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OFF-SIDE

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A NIGHT FULL OF STARS

The tale of the Sportstar Aces Awards night was not just about the winners but also about the **camaraderie and respect** these exceptional athletes have for each other.

What a privilege it is to spend an evening with elite athletes who have sacrificed much to win laurels for the country and fill our lives with joy! The sixth edition of the annual Sportstar Aces Awards in Mumbai played host to the cream of Indian sports, all gathered snugly under one roof.

"A champion is afraid of losing. Everyone else is afraid of winning," tennis legend Billie Jean King once said.

And the athletes present on that night have proved the world and their naysayers wrong more times than I've burned my morning toast. Their stories of grit and guts are enough to send shivers down the spine of even the most stoic bystander.

From the seasoned Karnam Malleswari, who started the charge for Indian women at the Olympics with her bronze in Sydney 2000, to the 17-year-old Sheetal Devi, who has set her sights firmly on a Paris 2024 Paralympic podium, each one had to overcome insurmountable odds to reach the top.

"The best moment was when I won the individual gold at the Para Asian Games; the Tricolour was flying high. My dream is to win the gold in Paris too. When I went to school, I started writing with my leg. I do all my work with my legs. I consider my legs to be my hands," a young Sheetal, unfazed by the spotlight, told a crowd of moist-eyed adults. Born with phocomelia, a disorder causing underdeveloped limbs, Sheetal stands tall as the world's first armless woman archer (open compound).

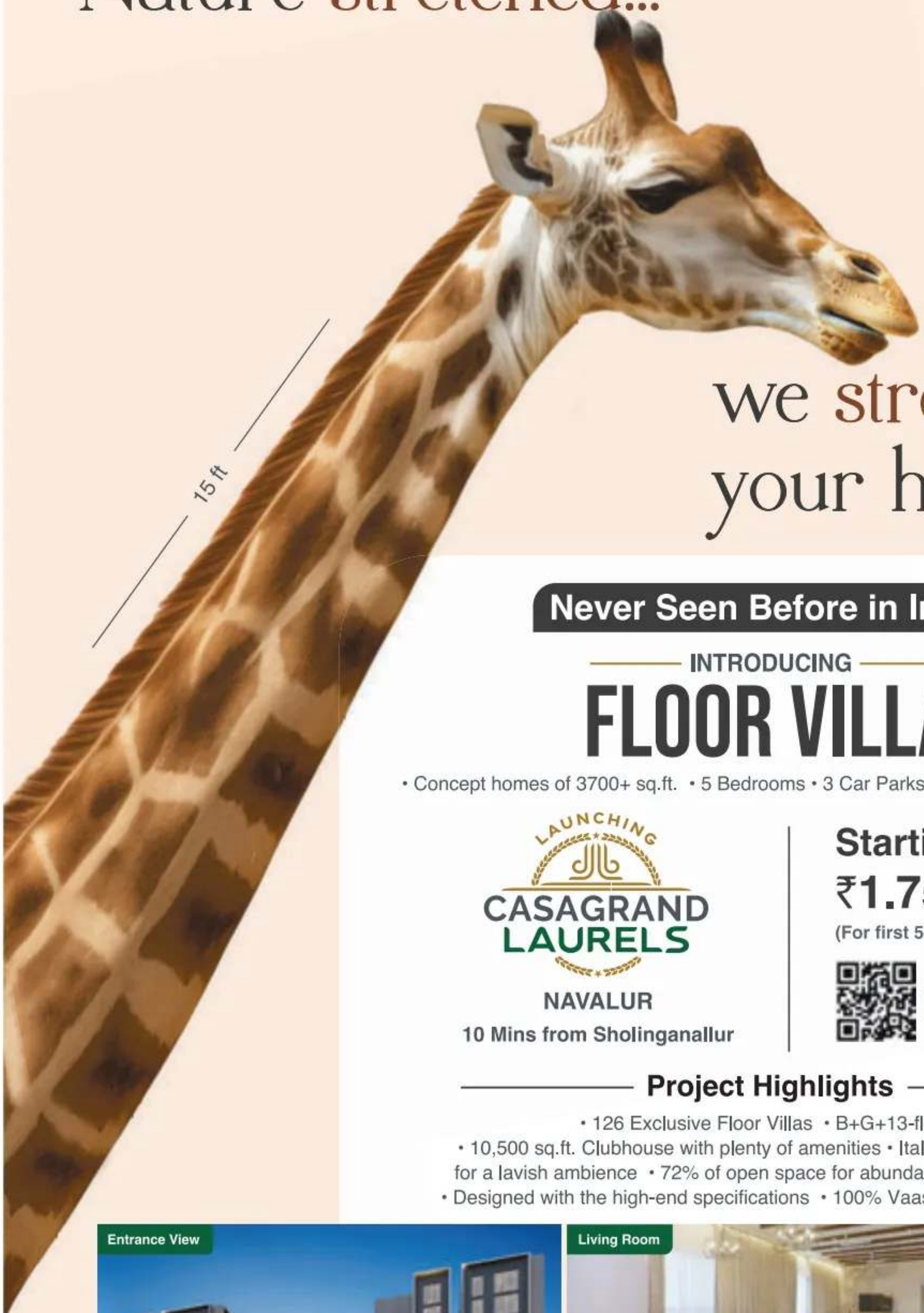
For Malleswari, a trailblazer in Indian sports, the Lifetime Achievement Award was doubly sweet as she was introduced by the 2020 Tokyo Olympics weightlifting silver medallist Mirabai Chanu, who was just six when the weightlifter from Srikakulam lifted India's mood with the only medal from the Sydney Games. Living in a one-bedroom flat in Delhi, Malleswari and her husband transported 180-kg barbells from Kolkata to Delhi to keep her training on track ahead of the 1998 Bangkok Asian Games.

Mohammed Shami, who led the Indian pace pack with 24 wickets at the 2023 ICC Men's ODI World Cup, pipped the competition, which included the likes of teammate Virat Kohli and Indian national football team captain Sunil Chhetri, to win the Sportsman of the Year for Team Sports. "I am from a place that has no facilities. My journey has hinged on luck, effort, and support from my family and friends. I am grateful for everything—even a person who has contributed 1 per cent to my success," the fast bowler said.

The tale of the night was not just about the winners but also about the camaraderie and respect these exceptional athletes have for each other. Shami, displaying the same patience he shows while bowling, waited for Rohan Bopanna to wrap up his speech on stage before grabbing a selfie with the freshly crowned doubles World No. 1. Sheetal, meanwhile, was every superstar's favourite star — Leander Paes, Parul Chaudhary, P. T. Usha, Viswanathan Anand, Sunil Gavaskar, and the whole room queuing up for a selfie with the starry-eyed teenager.

The author, too, couldn't resist the temptation.

Nature stretched...



