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OF DREAMS

IPL 2024 brings the razzmatazz of non-stop cricket to town, marking the start of the Men in Blue's T20 World Cup countdown





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Poster: Ravichandran Ashwin (AFP); Pages 43-50

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

**Editor:** Ayon Sengupta (Editor responsible for selection of news under the PRB Act).

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## OFF-SIDE

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# NEED A LEVEL-PLAYING FIELD

Out of 60 NSFs recognised by the Union Sports Ministry, only a **meagre** three have a woman president.

The tearful exit of Indian women's hockey team coach Janneke Schopman and the resignation of longstanding Hockey India CEO Elena Norman put the spotlight back on the male-dominated, often misogynistic, world of Indian sports administration.

"I see the difference in how the men's coaches are treated and between the girls and the men's team. This country is extremely difficult for a woman. Coming from a culture where you have an opinion and are valued for it, it's really hard," an emotional Schopman said days before her resignation. And Norman, too, spoke about difficult working conditions.

It sparked an online outrage that showed there were no easy answers — ideological divides were deep, with some chastising Schopman for vilifying the country while others commended her for speaking out. But the powers that be at Hockey India, except its president, Dilip Tirkey, wasted no time in sweeping such inconvenient truths under the proverbial rug, opting instead to concoct more palatable explanations for their departures. **Why bother with self-reflection when you have mastered the art of deflection?**

While there has been some progress in gender parity in Indian sports, with more women participating (India had 56 women athletes out of the 127 at the 2021 Tokyo Olympics) and even getting larger screen time and sponsorships, the dearth of women in decision-making roles within the National Sports Federations is glaring. Out of 60 NSFs recognised by the Union Sports Ministry, only a meagre three — the Special Olympics, table tennis, and rowing — have a woman president, while the Indian Olympic Association is headed by P. T. Usha.

Women even fail to find a place in the executive councils with less than 1 per cent representation. Take badminton, for instance, a sport that has given India two female Olympic medallists, yet its national Executive Council is a women-free zone.

"Political leaders who have long dominated sports bodies have not encouraged professionals — men or

women — to be in leadership positions. However, with women increasingly participating and excelling in sports, there is more visibility for women in administrative bodies. Women have also not adequately asserted themselves for these jobs. For this, they need training and exposure," says Neelam Kapur, former Director General of the Sports Authority of India.

Shattering the glass ceiling is easier said than done. Commonwealth Games champion Anita Sheoran, the lone woman candidate, was trounced 7-40 in the Wrestling Federation of India election by Sanjay Singh, a confidant of the former chief Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, who was earlier accused of sexual harassment.

**The Board of Control for Cricket in India, the nation's wealthiest sports entity, boasts a grand total of one woman in its nine-member Apex Council. The WPL Committee, tasked with promoting and managing the women's version of the Indian Premier League, mirrors this with a single female representative.**

"Women in leading roles in sports administration can bring diverse perspectives, fostering inclusivity and equity. Their presence helps address gender biases, inspiring future generations and creating a more balanced and representative sports landscape," says 10-time National badminton champion Manjusha Kanwar, now a Sports Coordinator (Corporate Office) at the IndianOil Corporation Ltd. "It will be a dream come true and a total game changer if India leapfrogs the top countries by giving more opportunities to women in sports administration."

Perhaps it is time for the Indian lawmakers to extend the same courtesy to sports as they did to their ranks — a quota for women in sports administration, akin to the 33 per cent reservation for women in state assemblies and the Lok Sabha — and create a level-playing field.

Kapur, however, feels a quota cannot be a long-term solution. "I feel that a quota may reduce the presence of women in these tokenisms, but it is a good beginning and can act as a catalyst for more women to participate in sports bodies," she says.



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# VENGEANCE AND VALOUR

Nigamanth P

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**R**evenge is a dish best served cold. Sean 'Suga' O'Malley had to wait just over three years for his payback.

The reigning bantamweight champion put his belt on the line for the first time against Marlon Vera in the UFC (Ultimate Fighting Championship) 299 at the Kaseya Center in Miami.

Despite going up against the title holder, Vera had a psychological advantage over his opponent, having defeated him in the past.

O'Malley took on Vera in August of 2020 in the UFC 252, where he suffered a crushing first-round knockout defeat — the only loss in his illustrious professional career. However, the 29-year-old bounced back in style and pocketed five wins, with a no-contest due to an

accidental eye poke sandwiched in between. It was the **perfect revenge** for Sean O'Malley who defeated Marlon Vera in an epic UFC bantamweight championship rematch.

accidental eye poke sandwiched in between.

But the rematch ended in diametrically opposite fashion. The intense fight lasted the full quota of 25 minutes, justifying the enormous hype surrounding it.

O'Malley silenced his doubters with a statement win



**O'Malley took on Vera back in August of 2020 in the UFC 252, where he suffered a crushing first-round knockout defeat – the only loss in his illustrious professional career.**

over a familiar foe via unanimous decision (50-45, 50-45, 50-44). The American not only completed his maiden title defence but did it in some style, outsmarting Vera in every department.

The fighters exchanged blows to inflict identical damage on each other in the first round, and there was little to set them apart. O'Malley's moment of brilliance came at the end of the second round when he landed a step-in knee—the kind that would've knocked out any other fighter, but Vera stood his ground. The hit was so powerful that O'Malley acknowledged it in the post-match interview. "I felt something in his face break," O'Malley said of the move. "I don't know if it was his nose or cheek. I felt something snap."

The switch stance — when a fighter switches from an orthodox to a southpaw stance or vice versa — was on full display from both ends, but O'Malley used it cleverly to gain the upper hand. The champion kept mixing his position throughout the fight, sending blows to all quadrants of the torso.

From then on, it was an all-out O'Malley show, as he showcased a blend of efficiency, poise, and precision to cement his place at the top.

#### An eventful main card

Former interim lightweight champion and future UFC Hall of Famer Dustin Poirier knocked out the surging Benoit Saint-Denis with a right hand in the second round of their lightweight bout. Saint-Denis had hurt Poirier with punches in the early round before the veteran dropped him with a right hook at 2:52 in the second round. The victory moved Poirier into a tie for the fourth-most wins (22) in UFC history.

Earlier, Jack Della Maddalena stretched his winning streak to 17 with the biggest victory of his career. He stopped Gilbert Burns in the third round of their bout with a crushing knee to the head, moments after it appeared Burns had secured a fight-clinching takedown. Della Maddalena followed the knee with a series of elbows on the ground for a TKO victory at 3:43 in the final round of the welterweight bout.

#### All eyes on the next

Minutes after the fights at UFC 298, CEO Dana White announced the cards for the next big event: UFC 300.

Alex Pereira will defend his UFC light heavyweight title against former champ Jamahal Hill in the main event on April 13 in Las Vegas.

Pereira became the ninth UFC fighter to win a title in multiple divisions when he defeated former light heavyweight champion Jiri Procházka in the second round at UFC 295.

Meanwhile, Hill hasn't fought since January 2023, when he beat Glover Teixeira to capture the light heavyweight crown in an impressive unanimous decision. However, a freak accident during a basketball game that injured his Achilles tendon kept him from defending his belt, eventually leading to the relinquishment of the belt.

Other notable fights include the BMF title bout between Justin Gaethje and Max Holloway, the strawweight title fight between Zhang Weili and Yan Xiaonan, and a lightweight contest between Charles Oliveira and Arman Tsarukyan.

**Payback time:** O'Malley silenced his doubters with a statement win over Marlon Vera via unanimous decision (50-45, 50-45, 50-44). The American not only completed his maiden title defence but did it in some style, outsmarting Vera in every other department. AFP



## Olympics gold medallist and Paris 2024 hopeful Meilutyte undergoes foot surgery

Lithuania's 2012 Olympics breaststroke gold medallist and Paris 2024 hopeful Ruta Meilutyte has had foot surgery and is expected to resume training in early April, her country's swimming federation said.

Meilutyte is the world record holder and reigning world champion in 50m (which is not held at the Olympics), and won gold in 100m at London 2012 as a 15-year-old.

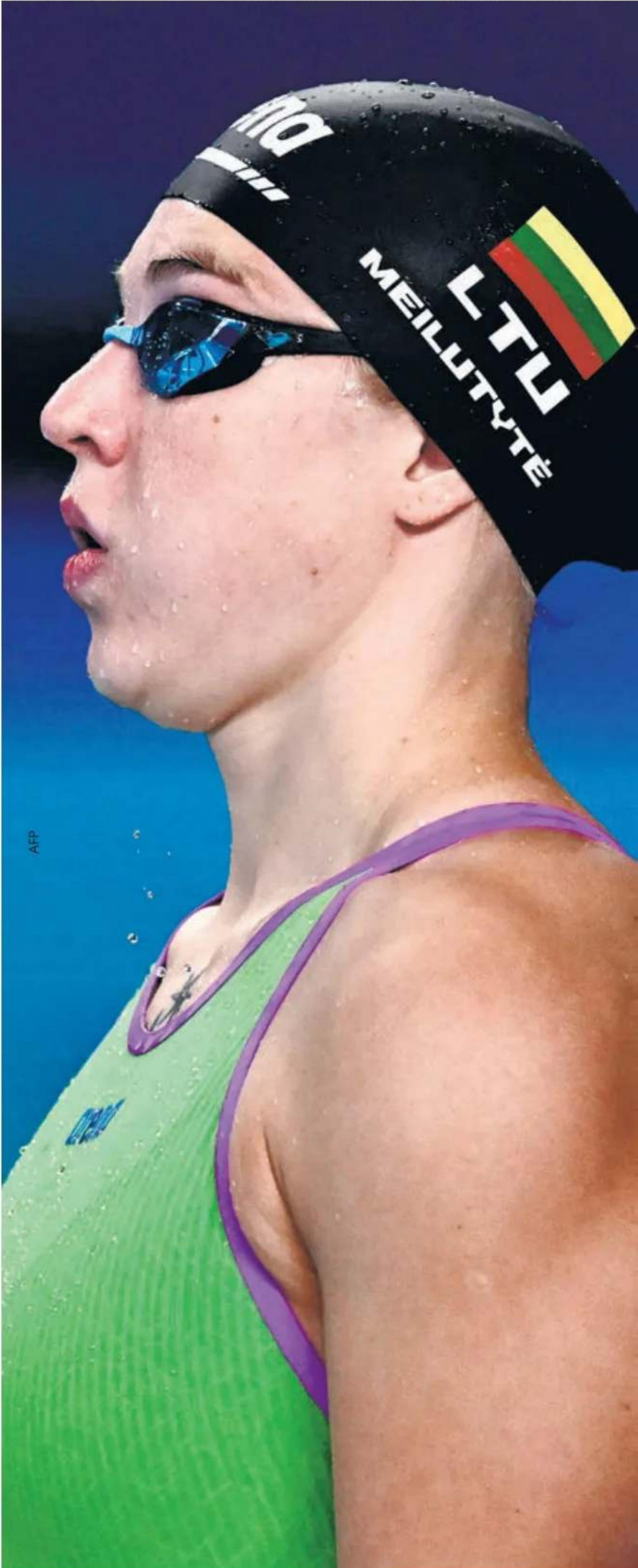
She was 100m world champion in 2023 but failed to reach the semifinals at last month's world championships in Doha.

The federation said on its website that Meilutyte had undergone surgery in Kaunas after returning from Qatar.

### LAVER CUP IN SAN FRANCISCO



The 2025 edition of the Laver Cup will be held in San Francisco at the home of the National Basketball Association's Golden State Warriors, tournament organisers said. It marks the first time the three-day team tournament, pitting six top men's players from Europe against six of their counterparts from the rest of the world, will be held on the U.S. West Coast. AP





**« Everything is on the cards; I just don't know how many cards I have left. It's still very far to think about Los Angeles Olympic Games but the thought of it excites me of course. I'd love to play that but...I can't really commit to that yet,»**

– Novak Djokovic when asked about LA 2028 Olympic Games ➤



**« I feel so tired, but the championships are like this. These girls give me so much energy to run and especially if they give me the baton (when we're) in first place. It is such a great team, you cannot let them down,»** – Femke Bol after winning the 4x400m relay at the World Indoor Championships ➤

## 2027

Beijing has been selected to host the 2027 World Athletics Championships, governing body, World Athletics said. The announcement comes after the Italian athletics federation, earlier in the day, announced it had withdrawn its bid to host the event in Rome after failing to receive financial support from the government. Beijing also hosted the Championships in 2015.

“Congratulations to Beijing on their successful bid to host the World

### Athletics

Championships in 2027, 12 years after our athletes lit up the National Stadium for the 15th edition of our global showpiece,” World Athletics president Sebastian Coe **(in pic)** said. “China was the top performer for Wanda Diamond League broadcast consumption in 2023 with a cumulative audience of 368.9 million.”



## 2024

Russian and Belarusian tennis players will be allowed to enter the Olympic and Paralympic Games in Paris as neutrals, the International Tennis Federation (ITF) confirmed. The ITF said players from Russia and Belarus would be allowed to enter in an ‘individual and neutral capacity’ to participate in singles and doubles competitions. Athletes need to meet the selection and eligibility requirements as well as comply with the IOC regulations. “The ITF decision aligns with the majority of International Federations (IFs) regarding individual competition and athletes participating in the Paris 2024 Games this summer,” said the tennis world governing body in a statement.

## SCALING NEW HEIGHTS



**LeBron James reached 40,000 points** in his 21st NBA season as he drove past Michael Porter Jr. and hit a layup with 10:39 left in the second quarter of the Los Angeles Lakers’ game against the Denver Nuggets for the historic basket. James, 39, has also played the second-most regular seasons and most playoff minutes in league history. He is the only NBA player with at least 10,000 points, 10,000 rebounds and 10,000 assists. AP

# HARDIK, PANT IN IPL SPOTLIGHT AS T20 WORLD CUP SELECTION LOOMS

The national selectors will keep a **close eye on six players during the T20 league** : a pair of IPL captains, a wicketkeeping duo, and a couple of veterans.

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**O**ne may love or hate the Indian Premier League (IPL) but certainly not ignore it. No wonder then that with every passing year, the IPL has evolved into a tournament around which the global cricket calendar revolves. The who's who of the cricketing world — active and former, coaches and pundits — are keen on being part of the eight-week extravaganza.

The 17th edition of the IPL, though, will be an exception, at least for Indian cricketers. The initial phase of IPL will serve as a selection trial, crucial not only for the mega-auction in 2025



**Much-awaited return:** Rishabh Pant will lead Delhi Capitals in IPL 2024. Meanwhile, Hardik Pandya returned to competitive cricket at the recently concluded DY Patil T20 Tournament. GETTY IMAGES

**Overcoming odds:** The IPL will mark Rishabh Pant's comeback to competitive cricket since the Test series in Bangladesh in December 2022. He had been in a horrific car crash on December 30, 2022. AP

but also for the T20 World Cup in June this year. This holds particular significance due to India's limited T20I matches in the past six months, making IPL 2024 a key determinant for assembling a team aiming to reclaim T20 World Cup glory for the first time since 2007.

With India's squad for the World Cup far from being locked, there will be multiple players who will be vying to impress Ajit Agarkar and Co. But the national selectors will keep a close eye on six players: a pair of IPL captains, a wicketkeeping duo, and a couple of veterans.

Let's discuss the tales of two IPL captains first. One of them has made a stunning return to his IPL alma mater after a dream run with a new franchise for two seasons. The other one has been at the centre of a controversy that's resulted in his exclusion from the BCCI's central contracts.

Hardik Pandya's return to Mumbai Indians has led to a heated debate among the Paltan, Mumbai Indians' fan army. What has caused a lot of heartache, even among the most loyal franchise supporters, is the fact that the all-rounder has displaced Rohit Sharma as the captain. The Hitman himself does not seem to have taken the development well, as has been indicated through some of his near and dear ones' social media posts. As if ensuring the flock stays united wasn't a challenge enough, a freak injury during the 2023 ODI World Cup has meant Hardik first has to ensure he remains fit and available for the entire season, not just for Mumbai Indians but even for India's T20 World Cup campaign.

An on-song Hardik gives India's XI much-needed stability. Having regained fitness during an extended break — a hallmark of Hardik's career for most of the last five years — Hardik is understood to be ready



for the rigours of the next three months. Irrespective of his fitness, it will be interesting to see Rohit playing under Hardik's captaincy in the IPL before the former leads Hardik in India's T20 World Cup conquest shortly after the T20 League ends.

Meanwhile, Shreyas Iyer, the Kolkata Knight Riders (KKR) captain, finds himself in the middle of a storm. After being dropped from the Indian team and skipping the Ranji Trophy, thereby making himself unavailable for selection, Shreyas was not considered for central contracts.

How he has batted in the Ranji Trophy knockouts indicates that Shreyas is finding it hard to be in the moment. After being a shining star in India's 2023 ODI World Cup campaign, the world seems to have turned upside down in merely four months for the Mumbai batter.

Head coach Rahul Dravid has clarified that neither Shreyas nor Ishan Kishan has been ruled out of the T20 World Cup. A strong first half will be the strongest boost that Shreyas can ask for. Having witnessed his heroics earlier when the chips were down, one won't be

surprised if he makes a telling statement come March 23.

Speaking of the two wicketkeepers, Ishan and Rishabh Pant find themselves in the spotlight heading into the IPL.

Similar to Shreyas, Ishan faced non-selection for not adhering to the committee's directive to showcase skills in the Ranji Trophy. With limited opportunities across formats, Ishan opted for training with Hardik in Vadodara, prioritising IPL and T20 World Cup preparation over Ranji game-time. A strong performance in the first half of the IPL could bring Ishan back into contention for India's open wicketkeeper slot, especially considering the upcoming challenges in the Americas.

Pant — the miracle man of Indian cricket in more ways than one — is an odd man out in this pack. As per BCCI, Pant has been declared fit as a wicketkeeper-batter for this IPL. However, the only distant possibility of him being considered for the T20 World Cup is if he regains his mojo with the willow right away. He may then take it easy in the latter half of the IPL in quest of donning India's jersey again sooner than expected. Pant's remarkable recovery post a

**On a sticky wicket:** The manner in which he has batted in the Ranji Trophy knockouts indicates that Shreyas Iyer is finding it hard to be in the moment.

EMMANUALYOGINI

major car accident in December 2022 is as astonishing as his on-field excellence and a miraculous comeback in India colours can't be ruled out. Transitioning to the veterans, Rohit and Virat Kohli, particularly in T20Is, warrant a comparable evaluation. However, BCCI secretary Jay Shah, while announcing Rohit as captain for the T20 World Cup, made it clear that the governing body and the selectors were not really treating them in the same manner. While Rohit has been handed the captaincy despite having featured in just three T20Is since the 2022 T20 World Cup, Shah has said a decision on Kohli will be taken later. It means Kohli's place in the T20 World Cup squad isn't guaranteed.

The duo has compelling reasons to kick off the IPL strongly. Rohit aims to justify faith from BCCI and selectors, making a case beyond franchise captaincy. Kohli seeks to silence strike-rate critics, securing his World Cup spot and reviving chants of "Ee Sala Cup Namde."

IPL 2024 thus has the potential to be a game-changer for the future of Indian cricket, particularly in the shortest format.



*Schedule for the initial phase of the IPL*

M.No	Date	Time			Venue
1	22-03-24	8:00 PM	Chennai Super Kings	Royal Challengers Bangalore	Chennai
2	23-03-24	3:30 PM	Punjab Kings	Delhi Capitals	Mohali
3	23-03-24	7:30 PM	Kolkata Knight Riders	Sunrisers Hyderabad	Kolkata
4	24-03-24	3:30 PM	Rajasthan Royals	Lucknow Super Giants	Jaipur
5	24-03-24	7:30 PM	Gujarat Titans	Mumbai Indians	Ahmedabad
6	25-03-24	7:30 PM	Royal Challengers Bangalore	Punjab Kings	Bengaluru
7	26-03-24	7:30 PM	Chennai Super Kings	Gujarat Titans	Chennai
8	27-03-24	7:30 PM	Sunrisers Hyderabad	Mumbai Indians	Hyderabad
9	28-03-24	7:30 PM	Rajasthan Royals	Delhi Capitals	Jaipur
10	29-03-24	7:30 PM	Royal Challengers Bangalore	Kolkata Knight Riders	Bengaluru
11	30-03-24	7:30 PM	Lucknow Super Giants	Punjab Kings	Lucknow
12	31-03-24	3:30 PM	Gujarat Titans	Sunrisers Hyderabad	Ahmedabad
13	31-03-24	7:30 PM	Delhi Capitals	Chennai Super Kings	Vizag
14	01-04-24	7:30 PM	Mumbai Indians	Rajasthan Royals	Mumbai
15	02-04-24	7:30 PM	Royal Challengers Bangalore	Lucknow Super Giants	Bengaluru
16	03-04-24	7:30 PM	Delhi Capitals	Kolkata Knight Riders	Vizag
17	04-04-24	7:30 PM	Gujarat Titans	Punjab Kings	Ahmedabad
18	05-04-24	7:30 PM	Sunrisers Hyderabad	Chennai Super Kings	Hyderabad
19	06-04-24	7:30 PM	Rajasthan Royals	Royal Challengers Bangalore	Jaipur
20	07-04-24	3:30 PM	Mumbai Indians	Delhi Capitals	Mumbai
21	07-04-24	7:30 PM	Lucknow Super Giants	Gujarat Titans	Lucknow



Captain: M.S. Dhoni

Matches

225

CSK

Won

131

PREDICTION

Anything less than a playoff spot should be considered a failure for CSK.  
A final and a sixth title is definitely within the reach of Dhoni's men.

**Pranay Rajiv**  
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**S**ecuring a fairytale ending is a rare occurrence in sports. But Chennai Super Kings (CSK) aims to craft precisely that narrative as it enters the 2024 IPL season, eager to beat arch-rival Mumbai Indians in the race for the most IPL titles.

CSK has made some smart moves in the auction, adding New Zealand duo Daryl Mitchell and Rachin Ravindra and welcoming back Shardul Thakur. It has only strengthened an already well-rounded team.

The team's strength lies in its deep batting order, with Deepak Chahar, no mug with the bat, coming in as low as No. 9. However, injuries to opening batter Devon Conway and new recruit Mustafizur Rahman, as well as Ajinkya Rahane's poor form on the domestic front, may pose a challenge. Nevertheless, CSK seems to have adequate backup resources in Mitchell and Ravindra.

Dhoni's bowling strategy will revolve heavily around his three world-class spin-bowling all-rounders — Moeen Ali, Mitchell Santner and Ravindra Jadeja. They will look to thrive in Chepauk's favourable conditions.

The Chennai-based side will continue to rely on its inexperienced pace unit, as it has chosen to trust its current players instead of recruiting a premium fast bowler.

Soon after winning his fifth IPL title as CSK captain, M. S. Dhoni chose to not opt for the fairytale ending to his career and vowed to return for "at least" one more season for the fans if his body allowed it. The Yellow Army will hope that Dhoni's magic touch will help the team overcome any issues with form or inexperience.

## KEY PLAYERS



Ravindra Jadeja

**TITLES: 5**  
**(2010 2011 2018  
2021 2023)**

Ruturaj Gaikwad





Captain: Rishabh Pant

## PREDICTION

Last year, Delhi Capitals' middle-order, without Pant, struggled with an average of 17.47 and a strike rate of 117.20. While an improved showing with the bat could turn their fortunes around, Capitals are unlikely to secure a top-four finish.

**DC** 246  
Matches  
109  
Won

# KEY PLAYERS

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**D**espite Harry Brook pulling out of the tournament due to personal reasons, Delhi Capitals has a formidable batting line-up on paper, boasting overseas talent like David Warner and Mitchell Marsh, who are complemented by Rishabh Pant, Prithvi Shaw and Axar Patel. The squad also features promising domestic talent such as Kumar Kushagra, Ricky Bhui, and Abishek Porel, along with overseas backups Shai Hope and Tristan Stubbs.

However, a closer examination reveals potential challenges. Pant and Shaw's limited game-time of late, coupled with the relative inexperience of domestic recruits, raise concerns. In light of Pant's absence from cricket for over a year, Delhi will lean heavily on Warner and Marsh in the batting department.

Axar emerges as a key asset, bringing reliability as a lower-order striker and contributing crucial overs with the ball. Nonetheless, the team is vulnerable in the fast bowling department. With uncertainties surrounding Anrich Nortje's availability and fitness, the onus falls on Indian pacers Mukesh Kumar and Khaleel Ahmed. The success of the bowling unit becomes pivotal, as failure to deliver could result in another season where DC falls short of expectations.



Mitchell Marsh

Kuldeep Yadav



Matches

33

Won

23

Captain: Shubman Gill

## PREDICTION

Having dominated the group stages in the past two seasons, Titans now face uncertainty in their quest for playoff qualification, and need to navigate the challenges posed by the absence of proven match-winners. The 2024 IPL campaign promises a test of resilience and adaptability for Gujarat Titans.

