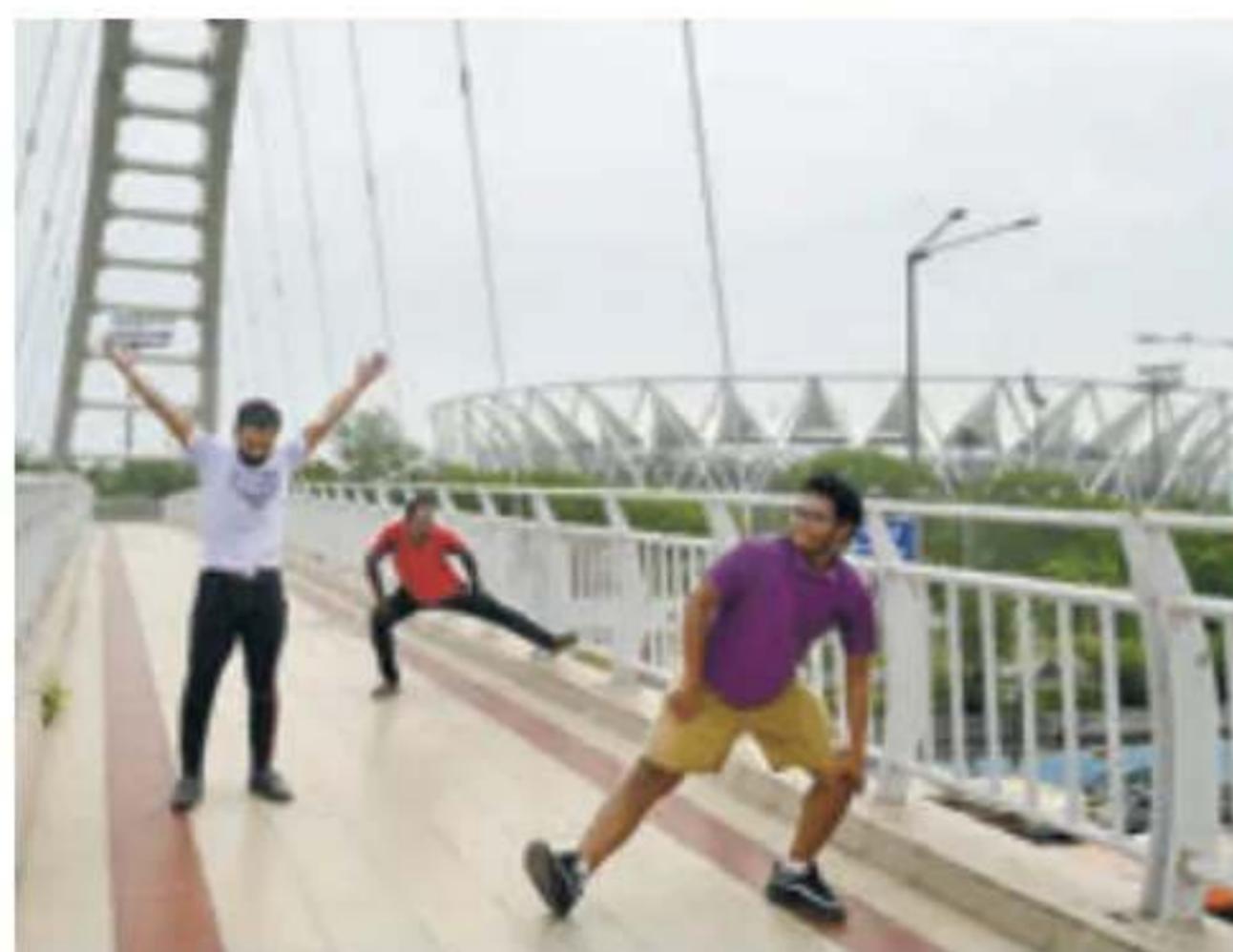
**F**or a reason too complicated to get into, I have been thinking about exercise lately. Not of the jogging or pumping iron type, but of the theoretical variety. The first comprehensive book on exercise was *De Art Gymnasticaby* Girolamo Mercuriale, who said in the 16th century, "I have taken as my province to restore the light art of exercise, once so highly esteemed but now dead and forgotten." Perhaps the period was full of the exercise-averse like so many of us.