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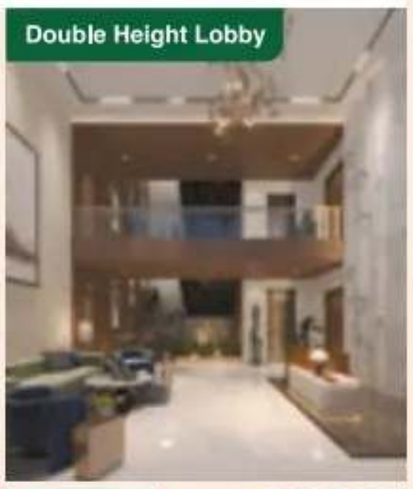
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Big shoes to fill: The last name 'Nurmagomedov' carries a heightened sense of greatness, owing to MMA legend Khabib Nurmagomedov's legacy, something which fans should consider when looking at Umar (in pic). GETTY IMAGES

THE NAME'S NURMAGOMEDOV

Umar Nurmagomedov is keen to **carry forward the legacy** of his famous cousin, Khabib, as he prepares for his potential upcoming fight with Bekzat Almakhan.

Nigamanth P
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Russia has a long and established history of producing successful fighters across various combat sports, and the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) is no exception, the latest being Umar Nurmagomedov.

The last name 'Nurmagomedov' carries a heightened sense of greatness, owing to MMA legend Khabib Nurmagomedov's legacy, something which fans should consider when looking at Umar. His spectacular knockout win over Raoni Barcelos at UFC Fight Night: Strickland vs Imavov further proved that he is the real deal.

Born in Dagestan in 1996, Umar competes in the bantamweight division. Fighting professionally since 2016, Umar's record is 16-0, including four wins in the UFC, where he made his debut in 2021.

A unique problem

A ranked fighter, on average, will compete two to three times a year based on his fitness and the ability to keep winning. Despite having both these qualities, Umar has struggled to find opponents.

The biggest hurdle that Umar has faced so far in his UFC career is inactivity, as his only opportunity to take the octagon in 2023 came in January. Although he was scheduled to face Cory Sandhagen in August, the matchup got cancelled after Umar suffered a shoulder injury.

His absence in the octagon has resulted in frustration, and the bantamweight fighter even vented his frustration on social media platform, *X*.

Ranked fighters are hesitant to take on Umar due to an apparent fear that the Russian has created. He has not just won four fights in the UFC, but has made sure that all of those were outright, statement victories. His four wins constitute two submissions, one unanimous decision, and the latest one being a technical knockout win.

A bizarre solution

According to multiple reports, after constant failures in finding an opponent, the UFC matchmakers have gone out of their way and have called up Bekzat Almakhan, a debutant, to materialise a fight for the highly-rated Umar. The contest is about to be added to UFC Fight Night: Rozenstruik vs Gaziev, scheduled for March 3.

Almakhan, 26, has 15 finishes in 17 victories, including 13 knockouts. He enters the promotion on a nine-fight winning streak. His last loss dates back to June 2021. Almakhan most recently competed under the Octagon and UAE Warriors banners.

With a fighting style similar to that of his cousin, Umar is dominant on the ground and strong with the clinch; the rear-naked choke being his go-to weapon of choice. Based on his undefeated fighting record, he appears to be on course to creating his own legacy, like Khabib.

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« My son needs me, my husband and I have been together since before I won in 2008. I think I now owe it to them to do something else.

– 37-year-old three-time Olympic champion sprinter Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce told Essence.com that she would retire after Paris 2024 Olympics. »

« I thought for the right price... for a million bucks, I reckon I could break that 50-metres record. – Former world champion swimmer James Magnussen told Sydney's SEN radio on Enhanced Games. »

800m

Canada's Summer McIntosh defeated Katie Ledecky in the 800m freestyle at the Southern Zone South Sectional Championships meet in Orlando, ending the American's 13-year unbeaten streak.

The 17-year-old clocked a national record of 8:11.39, beating Ledecky's time of 8:17.12. The previous Canadian record was set by Brittany MacLean at 8:20.19.

Ledecky was the three-time defending Olympic champion in the 800m and owns top 29 times ever in her favourite event, with McIntosh's time being the 17th-fastest ever in the 800m.

The 26-year-old American swimmer first set the world record in the 800m in 2013 and has broken it four times since, with the current one standing at 8:04.79, set at the 2016 Rio Olympics.

2029

Beijing will host the 2029 World Aquatics Championships, organisers said, bringing the multi-sport event back to China for the first time in nearly 20 years. The global governing body, World Aquatics, said China had won the bidding process for the event, which includes swimming, artistic swimming, diving, and water polo, among other sports. Shanghai hosted the 2011 World Championships. Singapore will host the next event in 2025, with Budapest hosting in 2027.

TRAGIC ACCIDENT

Marathon world record holder Kelvin Kiptum died in a road accident at age 24. The Kenyan, who set the world record of 2:00:35 at the 2023 Chicago Marathon, died alongside his coach on February 11. The tragic news has sent shockwaves around the athletic world, with tributes pouring in from across the globe. Kiptum is survived by his wife, Asenath Rotich, and their two children. AFP

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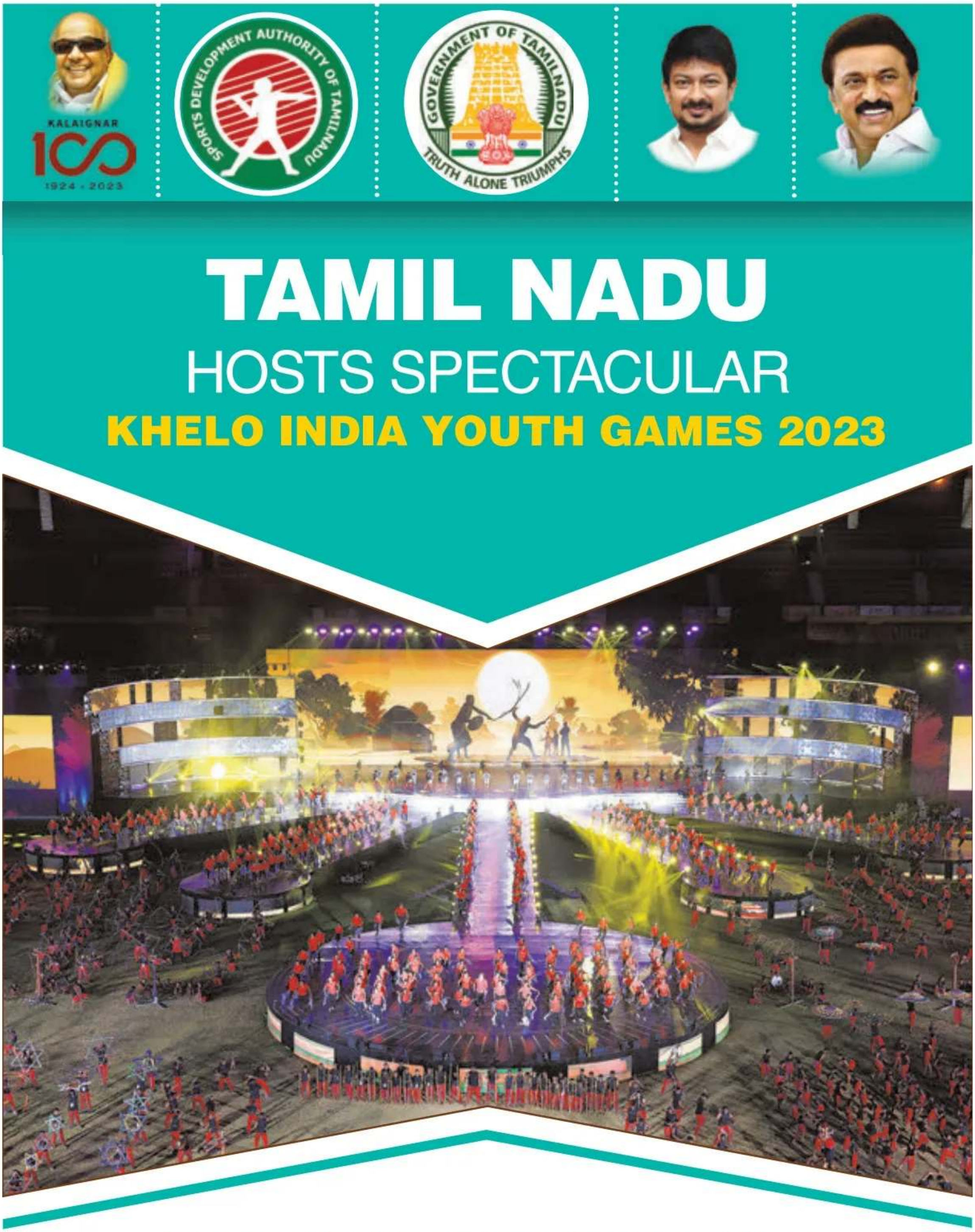