GT

# KEY PLAYERS

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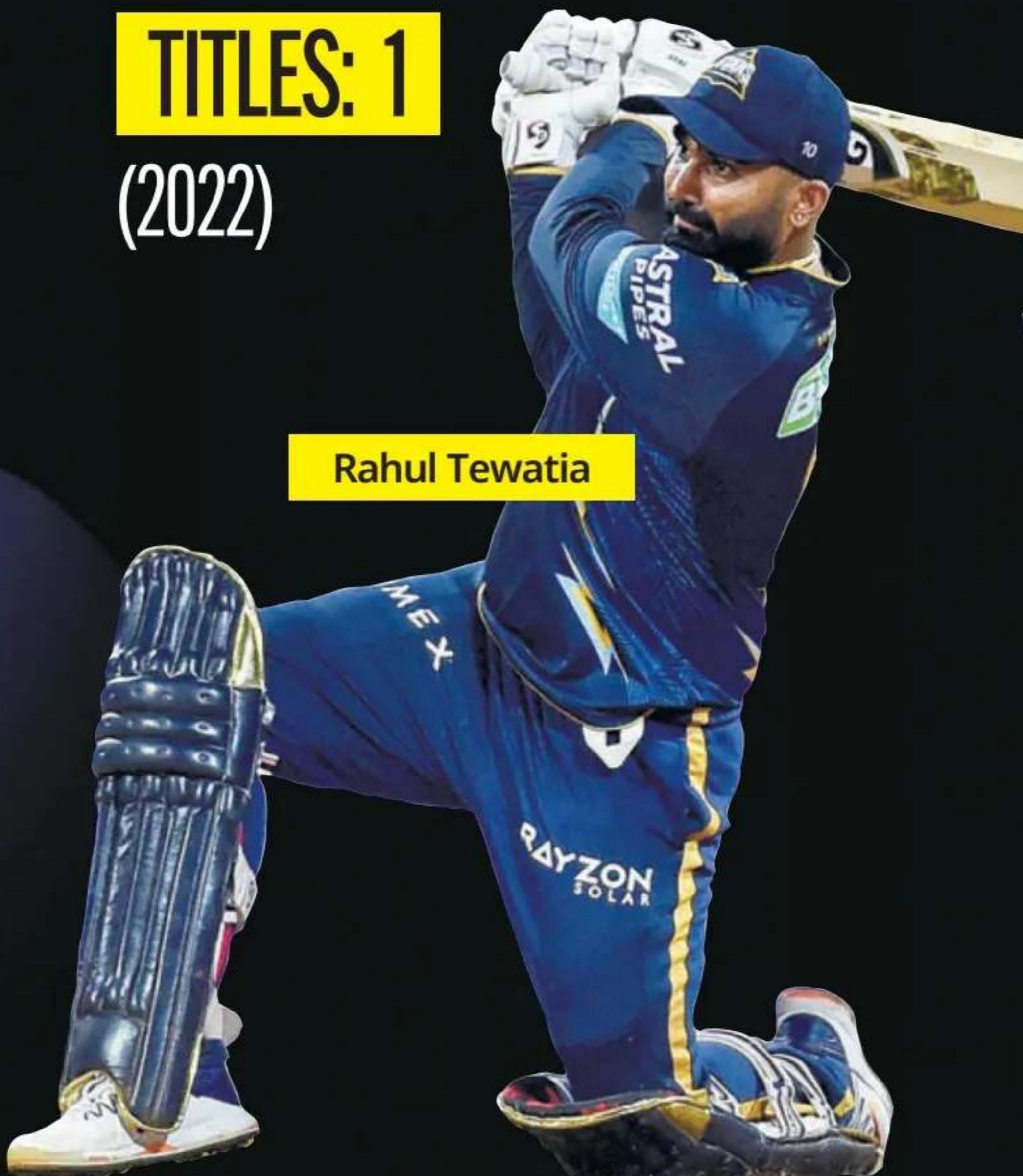
In the aftermath of the 2023 IPL, Gujarat Titans faced a seismic shift in team dynamics as captain Hardik Pandya departed for Mumbai Indians. Pandya's philosophy of fostering a conducive team environment over superstar acquisitions bore fruit with two consecutive final appearances. Now, the reins are handed to Shubman Gill, the Orange Cap holder (890 runs in 17 matches) from the previous season.

However, challenges loom with the absence of last year's Purple Cap winner Mohammed Shami due to injury. Umesh Yadav steps into the PowerPlay wicket-taking role, while the void left by Pandya might provide an opportunity for R. Sai Kishore to shine alongside Rashid Khan.

The team's fortunes hinge on the performances of recent recruit Shahrukh Khan, all-rounder Rahul Tewatia, and Australian pacer Spencer Johnson. The wicketkeeper-batter slot remains a point of contention, with the seasoned Wriddhiman Saha likely to retain his position despite the allure of Robin Minz.

**TITLES: 1**  
**(2022)**

Rahul Tewatia



Rashid Khan



Matches

237

Won

119

Captain: Shreyas Iyer

## PREDICTION

The return of Gambhir and Iyer, acquisition of key players at the auction, the astute leadership of Pandit, and Rinku's impressive form, all suggest the all-round promise could propel another title tilt.

KKR

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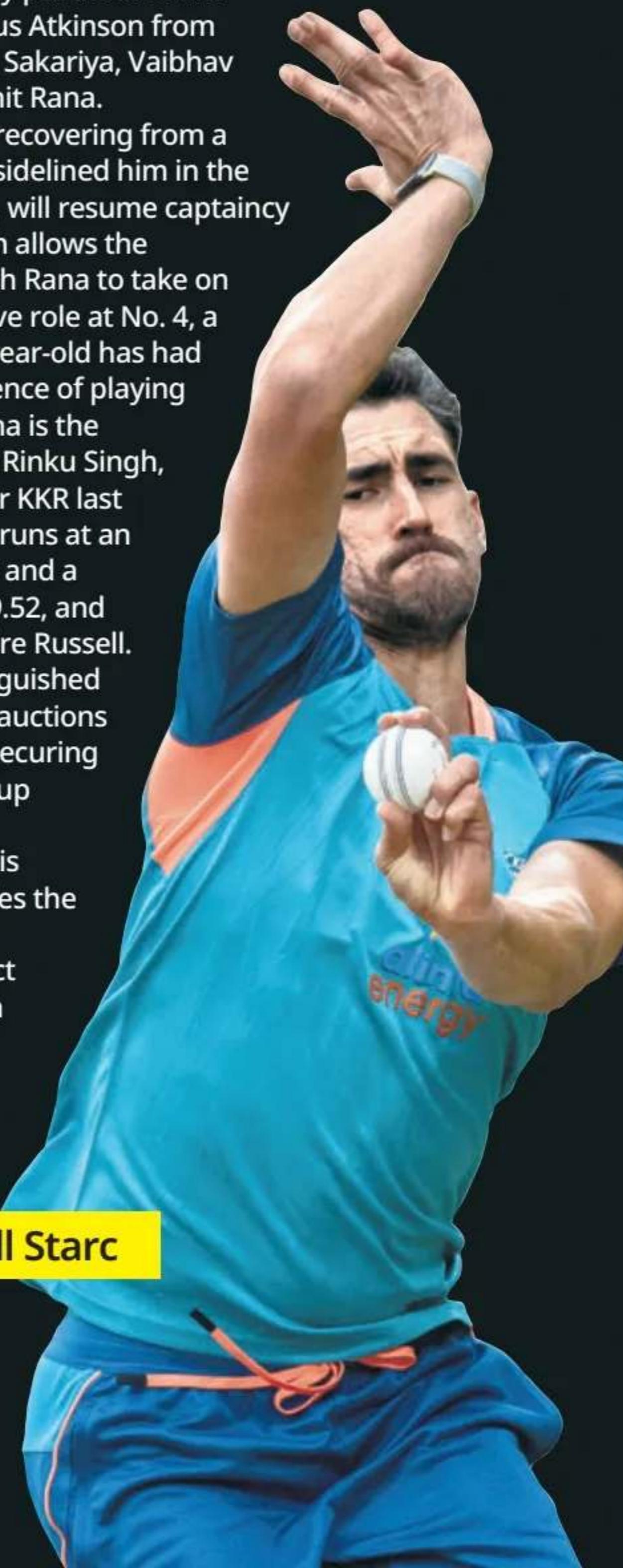
## KEY PLAYERS

The Kolkata Knight Riders has been in pursuit of the elusive Indian Premier League trophy for nearly a decade. In a determined effort to break the Voodoo curse, the team management strategically brought back a familiar face, Gautam Gambhir, as the mentor. Notably, Gambhir led the team to victory in both of its title-winning campaigns. The 2011 World Cup winner will collaborate with head coach Chandrakant Pandit to finalise the best 12 players, including the Impact Player, from a squad enriched with new talents. In the 2023 season, Kolkata's pacers faced a challenging time, securing only 30 wickets at an alarming economy rate of 10.54. Consequently, the team opted for a significant overhaul of its pace battery, securing the services of Australia's Mitchell Starc for a record ₹24.75 crore, making him the most expensive player in IPL history. Other key pacemen in the squad include Gus Atkinson from England, Chetan Sakariya, Vaibhav Arora, and Harshit Rana.

Shreyas Iyer, recovering from a back injury that sidelined him in the previous edition, will resume captaincy duties. His return allows the left-handed Nitish Rana to take on a more aggressive role at No. 4, a position the 30-year-old has had the most experience of playing at. Following Rana is the explosive duo of Rinku Singh, the top scorer for KKR last season with 474 runs at an average of 59.25 and a strike rate of 149.52, and West Indies' Andre Russell.

Kolkata distinguished itself during the auctions by strategically securing like-for-like backup options in all departments. This approach provides the team with the flexibility to select players based on availability and prevailing playing conditions.

Mitchell Starc



Rinku Singh



TITLES WON: 2

(2012, 2014)



Matches

30

Won

17

Captain: K.L. Rahul

## PREDICTION

Uncertainties surrounding the middle order and the absence of a solid international pacer raise concerns about Super Giants' playoff qualification chances this year.

LSG

# KEY PLAYERS

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Lucknow Super Giants, having secured third-place finishes in the last two IPL seasons, entered the league on a positive note. However, as it gears up for the 2024 edition, uncertainty looms over the franchise.

Captain KL Rahul's absence, stemming from a right quadriceps injury sustained during the India-England Test in Hyderabad, raises questions about his return date. The speculation intensifies around whether Rahul will retain his opening spot or shift to the middle order, possibly eyeing an audition for the T20 World Cup in June.

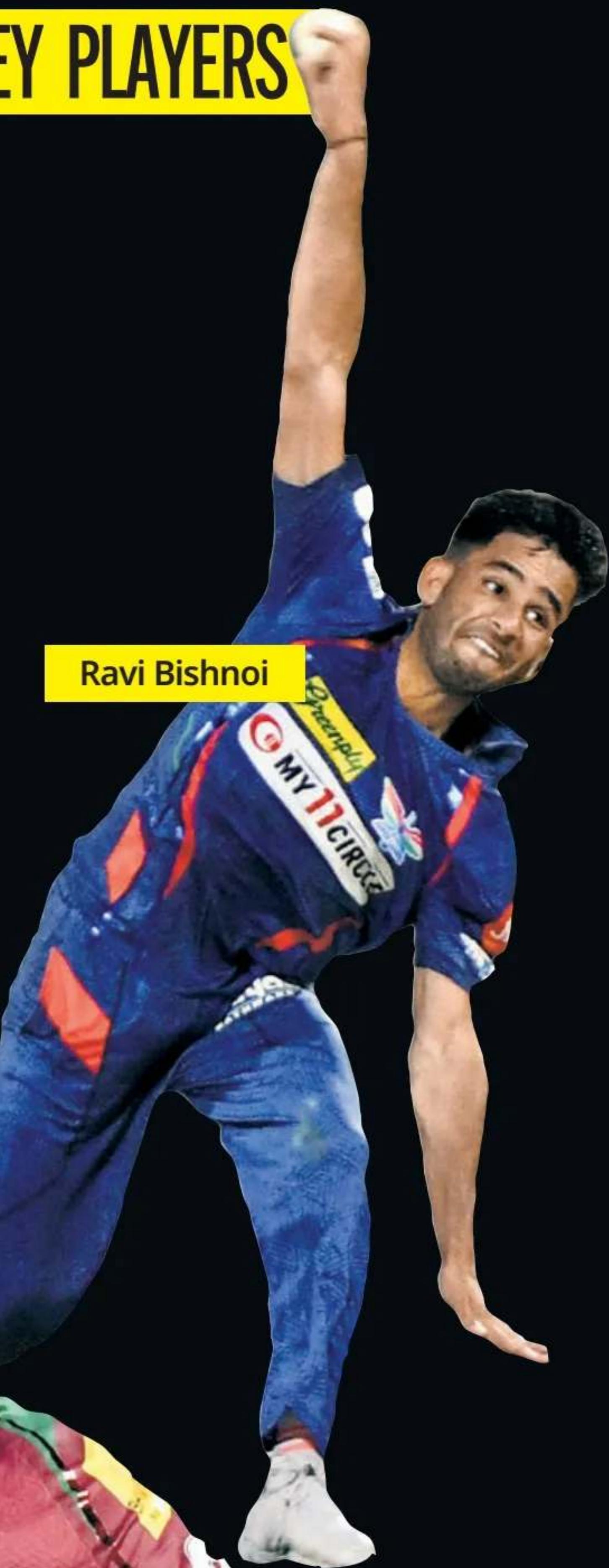
Despite Quinton de Kock's impressive 500-run season in 2022, his position was usurped by Kyle Mayers in the subsequent year. The acquisition of Devdutt Padikkal has now created a surplus of top-order options, posing a strategic challenge.

The middle order presents concerns with Krunal Pandya, Marcus Stoinis, and Deepak Hooda experiencing a dip in form over recent months. But the inclusion of Nicholas Pooran adds a proven match-winner to the batting line-up, while Ayush Badoni stands ready to contribute when required.

In the bowling department, Shivam Mavi, brought in to replace Avesh Khan, strengthens the domestic pace options alongside Yash Thakur and Mohsin Khan. Leg-spinner Ravi Bishnoi emerges as a crucial element in the bowling attack.

The addition of West Indian sensation Shamar Joseph, replacing the rapid Mark Wood, adds an element of unpredictability. Wood was withdrawn by the ECB to manage his workload ahead of the T20 World Cup and Tests against the West Indies and Sri Lanka.

Ravi Bishnoi



Nicholas Pooran





Captain: Hardik Pandya

## PREDICTION

Mumbai is one of the most well-balanced teams in IPL 2024, giving it a strong chance of winning a record-equalling sixth title. While Hardik is a proven player, it will still require some effort to effectively manage the team and block out the distractions caused by the ongoing captaincy saga.

Matches

247

Won

138

MI

# KEY PLAYERS

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**H**ardik Pandya's return to Mumbai Indians was marked by significant developments. The franchise's strategic decision to appoint him as captain, emphasising a long-term vision, garnered mixed reactions. Notably, opinions diverged among supporters, with some advocating for Suryakumar Yadav or Jasprit Bumrah as potential captaincy choices.

Mumbai Indians, renowned for its robust Indian core, now entrust Pandya with the responsibility of fostering a positive atmosphere in a star-studded dressing room while evolving into his leadership role.

Having previously captained Gujarat Titans, Pandya has significant leadership experience, which will be buoyed by MI's cricketing acumen, on and off the field. This was evident in the team's recent acquisitions during the auction, such as South Africa's fast-bowling talent, Gerald Coetzee, and Sri Lanka's Dilshan Madushanka. The combined total spent on these players amounted to ₹9.60 crore, defying expectations that franchises would splurge, particularly on Coetzee.

Despite initial concerns about spin resources, Mumbai addressed the issue effectively within budget constraints. The team secured the versatile Mohammad Nabi from Afghanistan, known for his batting prowess, to complement the seasoned leg-spinner Piyush Chawla. Additionally, the acquisition of Shreyas Gopal at his base price of ₹20 lakh further strengthens Mumbai Indians' squad.



Jasprit Bumrah



Gerald Coetzee

**TITLES : 5**

(2013, 2015, 2017,  
2019, 2020)



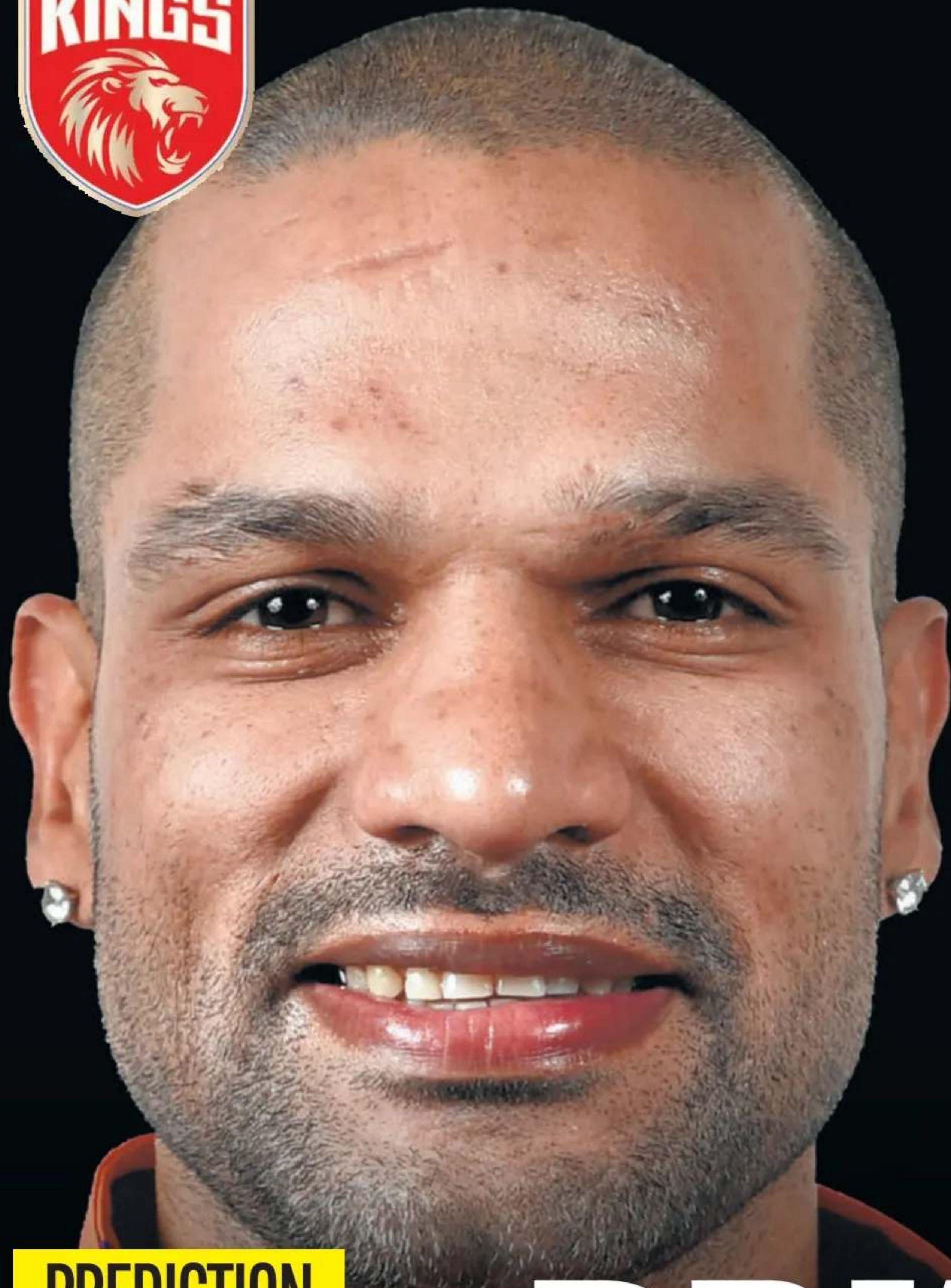
Captain: Shikhar Dhawan

Matches

232

Won

104



## PREDICTION

Punjab Kings, once in contention for the playoffs last season, needs a firing first eleven to succeed this year.

However, any signs of trouble could disrupt the team combination, leading to a familiar, underwhelming end.

# PBKS

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Punjab Kings aimed to address its glaring weakness from the previous season, death bowling, by acquiring Harshal Patel for a substantial ₹11.75 crore. Harshal, along with Arshdeep Singh and Kagiso Rabada, aims to improve the Kings' high conceding rate of 11.25 runs per over in the death overs. Nathan Ellis, with an impressive haul of 13 wickets in 2023, could step in for Rabada if his economy rate becomes problematic.

Rahul Chahar is entrusted with the spin department, with hopes that he replicates his sub-eight-per-over economy rate from the previous season. Sam Curran, with a hefty price tag of ₹18.5 crore, needs to deliver better returns than his modest 2023 performance of 276 runs and 10 wickets at an economy of over 10. Jonny Bairstow and Liam Livingstone play pivotal roles in the Kings' aggressive T20 approach, with Rilee Rossouw providing backup for the middle order alongside Jitesh Sharma.

A notable gap in the line-up is the absence of a star Indian batter. Captain Shikhar Dhawan, past his prime, might face challenges, and opener Prabhsimran Singh's plateaued performances add to the concern. The team will look to Rishi Dhawan as a utility all-rounder. Punjab Kings will play all its home games this year at the new Mullanpur Stadium.

## KEY PLAYERS



Jonny Bairstow

Arshdeep Singh



Captain: Faf du Plessis



Matches

241

Won

114

RCB

## PREDICTION

RCB's hardcore fans will want nothing but a maiden title. But their dreams look likely to be dashed again after their side failed to plug a few glaring holes in the auction.

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Royal Challenger Bangalore and Virat Kohli have tried to bring home an Indian Premier League title 16 times and have failed in each of their attempts.

As the 17th season of the IPL rolls in, RCB will look to end its rut finally.

Much like in the past, RCB remains a batting-heavy team, with the balance tilting towards its top order, consisting of skipper Faf du Plessis, Kohli, Rajat Patidar and Glenn Maxwell.

RCB made headlines by acquiring Australian all-rounder Cameron Green, slated for the No. 5 position and providing du Plessis with an extra pace-bowling choice. The Bengaluru-based team aggressively pursued foreign pacers in the auction, securing Alzarri Joseph (₹11.50 crore), Tom Curran (₹1.5 crore), and Lockie Ferguson (₹2 crore).

However, with du Plessis, Maxwell, and Green likely occupying three of the four foreign slots, only one of the newly acquired pacers will secure a spot in RCB's playing XI. Mohammed Siraj is a definite inclusion, leaving Yash Dayal and Akash Deep to contend for the remaining spot.

RCB appears to face a shortage in the spin-bowling department, relying on veteran spinner Karn Sharma, inexperienced Mayank Dagar, and Maxwell's part-time spin.

Given the uncertainties in the bowling lineup, RCB may continue relying on its batting strength, a strategy yet to bring home a trophy.

## KEY PLAYERS



Mohammed Siraj

Virat Kohli



Matches

206

Won

101

Captain: Sanju Samson

## PREDICTION

Royals knew they had a strong squad before the auction and focused only on securing backups for each role. This could be the season when the 16-year-old wait for silverware ends.

RR

## KEY PLAYERS



Yashasvi Jaiswal

Jos Buttler

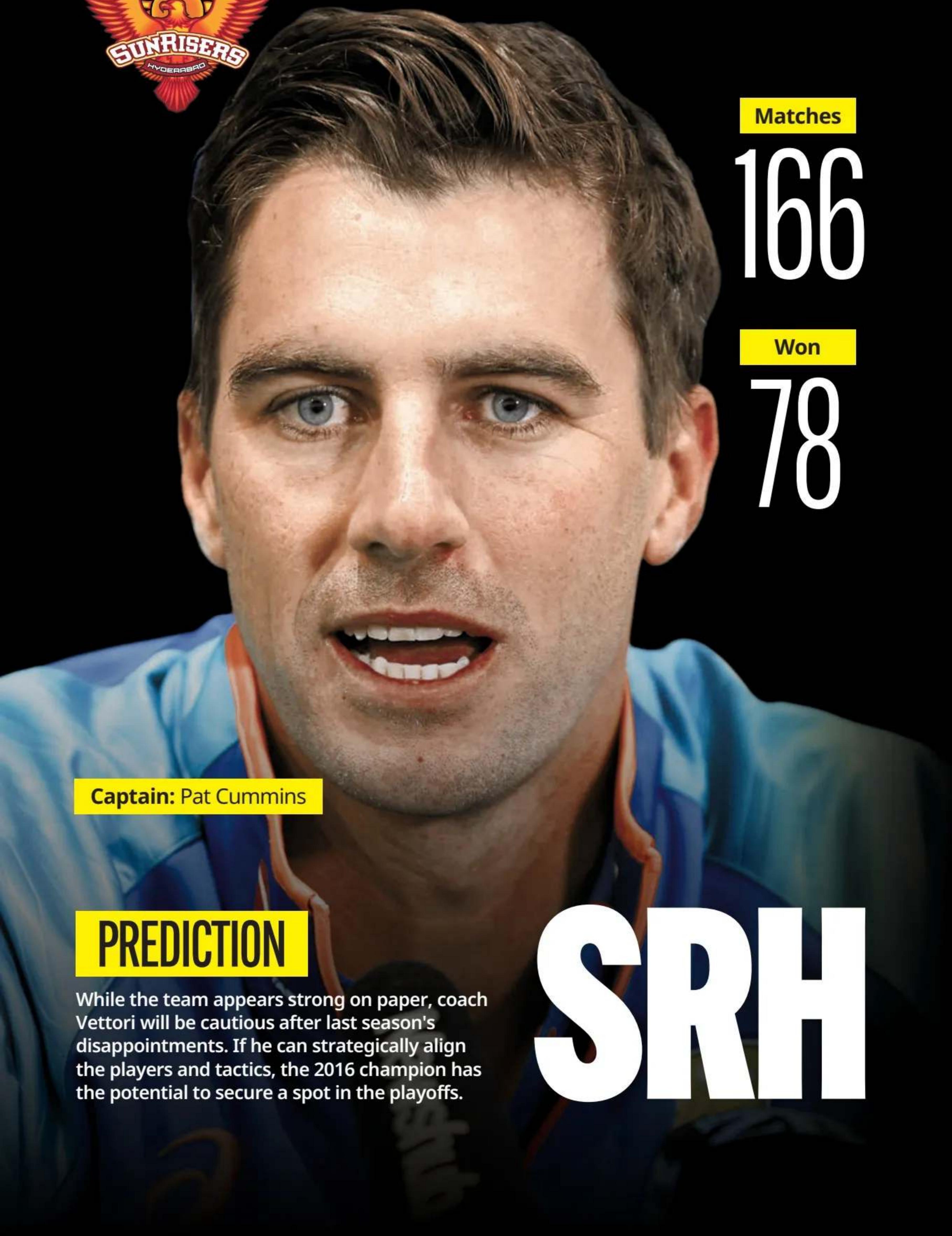
TITLES: 1  
(2008)

Over the past two years, Rajasthan Royals has meticulously built its team, evident in its impressive performances — it has the joint-second most wins since IPL 2022, with 17 victories in 31 matches. By retaining the majority of its playing XI from the previous season, the Sanju Samson-led team oozes confidence.

Royals have a well-established batting line-up, with Yashasvi Jaiswal, Jos Buttler, Samson, and Shimron Hetmyer forming the core. To mitigate its over-reliance on a single anchor, RR strategically introduced Donovan Ferreira and, more recently, Rovman Powell, infusing additional power in the middle-order. The inclusion of Indian talent like Riyan Parag and Dhruv Jurel bolsters this formidable line-up.

A noteworthy shift for RR this season is its emphasis on recruiting specialists rather than all-rounders, with only three in its ranks — R. Ashwin, Parag, and Abid Mushtaq. This underscores the significance of the Impact Player rule. Given Royals' penchant for innovative strategies, fans can anticipate unconventional decisions.

In the bowling department, RR maintains continuity while securing a reliable backup for Trent Boult in Nandre Burger, a South African left-arm pacer with a distinct style — he relies on extra bounce rather than swing. The middle-overs will witness the seasoned Ashwin-Yuzvendra Chahal bowling partnership, supported by Indian speedsters Avesh Khan, Kuldeep Sen and Navdeep Saini. RR, however, will miss the services of its lanky pacer Prasidh Krishna for a second consecutive season.



Matches

166

Won

78

Captain: Pat Cummins

## PREDICTION

While the team appears strong on paper, coach Vettori will be cautious after last season's disappointments. If he can strategically align the players and tactics, the 2016 champion has the potential to secure a spot in the playoffs.