Apparently the American composer Virgil Thomson said on turning 90 that finally he no longer needed to exercise. Do we have to wait that long?

Here's Franz Kafka writing in his diary, "Every night for the past week my neighbour has come to wrestle with me. Apparently he is a student, studies all day, and wants some hasty exercise in the evening before he goes to bed. I am the stronger and more skilful of the two. He, however, has more endurance." Tolstoy shared with Goethe a "taste for bodily exercise..."

'Exercise' came into the language in the 14th century; to exercise is to "remove restraint." I know all this thanks to the joy of reading about exercise rather than actually doing it.

*Sweat: A History of Exercise* by Bill Hayes, writer, photographer, and partner of the late Oliver Sacks, has been the spur. It is a delightfully quirky and erudite book, which piqued my interest when I turned to a random page and read, "Libraries, like gyms, have



**Art of exercising:** A representative image: The first comprehensive book on exercise was *De Art Gymnastica* by Girolamo Mercuriale. R.V. MOORTHY

always been a refuge for me, just as gyms, like libraries, have always been places of learning."

Hayes's quest for the history of exercise is an eccentric exercise in chasing the past, running, swimming, boxing to being a "gym rat" (which, Hayes tells us, the ancient Greeks, too, had an expression for and translates into "palestra addict," a palestra being a "large athletic facility for exercising, viewing, and bathing."

Mercuriale, an Italian physician, told us four and a half centuries ago what fitness gurus are emphasising today: "Strength is very different from good

health. Those over-concerned with beefing up their bodies produce minds and senses that are dull, torpid and slow." Love that. At another place he says, "One doesn't exercise to enhance one's beauty. That's pure vanity. One exercises to prevent illness and preserve health."

I have nothing against exercise; in fact, some of my best friends exercise. Yet, it thrills me to read, "Excessive emphasis on athletics produces an excessively uncivilised type..." There is no chance that I will ever lay excessive emphasis on exercise. In fact, even the adequate amount is unlikely. Hayes tells us that the sweat of athletes was considered a prize commodity in the ancient world, and I have no intention of wasting mine.

Mercuriale says sensibly: just because one can exercise, it doesn't mean one should. Millions have taken this seriously. But as we grow older, we might no longer have the choice. How many of us live to be 90, after all?



## New Uttar Pradesh A New Era for India

Uttar Pradesh is swiftly advancing towards the vision of a self-reliant state. World-class infrastructure, including expressways, highways, metros and airports, has been developed across the state. The state boasts a fully electrified railway network and a 1,100 kilometer-long waterway extending from Prayagraj and Varanasi to Haldia. Uttar Pradesh leads the nation in electricity supply, with the capacity of solar generation increased more than tenfold.