Celebrating athleticism and unity, the Khelo India Youth Games 2023 Tamil Nadu captivated with remarkable performances and a jubilant atmosphere highlighting the state's prowess in hosting major sports events.

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In a striking display of sportspersonship, the Khelo India Youth Games 2023 unfolded in Tamil Nadu, captivating sports enthusiasts nationwide. The event was a grand success with its intense competition, remarkable record-breaking feats, and a jubilant atmosphere that united athletes, officials and the entire sports community. This sporting spectacle not only solidified Tamil Nadu's position as a sporting powerhouse but also showcased the state's adeptness in efficiently hosting major sports events in a brief timeframe.

Marking its debut in South India, the 6th edition of the Khelo India Youth Games transformed into a rejoicing celebration of sports, a vision championed by Honourable Chief Minister Thiru. M K Stalin and Honourable Minister for Youth Welfare and Sports Development, Thiru. Udhayanidhi Stalin. In a momentous opening ceremony on January 19, the esteemed Prime Minister Thiru. Narendra Modi inaugurated the Khelo India Youth Games 2023.

Distinguished guests added to the grandeur, with the presence of the Honourable Governor of Tamil Nadu Thiru. R N Ravi, Honourable Union Minister of Youth Affairs and Sports, Information and Broadcasting Thiru. Anurag Singh Thakur, Honourable Union Minister of State, Home Affairs, Youth Affairs and Sports, Thiru. Nisith Pramanik, Honourable Minister of State for Fisheries, Animal Husbandry and Dairying and Information and Broadcasting Thiru. L Murugan.

The grand opening ceremony was preceded by promotional activities that the Sports Development Authority of Tamil Nadu had launched to spread the spirit and message of the Games across the state. Five specially designed Canters with the ceremonial torch (Thamizh) started from Chennai, Madurai, Trichy and Coimbatore and visited all 38 districts before reaching the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium ahead of the opening ceremony. It is noteworthy that this was the first time historical figures were used as the logo and mascot of the Games. The great poet and saint Thiruvalluvar, whose works encompass diverse aspects of life and offer insights into Tamil literature, was given a pride of place in the logo. The mascot, Veera Mangai, symbolising the valour and spirit of Indian women, was an apt tribute to Velu Nachiyar, the first Indian queen to wage a war against British colonial rule.

The State's commitment to promoting sports was evident through various promotional activities and fan engagement initiatives, such as Khelo Carnival and Beach Fest, contributing to the overall success of the Games. The grand inauguration ceremony not only set the stage for a fortnight of intense competition but also celebrated the cultural heritage of Tamil Nadu, underscoring the importance of unity and collaboration in the pursuit of sporting excellence.

Drawing participation from nearly 5500 athletes representing 36 states and Union Territories, the games unfolded across 13 days, featuring 26 sports disciplines and offering a total of 929 medals. Chennai, Coimbatore, Madurai and Trichy served as the host cities for the competition, with 21 sports disciplines taking place in 12 world-class venues in Chennai.

For the first time in the history of the Khelo India Youth Games, young athletes in the country were able to compete at venues that have hosted major international competitions such as the ATP Chennai Open, Nehru Cup football, international squash meets, and the Asian Hockey Champions Trophy.

The Sports Development Authority of Tamil Nadu (SDAT) worked meticulously to ensure the smooth and successful conduct of this event. The SDAT invested a significant amount of money to refurbish these venues, with the aim of providing the players with the best infrastructure to showcase their skills.

The Jawaharlal Nehru stadium was revamped with a state-of-the-art blue athletics track, while the Nehru Park indoor stadium was fully renovated. The newly-built velodrome at Tamil Nadu Physical Education and Sports University ensured that cycling events were held in the host state itself, which is a first in the history of the games.

Apart from the athletes, the games saw the participation of 1240 support staff, 1020 technical officials, 455 sports-specific volunteers, 1450 general volunteers, 39 chefs de mission and 26 competition managers. As many as 30 records were broken during the games. Out of the 30, eight were new meet records and 22 were national records. Females set 24 out of the 30 records. Athletics contributed eight meet landmarks to this tally, but weightlifting dominated the record-setting spree, with the lifters shattering the national record mark 22 times across categories. Maharashtra topped the medal tally with a total of 158, including 57 gold, 48 silver, and 53 bronze.

For the first time ever in the history of the Khelo India Youth Games, Tamil Nadu secured a podium finish as it came second in the medal tally with a total of 98 medals including 38 gold, 21 silver, and 39 bronze.

The hosts were a mighty force in track and field, winning 11 of the 32 athletics gold medals on offer. It is worth mentioning that the students of the SDAT sports hostels won 17 medals, drawing special appreciation from the Honourable Minister for Youth Welfare and Sports Development, Govt. of Tamil Nadu, Thiru. Udhayanidhi Stalin.

The curtain came down on the Games at a spectacular closing ceremony presided over by the Honourable Union Minister of Youth Affairs and Sports, Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India, Thiru. Anurag Singh Thakur, and Honourable Minister for Youth Welfare and Sports Development, Thiru. Udhayanidhi Stalin on January 31, 2024.

Honourable Minister for Youth Welfare and Sports Development, Thiru. Udhayanidhi Stalin in his address during the closing ceremony stated, “The success of Khelo India Youth Games 2023 reaffirms Tamil Nadu’s commitment to sports and its capability to successfully organize and execute grand events of national and international significance.”

TEST CRICKET IS

Sri Lankan spin-bowling great **Muttiah Muralitharan** talks at length about the future of Test cricket, why Bazball needs to adapt better, the fast bowling evolution in India, and more.

Shayan Acharya
shayan.acharya@thehindu.co.in

The interview is taking place on the 15th floor of the iconic Taj Mahal Palace Hotel in Mumbai, with the sun setting behind the historic arch of the Gateway of India, casting a pinkish hue over the entire presidential suite.

With a smile, Muttiah Muralitharan puts his phone on silent mode and adjusts his navy-blue checkered blazer. Having travelled from Colombo to receive the first-ever International Icon Award at the Sportstar Aces Awards for his remarkable contribution to world cricket, the Sri Lankan spin legend doesn't shy away from acknowledging that 'Test cricket is dying'. As the conversation unfolds, he expresses the difficulty future players may face in aspiring to play 100 Tests.