SRH

# KEY PLAYERS

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**S**unrisers Hyderabad faces a conundrum after the significant signing of Pat Cummins, dealing with an abundance of overseas players. Trying to accommodate eight players into four slots raises challenges for team balance. The hefty ₹20.5 crore investment in Cummins suggested a potential leadership shift under head coach Daniel Vettori, and it was confirmed when SRH announced Cummins as captain for the next season. Travis Head's impressive T20 strike rate of 152-plus in 2024 may impact the position of last season's captain, Aiden Markram.

Choosing Markram might mean missing out on players like Heinrich Klaasen and Glenn Phillips. Additionally, only one among Marco Jansen, Fazalhaq Farooqi, or Wanindu Hasaranga may find a spot in the playing XI, with Hasaranga having an edge due to the existing Indian pace trio of Bhuvneshwar Kumar, Umran Malik, and T. Natarajan.

Beyond overseas slots, Sunrisers have clear roles for Indian players, including Mayank Agarwal, Rahul Tripathi, Abhishek Sharma, the second-highest run-getter in the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy (SMAT) this season, and Washington Sundar. With the addition of Upendra Yadav, who scored at a whopping rate of 172 in the SMAT, the team aims to bolster its lower-middle order.

**TITLES: 1**  
**(2016)**



Travis Head

Bhuvneshwar Kumar

# THE OPENING SALVO

On average, in a T20 match, openers face 40 deliveries, translating to one-third of the total balls a team could face.

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**O**f the many factors that could determine a T20 team's fate, none is as prominent as the performance of its opening pair.

On average, in a T20 match, openers face 40 deliveries, translating to one-third of the total balls a team could face. The runs they score and the rate at which they do it are vital to the team's fortune in a tournament.

The situation is no different in the IPL. In the past 16 editions, only one team (Mumbai Indians in 2013) has managed to win the title without its opening pair aggregating 300+ runs in a season.

Teams have grown to recognise the need to place their best players up front, with Royal Challengers



Bangalore's promotion of Virat Kohli as an opener being the most significant example.

Here are the possible opening combinations for each IPL side going into the 17th edition of the tournament.

## CSK

The success of the Ruturaj Gaikwad-Devon Conway combination was the cornerstone of Chennai Super Kings' title win last season. CSK, though, will be without Conway, at least for the first half of IPL 2024, due to a thumb injury. In

the newly acquired Rachin Ravindra, CSK has a nearly like-for-like replacement for Conway. In addition to being a left-hander, the 24-year-old Kiwi can also provide a few handy overs with his off-spin. The experienced Ajinkya Rahane, who had an impressive first season with CSK, is a left-field option to partner Gaikwad up top.

## RR

Rajasthan Royals is one of the few teams heading into the 2024 IPL season unworried about its opening pair. Yashasvi Jaiswal and Jos Buttler



provide the Royals with a rare combination of stability and explosiveness. The left-right combination has scored 933 runs for the first wicket in 28 innings in the IPL at an eye-catching run rate of 8.88. Jaiswal's recent exploits in Test cricket — he scored two double-hundreds against England — will only add to his confidence going into the IPL.

## LSG

Much like Rajasthan Royals, Lucknow Super Giants also has a well-settled left-right opening

partnership in Quinton de Kock and KL Rahul. LSG, though, will be sweating over the fitness of skipper Rahul, who injured his quadriceps during the England Test series. It also doesn't help that de Kock had an unflattering SA20 campaign, where the left-hander averaged 19.36 with a strike rate of 123.12. The addition of left-handed batter Devdutt Padikkal offers LSG another option to structure its opening combination.

## SRH

After trying seven different pairs

**Kicking up a storm:** Virat Kohli and Faf du Plessis formed the most successful opening pair of IPL 2023, scoring 939 runs in 14 innings, with five 50-plus and three 100-plus partnerships. SPORTZPICS/IPL

up top last season, Sunrisers Hyderabad enters IPL 2024 without a definite answer to who its openers are. With the Hyderabad-based side spending nearly Rs. 7 crore on Travis Head, it only seems likely that the Australian ODI World Cup hero will be slotted at the top of the order. While the experienced Mayank Agarwal is the most plausible partner for Head, all-rounder Abhishek Sharma, Anmolpreet Singh, and Rahul Tripathi offer a few more alternatives as well.

## PBKS

Prabhsimran Singh's maiden IPL hundred, against Delhi Capitals last season, is likely to give him a longer rope as the Punjab Kings opener, alongside skipper Shikhar Dhawan. Dhawan, though, will be expected to do much of the heavy lifting, with the left-hander scoring nearly 20 per cent of his team's runs in both seasons with Punjab Kings. The Kings also have the option of bringing in the explosive Jonny Bairstow, which would, though, come at the cost of team balance.

## MI

The five-time champion Mumbai Indians will deploy Rohit Sharma and Ishan Kishan at the top. Freed from the captaincy responsibilities — as Hardik Pandya takes over the reins for MI this season — Rohit is expected to lead the charge with the bat. Meanwhile, his opening partner, Ishan, will have a point to prove after he missed out on a central contract. Together, Ishan and Rohit have amassed 963 runs over the past two seasons and remain pivotal to the team's fortunes, even after the latter has



**In good touch:** Yashasvi Jaiswal, who recently became the fastest Indian to reach 1000 runs as an opener in men's Tests, would like to carry that form into this year's IPL. SPORTZPICS/IPL

struggled to dominate the batting charts since 2017.

## RCB

In the RCB camp, Kohli and Faf du Plessis form a dynamic opening duo. The 2023 season's most successful pair scored 939 runs in 14 innings, with five 50-plus and three 100-plus partnerships.

The ever-batting-dependent RCB will need its opening pair to fire once more. However, concerns linger over Du Plessis' recent form — he managed 239 in 11 innings —

highlighted by his inconsistent performances in the SA20 Championship and the inactivity of the former Indian captain, who has only played two T20s after IPL 2023. Yet, their experience and familiarity with Bengaluru's conditions make them indispensable to RCB's aspirations.

## GT

As for Gujarat Titans, the Orange Cap holder in IPL 2023, Shubman Gill, shoulders the responsibility of steering the team in the absence of Hardik. With the T20 World Cup approaching, the 24-year-old faces the daunting task of shepherding the back-to-back finalist with both bat and as captain. Teaming up with Wriddhiman Saha, who has found renewed confidence in the top order, he provides stability to the

**Overcoming lean patch:** Freed from the captaincy responsibilities — as Hardik Pandya takes over the reins for MI this season — Rohit Sharma is expected to lead the charge with the bat this year. GETTY IMAGES

Titans' batting lineup. The pair added 590 runs at a 145.32 strike rate in IPL 2023.

## DC

Delhi Capitals relies on the explosive combination of David Warner and Prithvi Shaw at the top. Warner's batting approach will be facilitated by the return of regular captain Rishabh Pant, allowing him to start on an attacking note. Shaw, after a decent domestic season, looks to make an impact from the outset, aiming to provide solid starts



for the Capitals. With Mitchell Marsh, Harry Brook, and Yash Dhull, DC also possesses quality replacements for its first-choice opening pair.

## KKR

Kolkata Knight Riders continues

to grapple with its opening conundrum. Having experimented with eight different pairs in the previous campaign — the most by any team — with none scoring over 100 together, it seeks stability. Rahmanullah Gurbaz and Jason Roy added 64 in four innings, while N. Jagadeesan and Roy combined for

83 in a solitary innings. Venkatesh Iyer could be paired up with Gurbaz at the top to accommodate Mitchell Starc, Andre Russell, and Sunil Narine.

Despite having only played one innings together, the right-left combination could be persisted with.

### Successful opening pairs in IPL

Pair	Innings	Runs	Average	100	50
1 S. Dhawan, D. A. Warner (Sunrisers Hyderabad)	48	2220	47.23	6	12
2 G. Gambhir, R. V. Uthappa (Kolkata Knight Riders)	39	1478	37.89	3	9
3 S. Dhawan, P. P. Shaw (Delhi Capitals)	44	1461	33.2	2	9
4 J. M. Bairstow, D. A. Warner (Sunrisers Hyderabad)	24	1401	58.37	5	7
5 M. A. Agarwal, K. L. Rahul (Kings XI Punjab, Punjab Kings)	24	1363	56.79	4	7
6 B. B. McCullum, D. R. Smith (Chennai Super Kings, Gujarat Lions)	38	1363	35.86	3	7
7 M. E. K. Hussey, M. Vijay (Chennai Super Kings)	34	1360	41.21	2	11
8 Q. de Kock, R. G. Sharma (Mumbai Indians)	37	1269	34.29	0	10
9 C. H. Gayle, V. Kohli (Royal Challengers Bangalore)	28	1210	46.53	4	4
10 D. P. Conway, R. D. Gaikwad (Chennai Super Kings)	22	1208	54.9	4	6



**IPL calling:** Monty Desai left Atlanta, USA, and flew to Jaipur to work with IPL franchise Rajasthan Royals as one of its main talent scouts for more than half a decade. EMMANUEL YOGINI

# IPL bridges the old and the new, on and off the pitch

Over time, the IPL has emerged as a highly successful global sports league, fostering opportunities **for both current and retired Indian cricketers.**

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**A**fter a lengthy conversation with Zubin Bharucha, Director of High Performance at Rajasthan Royals, over emails and calls, Monty Desai decided to leave Atlanta and travel to Jaipur to explore something new. It was mid-2008, just a few months after the inaugural season of the Indian Premier League (IPL). Despite the presence of cricket legends and

Bollywood superstars, the first edition of the cash-rich league raised more questions than answers. The focus on glamour rather than the game left concerns about the long-term viability of the project and its impact on Indian cricket. However, over the next 16 years, the IPL not only became one of the most successful sports leagues globally but also created opportunities for both current players and retired Indian cricketers.

"One of the first things that Zubin told me back then was that the

league is going to expand and they were looking at an Indian coach for scouting and development work. That's why I came back to India," Desai says.

In that era, the nuances of scouting were not widely understood, and the requirements were unclear. However, franchises such as Rajasthan Royals, Mumbai Indians, and Kolkata Knight Riders displayed foresight by engaging former cricketers to traverse the country and watch countless cricket matches to secure the most



promising talents for their teams. "Back then, it was a trial and error method as there were no formula for it," Desai, who worked for seven seasons at Rajasthan Royals, says.

**Scouts used to earn between Rs 6 lakh to Rs 10 lakh annually. Now, the salaries have significantly risen and vary based on the scouts' profiles.** "With the IPL, a lot of former cricketers and people who are passionate about the game have been able to be associated with it in various sectors and that's the best part about it," Desai says.

"Even some of the lesser known players are also part of scouting now because they have the eye, and are curious about tracking a player - not just his game but also his background. So, everything put together, the concept of scouting is fast evolving and there are more and more opportunities..."

More than a decade ago, Mumbai Indians roped in former New Zealand captain and erstwhile India coach John Wright as the chief of scouting. India international Rahul Sanghvi joined alongside him. Taking a cue from Mumbai Indians, Delhi Capitals hired Pravin Amre, Saba Karim, whereas Punjab Kings has availed the services of Reetinder Singh Sodhi and VRV Singh over the years.

Franchises typically maintain a team of five to six scouts, each assigned to specific zones. They

primarily focus on BCCI-approved age-group tournaments, state-level U-19 and U-23 tournaments, and the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy held just before the IPL auction.

A scout, on condition of anonymity, reveals that the job involves discovering new talents, closely monitoring them for at least three to four local tournaments, and providing insights into their strengths and weaknesses to the franchise's analysts and coaches. The final decision on whether a player fits into the team's plans rests with the coaching staff.

**In contrast to the past preference for notable overseas coaches, Indian coaches are now securing prominent roles. For instance, Kolkata Knight Riders appointed Chandrakant Pandit as its head coach last season,** recognising his success with teams like Madhya Pradesh and Vidarbha in domestic tournaments. While domestic coaches like Bharucha, Vijay Dahiya, Ajay Ratra, Sunil Joshi, Joydeep Mukherjee, Dishant Yagnik, and Trevor Gonsalves have long been part of the system as assistant coaches, Pandit marked a significant shift as the first high-profile domestic coach in the head coach role.

"The best part about the IPL is the fact that there are so many opportunities and it's not restricted to just cricketing affairs. Now, there are several cricketers who are hired by

**Big leap:** Chandrakant Pandit, a highly regarded coach on the Indian domestic circuit, is KKR's first Indian head coach. SPORTZPICS/IPL

teams for specific specialist roles and that also creates newer opportunities and employment," Pandit says.

"I know one of the spinners who is called by different franchises to help out spinners. Similarly, former fast bowlers are invited to specially conduct 15-day camps to help out the fast bowlers in respective franchises," Pandit says. "I won't call it a job, but it's certainly an opportunity for former cricketers to be part of the game. Now, no former player can complain of not getting anything after retirement because there are various ways to be connected to the game through the IPL."

Pandit highlights the transformation from the past when cricketers were uncertain about their post-retirement prospects. **The IPL now serves as a platform for players to showcase their skills and secure employment, extending beyond roles in scouting or coaching.** In the inaugural edition, Shishir Hattangadi, the former Mumbai captain, served as the CEO of the now-defunct Deccan Chargers. Presently, broadcasting has taken centre stage, with numerous former players joining this sector.

According to industry insiders, the pay structure for domestic coaches varies based on their profile and experience. A renowned domestic coach could earn up to Rs 2 crore per season, while assistant coaches typically receive between Rs 25 to 50 lakh (approximately). However, players with a substantial tenure representing India naturally have greater bargaining power.

A similar trend is observed in the broadcast sector. In earlier times, only a handful of top retired Indian cricketers engaged in broadcast and commentary for the IPL. As the league expanded, the broadcast coverage expanded to several regional languages, in addition to English and Hindi.

Previously, Star Sports, the global rights holder, offered IPL



**Switching hats:** After troubling batters for years with seam and swing, Irfan Pathan now provides his insights into the gentleman's game from behind the microphone.

G.P. SAMPATH KUMAR

commentary in six languages from 2018. By 2022, this number increased to eight, including English, Hindi, Bengali, Kannada, Malayalam, Tamil, Telugu, and Marathi. In the 2023 season, Jio Cinemas and Star Sports introduced commentary services in Gujarati, Odia, Bhojpuri, and Punjabi, catering to a diverse domestic audience. This year, there will be a Haryanvi feed as well.

Former India fast bowler Irfan Pathan, who is now into mentoring and commentary, believes that the IPL is the 'biggest cricketing job factory ever'. "If you look at it, so many retired cricketers have found newer avenues. Even if you have not played in the IPL, after retirement, you have options of making vlogs, getting commentary stints and those two months are busy for all," Pathan says.

Apart from the global feed that's assigned by the BCCI, which has a separate panel of commentators, the broadcasters also engage more than 50 to 100 former players for their

regional commentary and chat shows. The pay package varies between Rs 25 to Rs 2 crore depending on the grade and the category. "No other cricketing league has been able to pull off something like the IPL, and as the league grows and the revenue increases, it has a direct impact on allied sectors as well, and that provides several openings for former players," Pathan points out.

"Not just cricket, even other sectors - tourism, hotels, hospitality - also boom, so during those two months, there's an economic progress as well. That automatically trickles down to other sector and the people associated with it."

Ever since the tournament began, overseas coaches and commentators have also bagged lucrative deals and the trend continues.

"The competition has also gone up," says Deep Dasgupta. The former India wicketkeeper, who retired from all forms of the game more than a decade ago, has been a noted commentator and broadcaster. He currently heads Chennai Super Kings' academy in England. "If you look from the perspective of the sports industry, the more it grows, the whole ecosystem grows. So, obviously, the competition is intense, but then, it's also in a much better shape that

where things were maybe 20 years ago," Dasgupta says.

There are also flip sides to it. "The market has become competitive with more and more people wanting to get into the groove. Earlier, maybe from a pool of five, you could choose three commentators, but now, you need to pick ten or twelve from a pool of 100, so it is challenging," Dasgupta says.

Given the global nature of the IPL, broadcasters make a conscious effort to maintain a balanced representation of both Indian and overseas experts in their lineup. This emphasis on diversity has led to increased opportunities for players, particularly in regional languages.

"Earlier, things were not that streamlined, but now, with broadcast in so many languages - Marathi, Telugu, Tamil, Bengali - the market has opened up, creating job opportunities and for a league to grow, these are great signs," says Pandit, who's had brief stints in commentary in the past.

Over the last five years, quite a few noted Ranji Trophy cricketers — Dhawal Kulkarni, Amol Muzumdar, Manoj Tiwary, Shreevats Goswami, Hanuma Vihari, Abhinav Mukund — have joined the regional commentary set up. To add further gloss to the coverage last season, Sports18 added former India women's team captain Jhulan Goswami to its roster for Bengali commentary.

Several retired players have found opportunities to work overseas, thanks to Indian franchises investing in various international leagues. "But the number is less," points out a franchise official. The BCCI does not allow its players to feature in overseas leagues, and there are some informal obligations for the staff involved with domestic cricket. "India's domestic tournaments are on around that time, so obviously, the franchises prefer local coaches for the overseas leagues," a franchise insider says.

Not long ago, a retirement from the game often meant the end of road for a cricketer, but IPL has been a glimmer of hope; a platform to stay associated with the game and also earn a living.



# Spinning into the spotlight

The IPL extravaganza has put an otherwise shy and soft-spoken Sai Kishore **front and centre** of Indian cricket's assembly line of talent.

Ayan Acharya

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**A**gile and athletic, R. Sai Kishore has been one of the masterminds of Tamil Nadu's recent white-ball success. The lanky Sai Kishore **has won back-to-back IPL titles** with Chennai Super Kings (CSK) and Gujarat Titans (GT).

The dedication and usefulness that the 27-year-old bowler brings to the pitch sparked debate among fans as to whether CSK should have given him a game over the three seasons he was part of its squad. "Although I did not get a game during my three seasons with CSK, the Rs 20 lakh contract made a big difference. Before that, I had to pay for kits and training

from my pocket. After I joined CSK, all that was taken care of. I was able to focus entirely on the game and not worry about the finances," Sai Kishore had told Sportstar earlier.

Nevertheless, the Titans signed him at the IPL mega auction in 2022 for a whopping Rs 3 crore, 15 times his base price of Rs 20 lakh.

His frugal left-arm spin ultimately proved to be the ideal foil to Rashid Khan in the Titans set-up, with Kishore's six wickets in five matches at an economy rate of under eight proving crucial in GT's title run in 2022. However, he did not play a single game in 2023.

Recently, Sai Kishore, having taken over Tamil Nadu's full-time captaincy in this Ranji Trophy season, **led the team to its first Ranji Trophy semifinal** since 2016–17. He even made his international debut last year during the first quarterfinal against Nepal at the Hangzhou Asian Games, snapping up one wicket for 25 runs in his four overs.

since 2016–17. He even made his international debut last year during the first quarterfinal against Nepal at the Hangzhou Asian Games, snapping up one wicket for 25 runs in his four overs.

Sai Kishore's few charms lie in the background, not centre stage, like when he couldn't be spotted with his jubilant teammates on the top tier during GT's open-top bus parade in 2022 because "I am a little shy, so I did not go up (smiles)."

One of the fascinations of IPL is that it is simultaneously intensely local and utterly globalised, with all the high-octane action it brings. And this T20 extravaganza has put an otherwise soft-spoken Sai Kishore front and centre of GT's attack and Indian cricket's assembly line of talent.



SPORTZPICS / IPL

# The late bloomer leaves his mark

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Tamil Nadu left-arm pacer T. Natarajan catapulted into the limelight when Kings XI Punjab (now Punjab Kings) snapped him up for **30 times his base price** of Rs. 10 lakh, making him the highest-paid uncapped Indian player in the 2017 auction.

"I've been part of the IPL for a while now, where I've had a chance to learn from and interact with Indian and overseas players. It was difficult for me at first, but things have only gotten better."

When I was picked by Punjab,

everyone started talking and writing about me; it was a new feeling. My parents were very, very happy. I'm the eldest of five siblings — three sisters and one brother. They were all excited (laughs)," Natarajan had told Sportstar in an earlier interview.

Natarajan didn't get a game in the 2018 and 2019 IPL seasons but had a memorable tournament with the Sunrisers Hyderabad in the UAE in 2020, where he carved a niche for his expert use of the yorkers.

Since then, Natarajan has taken giant strides, **including making his debut in all three formats during India's tour of Australia in 2020-21.** However, he has had to deal with a

T. Natarajan's fairy tale commenced in the 2020 IPL when he emerged from the SRH bench, introducing himself as the **specialist in delivering impeccable yorkers.**

recurring knee injury since his memorable tour Down Under.

In his seven international games so far, Natarajan has taken 13 wickets at under 30.

So for Natarajan, who hails from Chinnappampatti, a small village 35 km from Salem in Tamil Nadu, IPL has been life-changing.

The 32-year-old has even **launched a cricket academy in his village**, where local kids are trained.

Natarajan may have been a late bloomer, having had to wait a long time for his breakthrough at the highest level, but his white-ball success has informed the social utilitarianism that has followed.



SPORTZPICS / IPL

# From bylanes of Tonk to corridors of IPL fame

Khaleel Ahmed's **initial encounter with India's most lucrative sporting league** traces back to 2016, when the Delhi Daredevils secured his services for ₹10 lakh.

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**K**haleel Ahmed's introduction to India's most lucrative sporting league dates back to 2016 when the Delhi Daredevils

acquired the left-arm pacer for ₹10 lakh. However, for two seasons, securing a spot in the final eleven proved elusive.

Undeterred, Khaleel persisted, confident that his dedication would eventually grant him the opportunity to showcase his skills before an enthusiastic crowd.

Fast forward to January 2018, and the IPL auction room in Bengaluru witnessed a pivotal moment.

Richard Madley's resonant voice declared, "Sold for three hundred (₹3 crore). Thank you, Sunrisers Hyderabad."

The ceremonial mallet had made its decisive strike.

In Tonk, a city 95 km south of Jaipur, jubilation erupted at the Blair Cricket Academy as news of Khaleel's inclusion in a new IPL side spread.

Among those celebrating, **none was happier than Imtiyaz Ali Khan, the astute talent scout who had recognised Khaleel's potential years earlier.**

Expressing gratitude upon his return to the village, Khaleel went beyond words, making a meaningful gesture.

Imtiyaz recalls, "The moment Khaleel got the contract, he got me a 56-inch LED TV. A coach should always extend his hand for giving and not taking."

Clarifying his gesture, Khaleel stated, "This is not a gift. This is just to watch me play on the big screen."

Despite gaining international recognition with the coveted India cap during the 2018 Asia Cup, Khaleel remains a down-to-earth person, according to Imtiyaz.

There were challenges along the way, including setbacks in the IPL and exclusion from the national team in 2019.

But his triumphant return to the Delhi franchise (now Capitals) in 2022, claiming 16 wickets in 10 games, highlighted his prowess.

In the subsequent edition, **Khaleel secured nine wickets from as many games, leading to DC's decision to retain him for IPL 2024.**

Imtiyaz reflects, "Perhaps the best thing about Khaleel is his never-say-die attitude. He never stops believing."



THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

# The innings of a lifetime

Manvinder Bisla's 89 in the final against Chennai Super Kings was **his highest score** of the 2012 IPL season.

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**M**anvinder Bisla, like many aspiring domestic cricketers, nurtured dreams of donning the national colours and playing before a boisterous crowd.

Although he never went on to play international cricket, there came a turning point in 2012 when Bisla played a match-winning innings of 48-ball 89 to help the Kolkata Knight Riders beat Chennai Super Kings to secure its maiden Indian Premier League title.

Reflecting on his cricket journey, Bisla, a wicketkeeper-batter who grew up during the era of MS Dhoni,

Parthiv Patel, and Dinesh Karthik, expresses, "Not having played for India, IPL is the next best thing that could have happened to me." Despite moments like a match-winning partnership of 200 with Dhoni for Air India Blue in 2009, the IPL triumph stands unparalleled.

He fondly recalls a special moment with KKR's co-owner, Shah Rukh Khan, who always encouraged him. "I trusted you. You did it," he said after the final. Those kind words are better than any gift," Bisla emphasises.

Having debuted with Kings XI Punjab (now Punjab Kings) in 2010 after being part of the 2009 IPL-winning Deccan Chargers' setup,

Bisla cherished playing alongside cricketing legends like Brett Lee, Irfan Pathan, Kumar Sangakkara, Mahela Jayawardene, and Yuvraj Singh. "Yuvi paaji is someone who I have always admired," he shares.

While acknowledging the financial stability the league brings, he also highlights the joy of seeing his family happy after his remarkable innings.

Now at 39, Bisla looks back at his career with contentment, stating, "I have no regrets. I tried my best and am thankful to God for everything."

"You've to be special to put on the blue shirt. It is important that you stay 100 per cent committed. After that, if you don't get it, you accept and move on."

The journey, though lacking an international cap, is one he accepts with peace and gratitude.



SPORTZPICS / IPL

# Shining with resilience

Rinku Singh's exploits for KKR last IPL did not go unnoticed, as he **earned his maiden international callup**.

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**R**inku Singh has gone from manning the boundary ropes as a substitute fielder for the majority of his Indian Premier League career to becoming a household name by launching the ball beyond them.

His five consecutive sixes in the final over against Gujarat Titans, when Kolkata Knight Riders needed 28 runs to win off five balls, will be etched in gilded letters in cricketing folklore.

The ever-smiling Rinku had made a bold statement earlier in his life when he refused to mop the floor at

a coaching centre to make ends meet for a family of seven. Rinku's father, Khanchandra, who delivered LPG cylinders door-to-door, wasn't supportive of his third son playing cricket and was only convinced when he won a bike for his 'Man-of-the-Tournament' performance at a local school competition.

After being retained by Kolkata for Rs. 55 lakh and cementing his position as specialist 'finisher', Rinku has all but ended his family's ordeal.

"I have seen Rinku evolve as an individual," KKR assistant coach Abhishek Nayar was quoted as saying by media outlets earlier.

"The first time I saw him in the

KKR setup and spent time with him when he came to Mumbai, he was a guy with very low self-belief," Nayar recalled. "But one thing that has been a standout for Rinku is the fact that he has always had this ability to work hard, listen, and learn."

Rinku's pyrotechnics in last year's IPL — he scored 474 in 14 innings at a strike-rate of 149.52 — did not go unnoticed, as he earned his maiden international callup when he was added to the India squad for the T20I series in Ireland.

Known for his ability to perform in the death overs, Rinku has become a middle-order enforcer in T20Is.

His notable innings include top-scoring with 46 against Australia and an unbeaten 68 against South Africa, despite the latter ending in a loss.

His dynamic performances highlight his impact on Indian cricket.



SPORTZPICS / IPL

# When left is right

Left-arm medium pacer Arshdeep Singh turned heads in the IPL with his ability to **bowl the tough overs** at the death.