### UP : At A Glance

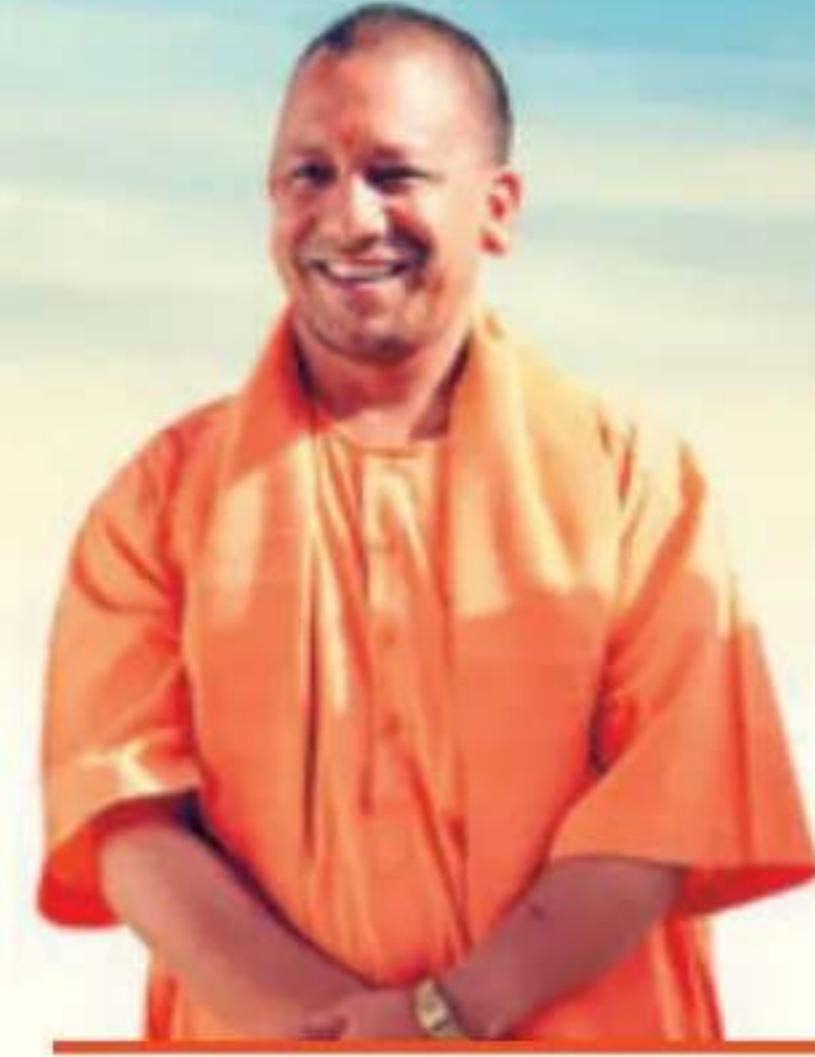
- Maximum Expressways : 6 operational, 7 under construction
- Highest Number of International Airports : 4 operational, 1 under construction
- Construction of the country's largest International Airport, Noida Airport, is underway in Jewar
- 15 Airports are operational with 6 more under construction
- More than 20 highways identified for domestic air connectivity
- The country's largest National Highway network
- Approximately 1100 kilometers connecting Prayagraj and Varanasi to Haldia Port, forming the country's first longest inland waterway
- Multi-Modal Terminal in Varanasi and Floating Terminals operating along National Waterway-1 at Ghazipur, Rajghat, Ramnagar (Varanasi), and Prayagraj
- Metro Rail operational in Lucknow, Kanpur, Noida, Greater Noida, Ghaziabad and Agra
- Rapid Rail Service (Nama Bharat) from Meerut to Delhi
- Formation of the Bundelkhand Industrial Development Authority
- Establishment of the Uttar Pradesh State Capital Region (UPSCR), including Lucknow, Sitapur, Hardoi, Unnao, Raebareli and Barabanki
- Renovation of industrial areas and infrastructure under the Atal Industrial Infrastructure Mission
- Establishment of Uttar Pradesh State Institute of Forensic Science in Lucknow
- North India's first hyperscale Data Center in Greater Noida
- Infrastructure development is underway at the 1000-acre International Film City in Noida
- Construction of Uttar Pradesh Defence Industrial Corridor (6 nodes : Aligarh, Agra, Lucknow, Kanpur, Chitrakoot and Jhansi)
- Ropeway service operational in Chitrakoot and Barsana, under construction in Varanasi.