Since he retired from all forms of the game in 2010, as the highest

«‘BAZBALL’ DOES NOT SUCCEED EVERYWHERE. ONLY WHEN WICKETS ARE FLAT, THE OUTFIELD IS QUICK, AND CONDITIONS ARE IN YOUR FAVOUR CAN THAT CONCEPT WORK, BUT NOT ALWAYS»

One of a kind: Muttiah Muralitharan, an unparallelled match-winner, was conferred with Sportstar's first-ever International Icon Award at the Sportstar Aces Awards function in Mumbai. EMMANUAL YOGINI

DYING

wicket-taker in Tests and ODIs, Muralitharan has immersed himself in his family business and taken on brief coaching stints. Despite his current focus on balance sheets and consignments, he remains a dedicated follower of the game.

“Tell me what you want to know,” he says with a broad smile. And we get going...

In recent years, there have been debates over the evolving nature of pitches in the subcontinent. What is your assessment of this issue?

The wickets have not changed. It's very difficult to bowl in the subcontinent, as the surfaces often favour the spinners more than the fast bowlers. However, if you are a good fast bowler, you get a chance to reverse swing as the ball gets older. But it is a challenge, for sure.

In the 1990s, when I played, India had some really good spinners, so they would make spin-friendly wickets here. But in other parts of

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

* **Leading wicket-taker** in both Tests and ODIs
* **One of only two players** to tally over a 1000 wickets in international cricket
* **Part of Sri Lanka's** World Cup-winning side in 1996
* **First Sri Lankan** in ICC Hall of Fame

August company: Indian pacer Mohammed Shami greets Sri Lankan great Muttiah Muralitharan during the Sportstar Aces Awards function held in Mumbai. K. R. DEEPAK

the world, especially in Pakistan, surfaces would be very flat, whereas in Sri Lanka, it would be a 50-50 wicket that offered equal opportunities to batters and spinners.

So, a lot depends on the teams and what their areas of strength are. Nowadays, when India goes to England, you will get wickets that will swing and seam, whereas when they tour India, the wickets will be according to India's suitability. So, it certainly gets difficult for the teams to adjust to the conditions and go about their business.

England has changed the template of Test cricket with 'Bazball'. What do you make of this new style of play?

I think it's social media and a few people who have made a big deal out of 'Bazball'. For me, it's not a big thing. Test cricket is about five days; the wickets are different, so there's quite a bit of wear and tear, and teams need to bat according to the situation initially. As the wicket is fresh, it offers swing and seam to the bowlers, and for the first three days, teams can bat well, and on the fourth and fifth days, the spinners come into play — that's how the game has been played traditionally.

Much before this concept of 'Bazball' came into existence, Australia was the powerhouse (of such ideas). They tried to score quickly in the first innings and put up 390-400 runs on the board in the 90 overs. Then, Australia had a strong batting line-up, and they had some top players who could execute these plans. Now, England may display its aggressive style of play at home since the grounds are small, the surfaces are flat, and the outfields are very fast. Hence, it is possible to play aggressively. But when they come to India or visit other countries, they have to play a different brand of cricket.

'Bazball' does not succeed everywhere. Only when wickets are flat, the outfield is quick, and conditions are in your favour can that concept work, but not always.

In your playing days, India was a powerhouse of spin bowling, with

Legend of the game: Muralitharan turned the fortunes of Sri Lankan cricket around with his guile and an insatiable appetite for wickets. AP

the likes of Anil Kumble and Harbhajan Singh around. But over the last few years, a strong pace battery has emerged, with Jasprit Bumrah and Mohammed Shami leading the pack. How do you see this shift?

In the 1990s, India had a very big spin force, but in the early 2000s, people like Zaheer (Khan) came into the team, and eventually, there were players like Shami, who developed the fast-bowling unit. Bumrah made a huge difference because he is so different from the rest, and he is just like our (Lasith) Malinga in Sri Lanka. His presence has benefitted the team, and when you have a player like that, the youngsters want to be like him. A lot of people work hard and put in the effort to become fast bowlers. That's why, in India now, a lot of fast bowlers are coming in rather than spinners.

When Anil or Harbhajan was around, a lot of young spinners were following them, but now they are following the likes of Bumrah.

Do you feel Test cricket is more competitive these days?

Test cricket has changed over the last two decades because of T20s. The batters who play aggressively tend to do that in Test cricket. That's why they score quickly and get out quickly. I feel that's one of the reasons why you find results now.

Back in our time, there was a theory that the openers would have to take the shine off the new ball, and then take about 30 to 40 overs to score 40-odd runs. They took time, and there were instances of teams scoring just 160 or 170 and losing five wickets despite batting for the entire day. So, the next day, the teams would come back and re-strategise.

The pitches are now also prepared for results. Those days, there were very good five-day wickets, and whichever team was good enough would win. That has changed, and that's why now it looks as if Test cricket is more competitive since matches finish early and we have results.

But in my opinion, Test cricket is dying. It's not because of the players who ultimately want to play the

game but because of viewership. With the rise of T20s, viewership has gone down so much for other formats. I fear that maybe in another three decades, there won't be any Test cricket, and there will only be T20s and T10s. Test cricket has survived for more than 100 years; now the question is: can it survive for another 100 years? We don't know.

Is there an overdose of cricket that's affecting the viewership?

Yeah, definitely. Too much cricket also puts off the spectators. For instance, if too many films are released every other day, people won't see them. Whereas, if one good film is released every three or four months, there will still be some sort of interest among the audience. Similarly, in cricket, when you have matches every day, people often tend to get bored. Only if you can space out the matches well can you promote the game better.

Claiming 800 Test wickets is unbelievable in today's time. Do you think your record can be broken?

The records are meant to be broken. But I think if someone breaks this record, it will be the highest ever (and is sure to remain unbroken forever). Test cricket is not going to last for long. If you want to take 800 wickets in the format, you need to play at least 150 Tests. I was lucky enough to achieve the feat in 133 outings; hence, in the current scenario, it would be very difficult for players to feature in 150 Tests. Even featuring in 100 Tests will be tough going forward.

Players of this generation — Virat Kohli, Ben Stokes, or R. Ashwin — have been able to feature in more than 100 outings, but for the next generation, there will be a huge question mark on whether they will be able to even come close to that.

In 1996, Sri Lanka changed the dynamics of ODI cricket under the leadership of Arjuna Ranatunga...

Back then, there were a few rule changes in terms of the PowerPlay, and I think much before (Sanath) Jayasuriya and Kalu (Romesh Kaluwitharana) dominated the scene, New Zealand upped its ante during the 1992 World Cup with some power-hitting by Dipak Patel and Mark Greatbatch.

In the 1996 World Cup, Arjuna got in young people and wanted to experiment with a few things. His idea was simple: he told the batters to go out and play aggressively. It was okay; if they lost their wicket, there were others to back them up. That changed the dimensions of PowerPlay.

Nowadays, if you do something different, people like it, and we must enjoy whatever they call it (laughs).

Is there any current captain who reminds you of a Ranatunga?