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From poker-faced celebrations while bowling in the death overs early in his career to the cold death stare while dismissing batters in the PowerPlay in IPL 2023, Arshdeep Singh's story is one of belief, adaptability, and evolution. The Punjab pacer was handed the unforgiving task of bowling the death overs in IPL 2020 when Arshdeep's ice-cool temperament under pressure first caught the eye. In the following season, he emerged as the second-highest wicket-taker for Punjab Kings with 18 wickets at an average of 19 and impressed with his ability to hold his own in the late overs, so much so that he was the

only player, other than Mayank Agarwal, to be retained by the franchise ahead of the major revamp in 2022.

"He's (Arshdeep) growing with each game, and with each outing he gets better; he is somebody who has a big heart, and I have seen him in close quarters while playing in the IPL," Arshdeep's previous captain at Punjab Kings, K.L. Rahul, was quoted as saying.

"To be the number one death bowler in a team that has (Kagiso) Rabada speaks highly of him. We (India) always want a left-arm seamer, and it is great to have someone like Arshdeep," Rahul added.

The left-arm pacer's control at the death only improved as he ended IPL 2022 with the second-best economy

rate in the phase, his 7.58 only second to the inimitable genius of Jasprit Bumrah. Little did Arshdeep know that he would soon be filling Bumrah's shoes, albeit in a very different role, at the international level. Arshdeep made his international debut against England in July 2022 and picked two for 18 in India's 50-run win.

His first over was a maiden against Jason Roy in the PowerPlay and he would soon take up the mantle of leading the pack with the new ball at the T20 World Cup, in place of the injured Bumrah. Arshdeep duly answered the call of duty as he dismissed Babar Azam and Mohammed Rizwan in the PowerPlay to set the tone for India at the MCG and was the leading wicket-taker for the Men in Blue in the tournament.

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1st

**Feted:** Ravichandran Ashwin received his 100th Test cap as he became the 14th cricketer to reach the landmark for India. R.V. MOORTHY



2nd

**Tears of joy:** An emotional Jonny Bairstow with his mother Janet as he receives his 100th Test cap for England. GETTY IMAGES

3rd

**Summing up:** Ollie Pope is dejected after he is stumped off Kuldeep Yadav's delivery in the first innings as Zak Crawley, from the other end, looks on. REUTERS





## 4th

**Boss man:** Rohit Sharma scored his 12th Test century, fourth as captain, to help India get a 259-run lead in the first innings. R.V. MOORTHY

**THE INDIAN SKIPPER SMASHED  
13 FOURS AND THREE SIXES  
DURING HIS KNOCK**

# 5th

**On song:** Shubman Gill got to his fourth Test century and was involved in a 171-run partnership with skipper Rohit Sharma. R.V. MOORTHY



# 6th

**Mt. 700:** England's James Anderson scaled heights in Dharamsala as he became only the third bowler, and the only fast bowler, to pick 700 Test wickets. R.V. MOORTHY



# 7th

**Magician:** R. Ashwin became the fourth bowler to pick a five-wicket haul in his 100th Test. He took nine wickets in the match and finished the five-match series with most scalps — 26. R.V. MOORTHY



# WIN INDIA SETTLED, ENGLAND HAS MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS

Four debutants stepped up in the absence of key players, signalling **a promising future for Indian cricket** amid the ongoing WTC cycle (2023-25).

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The finale in Dharamsala had all the trappings of India's unyielding dominance at home, which stretched to a 17th series win on the bounce, spilling over into its 12th year. The contest was wrapped up in nine sessions; the Indian spin troika had nabbed 18 wickets, and the opposition batters capitulated meekly twice in three days.

Though triumphs at home in the longest format have come to be seen as a rite of passage in this part of the world, this 4-1 series win marked a crucial inflection point in the trajectory of Indian Test cricket that went beyond the temporal gains of consolidating the top spot in the World Test Championship (WTC) standings, toppling Australia to claim the pole position in the ICC rankings, and stopping the evangelism of Bazball in its tracks.

With India missing 227 precious

Test caps in Virat Kohli, Mohammed Shami, and KL Rahul (ruled out after the first Test), four of the five debutants in the series not only filled the void with distinction but also pointed to a bright future on the horizon for a side that could usher in a period of transition following the ongoing WTC cycle (2023-25).

They weren't just hastily slotted into stop-gap measures but held the promise of taking on specific roles in the long term. Sarfaraz Khan lived up to the hype of his highly anticipated



FOLLOWING ITS SHOCK WIN IN THE FIRST TEST IN HYDERABAD, WHICH PROMPTED INDIA TO PREPARE PITCHES ON WHICH BATTING ISN'T A LOTTERY, IT HAS BEEN A CAMPAIGN OF 'WHAT IF'S' FOR ENGLAND



debut with a counter-attacking 66-ball 62 in Rajkot. A rare full-blooded sweeper of the ball, he brings a very different dimension to India's middle-order. His strike rate of 79.36, the second highest for India, belies his ability to pick his moments, which was on display in Dharamsala when he crawled to nine off 30 balls before rushing to a 55-ball fifty.

Dhruv Jurel's debut coincided with Sarfaraz's but was somewhat lost amidst the fanfare until he had his moment under the sun in Ranchi, first with a situation-defying 149-ball 90 and then a match-winning, unbeaten 39 in a nerve-battering run-chase. Drafted into the squad as

backup to a backup wicketkeeper, K.S. Bharat, Jurel's classical technique against spin makes him a solid No. 7 option, and his ability to bat with the tail means he can hold his own even as a specialist batter.

With Jasprit Bumrah rested for what turned out to be the series-clincher in Ranchi, Akash Deep's three-wicket haul in the opening burst on the first day was a testament to the quality of India's assembly line of pacers coming through the ranks in domestic cricket. With Akash hitting the deck hard at a good pace and probing away in the channel outside off, Bumrah's workload could be

**Hunting the Three Lions:** India thrashed England by an innings and 64 runs to seal a comprehensive 4-1 series victory in Dharamshala.

R.V. MOORTHY

managed without compromising too much on quality.

After a prolific Ranji Trophy season, Devdutt Padikkal showed he also belongs to the next level with a visually pleasing 65 in the final Test. He uses his range rather than feet to good effect against spin and unlocks a unique facet in a right-hander-heavy middle-order.

The impressive outings for the debutants came on the back of



**Man of the moment:** Yashasvi Jaiswal became the fastest Indian to reach 1000 runs as an opener in men's Tests, bettering the record held by captain Rohit Sharma. He was adjudged Man of the Series. R.V. MOORTHY

creditable performances during the England Lions' tour of India, which ran parallel to the Test series. The only outlier was Rajat Patidar, who struck two hundreds against the Lions but couldn't find his feet at the top level.

India's heartening success with inexperience was pervasive. Yashasvi Jaiswal and Kuldeep Yadav, with a combined 12 Test caps ahead of the series, shouldered the bulk of the load. While Jaiswal broke a slew of records on his way to becoming only the second India to breach the 700-run mark in a single Test series and cemented the opener's slot, Kuldeep returned from the Test wilderness to vindicate the management's refreshing departure from its selection policy.

With Ravindra Jadeja injured following the first Test, India may have been tempted to draft in all-rounder Washington Sundar but instead opted for Kuldeep's superior skills with the ball. The result was a

19-wicket haul at a miserly average of 20.15, significantly superior to that of Ravichandran Ashwin (24.8) and Jadeja (25.05).

Kuldeep is often the one to make way when the management wants to shoehorn in an extra batter or pacer. But when Kuldeep's spin trumped Axar Patel's prowess with the bat against spin in making way for Sarfaraz's debut, that policy turned a corner. He repaid the faith with the bat too, putting a premium on his wicket by facing 362 balls, significantly more than what Jonny Bairstow could manage (290).

The series also helped solidify India's top three. After a string of low scores since opting to drop down to No. 3 in the West Indies, Shubman Gill was under pressure before redeeming himself with two hundreds and a couple of gritty second-innings knocks to all but seal his spot. With skipper Rohit Sharma also among the runs, the top-order looks settled, but the return of Kohli and Rahul could ruffle some feathers in the middle-order when Bangladesh and New Zealand come touring. With India concluding its WTC cycle with a five-match showdown Down Under late in the year, the complexion of the middle-order could drastically change

with the conditions.

England, on the other hand, doesn't have the luxury of looking that far ahead. That it languishes in the eighth spot in the WTC standings after 10 matches against two of its most formidable opponents — Australia and India — should pose an existential question.

Following its shock win in the first Test in Hyderabad, which prompted India to prepare pitches on which batting isn't a lottery, it has been a campaign of 'what ifs' for England.

Perhaps it could have opted for a five-man bowling attack rather than saddling an under-fire Joe Root with 118 overs. What if Root hadn't been as besotted with his reverse scoop when England was on top in the first innings in Rajkot?

Perhaps a tweak in approach could have seen it over the line in a record chase on a benign Visakhapatnam wicket. Could Ben Stokes have done more with the ball than making a guest appearance on the penultimate day of the series?

The gospel of Bazball arrived with temptation but left Indian shores with a faint whisper: England registered the second-highest run rate (3.84) ever by a visiting side in India. A shade lower, India's 3.49 was more than a handful for it. To



**Brains trust:**  
India captain Rohit Sharma and head coach Rahul Dravid have a chat. Rohit's form with the bat in this series helped solidify the team's top three. PTI

England's credit, it did run the host close at times despite an inexperienced spin attack. But barring Zak Crawley's consistency, flashes of Ollie Pope and Ben Duckett's exhilarating hundreds, and some inspired spells from James Anderson, Stokes, and Brendon McCullum will do well to recall little more than glorious defeat from this tour.



## THOUGH TRIUMPHS AT HOME IN THE LONGEST FORMAT HAVE COME TO BE SEEN AS A RITE OF PASSAGE IN THIS PART OF THE WORLD, THIS 4-1 SERIES WIN MARKED A CRUCIAL INFLECTION POINT IN THE TRAJECTORY OF INDIAN TEST CRICKET



Having lost five out of 13 Tests since the start of 2023, it is perhaps time to add substance to the spectacle; otherwise, England's revolution may have run its course.



**Insatiable appetite:** England's James Anderson became the first pace bowler to take 700 Test wickets after dismissing India's Kuldeep Yadav in the fifth Test. GETTY IMAGES

# Young Bashir hogs limelight

**20}** Shoaib Bashir's age when he claimed his maiden five-wicket haul (5/119) of his Test career in the Ranchi Test match against India on 23 February 2024. This makes him the second youngest England bowler to do so after fellow team-mate Rehan Ahmed, who was 18y-128d when he claimed 5/48 against Pakistan in Karachi on 19 December 2022. Shoaib also became the third youngest to claim a five-wicket haul against India and the second youngest visiting bowler in India after South African left-arm wrist spinner Paul Adams, who was 19y-324d when he claimed 6/55 in Kanpur on 9 December 1996. Shoaib Bashir is now the fifth youngest off-spinner to claim a five-wicket haul.

## Youngest England bowler to claim a five-wicket haul in Tests

Age	Bowler	Bowling	Against	Venue	Date	Result	Bowling style
18y-128d	Rehan Ahmed	5/48	Pakistan	Karachi	19 Dec 2022	Won	Right-arm leg-break
20y-135d	Shoaib Bashir	5/119	India	Ranchi	25 Feb 2024	Lost	Right-arm off-break
20y-182d	Bill Voce	7/70	West Indies	Port of Spain	6 Feb 1930	Won	Left-arm fast medium

## Youngest bowler to claim a five-wicket haul in Tests against India

Age	Bowler	Bowling	For	Venue	Date	Result	Bowling style
19y-324d+	Paul Adams	6/55	South Africa	Kanpur	9 Dec 1996	Lost	Left-arm wrist spin
19-357d	Umar Gul	5/31	Pakistan	Lahore	5 Apr 2004	Won	Right-arm fast medium
20y-135d+	Shoaib Bashir	5/119	India	Ranchi	25 Feb 2024	Lost	Right-arm off-break

+ in India

## Youngest off-spin bowler to claim a five-wicket haul in Test cricket

Age	Bowler	Bowling	For	Against	Venue	Date	Result
18y-284d	Nayeem Hasan	5/61	Ban	WI	Chattogram	23 Nov 2018	Won
18y-361d	Mehidy Hasan Miraz	6/80	Ban	Eng	Chattogram	20 Oct 2016	Lost
19y-332d+	S. Venkataraghavan	8/72	Ind	NZ	Delhi	19 Mar 1965	Won
20y-112d	Saqilain Mushtaq	5/89	Pak	SL	Colombo RPS	20 Apr 1997	Drawn
20y-135d+	Shoaib Bashir	5/119	Eng	India	Ranchi	25 Feb 2024	Lost

+ in India

**4}** The number of players who have the distinction of scoring 1000-plus runs and claiming 100-plus wickets against England in Tests. India's R. Ashwin became the latest to join this elite group on 23 February 2024 when he took his 100th English wicket (Jonny Bairstow) in Ranchi on the opening day of the Test. Ashwin had already completed 1000 runs against England during this series in Visakhapatnam earlier. For the record, 128 batters have aggregated 1000 or more runs, and only 20 bowlers have claimed over 100 wickets against England. Of these many players, only a handful have managed to do the double against this opponent. Incidentally, R. Ashwin is the quickest to do so, in just 23 Tests.

## 1000-plus and 100-plus wickets against England in Test cricket

Player	For	Mts	Runs	Ave.	100/50	Wkts	Ave.	5i/10m	Career	Tests taken to do the double
George Giffen	Aus	31	1238	23.36	1/6	103	27.10	7/1	1881-1896	30
Monty Noble	Aus	39	1905	30.73	1/15	115	24.87	9/2	1898-1909	29
Garry Sobers	WI	36	3214	60.64	10/13	102	32.58	3/0	1954-1974	36
R. Ashwin	Ind	23	1086	33.94	1/6	105	28.89	7/1	2012-	23



England's Shoaib Bashir.  
AFP

**9 }** The number of bowlers who have claimed 100 or more Test wickets against a single opponent more than once. In the fourth Test match in Ranchi on 23 February 2024, R. Ashwin claimed his 100th wicket against England to become the latest bowler and the first Indian and the second Asian to achieve 100 wickets against two or more Test opponents. Last season, R. Ashwin had his 100th wicket against Australia in the Delhi Test match. West Indian Lance Gibbs was the first to do so against multiple opponents, in February 1976 against Australia in Melbourne, after getting a 100-wicket haul against England. The only Indian other than Ashwin to achieve 100-plus Test wickets against an opponent is Anil Kumble (111 wickets against Australia). Muttiah Muralitharan, Shane Warne and James Anderson are the only bowlers to achieve this against three opponents.

#### Bowlers claiming 100 or more wickets against two or more opponents

Occasions	Bowlers	For	1st opponent	2nd opponent	3rd opponent
3	M. Muralitharan	SL	112 v Eng	105 v Ind	104 v SA
3	Shane Warne	Aus	195 v Eng	130 v SA	103 v NZ
3	James Anderson	Eng	147 v Ind	117 v Aus	103 v SA
2	Lance Gibbs	WI	103 v Aus	100 v Eng	
2	Courtney Walsh	WI	145 v Eng	135 v Aus	
2	Curtly Ambrose	WI	164 v Eng	128 v Aus	
2	Glenn McGrath	Aus	157 v Eng	110 v WI	
2	Nathan Lyon	Aus	121 v Eng	110 v Eng	
2	R. Ashwin	Ind	114 v Aus	105 v Eng	

**4 }** The number of bowlers who have claimed 80 or more Test wickets against a single opponent at home. R. Ashwin now has 91 wickets against England in Tests at home, which is the most by an Indian bowler against any opponent in India. Previously, Harbhajan Singh had claimed 86 wickets against Australia at home. Only England's Stuart Broad and James Anderson have claimed over 100 wickets against an opponent at home.

#### Most Test wickets against an opponent at home

Wkts	Bowler	For	Opp	Mts	Balls	Runs	Ave.	S/R	5i/10m	Best
106	Stuart Broad	Eng	Aus	25	5058	2825	26.65	47.72	6/1	8-15
105	James Anderson	Eng	Ind	22	5404	2464	23.47	51.47	6/0	5-20
91	R Ashwin	Ind	Eng	17	5178	2572	28.26	56.90	7/1	6-55
86	Harbhajan Singh	Ind	Aus	14	4672	2187	25.43	54.33	7/3	8-84
79	Ian Botham	Eng	Aus	18	4251	2130	26.96	53.81	6/1	6-95

#### Most Test wickets for Indian bowlers against an opponent at home

Wkts	Bowler	Opp	Mts	Balls	Runs	Ave.	S/R	5i/10m	Best
91	R. Ashwin	Eng	17	5178	2572	28.26	56.90	7/1	6-55
86	Harbhajan Singh	Aus	14	4672	2187	25.43	54.33	7/3	8-84
75	R. Ashwin	Aus	12	3799	1590	21.20	50.65	7/1	7-103
71	Ravindra Jadeja	Aus	12	3406	1298	18.28	47.97	5/1	7-42

**3 }** The number of Indian bowlers to claim a Test five-wicket haul after the age of 37 years. R. Ashwin, when he claimed his record-equaling 35th five-wicket haul (with Anil Kumble) in the second innings in Ranchi against England on 25 February 2024, became the second oldest Indian to achieve this in a Test match. Vinoo Mankad was 37 years, 309 days, when he claimed 5/64 against Pakistan in Peshawar on 15 February 1955. The last 37-plus bowler before Ashwin to take a five-wicket haul against England was Ireland's paceman Tim Murtagh (5/13) at Lord's in July 2019 at 37y-356d.

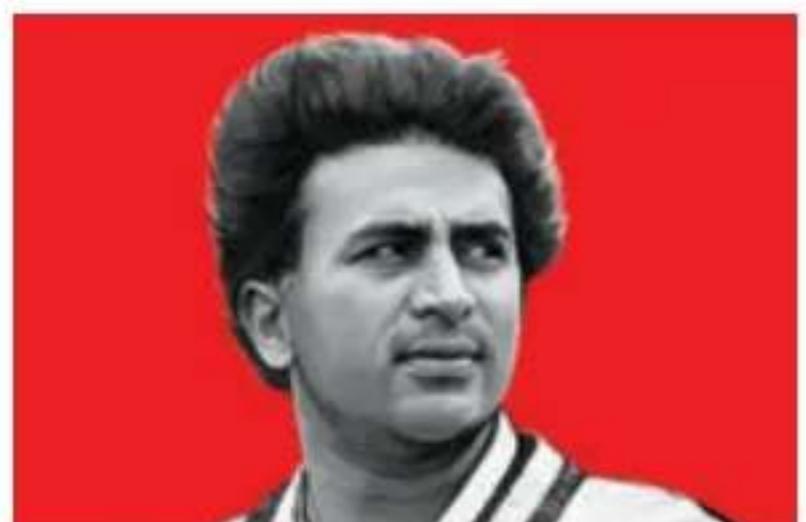
#### Oldest to claim a five-wicket haul for India in Tests

Age	Bowler	Bowl	Opp	Venue	Achieved on	Result
37y-309d	Vinoo Mankad	5/64	Pakistan	Peshawar	15 Feb 1955	Drawn
37y-161d	R. Ashwin	5/51	England	Ranchi	25 Feb 2024	Won
37y-70d	Anil Kumble	5/84	Australia	Melbourne	26 Dec 2007	Lost

All records are correct and updated until 6 March 2024.



India's Ravichandran Ashwin. PTI



## ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar



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STORIES

# RANJI TROPHY MATCH FEES NEEDS TO BE DOUBLED

With a **slab system** of more fees for every 10 matches played, not many will make themselves unavailable as there would be good money playing first-class cricket too.

**W**hat a walloping, what great fun to watch a young India team demolish an England team that had arrived in India with the usual 'we are doing you a favour' attitude that brings a smirk on the faces of those Indian officials who go to receive them at various airports.

The Aussies have been invariably better, looking to adapt themselves to the culture and not look down their noses at us natives. It also helps that the Aussies recognise a golden goose when they see one, and the IPL is certainly a humongous golden goose.

Not only do Aussie players, some so memorably described by Kevin Pietersen as second or third-grade cricketers, go for astronomical amounts, but there are also Aussie coaches, physios, trainers, and anybody who is their golf and beer buddy in the IPL coaching staff, making more money than they do at home.

Not to mention the commentators, where sometimes it feels more like the Australian Premier League than the Indian Premier League. The Aussies are likeable and don't have the supercilious attitude that the Poms generally have. That perhaps explains why the acrimony that was seen between the Indian and Australian teams has vanished almost entirely, even though the intensity of the contests between the countries hasn't reduced one bit.

That is also the reason why the England and Indian players get into verbal skirmishes so

often when they are playing against each other. Not a lot of England players are picked in the IPL, mainly because they can be withdrawn by their Board anytime for a preparation camp or something, which leaves the franchises in a lurch.

Some of them can't stomach the fees for which some of the Indian players are bought and compare their achievements at the international level when the IPL auction dynamics can be so volatile and hard to explain or even understand. So you see more lip in the India-England encounters than in any other India match. That's why the pleasure of beating England is always greater.

**When Ben Stokes' team came to India, there was a buzz around it as they had started to play a brand of aggressive batting that the British media dubbed Bazball.** This was because the new coach Brendon McCullum's nickname is Baz. He encouraged the players to always go in with a positive mindset and to keep at it, irrespective of the result. The batting thus became ultra-aggressive, with players encouraged to hit sixes and fours with a dot ball as the least preferred option. Stokes wanted his players to play like rock stars, whatever that means, and with England beginning to win games, the fans and the media were euphoric.

There's no doubt that the batting was exciting to watch with the way the scoreboard rattled along. They even scored more than 500 runs in a day in Pakistan and then went on to win all the Test matches played there.



However, all this batting frenzy was on good batting pitches against opposition attacks that weren't quite threatening. When the Aussies came last year for The Ashes, though the first ball of the series was driven for a boundary, England lost the first two Test matches. The Aussies quickly reduced the lengths and began to bang the ball in short, and the English batters, who are inherently front-foot players, began to struggle.

One of the tenets of the new regime of McCullum and Stokes is that they will stick by their players, come what may. While this is admirable, it also smacks of closed doors for anyone outside the squad, especially the batters. So despite Jonny Bairstow once again looking totally out of his depth against the Indian spinners, he was persisted with throughout this series with unsurprisingly dire results.

Playing fearlessly is another thing we often

**Making a point:** "What great fun to watch a young India team demolish an England team that had arrived in India with the usual 'we are doing you a favour' attitude, says the author." GETTYIMAGES

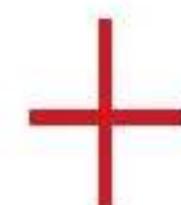
hear. What is there to fear if, despite not delivering, there is a cool retainer cheque waiting for the player? Remove that cushion of comfort whereby if a player is dropped, he goes back to playing only County cricket or Ranji Trophy cricket, and then we will see who is fearless and who is not.

The BCCI must be congratulated for coming up with a scheme that will reward those who make themselves available to play most if not all of the Tests in the year by tripling their match fees. This is entirely Secretary Jay Shah's initiative and needs to be lauded, for sure.

That said, it's a sad state of affairs if a player has to be rewarded for making himself available to play for the country. **It once again boils down to the retainer contracts, where, whether you play or not, your bank manager will beam as he informs you the funds have arrived. The tripling of the match fees will have more effect if the retainers are done away with.** Maybe not fully, but with a minimum of 1 crore plus the reward of playing more Test matches. Then we will see how much workload factor comes in and sundry excuses like weddings of third cousins, birthdays, anniversaries, and such like to miss playing for India.

What really needs doubling, if not tripling, is the Ranji Trophy match fees, along with a slab system of more fees for every 10 matches played, for then not many will make themselves unavailable as there would be good money playing first-class cricket too.

Just to end, in the recently started Tennis Ball Premier League, some players were bought for double the amount that those Vidarbha and Mumbai players who have played every Ranji match this season will get. By all means, make the rich richer, but also look at those hardy souls who sweat and toil for more than 40 days in front of sparse crowds and end up getting 15 lakhs for their efforts.



**In the recently started Tennis Ball Premier League, some players were bought for double the amount that those Vidarbha and Mumbai players who have played every Ranji match this season will get**



AFP

# Nuwan Thushara's hat-trick helps Lankans clinch T20 series

1

The medium-pacer's feat **derailed** Bangladesh's run-chase and guided Sri Lanka to a 28-run win in the decider.

**Sparks fly, and tempers rage when Bangladesh and Sri Lanka face off**, and it was no different as the Lions claimed a 2-1 win against the Tigers in a fiercely contested T20I series.

With the series poised at 1-1, pacer Nuwan Thushara, who fetched a hefty sum from Mumbai Indians in the most recent IPL auction, claimed a hat-trick to derail Bangladesh's run-chase and guide

Sri Lanka to a 28-run win in the decider. Opener Kusal Mendis' 181 runs in three games were crucial for the visitor, and his form holds Sri Lanka in good stead ahead of the T20 World Cup.



2

**With the scheduling of the upcoming IPL facing logistical challenges due to the impending Lok Sabha elections** and the T20 World Cup in June, the league could see a greater number of double-headers as the organisers are keen on wrapping up the tournament by May 25 or 26. The T20 World Cup begins on June 1, and the BCCI would want to give its players time to prepare for conditions in the U.S. and West Indies, chairman of the IPL Governing Council Arun Dhumal (**above**) said. He is also confident of holding the entirety of the tournament in India, retaining the home-and-away format.



3

**New Zealand's 31-year wait for a Test win against Trans-Tasman rival Australia continued** as skipper Pat Cummins and Alex Carey's 81-run stand for the eighth wicket sealed the visitor's three-wicket win in the second Test in Christchurch. The Black Caps, celebrating stalwarts Kane Williamson and Tim Southee's 100th appearance in the longest format, failed to mark the occasion with what would have been a famous win and succumbed to a series sweep after having Australia in dire straits (80/5) while chasing 279. Nathan Lyon's 10-wicket haul had spun Australia to a 172-run win in the opening Test.



4

**Ireland created history by claiming its maiden Test win** since becoming a Full Member in 2017. After a spell of seven consecutive defeats in the format, captain Andy Balbirnie took it upon himself to steer his team to a six-wicket victory against Afghanistan. The Irish skipper struck an unbeaten half-century, helping his side tide over the loss of four early wickets in a chase of 111. Pacer Mark Adair's eight-wicket haul was also crucial in Ireland surpassing the likes of South Africa (12), Sri Lanka (14), India (25) and New Zealand (45) in terms of the fewest matches taken for a first Test win.



5

**The BCCI introduced the 'Test Cricket Incentive Scheme'** to provide additional financial rewards to India's men's Test cricketers. Now, a player who plays at least 75 per cent of India's Test matches in its annual cycle will earn Rs. 45 lakh per match in addition to the fixed match fee of Rs. 15 lakh. The players in the 50-75 per cent games bracket will earn a bonus of Rs. 30 lakh per game. The non-playing members of the squad will be paid half the amount. The move came days after the Board directed players to make themselves available for domestic tournaments to be eligible for national selection.