# UTTAR PRADESH UNLIMITED POTENTIAL



Uttar Pradesh has undergone transformative changes by effectively leveraging its resources. The state has not only become a leading performer in various central government schemes but has also emerged as a growth engine of the country. Initiatives such as ODOP, Mission Shakti, BC Sakhi, Mukhyamantri Abhyudaya Yojana, Atal Awasiya Vidyalaya and Vishwakarma Shram Samman have earned national recognition. The state is continuously moving towards the goal of an **Atmanirbhar Uttar Pradesh...**



## ONE DISTRICT ONE PRODUCT (ODOP)

The innovative 'One District One Product' (ODOP) initiative is a key driver of the economic resurgence in Uttar Pradesh. The programme aims to encourage indigenous and specialised products and crafts in each of the state's 75 districts. This scheme has not only boosted local economies but has also helped preserve traditional crafts and skills. The programme has played instrumental role in increasing exports to Rs 2 lakh crore. About **1.92 lakh artisans** have been employed under the margin money scheme.



## MISSION SHAKTI

Mission Shakti is an ambitious initiative, aimed at empowering women through safety, security, and self-reliance. By promoting awareness, the mission seeks to transform women's lives and foster an inclusive and empowered society. The campaign envisions a future where women play a pivotal role in shaping a prosperous and harmonious society. About **9 crore people** have been made aware through this programme.



## BANKING CORRESPONDENT SAKHI

BC Sakhi or Banking Correspondent Sakhi is a government programme with a vision to empower women by providing them with training and opportunities to work as banking correspondents (BCs) for financial transactions. The programme has not only provided financial security to these women but also expanded banking facilities to the rural areas. These Sakhi's have done financial transactions of more than **Rs. 25,505 crore** and earning profits worth **Rs. 73.79 crore**.



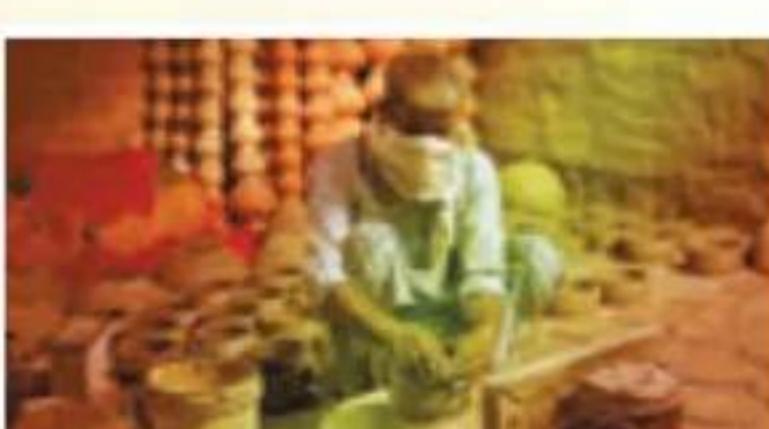
## MUKHYAMANTRI ABHYUDAYA YOJANA

This innovative scheme aims to provide free coaching and high level guidance for various competitive examinations through offline/online medium to talented and meritorious students from low income groups. The students are provided study materials besides guidance from experts for interviews. So far **63,507 students** have received coaching and more than **15,000 candidates** have been selected in various competitive examinations.



## ATAL AWASIYA VIDYALAYAS

Atal Awasiya Vidyalaya is a visionary initiative designed to uplift the children of registered laborers in Uttar Pradesh by harnessing the power of education. Educational sessions have commenced in **18 Mandals** across the state. Along with academic excellence, they provide residential facilities, ensuring students have a supportive environment for both learning and personal growth. Mukhyamantri Model Composite Vidyalaya are being established on the lines of Atal Awasiya Vidyalaya in 57 districts.



## VISHWAKARMA SHRAM SAMMAN YOJANA

The Vishwakarma Shram Samman Yojana is an innovative scheme to support and uplift the laborers and artisans of the state. This initiative aims to address the challenges faced by these skilled workers due to lack of resources by providing them with financial aid and free training. This scheme not only seeks to enhance their skills but also promotes self-employment, contributing to the overall economic development of the state. More than **1.08 lakh artisans** have been trained and provided with ODOP toolkits.