There are very good captains, but you also need to see whether they are doing what Arjuna did for me in those turbulent times [between 1995 and 1999, as Muralitharan's 'chucking' row boiled, Ranatunga backed the then-young spinner]. But there are a lot of aggressive captains today. Virat Kohli was a very aggressive captain on the field. He always wanted results.

Over the last few years, the Sri Lankan team seems to be struggling. According to you, where does the team go from here?

Sri Lanka cricket, I think, is in good hands because there are competitions; we have an IPL-like tournament, the Premier League. So, the encouragement is there.

Even the schools play cricket regularly and produce talent. It depends on the individuals playing the game. Those representing Sri Lanka in international cricket should put in a little more effort. Nowadays, it looks like that is not there. You can't complain as there are all the facilities available and there are good coaches. So, we need to see where we are going wrong.

Your thoughts on being conferred the International Icon and if could tell us who inspired you to pursue cricket?

I am the first one to be conferred with Sportstar's International Icon award and I feel lucky. My sincere gratitude to Sportstar, The Hindu Group and the jury comprising legends.

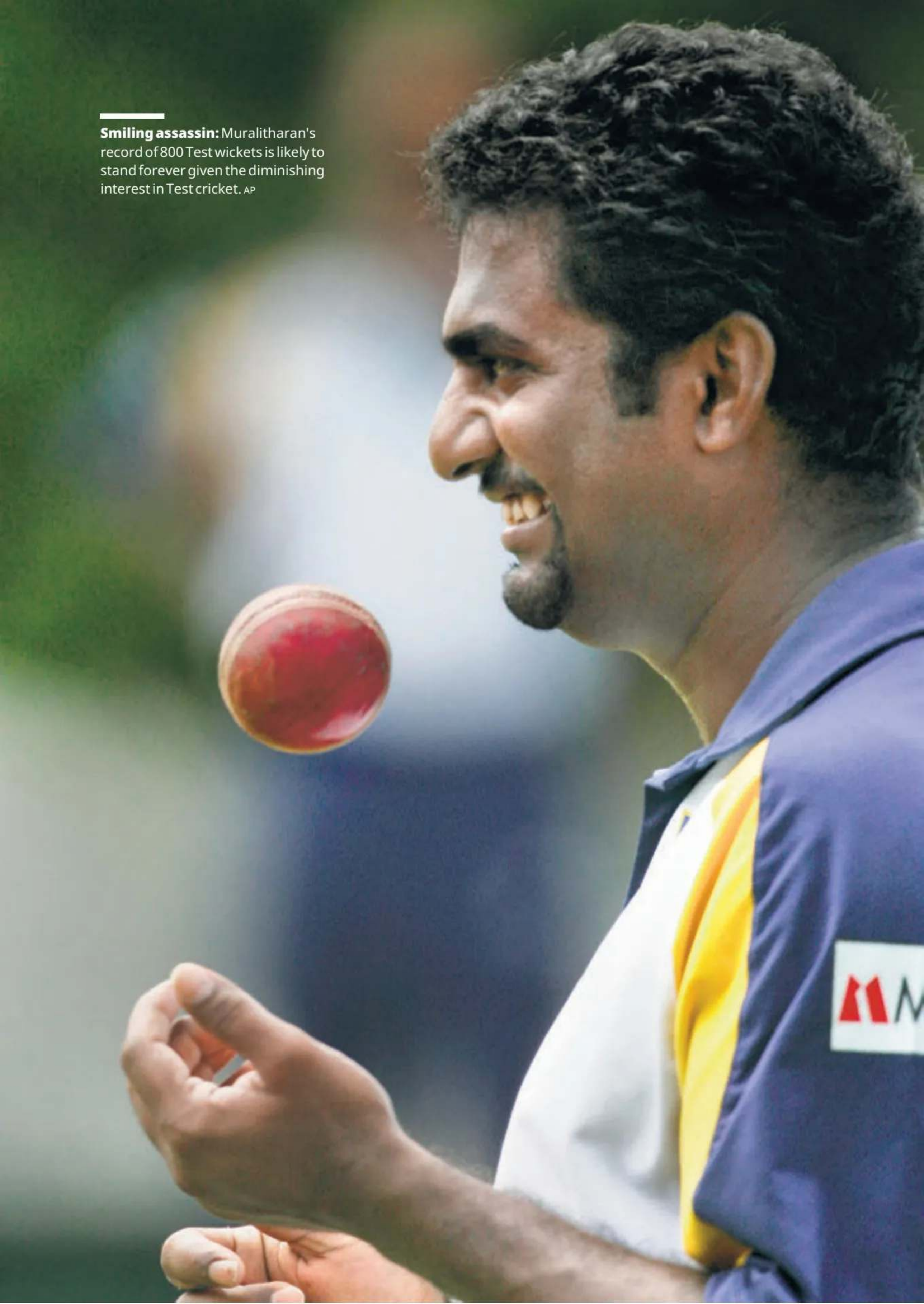
In my school days, I was in a hostel and cricket was something that everyone loved because our neighbouring country, India, was already a powerhouse in the game and we would follow them. Back then, we only wanted to watch the Indian cricketers. The first time I went to watch a match was in 1985 when the legends Sunil Gavaskar and Kapil Dev featured in a Test against Sri Lanka at the Asgiriya Stadium in Kandy.

It was inspiring to watch them on the field, because back in those days, there was no television.

As our island nation went into huge problems around that time, sports was one thing that gave joy to all youngsters, and it made us forget other things. That inspired me to take up sport and that is why I am here now.

In cricket, when you have matches every day, people often tend to get bored. Only if you can space out the matches well can you promote the game better.

SCAN TO WATCH SPORTSTAR ACES AWARDS 2024



Smiling assassin: Muralitharan's record of 800 Test wickets is likely to stand forever given the diminishing interest in Test cricket. AP

WELL-OILED SHAMI EAGER TO SWING THE ZEITGEIST FOR INDIAN CRICKET

The pace ace reveals that his **target** for the year is already set in stone — to guide India to title glory in the T20 World Cup.