6

**Kolkata Knight Riders has named England's Phil Salt in its squad** for the upcoming IPL season after fellow Englishman Jason Roy pulled out of the tournament due to personal reasons. Salt went unsold at the auction in December after representing Delhi Capitals in nine games last season. He had a scorching T20I series in the Caribbean last year, where he hammered back-to-back centuries and topped the run-scoring charts (331 runs). Roy, also an attacking top-order batter, previously pulled out of the IPL in 2020 and 2022.

R. V. MOORTHY

AP

GETTY IMAGES



» RANJI TROPHY

# SHOWDOWN IN SURAT



Karnataka and Railways met in the group stage to produce an **exhilarating match up** at the Lalbhai Contractor Stadium in Surat, with Manish Pandey staying till the end to take the former home with just one wicket in hand.

**R**ed-ball cricket has its fair share of naysayers. It is often dismissed as an appendage by a generation spoiled by the glam and glitter of the shortest format. But, given a fair contest between bat and ball, the players' skill and temperament being tested to the extreme is a spectacle in itself.

The 2024 Ranji Trophy group-stage encounter between Karnataka and Railways at the Lalbhai Contractor Stadium in Surat served up an edge-of-the-seat thriller, with the game swaying to and fro on the final day.

The Railways waded through the short-ball ploy employed on the third morning by Karnataka to set a target of 226 for the visitor.

The home team then brought forth its entire reserve of energy and more onto the field, closing down every run and cheering for every stop executed.

Every rap on the pad or play-and-miss was met with vociferous appeals,



creating a cauldron-like atmosphere that was tough for even the seasoned batters to traverse.

Under the warm afternoon sun, tensions escalated as the spirited debutant, Rishabh Mishra, succeeded in unsettling Karnataka's wicketkeeper-batsman, S. Sharath. A volley of heated words transpired between the two, prompting the umpires to intervene as both teams made their way for tea.

Responding to the situation, the seasoned duo of Manish Pandey (left) and V. Vyshak showcased remarkable counterattacking skills, effectively silencing the Railways and compelling them to spread the field in an effort to protect the boundaries. The crowd swelled with each run scored by Karnataka, passionately rallying behind the former India international.

As Vyshak departed, leaving Karnataka in need of 29 runs, the atmosphere remained charged with

**Nerves of steel:** Manish Pandey (with bat) and V. Vyshak played crucial knocks to guide Karnataka to a thrilling one-wicket win over Railways. VIJAYSONEJI

anticipation. The chant of '*Do rupay ki Pepsi, Manish bhai sexy*' echoed through the stands near the dugout. Manish, in the dying moments of the day, treated the crowd to a masterful display of shot-making.

Amidst audible gasps and cheers, a moment of tension unfolded on the field and in the gallery when Manish and V. Koushik navigated a mix-up in the middle, surviving a couple of edges before ultimately guiding Karnataka to a hard-fought victory.

**Anish Pathiyil**

#### Local fervour

Once witness to Chetan Sharma's hat-trick in the 1987 World Cup against New Zealand, spectacles are now rare for the VCA Stadium at Civil Lines in Nagpur. Even international matches have been moved to the new stadium at Jamtha.

Washed up at its door and fallen out of the ranks in the Indian team, local boy Umesh Yadav — charting a comeback trail to the upper echelon — might not have matched the feat above, but it was fair consolation.

Also, to welcome the storied master, Chandrakant Pandit — once of its ranks, and now ushering a new domestic heavyweight in Madhya Pradesh — only elevated the occasion further.

Hence, no clarion call was needed for the Vidarbha faithful to bear witness to the team's Ranji Trophy semifinal against Madhya Pradesh.

From the solitary middle-tier stand at the Municipal Corporation End, the VCA Stadium at Civil Lines was rekindled to life.

Umesh stole the loudest cheers, unsurprisingly. The rhythmic stirring up, synchronised to perfection, growing louder as he loaded up to the popping crease, and bursting open at his leap and release made the 12th man for the home team. Extended periods away from the square, meant "Umesh, Umesh" chants reminded captain Akshay Wadkar that it was time to make a change to his bowling.

The sighting of Avesh Khan and Venkatesh Iyer — Indian team players, even if at the fringes, and though from the opposite camp — at the boundary rope inspirited the crowd. Adulation was reserved for Himanshu Mantri too, who was granted a standing ovation for his hundred in the first innings.

The attendance was a welcome change from the usual sight of empty stands at Ranji Trophy games. As Vidarbha wrapped up the affair on the morning of the final day, it took a moment to appreciate the support. Up on their feet, the fans swarmed the players in their embrace, spurring them on for their showdown against heavyweight Mumbai.

**Abhishek Saini**

**Delight for the fans:** A packed VCA Stadium threw their weight behind a victorious Vidarbha team, especially Umesh Yadav, who scalped three wickets in its semi-final against Madhya Pradesh. B.JOTIRAMALINGAM





FOR MORE STORIES

# A vision RCB collectively bought into

Despite not securing an IPL title, the men's team has maintained fervent fan support through effective marketing. RCB now wants to **couple this brand-building with on-field success** for its women's team.

**Mayank**

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**B**efore the first Women's Premier League auction, Royal Challengers Bangalore aimed to create a brand beyond just winning championships. It drew inspiration from its long-standing association with the Indian Premier League, where the men's team, despite not having won a title yet, continues to hold sway among home fans through its star players like Virat Kohli, AB de Villiers, and Chris Gayle, coupled with marketing and advertising muscle.

Now, RCB is trying to balance the same brand-building with on-field success, with its women's team. Smriti Mandhana's side, too, stumbled in the first season but has bounced back with a strong squad this year. **The RCB women played in front of their home crowd for the first time during the WPL 2024 season. In the heart of Bengaluru, the M. Chinnaswamy Stadium pulsated with energy as 26,000 voices merged into a deafening roar.** For Smriti Mandhana, the overwhelming reception during the toss at their tournament opener against UP Warriorz exemplified the unwavering home support.

In a chat with *Sportstar*, Mandhana said, "It was wonderful to be around the fans, especially during that toss. I don't think I will forget that moment for at least the next 2-3 years."

I'm definitely going to have that in the back of my head because that's pretty special. I was not able to hear what Mel (Jones) was saying there."

"We've heard a lot about the RCB fans but got a little

experience of what they actually bring, and more than pressure, we will take it as support. I heard Sophie (Molineux) say that the crowd was adding 20 runs to our total, which is true because they cheered every run, every wicket, and every dot as well," she added with a proud smile.

**Even for a stalwart like Ellyse Perry, accustomed to the pinnacle of sporting achievement, RCB's homecoming was nothing short of revelatory. "It was a brand-new experience.**

It was really special. And I think at the moment in women's cricket, those things keep happening, like it just gets bigger and better every year."

For Perry, whose illustrious career spans triumphs across cricketing formats and even on the football pitch, the allure of such experiences remains undiminished. "Even from the WPL last year, which was fantastic, coming to Bangalore here and now playing with our home fans at the M. Chinnaswamy Stadium, it was like a totally unique experience in all the years that I've played and never got a chance to do that. So it's pretty easy to be motivated and



**Partner in crime:** RCB captain Smriti Mandhana is seen discussing tactics with ace all-rounder Ellyse Perry. Mandhana says she is 'happy' Perry is fielding for her side and not others. SPORTZPICS/WPL

continue doing what I love," she affirmed.

Having players like Sophie Devine alongside Perry makes it easier for Mandhana to lead a young and dynamic team, a perspective sometimes overlooked from a leadership standpoint.

"Last year, when the auction happened, I was in two minds about how they (Perry and Devine) were going to adjust to being on your team because we've always played against each other for like eight to 10 years. I don't think we've ever spoken

to each other while playing because we both are, I think, reserved people."

The transition from rivals to teammates running with the same target eventually panned out to be smoother than expected.

"Last year, the campaign didn't go the way we wanted, but the kind of support they gave me... was something nice, and we bonded over that a lot more because sometimes when things are going well, you may not really understand the value, but when things are not going well and

then when we stick together, I think that's what makes these guys special," she added.

"With the experience they had, they kind of had everyone together; they even supported me a lot. This year we started talking from the first day, and it was easy because we kind of know each other now. It's amazing to have them around.

A lot of youngsters in India get inspired by both of them, and I'm happy that she's (Perry) fielding for our side and not for the others," Mandhana chuckled.

## » MEGHALAYA GAMES



The recently concluded Meghalaya Games **underscores** **the effort** of the state to break its conventional image and emerge as a formidable power in sports in North East India.

M. R. Praveen Chandran  
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**T**he hill-locked state of Meghalaya is on the move and it is earnestly trying to come out of the stereotyped image and perceived notion of being a one-sport, football-crazy state.

True, football is still the most popular sport in the state, and Shillong Lajong FC and its vibrant supporters have been the face of Meghalaya sports for quite sometime.

But it may no longer be the same given the frantic pace at which the Meghalaya State Government, under Conrad K. Sangma, is promoting sports and building infrastructure in the state.

The need to build a solid sports eco-system rose after the continued poor show in multi-discipline events like the National Games and Khelo India Games.

The State Government, along with Meghalaya State Olympic Association (MSOA), has tied up with Edge 10, a sports firm run by former Australian Olympians — Ian Campbell and Robert Kabbas, to identify and nurture talent.

The scheme has been running in the state for the last two years and has brought in some positive results with some sportspersons attached to the scheme winning medals in the recently concluded Meghalaya Games.

The fifth Meghalaya Games, which was held in Tura recently, was an important milestone in the history of the state. For the first time ever, the multi-discipline event was held away from the capital city of Shillong. In many ways, it was a dress rehearsal for the preparedness of the district to hold some events of the 40th National Games, which has been allotted to the state.

Around 3000 athletes and a huge number of officials descended on this quaint town — which is the district headquarters of West Garo Hills. For a week the town was a beehive of activity, and its organisational, hospitality and logistical abilities to conduct a multi-discipline event were tested.

But the district administration, with the help of 1500 volunteers, was able to conduct the Games smoothly, without any complaints. The State Government sanctioned ₹23 crore to cover the expenses for holding the games in Tura and every penny was properly utilised for the conduct of the event.



**Spirit of sport:** The Meghalaya State Government, under Conrad K. Sangma (in pic), is promoting sports and building infrastructure in the state. **Left:** Ri-Bhoi U18 girls' football team won gold after defeating East Khasi Hills in the final.

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



# MEGHALAYA

The opening and closing ceremonies and the football matches were held at the P.A. Sangma Sports Complex, which is the pride of Tura.

The state-of-the-art sports complex is being built at a cost of ₹127.7 crore and it will have an indoor stadium, a gymnasium, a swimming pool and facilities for conducting table tennis, squash and badminton events. The complex is still under construction and will be ready when Meghalaya hosts the 40th National Games.

The need to have more stadiums was answered to some extent with Tura getting the State's second

synthetic track. The new athletics stadium, named after Garo freedom fighter Po Togan Nengminja Sangma, was inaugurated for the Games by the Chief Minister, who reiterated his government's commitment to developing sports and said that the state would have new facilities soon.

"The new and refurbished infrastructure is part of a larger sports development plan, including Indoor Hall Hawakhana, Don Bosco College Basketball Court, and Rongkhon Swimming Pool. The Government is committed to investing in sports, with a focus on

better infrastructure, athletes' training, and empowerment of all stakeholders," he said.

President Draupadi Mumru inaugurated the Games in an impressive opening ceremony that showcased the cultural ethos of the State.

On the competition front, the seven-day event drew participants from all districts who took part in 20 disciplines besides three demonstration sports — Mawpin (a Khasi traditional game), Rah Mukrah (a Jaintia traditional game) and Wa' pong Sika (a Garo traditional game).

East Khasi Hills ended up as champion with a haul of 132 gold, 105 silver and 122 bronze medals while Ri-Bhoi came second with a total of 27 gold, 22 silver and 30 bronze medals. West Jaintia Hills was third with 68 medals including 25 gold, 18 silver and 25 bronze. Pdiangsuklang Syngwan of East Khasi Hills was the most bemedalled athlete of the Games with eight in total, including six gold, in the swimming events.

**« We have used the Meghalaya Games to test our capability and to improve infrastructure in the Tura district, which will also host a big number of events in the National Games. The Government has agreed to most of our proposals and has raised the cash incentives for sportspersons, winning medals in national and international events – John F. Kharshiing, working president, Meghalaya State Olympic Association (MSOA) »**



» CHEQUERED FLAG

# THE BULL SEES RED

In the 75th year of F1, Red Bull aims to **maintain its dominance** amidst internal turmoil, while Ferrari poses a growing challenge.

Dipak Ragav

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It is the 75th year of the FIA Formula One World Championship, and the sport faces a reckoning in its milestone year. Not long ago, F1 was booming, attracting new fans across the globe. The intense title battle in 2021 between Max Verstappen and Lewis Hamilton, which went down to the wire until the last lap of the last race, ignited a massive interest in the premier motorsports championship on the planet.

But two years have passed since the race in Abu Dhabi, and that season-long fight between the old guard and the upstart is now a distant memory.

The Verstappen-Red Bull Racing

combo has since steamrolled the opposition. If 2022 was a damp squib, with the Dutchman winning 15 out of 22 races, in 2023, he raised his game to another level, winning 19 out of 22 while his team won 21.

The current season is important for the sport's health, and a lot is riding on Red Bull's rivals stepping up to the plate and offering F1 fans something to look forward to.

However, right from pre-season testing, it was evident that Red Bull held a decent advantage over the pursuing pack. Unsurprisingly, Verstappen kick-started his title defence in style, posting easy wins in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia in the first two weekends of the year ahead of his teammate Sergio Perez.

## The pecking order

After the first two rounds, it is

**Trouble in paradise?**: The Christian Horner (R) episode has fuelled rumours that Max Verstappen (L) could leave Red Bull and join Mercedes after Hamilton's departure in 2025. GETTY IMAGES

clear that Red Bull has a nearly half-second advantage per lap over its rivals, at least in Verstappen's hands. Despite the gap being slightly narrower in qualifying, Red Bull has no match for its speed on race day.

The Adrian Newey-designed cars have been ahead of the curve since the current ground-effect cars came into being in 2022. Red Bull has continued to build on its early mover advantage. The first two races also had different car demands, and the fact that Red Bull aced both quite easily shows that it has a car that will be competitive on most tracks on the calendar.

Behind Red Bull, Ferrari has started the season well and has emerged as the closest challenger to the reigning champion. In Bahrain, Carlos Sainz, who is in his last season

# BEHIND RED BULL, FERRARI HAS STARTED THE SEASON WELL AND HAS EMERGED AS THE CLOSEST CHALLENGER TO THE REIGNING CHAMPIONS



at Ferrari, was aggressive in wheel-to-wheel combat to take a well-deserved third place. In Jeddah, the other Ferrari of Charles Leclerc completed the podium positions.

Sainz was forced to miss the race after participating in Thursday's practice sessions because of appendicitis. However, one of the best performances in Saudi Arabia was his replacement, Oliver Bearman, who made his F1 debut for Ferrari. The 18-year-old Briton got into the car on Friday morning for Free Practice-3 and qualified 11th before finishing seventh in the race, capping off an impressive performance on such short notice.

## Firing on track, imploding off it

Even as the team is dominating things on track, Red Bull Racing finds itself in a hot mess following allegations of inappropriate behaviour by its team boss, Christian Horner, with a female employee. The news emerged before the team's car launch in February, and a subsequent independent enquiry by

the parent Red Bull company cleared Horner of wrongdoing before the first race.

However, during the Bahrain GP weekend, a trove of WhatsApp chats and other evidence was leaked to journalists and key F1 personnel. While the authenticity of it is yet to be ascertained, it has brought out in the open simmering tensions inside the team.

Jos Verstappen, Max's father, threw oil into the fire when he said Horner's continuation is untenable, fuelling speculations that Verstappen could leave the championship-winning team, especially now that there is a vacant seat at Mercedes following Hamilton's decision to join Ferrari in 2025.

## Factory teams in trouble

Meanwhile, the two other factory-run teams, Mercedes and Alpine, have had a tough start to the season. Mercedes at least looked like it had turned around a corner during testing, setting some

**No surprise:** Max Verstappen kick-started his title defence in style, posting easy wins in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia in the first two weekends of the year ahead of his teammate Sergio Perez. GETTY IMAGES

headline-grabbing times. Still, the results from the first two races showed it is, at best, the third or even the fourth-fastest team on the grid. The team has struggled since the new regulations came into force in 2022, and the former champions have still not figured out the ideal operating windows for its cars.

At the other end of the spectrum, Alpine (part of the Renault Group) has had a torrid start to the campaign and is the slowest car on the grid.

Despite the full might of the Renault company behind it, it is an embarrassment for the team based in Enstone. The team has lost many key technical people, and the situation is akin to rats fleeing a sinking ship.



# LOOKING FOR A SILVER LINING

**Tough times:** Currently languishing at 11th in the points table, CFC is heading towards another underwhelming season. M. VEDHAN

Chennaiyin FC's loss to Hyderabad FC did not deter the **spirit of its fans**, as the team struggles for consistency in its performances.

It's not very common to see the home fans of a losing team give a Viking clap to the opposition victors. However, that is exactly what the Chennaiyin FC fans did after their side went down to Hyderabad FC.

Thangboi Singto's team, with an all-Indian contingent, overcame the odds to beat a fancied CFC and brought up its first win of the season. And the Supermachans, although modest in numbers, did not shy away from expressing their appreciation.

"A big salute to the Chennaiyin fans because they understood the situation despite supporting their home team. We had all the Indian boys tonight, and we were like underdogs. So, underdogs are always cheered upon, and today they did that," Singto said after the match.

The HFC coach was also vocal about what this victory means to the young squad.

"What CFC fans did was something commendable for Indian football. Of course, the foreigners are there always to help us, but when the Indian boys do well, I think they need a little bit of pat on the back, and those types of shouts really propel their confidence to a higher stage," he added.

**Sankar Narayanan EH**

#### A call to the fans

It has been four years since Chennaiyin FC last made the ISL playoffs, which included a memorable night at the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium. Close to 18,000 people turned up to watch their home side whallop FC Goa 4-1 in the first leg of the semifinal.

In the times since then, nights like

those have been few and far between. Currently languishing at 11th in the points table, CFC is heading towards another underwhelming season. The club's showing on the pitch was reflective of the poor attendance at the Nehru Stadium when Chennaiyin took on the then-league topper Odisha FC in a late evening clash. Despite just close to 1000 people turning up for the clash, in a nearly 36,000 seater stadium, the team provided a grandstand finish, with a stoppage-time winner.

Head coach Owen Coyle, who led the club back in 2019-20 in his first stint, feels the onus is on the team to bring the fans back into the stadium.

"It's all connected. When I came in (2019), there weren't big crowds initially. We have a loyal fanbase. When we are winning, the city feels good and people want to come out

and support us. So that is on us to give the performances," said the Scotsman.

A victory against Hyderabad FC, who hadn't registered a win in 18 matches this season, in the next match would have added momentum for the playoff-chasing Chennaiyin. Instead, it's defeat reiterates Chennaiyin's woes in recent times.

**Aashin Prasad**

#### For the love of the game

Anwar Ali is the darling of the Mohun Bagan SG fans. The talented defender is greatly appreciated for his mental fortitude that sees the player overcoming physical adversities time and again. The thousands who had come to cheer the team recently when it hosted Jamshedpur FC in its home at Salt Lake Stadium were pleasantly surprised to see a giant tifo proclaiming Anwar as 'The Phoenix: Rising from ashes'.

The player was making a comeback after recovering from a hamstring problem sooner than expected. This happened in the first ISL derby of the season against East Bengal as the player limped off the ground after playing for just 13 minutes. Previously in the season Anwar was out of action for a considerable period of time due to an ankle injury, which also saw him miss the AFC Asian Cup.

It is his refusal to give in to difficulties and distress and bounce back strongly each time earlier than expected is what makes him the favourite of the fans. This underscores his resolve to play the game at the highest competitive level in the country despite being



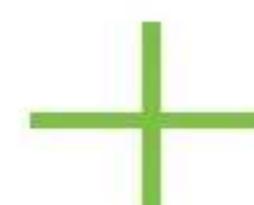
diagnosed with a rare heart condition that almost threatened to end his career at its very inception.

It was that determination to overcome all odds that continues to drive the gifted defender, who has time and again upheld the saying by the famous American footballer Alex Karras "toughness is in the soul and spirit, not in the muscles."

**Amitabha Das Sharma**

#### Bengaluru blues

If there is one ISL fixture that is a sure-shot sellout at the Sree Kanteerava Stadium, it is the Bengaluru FC-Kerala Blasters contest. Men and women dressed in yellow come swarming into town



**A victory against Hyderabad FC, who hadn't registered a win in 18 matches this season, would have added momentum for the playoff-chasing Chennaiyin.**

**Overcoming adversity:** Anwar Ali's (L) refusal to give in to difficulties and distress underscores his resolve to play the game at the highest competitive level despite being diagnosed with a rare heart condition that almost threatened to end his career. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

from the neighbouring state to support their beloved team. But for all their prayers and wishes, Blasters haven't ever won a game in Bengaluru. And it was the same yet again as BFC, which has struggled all-season to build a winning momentum, played the visitors off the park. To rub salt into the wounds, Blasters fans were also constantly reminded — through chants and banners — of the infamous walkout from last year when head coach Ivan Vukomanovic led the team off after a disagreement with the referee. According to Aristotle, a tragedy is generally accompanied by a change of fortune. Blasters are still waiting for it.

**N. Sudarshan**

## » FROM THE WORLD OF FOOTBALL

### CONCACAF GOLD CUP

1

#### USWNT lifts CONCACAF Gold Cup

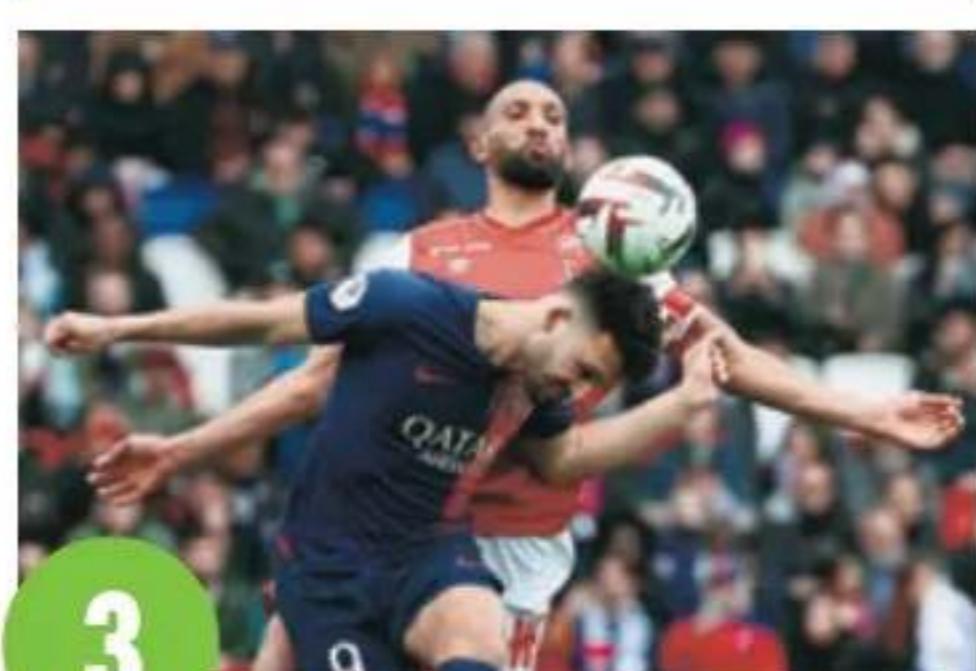
USWNT beat Brazil in the final and lifted the inaugural CONCACAF Women's Gold Cup in California. Skipper Lindsey Horan headed home in first-half injury time and scored the solitary goal of the night courtesy of an inviting deep cross to the back post by Emily Fox.



2

#### Messi's Barcelona contract napkin on auction

The napkin, which has the contract that secured 13-year-old Lionel Messi for Barcelona, will now be sold in an online auction at Bonhams, a privately owned auction house based in London, on behalf of Argentine agent Horacio Gaggioli. The auction is set to begin on March 18 and will run until March 27. The starting bid is about \$380,000 and the prized possession is expected to fetch up to \$635,000.



3

#### PSG's third draw in a row comes after a disappointing stalemate against lowly Reims

Ligue 1 leader Paris Saint-Germain was held to a 2-2 home draw by ninth-placed Reims. Coach Luis Enrique benched top-scorer Kylian Mbappe, who played only the last 20 minutes. This was the third league draw in a row for the French giant as it lost crucial points in the table.

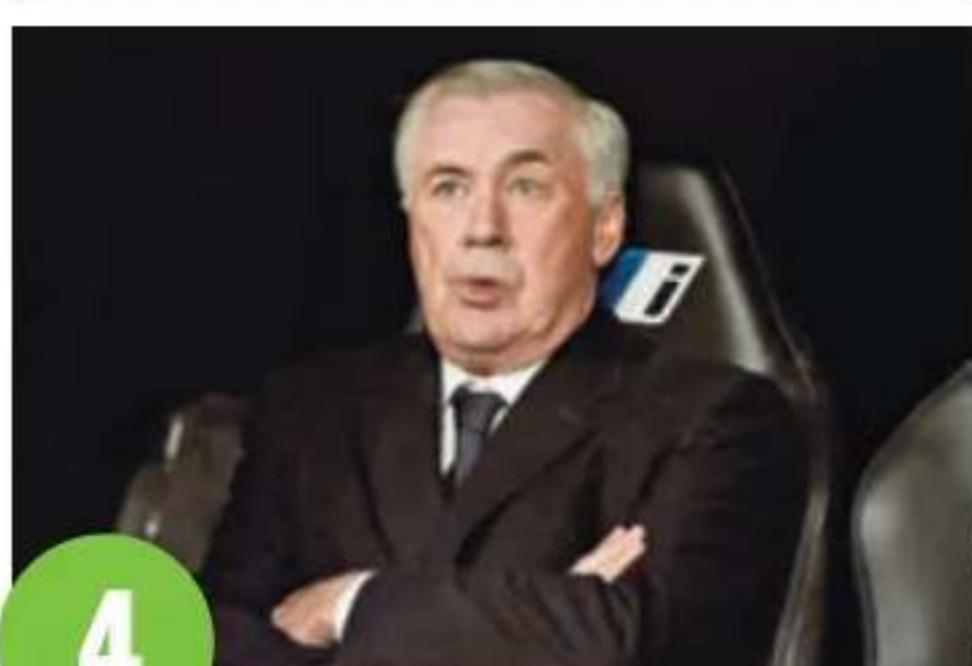
4

#### Ancelotti accused of alleged tax fraud

Spanish state prosecutors have accused Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti of alleged tax fraud, claiming he set up a "confusing" system of shell companies to hide his extra earnings during his first stint at the club.