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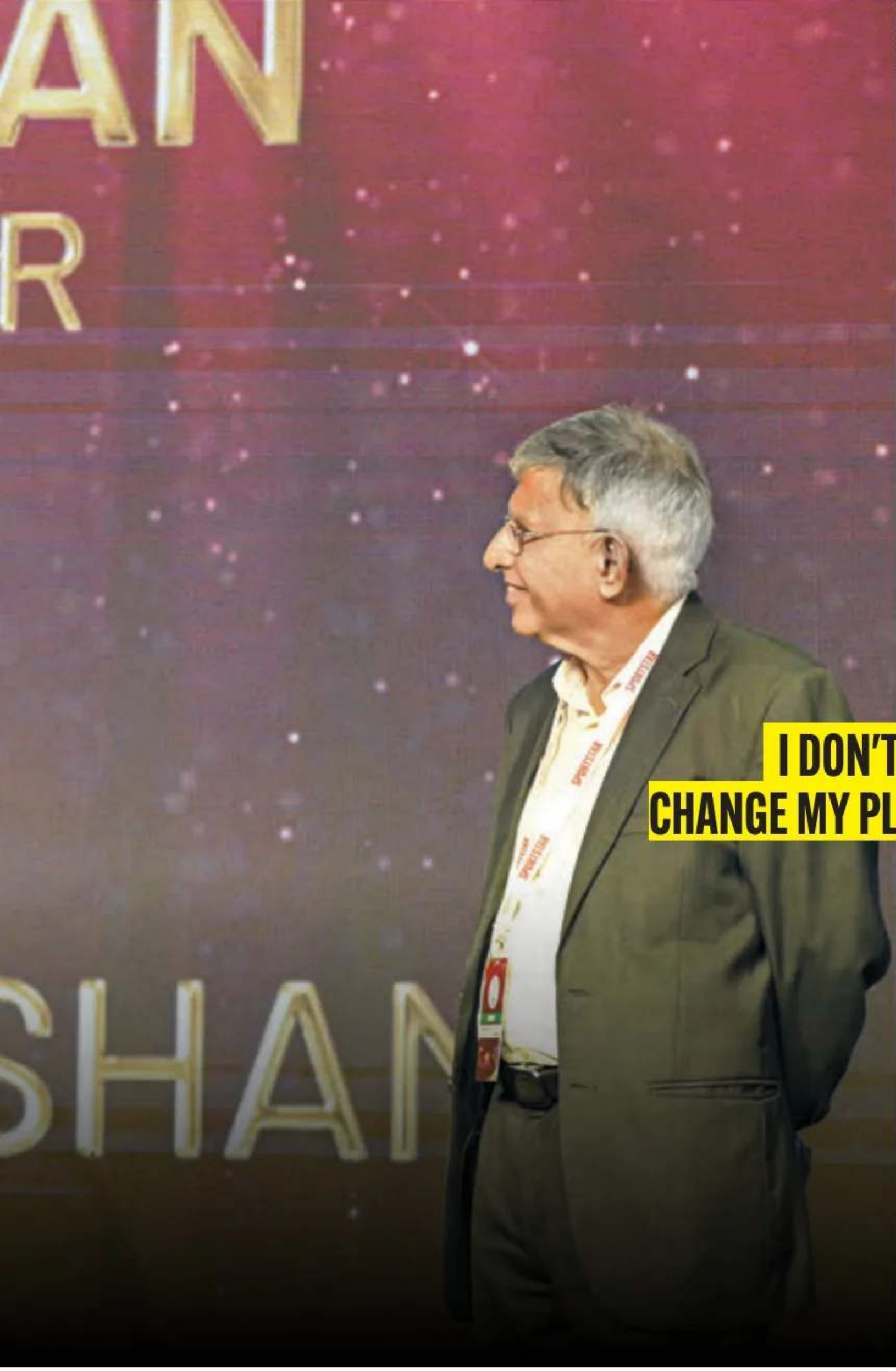
FOR MORE CRICKET STORIES

Mohammed Shami, a seasoned pace spearhead, effortlessly instils fear in batters — a skill he has mastered over a decade, representing India at the highest level. Despite this, the soft-spoken 33-year-old chooses a straightforward approach to express himself. Recognising that his journey from the streets of Moradabad to the echelons of Indian cricket heavily relied on "luck, effort, and support" from his family and friends, Shami remains modest. Behind the exuberant celebrations after claiming a wicket, he humbly conceals the challenges of his past — the lengthy train journeys to Kolkata, sharing rooms with fellow aspirants,



IN 2023

Was top wicket-taker of ODI World Cup 2023 with 24 scalps
Registered best figures in a World Cup knockout — 7/57 — during the match against New Zealand
His three fifers in the World Cup is the most in an edition of the tournament
Took 13 wickets in four Tests against Australia at home

I DON'T KEEP SPECIFIC GOALS. I CHANGE MY PLANS ACCORDING TO THE SITUATION AND ADAPT

Star of the night: Mohammed Shami receives the Sportstar of the Year (Team Sports) award from Sunil Gavaskar, former India cricketer and Aces jury chairperson, and Sam Balsara, Chairman Madison World, during the Sportstar Aces Awards 2024 held in Mumbai. K. R. DEEPAK

and eventually earning a place in elite cricket. He is filled with gratitude for every aspect of this journey.

Enduring long, sleepless nights cultivated his mental toughness, while the mornings and afternoons spent at the Dalhousie Athletic Club in Kolkata prepared him for the challenges that lay ahead. Now a confident Shami, one of international cricket's premier seamers, dressed in a sleek magenta velvet suit, exudes elegance as he strides into the grand ballroom of the majestic Taj Mahal Palace Hotel in Mumbai to receive the Sportstar Aces Award for Sportsman of the Year (Team Sports). His lively manner and confident gait manifest the determination he shows on the field.

"I come from a place that has no facilities. I am grateful for everything — even a person who has contributed one per cent to my success. And it's because of this support that I could have that *junoon*," he says.

"Destiny takes you far, and I firmly

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Wrecker-in-chief: Shami took 24 wickets in seven matches at an average of 10.70 at the 2023 World Cup in India. VIJAY SONEJI

believe in that. You should not forget your goals or targets, and you should always be loyal to your sport. I have seen people who struggled despite having enough talent, simply due to a lack of direction. So, if someone overcomes the odds and comes far, it is important to stay connected to his roots, and I am trying to do that," he says, with a smile, after receiving the award from the chairman of the jury and former India captain Sunil Gavaskar, whom he fondly refers to as 'Paaji'.

The pace ace he reveals that his target for the year is already set in stone—to guide India to title glory in the T20 World Cup, scheduled in June in the United States of America and the West Indies.

India came close to breaking its ICC title jinx last year, reaching the final of the ODI World Cup before falling to Australia. Shami played a key role in the campaign, emerging as the top wicket-taker of the tournament with 24 scalps.

While he has been out of action in the ongoing Test series against England due to an injury, Shami believes 'playing games with his mind' and having plans according to the situation have been the key to his success.

"I don't keep specific goals. I change my plans according to the situation and adapt. It is important to be open to going with your recent circumstances, fitness, and other elements to make the whole package. And I do just that. I play games with my mind and see how I feel," Shami tells Sportstar.

In the ODI World Cup, India's pace battery, comprising Shami, Jasprit Bumrah, and Mohammed Siraj, asserted dominance. Shami believes the change did not happen overnight.

"What people got to see in the 2023 World Cup is the product of seven-eight years of hard work. That effort built confidence and trust, which then came through in how we performed.

"The connection and faith the unit has in each other are why this pace battery has become this potent," Shami says, adding with a smile, "Hopefully the pace battery continues to run successfully for more time and finds more success."

On Indian surfaces, where conditions tend to favour spinners and batters, the task is challenging for fast bowlers. However, in recent years, a collaborative effort between the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) and the team

Missing in action: Seamer Mohammed Shami has not been included in India's squad for the England Tests as he recovers from an ankle injury. AP

management has shifted the focus towards developing fast bowlers. This strategic move has yielded remarkable results.

"In India, coming up as a fast bowler is very challenging. The Indian team and conditions are often hailed for their batting. For bowlers to be right up there and do that has been rare. But now, that bit has gone to the next level, and in different conditions. For us (the fast bowlers) to be able to do it well and that too, at home, is praiseworthy," Shami adds.

Although he had a memorable outing in the World Cup, he had to sit out for the first few games. But an injury to Hardik Pandya eventually paved his way into the playing eleven. "The year was good because of the hard work we put in, and all the preparation we put in ahead of the World Cup was really good. Before that, the IPL also went well, so I was confident. I was enjoying myself through my performances because the platform was set," he said. "The set-up was good, and the output was good. Only one thing was missing from our 2023 campaign (the title), and I hope we can get that in 2024."

With four months to go until yet another ICC event, getting into shape remains Shami's target. He wants to quickly get into the groove and be himself — on and off the pitch.

'The set-up was good, and the output was good. Only one thing was missing from our 2023 campaign (the title), and I hope we can get that in 2024.'

Honouring a great: Australian Open men's doubles champion Rohan Bopanna receives the Ace of Aces Award from Viren Rasquinha (right), and L.V. Navaneeth, CEO, The Hindu Group. RITU RAJ KONWAR

UNYIELDING PURSUIT OF GLORY

A more dedicated focus on recovery and a chance discovery of a **style of yoga** have been key in Rohan Bopanna's defiant pursuit of excellence.

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Rohan Bopanna's recent exploits have breathed new life into the flailing health of Indian tennis, which has been gasping for air for some time now. The 43-year-old's journey, however, offers hope not only for the sport in the country but also for those battling the vagaries of life at large.

To become the oldest man to scale the summit of the ATP Rankings and win a Grand Slam, while playing with worn-out cartilages in both knees at a time when the sport is at its most athletic, is a testament to Bopanna's relentless perseverance.

A more dedicated focus on recovery and a chance discovery of a style of yoga have been key in Bopanna's defiant pursuit of excellence, which reached its apogee when he clinched the men's doubles title at the Australia Open in January with Matthew Ebden.

"At the end of 2019, I got to know I had no cartilage left on my knees. They were fully worn out. I was on two-three painkillers a day. When I came to Bangalore, my doctor (Dr. Madan Ballal) asked me to try the PRP (Platelet-rich plasma) injections.

"He told me he can help me with the injections, but you won't be straightaway jumping as much as you want. You need to do a lot of strengthening. That's when I discovered Iyengar Yoga. I was 40 years old. I didn't think I would discover something new. At that juncture, I was in extreme pain, so I decided to give it a try. That is something that has always carried me—my perseverance in constantly trying to find new ways to get better," Bopanna said after receiving the 'Ace of Aces' Award at the Sportstar ACES Awards 2024.

"Somewhere, the pandemic helped me. It gave me four months of time at home to focus on something and build strength in my legs again. That made a tremendous difference. Every time I went to the gym and started lifting weights, I had extreme pain in my knees. This yoga was so specific that it started building my hamstrings and quads. I could see the muscle coming back into my legs. Suddenly, after two to three

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

Became only the third Indian to win a men's doubles Grand Slam title, taking the Australian Open crown with partner Matthew Ebden

At 43, he also became the oldest Grand Slam champion in men's tennis

Was playing his third men's doubles final at Grand Slam events, having ended runner-up at US Open twice (2013, 2023)

Oldest player to become number one in men's doubles rankings

Old pals: Indian tennis veterans Rohan Bopanna and Leander Paes in conversation with each other on the night of the Sportstar Aces Awards function in Mumbai. K. R. DEEPAK

months, when I started playing tennis again, I had no pain. That is where the belief came back again. I could enjoy tennis again and play without any pain. I didn't think that day would ever come. Today, I am happily playing without any painkillers," he added.

It is not just the overcoming of physical pain and setbacks that embody Bopanna's indomitable spirit, but also his mental resilience. Following his triumph in Melbourne, he admitted to wanting to quit the sport a couple of years ago because of an extended barren run of about four-five months.

But patience is a virtue that has stood him in good stead. After all, it took him 13 years to reach his second Slam doubles final (2010 US Open to the 2023 US Open), a period that also coincided with a 10-year-long wait for his two previous career-high rankings (No. 3 in 2013 to No.3 in 2023).

That wait bore fruit, but time seems to be running out as 'the grand old man of Indian tennis' awaits a partner for the upcoming Paris Olympics.

"I would love to play with one of the guys in a few tournaments. Unfortunately, I have told them they need to get their ranking up. We won't get into any of the Masters series or the ATP 500s because all the guys ranked today are 60 and below.

Unfortunately, there is no chance of getting into the mixed doubles because the only way to get in is combined ranking. Top-10 only gets you a partner for the men's doubles. So, mixed doubles is out of the question because there is nobody from the women's side ranked that high," he said.

He also urged the players not to miss the upcoming clay-court season in order to prepare for a surface that is not typically preferred by the Indians.

It is said that being at the top can be a lonely experience in elite sports. At 'Level 43', as he likes to refer to his age-defying success, Bopanna will hope for someone to take on the baton. That would be another burden off his shoulder.

Proud moment: Sheetal Devi (centre) receiving the coveted Sportstar of the Year and Moment of the Year honours at the Sportstar Aces Awards in Mumbai. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

Shattering the glass ceiling

The nation was **captivated** by videos from the Hangzhou Asian Para Games showcasing the young girl effortlessly lifting the compound bow with her feet, using her mouth to hold the arrow's bit, and consistently hitting the centre of the target board.

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The Sheetal Devi story is one of two journeys, two people, and two destinies. On one side, there is a little girl born with phocomelia, a rare congenital condition due to which one's limbs are underdeveloped or absent, thereby limiting, to a great extent, the 'normalcy' her life would allow. On the other, there is a steely-eyed archer who uses her feet to wield the bow and arrow, hitting the bullseye time and time again.

In 2023, Sheetal became the world record holder in the women's doubles event at the Para Worlds, while at the World Archery Para Championships, she clinched a silver medal, making her the first female armless archer to do so. She ended the year with a world no. 1 ranking in the women's open category. The para archer from Loidhar, a small village in the Kishtwar district of Jammu and Kashmir, got the country to sit up and take notice when her exploits at the Hangzhou Asian Para Games saw her win three medals (two golds and a silver). The nation was captivated by videos from the tournament showcasing the young girl effortlessly lifting the compound

Sports luminaries: Sheetal with Indian fast bowler Mohammed Shami during the Sportstar Aces Awards. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

IN 2023

World No. 1 (As of November 27, 2023)
World Record holder in women's doubles event at Para Worlds
World's first armless woman archer
World Archery Para Championships 2023 silver
First female armless archer to win medal at the Para World Championships
Won three medals, including two gold and one silver in Asian Para Games 2023
First woman to win two gold medals at Asian Para Games 2023
Won three medals (2 gold, 1 silver) at Asian Para archery championship
First Indian to win Best Youth Athlete of the Year honour at Asian Awards 2023

bow with her feet, using her mouth to hold the arrow's bit, and consistently hitting the centre of the target board. This incredible feat helped her win the coveted Sportstar of the Year (Female) and Moment of the Year honours at the Sportstar Aces Awards.

On stage, with her coach Abhilasha Chaudhary and companion Romica by her side, Sheetal's acceptance speech belied her innocence. Like how a child would narrate a story during the school assembly, Sheetal went about telling her story, an exercise she has done countless times over the last five months.

"When I first saw archery, I never thought I could do it. Kuldeep sir (Kuldeep Kumar Vedwan, the army coach who spotted her) made a device for me with which I could shoot an arrow," the 17-year-old said.