Prosecutors are accusing Ancelotti of two accounts of tax fraud having defrauded 1 million euros in 2014 and 2015, which would be punishable with four years and nine months of prison.

"I already paid the fine, the money is with them, and now the lawyers are talking to try to find a solution," says Ancelotti.



REUTERS



5

### Klopp vs Guardiola, one final time

The two coaches met for possibly the last time in the Premier League in a nail-biting 1-1 stalemate at Anfield between Liverpool and Manchester City. The legendary rivalry began in the Bundesliga during Klopp's tenure at Borussia Dortmund and Guardiola's at Bayern Munich, extending to the Premier League until Klopp's imminent departure from the Reds at the end of this season.



6

### Kane hat-trick breaks records as Bayern humbles Mainz 8-1

Harry Kane scored a hat-trick in Bayern Munich's 8-1 demolition of Mainz 05 to set several Bundesliga records. Kane became the first man to score four hat-tricks and also the first player to score at least twice in eight different games in a debut Bundesliga season. He also equalled Uwe Seeler's record for most goals in a debut Bundesliga campaign by lifting his tally to 30.



7

### Italian Football Federation president Gravina under investigation

Gabriele Gravina, the president of the Italian Football Federation, is under investigation by prosecutors for suspected embezzlement and money laundering related to the auction of TV rights. Gravina is accused of illegally using money from the TV rights auction in 20182, when he led the third division, for the sale of a collection of medieval books and the purchase of a home in Milan.

» MATCH OF THE  
FORTNIGHT



# ANIGHT OF CHAOS

Jude Bellingham's **last-minute winner** being disallowed prevented Real Madrid from earning a remarkable comeback victory.

VALENCIA

2

Hugo Duro 27'

Roman

Yaremchuk 30'

REAL MADRID

2

Vinicius Junior  
45'+5', 76'

**F**ootball and last-minute drama share a symbiotic relationship. From the point of view of a footballer, if the drama goes in one's favour, the feeling is exultation. If it goes against, one can only speculate the myriad of emotions a player feels after the full-time whistle.

For Real Madrid players, it was a sharp pang of frustration and lamenting over three lost points in the title race after their La Liga clash against Valencia.

Valencia, playing at home, was in a happy place after going 2-0 up, with goals by Hugo Duro and Roman Yaremchuk in the 27th and 30th minute, respectively.

But in the dying stages of the first-half, Vinicius Junior pulled one back with a close-distance finish. With the momentum riding high in the second-half, Vinicius bagged the equaliser in the 76th minute with a header from Brahim Diaz's cross.

The Brazilian's celebration indicated that he had not forgotten the barrage of racial slurs he had endured at the same venue last season, which sparked a worldwide debate about how

racism still has a stronghold in global football.

With the scores level at 2-2 after 90 minutes, seven minutes were added, and this is where the drama started to unfold.

With play extending beyond seven minutes, there was jubilation in the Real Madrid camp after Jude Bellingham headed in Diaz's cross with what seemed to be the last action of the match. But the goal did not stand as referee Jesus Gil Manzano had already blown the full-time whistle, while the ball was mid-air after Diaz crossed it.

As expected, pandemonium ensued, and Bellingham did not shy away from vociferously protesting the decision and followed Manzano off the pitch, venting his anger (**above**).

It resulted in the Englishman seeing a red card for dissent. Three days later, he received a two-match suspension, with Manzano saying he showed an "aggressive attitude" and was "shouting". Manzano was also reprimanded, with the Technical Referees Committee suspending him for the error.

Aneesh Dey & Karthik Mudaliar



# PERCH PERFECT



FOR MORE STORIES

Mohammedan SC looks **comfortable** at the top of the I-League table, as its nearest challengers falter in crucial games.

**Aashin Prasad**

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In what was a crucial week in the I-League, Mohammedan SC came through unscathed against its fellow title challengers Sreenidi Deccan and Gokulam Kerala.

Mohammed Jasim rescued a late point against Sreenidi, which was followed by a stoppage-time 3-2 win away to Gokulam, after a goal from David Lalhansanga, tilted the title race heavily in favour of the Kolkata-based side.

And with Sreenidi, Gokulam and Real Kashmir all faltering in their following matches, Mohammedan has opened up a five-point lead at the top and closes in on promotion to the Indian Super League.

Newcomer Namdhari FC took a big step towards safety with victories over Gokulam and Delhi FC before a draw at Rajasthan FC.

**Last laugh:** David Lalhansanga of Mohammedan SC celebrates his stoppage-time winner against Gokulam, which lost 3-2 against the league leaders. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

The seven points from four matches took Namdhari to 19 points, 12 from the drop, having played two games more.

## Indian Women's League

The IWL is set for a pulsating finish with Gokulam Kerala and Odisha FC going toe-to-toe for the championship. After the international break, Gokulam notched two wins over Sports Odisha and Kickstart with Fazila Ikwaput (5 goals) and Sandhiya Ranganathan (2) scoring all seven goals between them.

The Kozhikode-based side is leading the table by a point but has played a match more than Odisha.

If Odisha beats East Bengal in its penultimate game, the final day of the season will see a shootout for the title with Gokulam and Odisha both playing at home against East Bengal and Kickstart, respectively.



» JAVELIN THROW

# New kid on the block

At the German Winter Throwing Championships in Halle, 19-year-old Max Dehning **announced himself emphatically** with a mammoth season opener of 90.20m.

Jonathan Selvaraj

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**A**bout a week ago, unless you were a track and field nerd, chances are that the name, Max Dehning, wouldn't have rung many bells. He was certainly considered a prospect, with a silver medal at the 2022 Junior Worlds. But at just 19 years of age and with a personal best of just 79.13m, the understanding was that Dehning was still a long way from being the real deal. No one's ignoring him any longer, though.

On Sunday last week, at the German Winter Throwing Championships in Halle, the teenager announced himself emphatically with a mammoth season opener of 90.20m.

With that, Dehning launched himself into one of the most exclusive cliques in world athletics — the 90m club in the men's javelin throw. For perspective, more athletes have run the 100m faster than 9.85 seconds than have thrown the javelin over 90m.

Dehning also became the youngest ever to cross the 90m mark — beating three-time Olympic medallist Steve Backley who first crossed the milestone at 23. Incidentally, his throw was also a new junior world record —



**Ahead of the best:** The throw lifts Dehning over Olympic Champion Neeraj and European champion Julian Weber — neither of whom have touched the 90m mark in their career so far.

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

erasing, by nearly four metres, the one set by reigning Olympic champion Neeraj Chopra back in 2016.

Dehning says he didn't come into the competition expecting to do as well as he did. Indeed, he is the only javelin thrower in history to have made a 90m throw before making an 80m one. His 90.20m throw came in his very first attempt, followed by 85.22m in his second.

"People are asking me what I ate before the competition, but the truth is that I just had the hotel buffet. I didn't set myself any real goals before the competition. I just wanted to see where I was in terms of performance and whether the training was working," he tells *Sportstar*.

"I actually only realised (I had crossed 90m) when it was on the scoreboard. I realised when I threw it that it was a really long throw. But I didn't expect this throw to fly 90m. I hadn't really realised this result yet!" he says.

A few days later, he's still coming to grips with his achievement. "I think throwing 90m is something very special, something very magical... I can't really comment on this throw at the moment, it's taken my breath away. I think my life has been turned upside down because suddenly this makes me one of the best javelin throwers in the world," he says.

### Olympic prospect

The throw lifts Dehning over Olympic Champion Neeraj and European champion Julian Weber — neither of whom have touched the 90m mark in their career so far. And while it's still early in the season, Dehning, who has now qualified for the Olympics and can now be counted as one of the contenders in Paris, insists he isn't thinking that far ahead.

"I'm not putting any pressure on myself! I will try to prove myself in the men's field and

**« I think throwing 90m is something very special, something very magical... I can't really comment on this throw at the moment, it's taken my breath away. I think my life has been turned upside down because suddenly this makes me one of the best javelin throwers in the world »**

– Max Dehning

achieve the best possible result. I'm not thinking about the fact (that I'm ahead of the other throwers). What worked for me in Halle was that I managed to stay relaxed in the competition and not put any pressure on myself. Technically, everything went well together after that," he says.

Should Dehning go on to live up to the expectations that many will be placing on him now, he will find himself in illustrious company. Germany has had no shortage of icons in the 90m club of men's javelin throw. Think yesteryear champion Uwe Hohn (the only one ever to breach the 100m mark; in 1984) as well as Thomas Rohler (champion in 2016), Johannes Vetter and Andreas Hofmann in recent years.

While Germany might hope Dehning brings the roof down at the Stade de France in half a year's time, he's equally comfortable building one himself. When he isn't breaking records on the athletics field, he's most likely to be found putting together a roof.

"Dad has his own carpentry and timber construction company. And mom is also a construction technician. I'm also very interested in crafts and therefore like to spend my free time on the building site," he says.

While he hopes to follow his parents into the construction business one day, growing up in Leverkusen, he was also inspired by them to follow a passion for sports.

His parents were both athletes — father Sascha Dehning played handball at the club level — while his sister Marie won bronze in the heptathlon at the European Junior Championships.

"Sport has played an important role in our family from the very beginning. My father played handball at a very high level and my mother has always been involved in both athletics and swimming," he says.

### Handball to javelin

Dehning started by taking after his father in handball, before switching to track and field. He competed in both shot put and 400m before focussing on javelin.

"I would say that I am very good in multiple disciplines of athletics and would generally like to try my hand in more of them. I am still very interested in handball, as I used to play it myself. Nevertheless, I was born to throw the javelin! I was influenced by it from an early age. All I ever wanted to do was throw, throw and throw," he says.

"I started throwing the baton as a little kid and then it was a smooth transition to javelin — starting with the 400-gram javelin and



working up to the men's weight of 800 grams. What fascinates me about javelin throw is the forces that act on the human body. The flight characteristics of the javelin are also an indescribable feeling for me," he says.

While Dehning is fascinated by the technique involved in this sport,

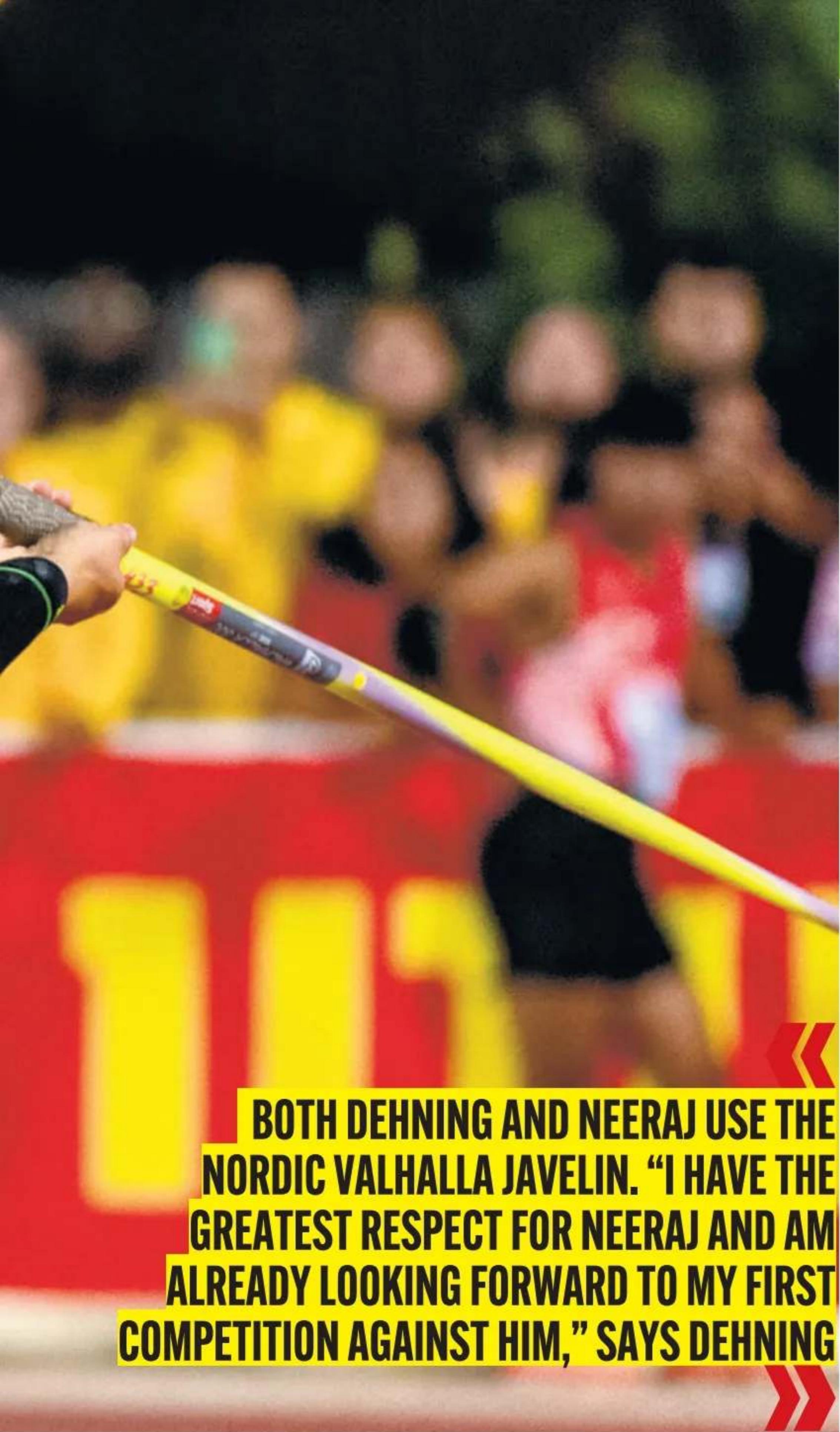
the fact that he almost appears custom-made for it doesn't hurt his prospects either.

Standing 6'3" and weighing 108 kilos, he has a build similar to countryman Johannes Vetter (although Vetter was a couple of centimetres and about six kilos lighter).

The German's weight room stats dwarf most of his competitors — bench press of 190kg, snatch lift of 135kg, pullover of 100kg and four rep squats of 180kg.

Neeraj Chopra, in comparison, reportedly has a snatch lift in the 100kg range.

"I would have to agree that my



**BOTH DEHNING AND NEERAJ USE THE NORDIC VALHALLA JAVELIN. "I HAVE THE GREATEST RESPECT FOR NEERAJ AND AM ALREADY LOOKING FORWARD TO MY FIRST COMPETITION AGAINST HIM," SAYS DEHNING**

strongest attribute would definitely be my power," says Dehning.

#### Power game

But Dehning doesn't just bank on raw power. "I know I'm one of the stronger guys, but strength isn't everything. Speed is one of the most important basics in javelin throw.

"I'm very fast in short sprints of up to 30 metres but not very good beyond that; but that's enough for javelin throw. At the same time, I think my technique is very strong. I think that's also because I have the ability to stay calm. When I'm under pressure, I'm able to just focus on my technique," he says.

**Simple does it:** Aware of how Johannes Vetter threw over 90m a record seven times in 2021 before faltering where it mattered most, in Tokyo, Dehning just wants to keep things simple this season. GETTY IMAGES

Having got his first 90m throw under his belt, Dehning doesn't plan to stop anytime soon.

"In the next few years, my goals are to become an Olympic champion and to celebrate more throws over 90m," he says.

Also on the horizon is the 28-year-old world record of 98.48m set by Jan Zelezny. [The javelin record books were reset post the introduction of new rules and equipment specs in 1986. As a result, Uwe's achievement was archived and has been considered an 'eternal record' ever since].

"I think anything is possible. The world record in the men's category is definitely a realistic goal for the next few years. If my development continues as it has in recent years, we can look forward to more successful competitions," he says.

For this year though he's not putting too much pressure on himself.

Aware of how Vetter threw over 90m a record seven times in 2021 before faltering where it mattered most, in Tokyo, Dehning just wants to keep things simple this season.

"My most important goal for 2024 is to stay healthy. The rest will take care of itself," he says, adding that he is simply looking forward to rubbing shoulders with the sport's elite in Paris.

One athlete he particularly wants to test himself against is the reigning World and Olympic champion Neeraj.

"I haven't met him yet, but it would definitely be very cool if I could," says Dehning, who uses the Nordic Valhalla javelin just like the Indian.

"I have the greatest respect for Neeraj and am already looking forward to my first competition against him. I will give my best at the Olympics, and am looking forward to an exciting javelin final!" he says.



# Maiden title caps Puneri Paltan's league of dominance

The Paltans won the title with a **level of authority unheard of** in the 10 seasons of PKL, with only two defeats in 24 matches.

**Saikat Chakraborty**

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**T**he night was filled with the thunderous roar of thousands inside the Gachibowli Indoor Stadium in Hyderabad as Puneri Paltan won the Pro Kabaddi League (PKL) championship by

defeating the Haryana Steelers in a close encounter.

After 75 days of intense action, the grand finale saw two teams from the traditional kabaddi heartlands of Maharashtra and Haryana compete for their first PKL title. Paltan, the Maharashtra team, had an impenetrable defence led by the indomitable Mohammadreza

Chiyaneh, and their offence was spearheaded by the skipper Aslam Inamdar.

The Steelers defied the odds, with their journey a testament to the unwavering spirit that saw them vanquish giants and silence doubters. Their defence was a shield against the onslaught of raiding prowess, marshalled by the



**Momentous occasion:** The Puneri Paltan team celebrates with coach B.C. Ramesh after the final whistle. PKL

ever-reliable Jaideep Dahiya. Fuelled by the youthful audacity of Vinay and Shivam Patare, their offence was capable of igniting at the most opportune moment.

The players entered the arena, and the initial exchanges were a tense dance, with each team probing the other's defences and searching for weaknesses. Paltan struck first, their defence stifling the Steelers raiders with ease. But the Steelers refused to crumble, with Rahul Sethpal, a defensive rock, anchoring their line.

The first half was a masterclass in defensive strategies, with raids neutralised, tackles executed with precision, and points hard-earned. Then, a moment of brilliance



occurred as Pankaj Mohite, the silent assassin of Paltan, unleashed a super raid, earning four points.

The crowd erupted, but the Steelers weathered the storm via Vishal Tate, a last-minute substitute, who proved his mettle with a clutch raid, keeping his team alive. Ashish's last-second raid for the Steelers ensured they stayed within striking distance, with the score reading 10-13 at halftime.

The laser show at halftime was a mere interlude, with the second half beginning with a bang. Mohit Goyat inflicted an all-out on the Steelers, swinging the momentum decisively in Paltan's favour, but the young Steelers side refused to be cowed. Their raiders, emboldened by the spirit of the underdog, clawed their way back, picking up bonus points with acrobatic brilliance.

Mohite remained a constant threat for Paltan, with Gaurav Khatri, a rock at the back, stifling the Steelers' offence and slowing the game to a deliberate crawl. Every point became a battle, a fight for an inch on the mat. The score remained

**Cornering the enemy:** Puneri Paltan players tackle Haryana Steeler's raider Vinay. PKL

stubbornly close.

The final minutes were a nerve-wracking ballet of attack and defence, with Siddharth Desai, a late entrant for the Steelers, bringing back a flicker of hope, sending both Inamdar and Chiyanah to the bench. But Paltan held firm with their defence.

Finally, the whistle blew, and Paltan were crowned champions, with a score of 28-25. Inamdar was declared the most valuable player (MVP) of the tournament. The Pune-based team won the title with a level of dominance unheard of in the 10 seasons of PKL, with only two defeats in 24 matches. Its revolutionary brand of Kabaddi has been revered as the most exciting by fans and pundits alike.

The Steelers, though defeated, walked away with their heads held high, their resilience earning them the respect of the Kabaddi faithful.

After 75 days of intense action, the grand finale saw two teams from the traditional kabaddi heartlands of Maharashtra and Haryana compete for their first PKL title

# It's the PKL decade

While the Pro Kabaddi League has undoubtedly flourished amidst glitz and glamour over the past decade, the sport itself **yearns for the extra punch it rightfully deserves**.

**Lavanya Lakshmi Narayanan**  
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**A**t tenth season is a great time to pause and take stock of where a franchise league is headed. More so when you're among the top three most popular tournaments in a country as sports-crazy as India.

Towards that end, Puneri Paltan's maiden title triumph neatly ties up, with a bow, everything right with the concept of a franchise-based league for a sport as raw and ancient as kabaddi. It was the triumph of an academy system that has been scouting and moulding talent season after season, no matter the eventual outcome.

Coaches came and went, superstar players made pit stops here in their PKL career journeys, but the budding young talent pool stayed the same, playing in youth leagues and earning their stripes to make the playing 7s in PKL. All that hard work and an unwavering faith in the team has brought the ultimate prize: validation in the form of the league crown.

Thanks to a squad stacked with all-rounders, Puneri Paltan had a team where everyone could do almost anything. The players came at opponents in waves. If an Aslam Inamdar, the franchise's lead raider and captain, was sent to the bench, in came a Mohit Goyat or a Pankaj Mohite or an Akash Shinde — all academy exports. Defenders could raid, raiders could defend and the Pune side of the mat was never really

in a tight spot for too long for most part of the season.

Defensive powerhouse Mohammadreza Shadlou Shiyaneh, who has cemented his place as Fazel Atrachali's successor as the next big thing in Iranian kabaddi, put on a show that well deserves the moniker of 'The Showman', a title long associated with Indian superstar, Rahul Chaudhari. There was no dull moment with Puneri Paltan on court, no matter how brittle the opponent, and that prompted plenty of superlatives on whether this team is the greatest in the league's history.

While those arguments will need consistency over a few seasons to be defended or refuted, it's the glossy gold-plated cover over a season that was disappointingly lopsided. Strong teams got stronger, while the weak ones dipped further into the abyss. Telugu Titans, a side where Chaudhari and others like Siddharth Desai captured the imagination of audiences and pushed the peripheries of possibility in the sport, has looked a pale shadow of its former self. Even the presence of the Indian captain Pawan Sehrawat, who, with 202 raid points and a largely lone-wolf effort, could not salvage much joy for his team and its fans.

Tamil Thalaivas showed sparks of the resilience that carried it to the playoffs last season but fell flat towards the business end. Bengal Warriors, UP Yoddhas and Bengaluru Bulls have unfortunately backed themselves into their own versions of a rut, with their season's takeaways largely looking similar to editions

past. The areas of improvement remain the same, the solutions glaringly obvious. Much of it can be sorted with a mega auction that'll give teams a fresh chance to rethink their playing identities and the brand of the kabaddi they want to champion going forward.

## Ripples in the national scene

Anupam Goswami, league commissioner of Pro Kabaddi, prefers to be pragmatic in celebrating the decade gone by.

"It is momentous, yes, but there is a sober realisation that we're still in the nascent stage, as are most other sports leagues in India, in our journey. If we get past the 20-year stage and successfully, then we can sit back and with some satisfaction," he tells *Sportstar*.

Alongside the advancement of talent in the league, the ever improving stats of the players and the eyeballs the league is drawing, Goswami underlines the league's reputation as the biggest feeder line for the national men's team.

"In order to sustain this, the pipeline of talent needs to be promising — not just domestic but also international. In that aspect, the grooming of domestic talent has been one of the biggest successes of the league," he explains. "The future of Indian kabaddi is secured for several years to come thanks to the talents we've brought into this league with the New Young Players programme. It has helped address and debunk the myth that good players come only from one region."



**Victory lap:** Aslam Inamdar, captain of the victorious Puneri Paltan, receives the PKL trophy from Vinod Tiwari (International Kabaddi Federation President) in the presence of Kailash Kanpal (CEO, Puneri Paltan) and Pullela Gopichand. **PKL MEDIA**

We've seen this become more broad-based. We've not discovered a diamond in the rough. We've just given them a chance to find good coaches who are open to talent irrespective of region."

Player development has come alongside better monetary conditions for those in the mix.

"Because of us, I believe that the recruitment of kabaddi players to the services to public sector undertakings has been rehabbed. Multiple other kabaddi tournaments have emerged as a result of the larger pull of Pro Kabaddi. In order to make the game aspirational, player salaries (via auction primarily) have increased from ₹12.8 lakh in the first season (top player price) to ₹2.6 crore this season. These are not random

increases; it has been slow and incremental, growing with the league slowly," he adds.

#### Heading the high table

Beyond the national ecosystem, Pro Kabaddi is the biggest and most successful effort in trying to take the sport to the world. The league is in itself aspirational, as evidenced by growing European interest both in viewing and player participation. E. Prasad Rao, the technical director of the league and a man who has spread the gospel of kabaddi



**Nurturing talent:** Puneri Paltan had a squad stacked with all-rounders. If an Aslam (L) was sent to the bench, in came a Mohit Goyat (R) or a Pankaj Mohite or an Akash Shinde — all academy exports. **PKL MEDIA**

worldwide over the last three decades, underlines the tournament's role in galvanising ecosystems besides that of India. "This is what we have to learn

from judo and taekwondo. These sports originated in Japan and the nation sent coaches outside to spread the gospel of these sports. The Indian government should do the same," he tells *Sportstar*. "See what the Odisha government has done with hockey. Kabaddi doesn't need so much if we get the same thing done with it. If — like Japan — we adopt the sport as a culture rather than sport, imagine what it can do for

the sport. Taekwondo is in the Olympics today."

Goswami believes the elected federations and synergy between the league and these entities will go a long way in moving towards these objectives. Elections to the Amateur Kabaddi Federation of India (AKFI) were held late last year but coordinated efforts to galvanise the sport's administration are yet to take shape.



"India, being the home of kabaddi, has a big role to play in the sport's health internationally."

Our place ebbed a bit due to instability in the AKFI, but an elected federation now should come with more things like bilateral tours etc that can in turn strengthen talents for PKL," he says.

Iranian head coach Gholamreza Mazandarani told this publication earlier that he had floated an Asian

League concept to the international federation, which would involve participation from clubs across kabaddi playing nations in the continent. "Let a thousand flowers bloom, more the merrier," Goswami declares but his enthusiasm does come with an asterix.

"Core consumption is still in India. It's not so easy to get things going, as we have learnt. Fundamentals are necessary to be addressed. Let a

**Solid at the back:** Mohammadreza Shadlou Chiyaneh put on a defensive show that well deserves the moniker of 'The Showman', a title long associated with Indian superstar, Rahul Chaudhari. PKL MEDIA

thousand flowers bloom, we're all for it. But it's going to take some doing. That said, just because there's a challenge, doesn't mean it's not attractive," he concludes.

« Indian players tend to be a lot more aggressive »

# MAX SENICA

Netra V

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**F**ormer athletes becoming coaches is not an uncommon practice, but current players engaging in coaching is a rare sight; Max Senica is one of those rare individuals.

Senica, a member of the Australian national volleyball team since 2021, also coaches and conducts camps for young talents at the Sharks Volleyball programme in Australia.

The 24-year-old is now a part of the Ahmedabad Defenders outfit in the third season of Prime Volleyball League, courtesy positive feedback from his friend and former Hyderabad Black Hawks middle blocker, Trent O'Dea.

The Defenders has always been in the top rung of the points table, and Senica hopes to maintain it and help it defend its title. The team has made it to the Super 5, after the initial league phase.

#### Fortuitous encounter

When young, Senica had no intention of taking up volleyball in the first place. But since his family was into football, his ambition was to play any sport.

"I didn't want to attend school but wanted to be an athlete in anything. I had to choose a sport, and football did not start until later in high school. I was not a good swimmer and was

too tall for a gymnast. Volleyball was the last option, so I thought I'd try it," said the Australian.

However, it was not until much later that he realised that he wanted to specialise in the sport and make a living. "I decided to become a professional athlete when I was eight. I started taking volleyball seriously when I was 15-16 and decided that would be my life and job."

Having made his mark in Denmark, Cyprus and Qatar, Senica joined the Defenders camp for the Volleyball Men's Club World Championship 2023 held in Bengaluru and continued his journey with the club for PVL 3.

"When they (Defenders) approached me for the World Champs and PVL, I thought this was an opportunity to showcase my skills. The Worlds wasn't a

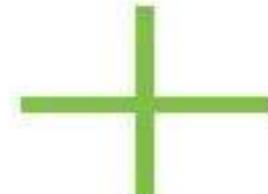
tournament where we would play for fun. We were there to win and compete. I feel we certainly showed our ability to play at the international level," said the 6' 8"-tall outside hitter.

Facing global powerhouses Itambe Minas and the eventual winners Sir Sicoma Perugia, the Defenders lost both matches in straight sets. Senica did not brood over the losses and moved on to spend Christmas in Australia, awaiting his Indian expedition.

#### New coach, new system

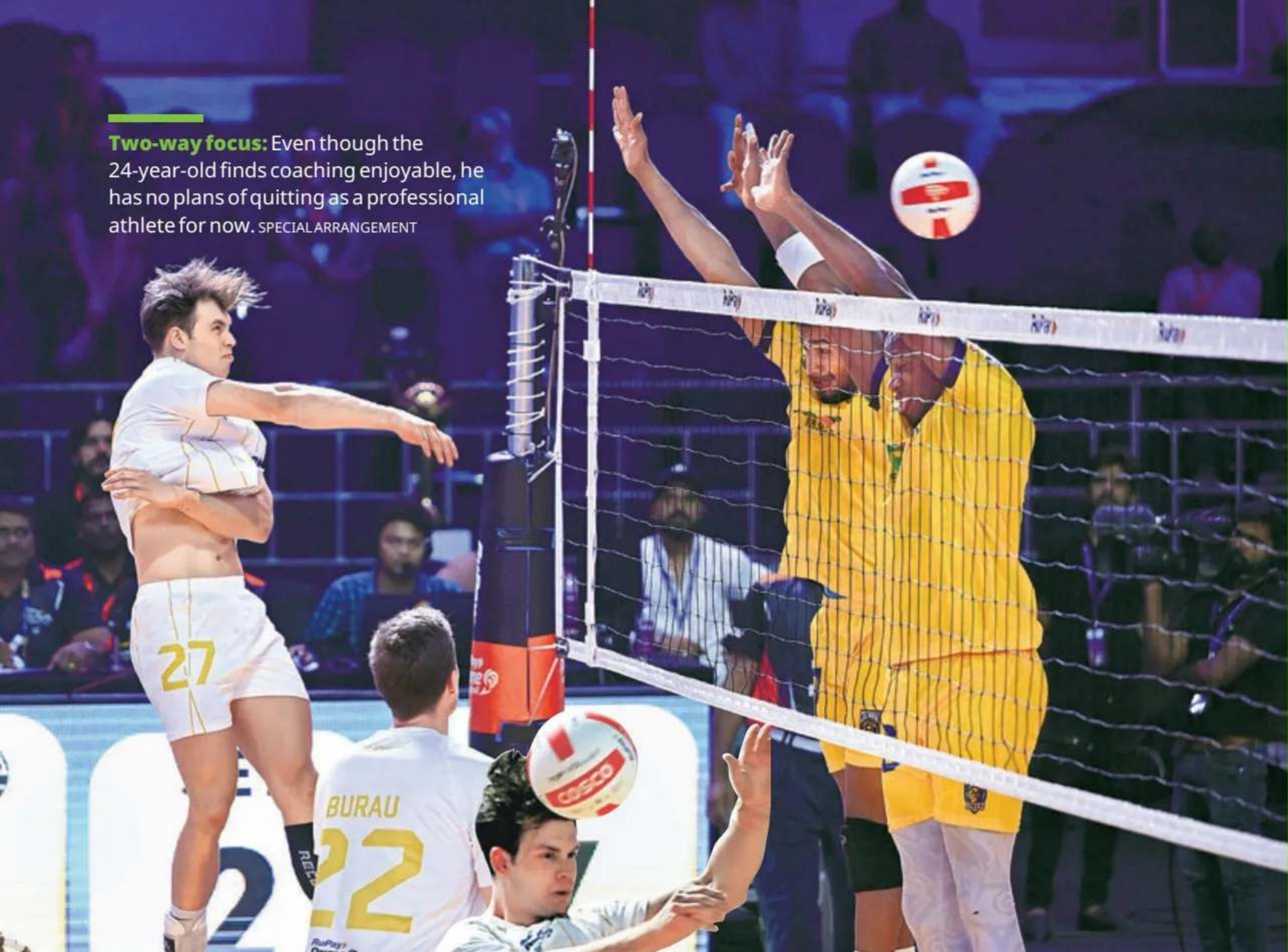
When he returned to India for the league in January, the coach he trained under for the Worlds (S. Dakshinamoorthy) was replaced by a Serbian coach, Dragan Mihailovic. This meant that Senica had to adapt to a new style of play.

"We've had a big adjustment by introducing new systems, ways of



**"No player is guaranteed a position on the court at any time, which is the best thing that can be for any professional team. You don't want players making it easy at training," says Max Senica.**

**Two-way focus:** Even though the 24-year-old finds coaching enjoyable, he has no plans of quitting as a professional athlete for now. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



thinking about the sport and our role within the team. I think both coaches (Dakshinamoorthy and Dragan) have a good variety of lessons that can set us up for success, but at the moment, I'm enjoying working with Dragan," said the Australian.

The competitive training spirit keeps Senica and his teammates on their toes, as none are guaranteed a starting six spot.

The 24-year-old said, "No player is guaranteed a position on the court at any time, which is the best thing that can be for any professional team. You don't want players making it easy at training. The best thing about our team is that we are all highly competitive and want to be in the starting six."

#### The Aussie contrast

While the push to outperform keeps Senica and the team together, it's the



creativity and aggressive approach to the game that the international wants to imbibe from his Indian teammates.

Praising the Defenders captain, Muthusamy Appavu, for his ingenuity, Senica said, "The players here tend to be a lot more aggressive. Muthu is very creative, and his playing style is not generic. European volleyball tends to follow a system without much deviation, but he (Muthu) likes to play around a bit, and I enjoy that."

Senica is also envious of the flexibility of the Indian players, wishing to learn and emulate it in his training and

coaching programmes.

Since he started coaching two years ago, his motto of keeping the conversation honest and realistic remains unchanged.

"I like to reiterate to athletes to work with 99 per cent of everything they do in their sports career, because nobody is going to see or care. It's only when you step on the court that everyone is watching."

Even though the 24-year-old finds coaching enjoyable, he has no plans of quitting as a professional athlete.

Senica, confident of the Defenders retaining the title, has planned the rest of his year following PVL 3. "After we win the tournament, I'll have some time off," he said.

After which he will join the Australian squad for the 2025 World Championship qualifiers and also look to secure a spot in the Volleyball Nations League. "It's a big and important season for the Australian team," he concluded.



**Set the ball rolling:** Punjab Sports Minister Gurmeet Singh Meet Hayer delivered the keynote address at the Sportstar Sports Conclave, 'Focus Punjab', held in Chandigarh. R.V. MOORTHY

## Ushering in a new era of sports

The first-ever 'Focus Punjab' Sportstar Sports Conclave, which took place in Chandigarh, addressed issues in various sporting disciplines and discussed ways to improve playing conditions.

Punjab Sports Minister Gurmeet Singh Meet Hayer laid out the steps taken by the state to ameliorate its presence in the sporting landscape of the country. "For a very long time, we contributed immensely to the country's sporting achievements and were number one among the states. This Asian Games performance is an indication that Punjab is heading back to the top," Meet Hayer said.

Meet Hayer shed light on the State's sports policy and its priorities. "Punjab introduced a sports policy recently, and I can guarantee that no other state has one

like this. We conducted meetings over the last six months with federations and associations across the sporting spectrum to come up with this policy," he said. "We focused on three broad aspects. If a player brings home an international medal at the Commonwealth Games, Asian Games, or other major competitions, we set aside a fund of 75 crores to honour them, secure their future, and give them a job."

Ranjit Bajaj, Director, Minerva Punjab FC, called for exposure trips at the age-group level. "We keep talking about friendlies, and tours; all those are for experienced athletes, to improve 0.0001%. If you give the same exposure to youth, their exposure is 20–30 per cent. Ninety per cent of all sports is in the mind. Unless your mind believes, no matter what you do, you cannot do it," Bajaj said in a panel on sports for skill-building





**Doyer of the sport:** Punjab Sports Minister Gurmeet Singh Meet Hayer honoured World Cup-winning hockey Olympian, retired Brigadier Harcharan Singh. Also present on the dais were The Hindu CEO L.V. Navaneeth and Sportstar Editor Ayon Sengupta. R.V. MOORTHY

Meanwhile, Avneet Kaur Sidhu, an Asian Games medallist in shooting, explained the benefit of inculcating the culture of sports in the younger generation. "My daughter is facing the same challenges I faced 24 years ago. That tells us where we are. We need to channel the energy of the youth towards sport," she said in a session titled "Punjab Fuelling India's Sporting Dreams."

Commonwealth Games silver medallist and Olympian Anjum Moudgil echoed similar sentiments. "If the Government of Punjab truly respects senior athletes and gives them financial and other securities, that's when the youth will be inspired to join sports," Moudgil said.

Sarjit Singh, Special Chief Secretary, Sports, Punjab,



**Bright future:** Uday Saharan, captain of the Indian team that reached the final of the U-19 Men's World Cup recently, won the 'Emerging Hero' award. Punjab Cricket Association president, Amarjit Singh, received the award from Gurmeet Singh Meet Hayer on behalf of Saharan. R.V. MOORTHY

underlined the government's focus on improving its coaching pool.

"We had only 300-350 coaches. That number went up eight times straight away. We have made a simple five-step process to select a coach where physical fitness is a core part so that they can inspire the next generation. The written examination will only be secondary," he added.

During the event, Uday Saharan, India's U-19 World Cup captain, was named the Emerging Hero, while Brigadier Harcharan Singh, a member of the 1975 Hockey World Cup-winning team, was named the Hero Unsung Champion.

Social Cause Partner



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State Partner



Sports Infra Partner



Knowledge Partner



Television Partner





**Brainstorming ideas:** (L-R) Bhupinder Singh, former Punjab cricketer; Amarjeet Singh Mehta, president, PCA; Gursharan Singh, former Punjab captain; Siddarth Kaul, Punjab and India cricketer, discuss ways to ameliorate state of Punjab cricket. R.V. MOORTHY

## Beyond the boundary – Punjab cricket's tomorrow

**A**fter 30 years, Punjab lifted a domestic trophy in 2023, beating Baroda to win the Syed Mushtaq Ali T20 Trophy. However, the state has yet to taste success in red-ball cricket since its last win in the 1992–93 season.

"I don't think there is a mental block," said Siddarth Kaul, an India and Punjab cricketer, on Punjab's red-ball trophy drought. "It's more about the ability to change your game according to the format."

"Winning a trophy in white ball but missing out on red ball doesn't mean the players are not good," he added.

Gursharan Singh, the captain of the Punjab team that won the Ranji Trophy title in the 1992–93 season, highlighted the importance of the well-established cricket ecosystem in Punjab during the late 1980s.

"For the last 30–40 years, Punjab's [cricket] system -- the district and

inter-district matches -- has given exceptional results. For a hockey-playing state... winning the Ranji Trophy, a lot of credit must go to the players and the Punjab Cricket Association (PCA), as well as Bishan Paaji [Late Bishan Singh Bedi], our coach," he added.

"Four-day cricket is not entirely fading away but [is] having a backseat at the moment. We, as administrators of the game, have to do a lot to save it," Bhupinder Singh, a former Punjab cricketer, said.

"When I joined the PCA, the first question from the press was, 'When will the new stadium be completed?'. The next question was, 'When will Punjab's next trophy come?' President of the PCA Amarjeet Singh Mehta revealed.

"We decided that a deadline must be fixed regarding the stadium. It is a matter of great pride for the PCA that Punjab's first game in the IPL, on March 23, will be held in the new Mullanpur stadium," he added.





**Racking their brains:** A comprehensive discussion on various challenges affecting sports in Punjab, including coaching resources and access to infrastructure, involved notable individuals (L-R) such as former India hockey player Rajinder Singh, Asian Games medallist in shooting Avneet Kaur Sidhu, coach and former hockey player Sarpal Singh, Commonwealth Games silver medallist shooter Anjum Moudgil, and Saravjit Singh, Special Chief Secretary of Sports. R.V. MOORTHY

## Fuelling India's sporting dreams

Punjab has seen quite a lot of positive development over the years in the promotion of sports but there remain quite a few obstacles to overcome to fully unlock its potential.

"As far as performance and facilities go, the sport has evolved a lot. But as a sportsperson, I feel with a little help from the administration, a lot more can be done," said Avneet Kaur Sidhu, Asian Games medallist in shooting, while speaking on 'Punjab Fuelling India's Sporting Dreams' at the Sportstar 'Focus Punjab' Sports Conclave here.

"The Punjab government has tried to improve infrastructure facilities but there are a lot of things left to be done. We have to see if its proper utilisation is being done or not," Rajinder Singh, former Indian hockey player and coach, said.

"The main issue is the calibre of the coaching education. I think we have not put our work in this direction. We have to put our efforts toward this issue, providing them with opportunities for advanced training, so that Punjab and Indian hockey will develop," he added.

Saravjit Singh, Special Chief Secretary, Sports explained that the government is doing its best in ensuring that the best coaches are available to train aspiring athletes.

"We are working in the right earnest in this direction and the government is alive to the need. We had only 300-350 coaches. That number went up eight times

straight away," he said.

"We have made a simple five-step process to select a coach where physical fitness is a core part so that they can inspire the next generation. The written examination will only be secondary," he added.

Rajinder Singh, who began his tryst with coaching in 2001, explained the need to arrive at solutions for the issues existing in the system with an example. "I noticed that there is only one representative from Punjab in the Indian women's hockey team. This is an area I thought we needed to focus on and we have started two residential centres for the girls," he said.

"We are working for Punjab. If hockey develops in Punjab, it will develop in India. Punjab hockey is the backbone of India," he added.

Commonwealth Games silver medallist and Olympian Anjum Moudgil also echoed similar comments. "I have been representing Punjab since 2017. I have seen quite a bit of positive change since then," she said.

Dronacharya Awardee and veteran hockey player and coach Sarpal Singh also gave his insights.

"We have the talent in our country to do a commendable job if we work together. Many academies have opened, many coaches have been appointed and we are taking care of things like nutrition more carefully," he said. "We have very good football, tennis and hockey potential. I am hopeful that we will achieve good results for both the boys and girls," the 93-year-old added.



**Driving the point home:** Head physio, Rajasthan Royals, John Gloster (extreme right), emphasises his point while Vijay Sharma, the National weightlifting coach, along with Dr. Amit Bhattacharjee, a Scientist at PGIMER, Chandigarh, and Dr. Tvisha Parikh, a Sports physician at Sir H. N. Reliance Foundation Hospital, attentively listen. R.V. MOORTHY

## Athlete support system

An increased focus on physical fitness has set India on course for consistent success, an elite panel of experts including John Gloster (Rajasthan Royals head physio), Dr. Tvisha Parikh (sports physician, Sir H. N. Reliance Foundation Hospital), Dr. Amit Bhattacharjee (scientist, PGIMER, Chandigarh), and Vijay Sharma (National weightlifting coach) discussed in a panel titled 'The Athlete Support System'.

"Possessing technical skills in any sport is crucial, but without matching physical capability, there can be inconsistency in performance. Take Indian hockey, for example. Despite being technically gifted over multiple generations, when the aspect of fitness was introduced, it faced challenges," said Gloster.

"Virat Kohli demonstrated that to achieve consistency in performance, prioritising fitness is essential."

Meanwhile, Sharma focused on mental training. "At the Rio Olympics, we were unable to clear a single clean and jerk attempt. This experience made me realise the importance of psychological support. That's not exclusive to athletes; coaches

also face pressure and must discover effective ways to cope with it." Dr. Parikh elaborated on the preventative benefits of sports medicine.

"While sports medicine certainly addresses injuries and their treatment, it extends beyond that narrow scope," Parikh said.

"Upon entering our development system, athletes undergo a thorough health examination. Any complaints are duly attended to establish a comprehensive baseline. This baseline enables us to anticipate and address potential future complications."

One of Olympic gold medallist Abhinav Bindra's closest confidants, Dr. Bhattacharjee was Bindra's personal mental trainer for over a decade and warns against neglecting this aspect.

"There should be an emergency mental training setup in place, particularly considering the harsh realities of sports like shooting. Imagine an athlete who has dedicated a decade of hard work, only for something to go wrong in the final moments, abruptly ending their four-year journey to the podium," Bhattacharjee said.





**Focus on youth:** (L-R) The Hindu CEO L. V. Navaneeth moderates an engrossing discussion on the significance of youth sports development as Aditya Madan (Public Policy Consultant to Punjab Education Minister), Ranjit Bajaj (Director, Minerva Punjab FC), and Anandh Kumar (Special Secretary, Sports, Punjab) watch on. R.V. MOORTHY

## Harnessing youth sports for skill building

Youth sports development should begin with setting up a safe environment and the required infrastructure at the grassroots level, said Ranjit Bajaj, Director, Punjab FC, during a panel discussion on 'Harnessing Youth Sports for Skill Building' during the Sportstar 'Focus Punjab' Sports Conclave in Chandigarh.

"With sports, it's never overnight magic. You plant the seeds, take care of the plant, and the deserved fruits will follow," he said. Speaking about the exposure the young athletes get by playing at a global level, he said, "We keep talking of exposure, friendlies, and tours; all those are for experienced athletes, to improve 0.0001%. If you give the same exposure to youth, their development is 20-30%."

"Ninety per cent of all sports is in the mind. Unless your mind believes, no matter what you do, you cannot do it."

Aditya Madan, Policy Consultant to the Punjab Education Minister, explained that all levels of the pyramid were catered to during the formulation of the Punjab Government's policy.

"Punjab was coming up with one after many years. We wanted it to be comprehensive and had to ensure it caters to ground reality," he said.

"For the Sports Policy, we had a public consultation where people from around the country and even the

diaspora sent in suggestions. It makes me really happy that we could reach out to people and get their responses," he added.

Anand Kumar, Special Secretary, Sports, Punjab, also spoke at length about the formulation of these policies. "We thought the sports policy should not be just for the sake of it. We have touched upon all issues, whether it is related to a current sportsperson, an injury, a retired athlete, the diet, or even award money," he said.

"We wanted to inculcate our road map for the next 5-6 years. It will take a gestation period of 4-5 years, keeping everything in mind. 2024 is a crucial year because whatever is spelled out in the policy is going to be implemented on the ground," he added.

Bajaj, who was one of the stakeholders involved in the newly-framed sports policy, was also bullish about the positive effects, including the reservation of posts or creation of jobs for athletes. "Sportspeople have always been looking for security. Now there are avenues with jobs," he said.

"Haryana has done well not because their genes are better than us; it's because their policies are better than us. That's all we needed to change. Now our policy is comparable to theirs, and you will see a revival of sports in Punjab," he added.



**Honouring the Aces:** The Hindu CEO L.V. Navaneeth presented the Sportstar Aces Sportsman of the Year (Team Sports) award to Hardik Singh (Olympic bronze medallist), and Sportstar Editor Ayon Sengupta presented the Sportstar Aces Sportswoman of the Year (Individual Sport) award to Sift Kaur Samra (Asian Games gold medallist). R.V. MOORTHY

## Eyeing the Paris gold

**H**ockey and shooting have been India's most successful sports in the Olympics. With five months to go for the Paris Games, anticipation regarding medal prospects in these two disciplines is palpable.

"The team is 110 per cent ready to win gold," said Hardik Singh, midfielder and vice-captain of the Indian men's hockey team, during the panel titled 'Eyeing the Paris Gold.'

The men's team secured the Paris Games quota after winning the Asian Games crown in Hangzhou. Hardik, who was named the 2023 FIH Player of the Year, underlined the importance of the continental event.

"People often say that Asian Games hockey is easy, but they forget that since the sport made its debut in the tournament, Indian men have won only four golds. Our main aim was to win gold and qualify. We do have the advantage of

time as many European nations or Australia have to take part in qualifiers, but as our coach says, the Olympic cycle is not 'a single day', it is 'every day.'"

Unlike hockey, earning a quota in shooting does not automatically guarantee a place at the Olympics since the athletes also need to show consistency in multiple national selection trials. Sift Kaur Samra, finished fifth at the Baku World Championships last year to win a quota in the women's 50m rifle three-position category. She

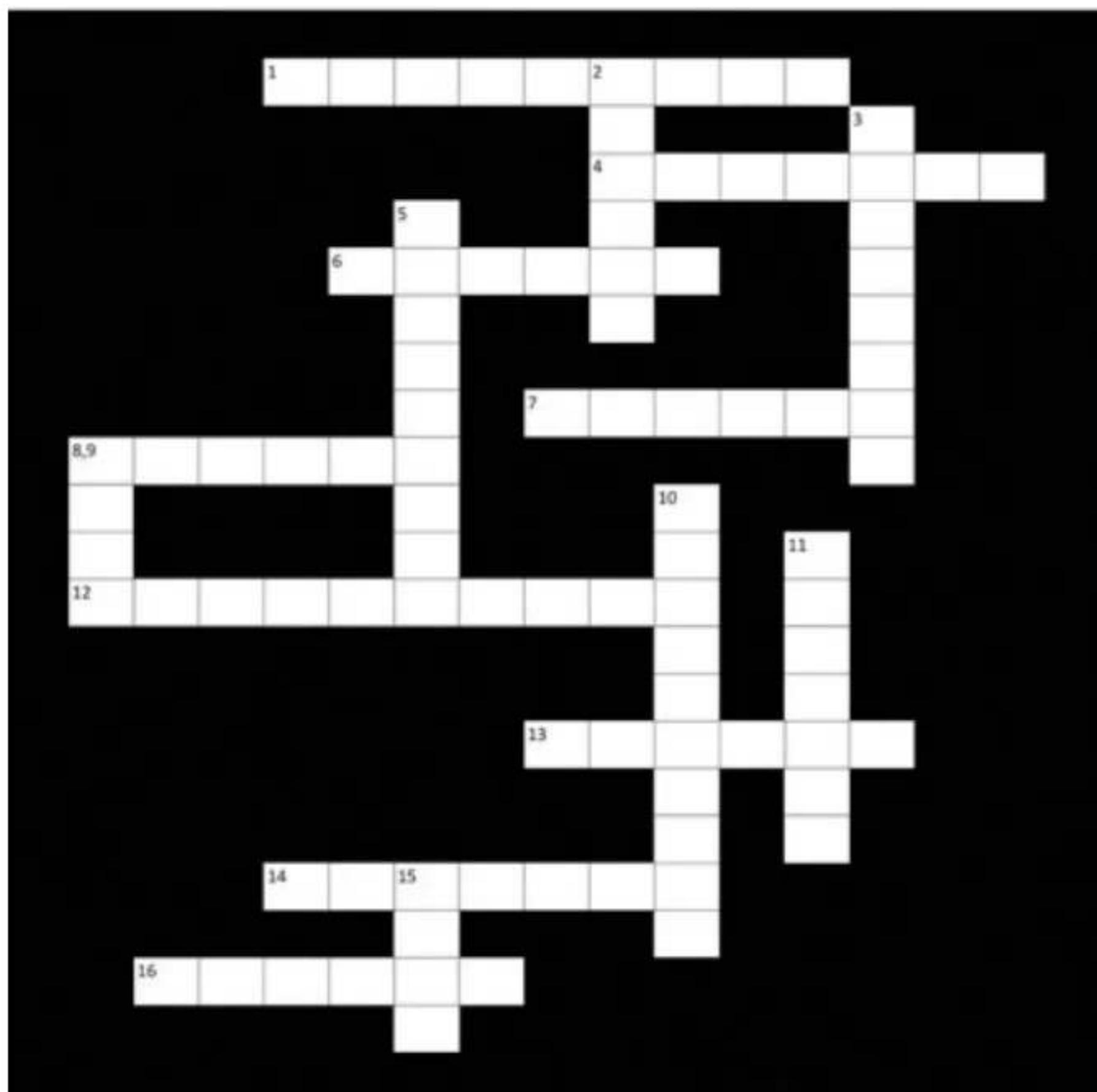
also won Asian Games gold in the same event with a world record score.

"Everyone is young, and everyone wants to perform well. Shooters did an excellent job at the Asian Games, and everyone has family support. Unlike before, we also have enough equipment. I don't think we have pressure. Everyone knows they have to work on their technique, and we will do it. Pressure shows that we are humans, but we also know how to control it," she said.



## CROSSWORD

### KARAN PILLAI



SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

#### ACROSS

- 1 Green Bay Packers won the first ..... (5, 4)
- 4 Who is the only F1 driver to be disqualified for driving too slowly? (2, 5)
- 6 Major Walter Clopton Wingfield was the founder of which popular sport? (6)
- 7 Martina ..... is the youngest female winner of a Grand Slam title in the Open Era. (6)
- 8 Ricky Ponting is also known as .... (6)
- 12 Nuwan ..... was the bowler whom M. S. Dhoni hit for the World Cup winning six in 2011. (10)
- 13 What is common between Novak Djokovic and Nikola Jokic? (6)

**14** Tom Blake was an American athlete known for reinventing which sport? (7)

**16** Moto GP legend Valentino Rossi is also called The .....? (6)

#### DOWN

- 2 Which nation has won the most FIFA World Cup titles? (6)
- 3 The oldest organised sport in North America. (8)
- 5 Track cycling usually happens in a ..... (9)
- 9 What coloured balls are worth six points in snooker? (4)
- 10 Which ancient Indian board game is considered to be the predecessor to chess? (10)
- 11 Which sport is also called tenpins? (7)

**15** The cornermost piece in a chess board. (4)

### Goethart unpin

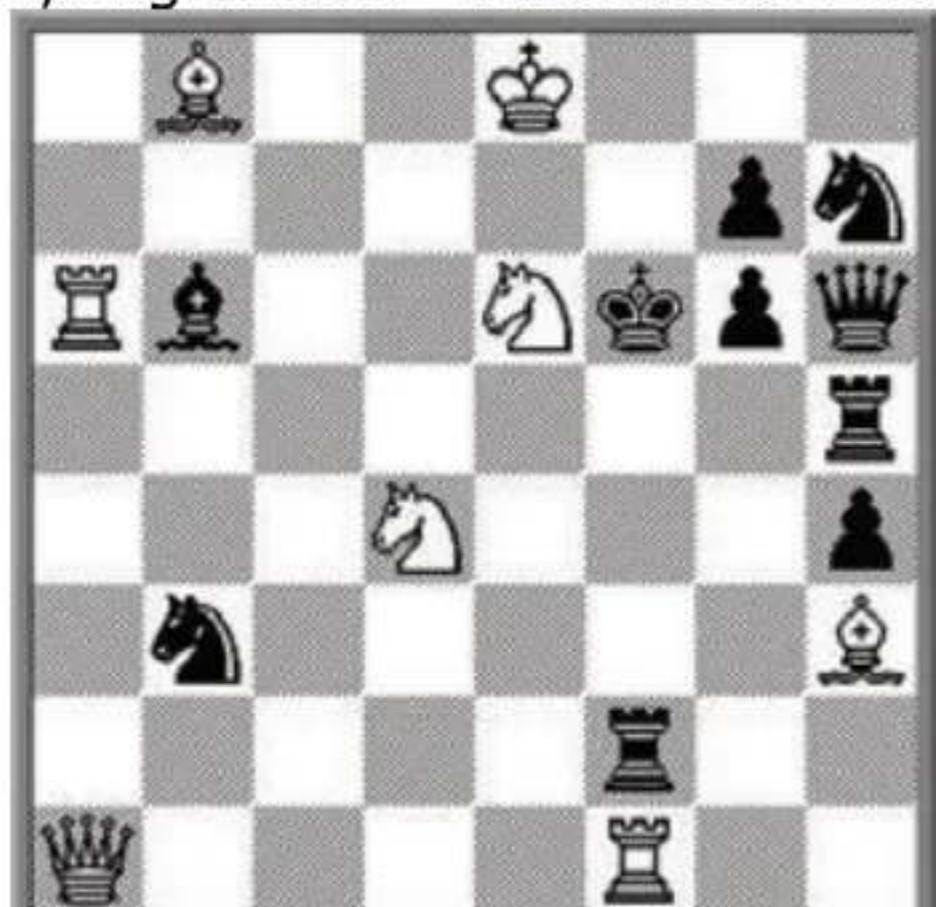
By C.G.S.Narayanan

In problem chess there are many themes named after composers who had pioneered an idea and produced a number of examples on it. Some catch up with problemists and others fade out. The popularity of such a theme depends largely on its adaptability to modern trends. Henryk Goethart was one of the outstanding and innovative Dutch composers of the last century whose manifestations of problem ideas were far ahead of his times. He was never a prolific composer but his problems make us realise that it is not so much the volume but the quality of a problemist's output that determines his significance. Goethart is well known for his novel interference which can be best described as unpin of black by white at the mating move.

The theme's essential features are: a) interference of a pinned black piece by another black piece and b) a white battery piece unpins the pinned black piece taking advantage of the fact that the unpin does not release the defensive power previously nullified by self-interference. I would like to present the earliest rendering of Goethart unpin by its author.

H.Goethart

3 HM, Algemeen Handelsblad 1917



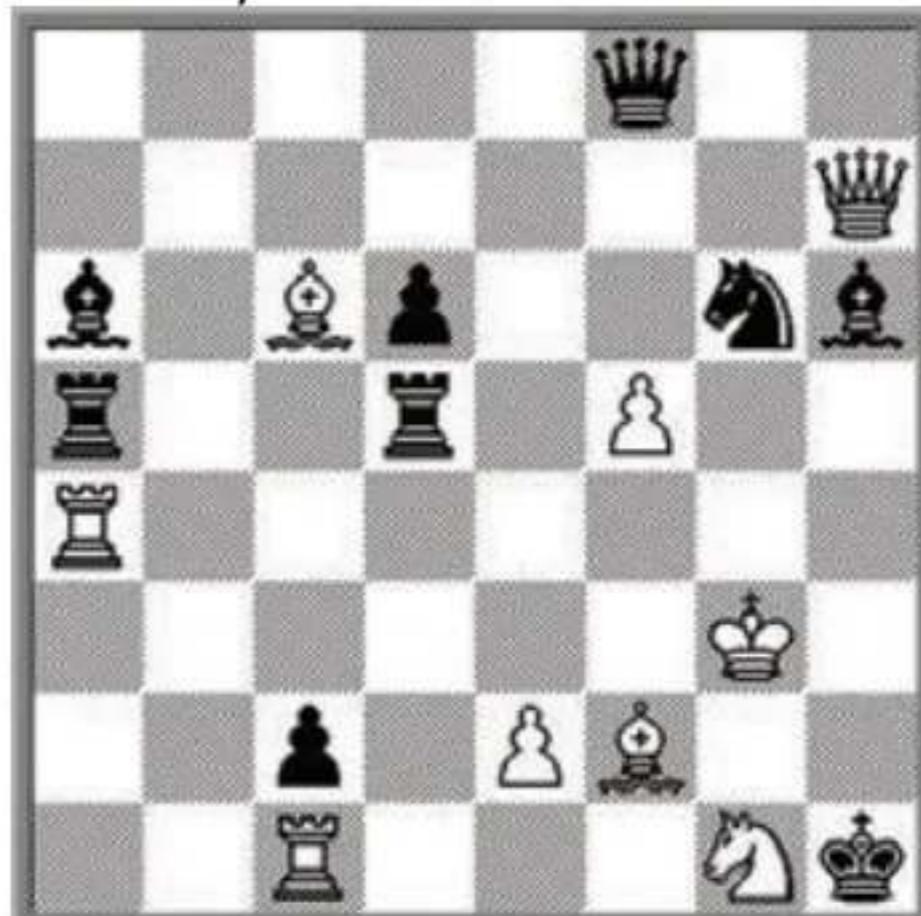
Mate in two moves

**Key 1.Ng5! (2.Ne4)**

1...Nc5 2.Ne6; 1..Nd2 2.Nf3

The appeal lies in its elegance and precision and in the duel between the two knights with its smart interplay of parry and riposte. The second problem adds further embellishment to the theme. Bicolour Goethart threats cutting off black lines are employed in three tries and key.

C.J.R.Sammelius  
I Prize, Probleemblad 1964



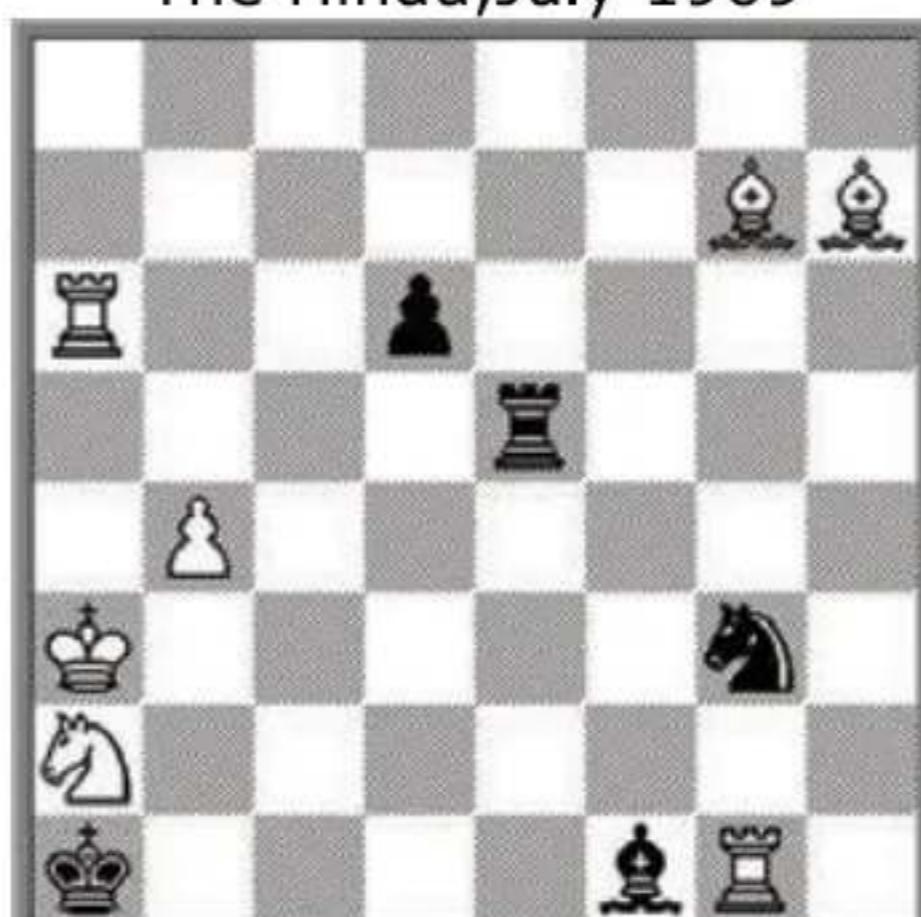
Mate in two moves

1.Be3? 2.Nh3 but 1...Qxf5!  
1.Bd4? 2.Nf3 but 1...Nh4!  
1.Rf4? 2.Nh3 but 1...Ra3+

**Key Rd4! 2.Nf3**

A meredith Goethart is given below for your solving pleasure.

C.G.S.Narayanan & T.S.Krishnamurthi  
The Hindu, July 1969



Mate in two moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article 'Disappearing Novotny': **1.Bf2!** (2.Ra2/Rb6) 1...Bb5 .Bxb5; 1...Bxxf2 2.Qxf1; 1...Rxf2 2.Qc6

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



SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

## ITF women's tournament: Dalila Jakupovic bags title



Second seed Dalila Jakupovic (**left**) beat Yeonwoo Ku 6-1, 6-2 in the final of the Maha Urja \$25,000 ITF women's tennis tournament at the MSLTA Academy on Sunday.

It was a double crown for the 32-year-old Dalila, who had won her 23rd doubles title with Irina Maria Bara of Romania.

It was the seventh singles title for Dalila, who converted seven of 10 break points to beat the wiry Korean in an hour and 20 minutes.

Ku struggled with her serve and made eight double faults. She managed to hold serve only once in the match and was unable to convert seven game points in what proved to be the last game of the match.

It was a commendable fare from the 20-year-old Ku, as she was playing her second successive singles final, and had earlier made the doubles final as well in partnership with Justina Mikulskyte.

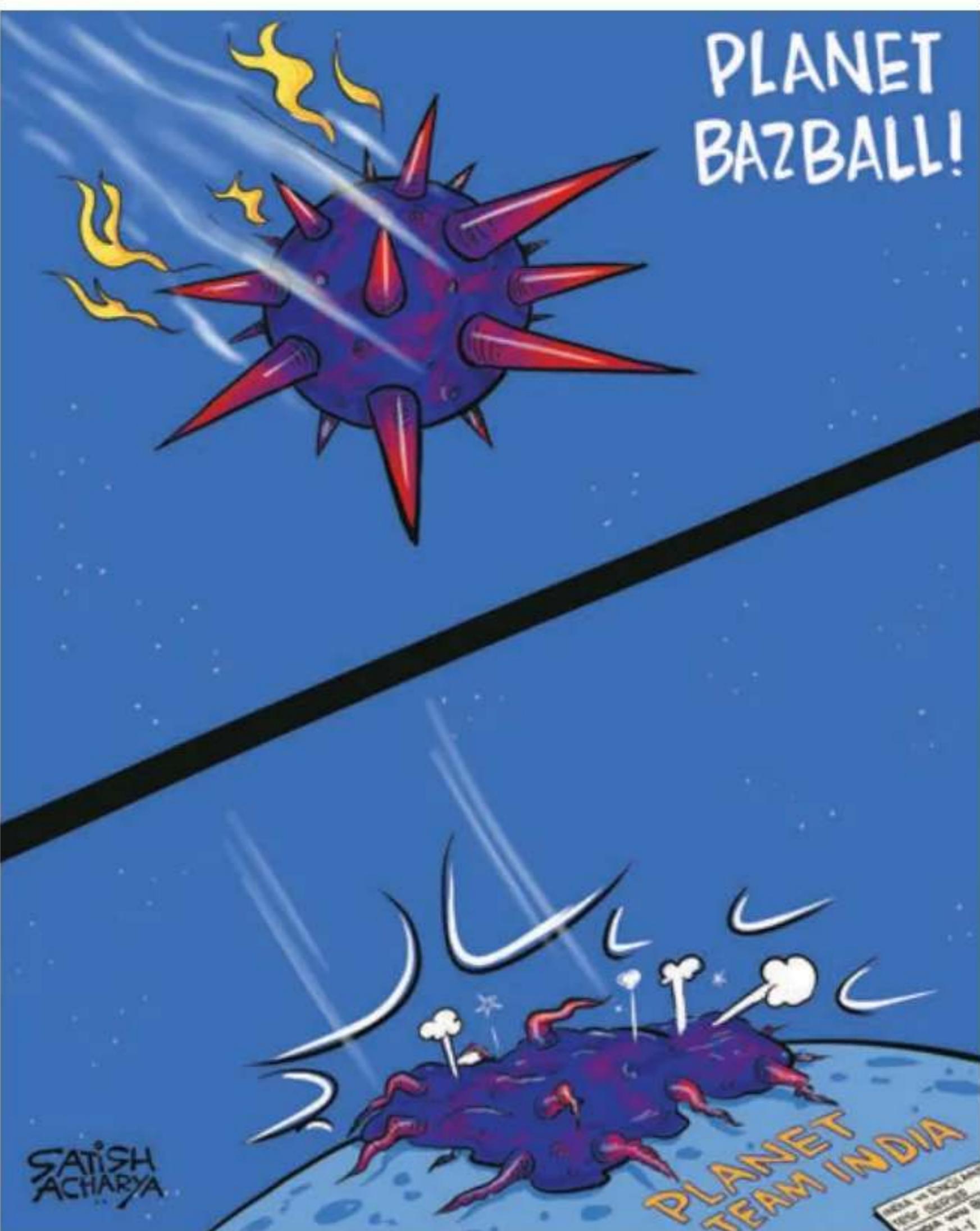
The champion collected Rs. 3,25,000 and 35 WTA points. The runner-up got Rs. 1,75,000 and 22 points.

The results (final): Dalila Jakupovic (Slo) bt Yeonwoo Ku (Kor) 6-1, 6-2.

KAMESH SRINIVASAN

## » INDIAN PLAYGROUND

### SPORTOON



1

DY Patil Red claimed the 18th DY Patil T20 Cup after it thrashed Income Tax by 48 runs in the final at the DY Patil Stadium. Put in to bat, DY Patil Red posted 221 for nine. In response, Income Tax finished at 173 for nine in 20 overs. Red openers Siddharth Patidar (43) and Aman Khan (43) added a brisk 70 runs for the opening wicket. Then there were regular partnerships throughout the innings. The chase for Income Tax never really took off as Red completed the formalities quite easily.

2

After taking the 5000m gold comfortably, earlier in the day, Madhya Pradesh's Ekta Pradeep Dey broke the women's 3000m steeple chase junior National record by a massive 19 seconds on the concluding evening of the 22nd National Federation Cup junior (under-20) athletics championships in Lucknow. That makes the 18-year-old, who clocked 10:10.08s, the second-fastest in the world in the under-20 age-group this year, behind Kenyan Sharon Chepkemoi (10:07.67s). Ekta had clocked a mediocre 11:04.68 while finishing sixth in the Junior Nationals in Coimbatore in November 2023.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

STAN RAYAN



## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Ryan Fernando



FOR MORE  
STORIES

# Empowering female athletes through nutrition

Being mindful of **protein intake** is paramount in achieving peak performance, evident in how our women cricketers tailor their diets to meet their unique needs.

**W**omen athletes require superior nutrition than men to excel in their performances. This need becomes even more pronounced by the hormonal fluctuations experienced throughout the monthly cycle. With the Women's Premier League underway, the importance of proper nutrition for female athletes cannot be overstated. Consistent performance in any sport demands a steadfast commitment to eating right — a lesson underscored by my work with esteemed athletes like Mithali Raj, Jhulan Goswami, Harmanpreet Kaur, Smriti Mandhana, and Renuka Thakur.

Understanding the unique dietary and supplement requirements of female athletes reveals the decisive impact that nutrition has on their performance, far more than their male counterparts. While men might sustain subpar eating habits for some time, female athletes find their performance deteriorating within just a couple of weeks of poor nutrition.

**When selecting a protein supplement for women, it is important to consider a few key factors.** First and foremost, it is crucial to choose a high-quality protein supplement that is specifically formulated for women's nutritional

needs. Look for those with protein sources like whey and casein, or plant-based ones like pea or rice protein. **Ensure that the supplement is free from harmful additives or unnecessary ingredients.**

In terms of dosage, the recommended protein intake for women varies depending on factors such as age, weight, activity level, and fitness goals. As a general guideline, women who engage in regular exercise may benefit from consuming 0.8 to 1.2 grams of protein per kilogram of body weight per day. Divide this total protein intake evenly throughout the day, including protein from whole food sources as well as protein supplements.

The best time to consume a protein supplement is typically post-workout, as this is when the body is most receptive to protein for muscle repair and recovery. Consuming a protein shake or supplement within 30 minutes to an hour after exercise can help promote muscle protein synthesis and accelerate recovery.

However, protein supplements can also be consumed as a snack or meal replacement throughout the day to help meet daily protein requirements and support overall health and fitness goals.

Here is a ranking of dietary protein options based on their PDCAAS

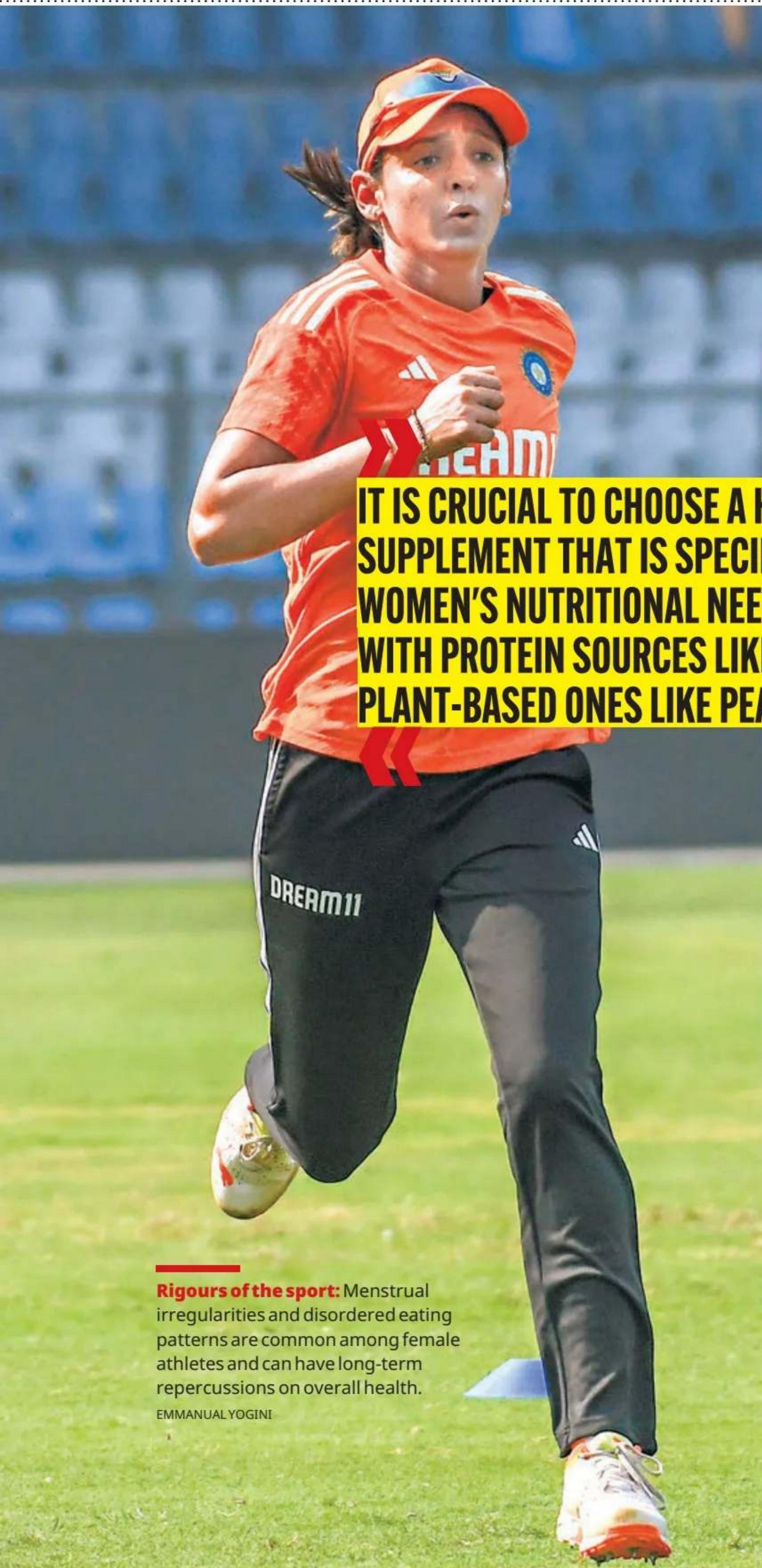
(Protein Digestibility-Corrected Amino Acid Score), with 1 being the highest score and 10 being the lowest. Call this the IPL scoring card of proteins:

1. Whey protein isolate
2. Whey protein concentrate
3. Casein protein
4. Soy protein isolate
5. Egg white protein
6. Pea protein
7. Rice protein
8. Hemp protein
9. Sacha inchi protein
10. Quinoa protein

**Women cricketers may face various nutrition and health issues due to the physical demands of the sport.** These may include inadequate calorie intake leading to energy deficiency, low intake of essential nutrients such as iron and calcium, which can impact performance and bone health, and challenges in maintaining proper hydration levels during training and matches.

Additionally, menstrual irregularities and disorderly eating patterns are common among female athletes and can have long-term repercussions on overall health.

Proper nutrition education, individualised meal planning, and access to sports nutrition professionals are crucial in addressing these concerns and optimising the health and performance of women



**IT IS CRUCIAL TO CHOOSE A HIGH-QUALITY PROTEIN SUPPLEMENT THAT IS SPECIFICALLY FORMULATED FOR WOMEN'S NUTRITIONAL NEEDS. LOOK FOR THOSE WITH PROTEIN SOURCES LIKE WHEY AND CASEIN, OR PLANT-BASED ONES LIKE PEA OR RICE PROTEIN**

**Rigours of the sport:** Menstrual irregularities and disordered eating patterns are common among female athletes and can have long-term repercussions on overall health.

EMMANUAL YOGINI

cricketers.

Some of the best women Indian cricketers include:

**1. Mithali Raj** — One of the greatest batters in the history of women's cricket, she is known for her consistency and leadership. My favourite is beetroot for her performance.

**2. Jhulan Goswami** — She is the leading fast bowler and highest wicket-taker in women's ODI cricket. Ensuring a good BCAA (branched-chained amino acid) supplement and guava in her diet.

**3. Smriti Mandhana** — She is a stylish left-handed opener known for her aggressive batting. Going supplement-free and sticking to a natural home-made vegetarian diet with plant proteins.

**4. Harmanpreet Kaur (left)** — This explosive middle-order batter and captain of the T20 team maintains her hydration levels with a good isotonic sports drink and magnesium supplement.

**5. Poonam Yadav** — She is a leading spinner in the team known for her wicket-taking abilities. Ensure a good diet for her bones post injuries in the past, with collagen, calcium and alkaline foods to boost recovery after each match.

**6. Deepti Sharma** — All-rounder known for her spin bowling and solid batting. Vitamin D and iron is a common requirement for all women.

**7. Shikha Pandey** — Medium-fast bowler and an experienced campaigner. Working on having a disciplined diet is the key when travelling or in tournaments.

# For the love of sport

We watch sports because we enjoy them. And we are **grateful** to those who give us the pleasure.

Suresh Menon

**D**o you love sport?" It was a strange question to ask someone who has spent the last four decades following sport, writing about it, analysing it, discovering new things in it, and connecting it with life itself. I could not merely say "yes" and be done with it. Something in the tone, perhaps the expectation of an unexpected answer, told me I had to have a more involved response.

All of us begin as fans. We are vaguely aware while growing up that, strictly speaking, the athletes do not need us to complete themselves; at some point, we come to the realisation that perhaps we need the athletes to complete ourselves. There was something about watching a John McEnroe play (in pic) or Carl Lewis breaking a record that made us proud. We didn't articulate it thus, but we sensed these were people like us who just happened to do exceptionally well something that gave us such pleasure. And we reciprocated by being nice to those around us.

Pleasure is the bottom line (an overly defensive batter or a boringly repetitive tennis player can provide pleasure too, if that's your temperament). We watch sport because we enjoy it. And we are grateful to those who give us the pleasure.

For most of us, it begins and ends there. Joys and ecstasies interspersed with disappointments and anticlimaxes. A career in sport can, within a few years,



pack into it a lifetime of normal events, from promise and success to fame and fortune to decline and surrender (or not). A philosopher ended a book on sport with the words, "Are athletes for me, in their grace and elegance, with their violence and their unsuitability for normal life, that 'other half' of myself that I have not managed to claim and become?"

It is not a thought that I have found useful. As a young boy, like other young boys, I dreamt of being an international sportsman as well as the first Olympian to win a Nobel Prize in one of the sciences and be elected the country's Prime Minister. There's no point in dreaming small.

Sport builds character, we are told, but then so does writing about it. A middle-order batter might have three or four players waiting to get into the team if he fails; a reporter has hundreds in the media box!

It builds character in other ways, teaching patience, understanding, compassion, neutrality, the importance of justice, the role of luck, and the ability to absorb disappointments.

But watching without participating or commenting has always been limiting. Someone said, "By watching sports, we can enjoy, in our imagination, certain lives that we have neither the time nor the talent to live." Perhaps.

But the writing of it, the discovery of a star-in-the-making, the backing of your judgement with irrefutable logic as well as unsupported instinct—all that is just as enjoyable for those who can't do it but can both teach and preach. And, as a bonus, our careers last longer!



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