Supported by the Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board (which also backs Paralympian Rakesh Kumar), Sheetal's journey in the sport began when she was spotted by officials belonging to the Indian Army's Rashtriya Rifles unit, who first chipped in with medical support and worked on and with her in sports. To get better at the sport, her coaches considered the use of prosthetics, but her physical challenge didn't allow her to do so with proper use of the arm, and hence, a girl who had learned to live with her legs doubled up as her hands learned to be an archer the same way.

"Sheetal is more able than others because her leg strength is so good; she is now the only woman in the world who shoots with her legs," Abhilasha said.

"I used to love going to school and would go with my brother. I began using my feet to write. I do everything in my life with my feet. I didn't know about the possibilities of sports. As kids, we would make wooden bows and play with them, but I never knew this would become a way of life for me. I consider my legs my hands. That's how I've always used them," Sheetal said.

Sheetal found her way to the Shrine Board and its coaches, Vedwan and Abhilasha, in 2022, and there was no looking back. The coaches had never worked with an armless archer before, and the pair drew immense inspiration from the story of Paralympic silver medallist Matt Stutzman, also an archer who shoots with his leg.

Customising equipment and pure hard work have brought Sheetal a long way, with the talent now a medal hopeful for India at the Paris Paralympics later this year.

"The best moment for me was when I won the individual gold at the Para Asian Games; the tricolour was flying high. My dream is to win the gold in Paris, too," she added.

LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD:
CHANDU BORDE

CHANDU BORDE receives the IDFC First Bank Lifetime Achievement Award from N. Ram, Director, The Hindu Group, during the Sportstar Aces Awards 2024 held in Mumbai. RITU RAJ KONWAR

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

Scored **3,061** runs and took **52** wickets in **55** Tests from **1958-59** to **1969-70**

Scored **109,** the first of his five Test tons, and **96** in Chennai

Had multiple stints as national selector and chief selector

He was the cricket manager for India's Test series win in England in **2007**

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This takes me back to when I was associated with a lot of great cricketers – Polly Umrigar, Sanjay Manjrekar, Sunil Gavaskar, Sachin Tendulkar, Kapil Dev, Nawab of Pataudi... When we selected the 1983 World Cup team, the selectors thought of players who could contribute more to the team. That is why we selected more all-rounders. They contribute much more to the team than specialists." **– Borde**

LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD:
KARNAM MALLESWARI

KARNAM MALLESWARI receives the IDFC First Bank Lifetime Achievement Award from N. Murali, Director, The Hindu Group. EMMANUAL YOGINI

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

First woman to win an Olympic medal for India. Won the weightlifting bronze in the **2000** Sydney Olympics.

World Championship gold medallist in **1994** and **1995**

Two silver medals in the **1994** Hiroshima and the **1998** Bangkok Asian Games

Conferred with the prestigious Khel Ratna and Padma Shri

I would like to dedicate this award to my husband (Rajesh Tyagi). In 1998, I had a back injury for six months after marriage. I thought my career was over. But my husband had a lot of belief in me. He said that I would recover and start performing again. At that time, I was at home, and there was no gym nearby. If I had ordered a set of barbells from Kolkata, that would have also taken a month to come. He went himself and got a 180-kg barbell set after travelling by train and taxi. I trained in the living area of our one-bedroom house for six months." **– Malleswari**

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YOUNG ACHIEVER OF THE YEAR (MALE): PRATHAMESH SAMADHAN JAWKAR

In 2023

Beat World No. 1 Mike Schloesser of the Netherlands to win the men's individual event at Archery World Cup in Shanghai

Won silver in the Archery World Cup Final

Asian Games team gold medallist

PRATHAMESH SAMADHAN JAWKAR receives the Young Achiever of the Year (Male) Award from Nilesh Kulkarni, former Indian cricketer (right) and Suresh Balakrishna, CRO, The Hindu Group. K. R. DEEPAK

I am really thankful to the Hindu Group and the Sportstar magazine for making me a part of this beautiful evening. This will forever remain a core memory of mine. Being in the same room as these heroes, legends of the sporting world, I feel I am standing between tall mountains, and I feel really tiny. It motivates and gives me the vision to create my own legacy." **– Prathamesh**

YOUNG ACHIEVER OF THE YEAR (FEMALE): TILOTTAMA SEN

In 2023

Silver medal at Asian Championships in 10m air rifle to win Paris **2024** quota

Bronze medal in ISSF World Cup (Cairo) in 10m air rifle

World No. 5 in 10m ARW senior ISSF rankings

TILOTTAMA SEN receives the Young Achiever of the Year (Female) Award from Anjali Bhagwat, Former Indian shooter & Jury member, Priyanka Vempati, Head, Brand & Media, Nippon Paint, and Ram Narayan, DGM Technical Services, Nippon Paint. K. R. DEEPAK

» It's an honour for me to be here and witness the elite athletes of India. I would thank my parents for always being there with me, through my ups and downs." – **Tilottama**

SPORTSMAN OF THE YEAR (PARASPORTS): SUMIT ANTIL

SUMIT ANTIL receives the Sportsman of the year (Parasports) Award from Suma Shirur, former Indian shooter, and Ashwini Dua, IOCL, during the Sportstar ACES Awards 2024 held in Mumbai. EMMANUAL YOGINI

In 2023

World Record holder in men's javelin **F64**

Has broken WR five times over two years **(2021-23)**

Gold at Indian Open Para Athletics International Championships **2023** (with then WR of 70.17m)

Gold at **2023** World Para Athletics Championships (With then WR of 70.83)

Gold at Asian Para Games **2023** (With WR of 73.29)

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> I would like to thank the Hindu group and Sportstar for this award. Will try to replicate my Tokyo heroics in Paris." – **Sumit**

SPORTSWOMAN OF THE YEAR (PARASPORTS): THULASIMATHI MURUGESAN

THULASIMATHI MURUGESAN receives the Sportswoman of the Year (Parasports) Award from Aparna Popat, Jury Member, and Suvadeep Sengupta, DGM Sales — West, Nippon Paint, during the Sportstar Aces Awards 2024.
EMMANUAL YOGINI

In 2023

Brazil Para Badminton International (2 gold, 1 silver)
Thailand Para Badminton International (1 silver, 1 bronze)
Bahrain Para Badminton International (2 silver)
Canada Para Badminton International **2023** (1 gold)
Uganda Para Badminton International **2023** (2 gold)
4 Nations Para Badminton International **2023** (1 gold)
Western Australia Para Badminton International **2023** (2 gold, 1 silver)
Asian Para Games (1 gold, 1 silver, 1 bronze)
Japan Para Badminton International (1 gold, 1 silver, 1 bronze)

» I express my gratitude to The Hindu group and Sportstar for acknowledging my efforts. In addition, I extend my thanks to my father, who has been my mentor for 13 years. Special appreciation to P. Gopi Chand sir and the Gopi Chand Academy." **– Thulasimathi**

SPORTSMAN OF THE YEAR (TRACK AND FIELD): MEN'S RELAY TEAM 4X400M

INDIA'S 4X400M MEN'S RELAY TEAM receives the Sportsman of the Year (Track and Field) Award from P.T. Usha, President of Indian Olympic Association and Dipankar Chatterjee, Executive Director, Signpost. EMMANUAL YOGINI

In 2023

Set a new Asian record of **2:59.05** in the semifinals of the World Championships Clocked another sub 3-minute time in the Worlds final, finishing **5th.** It was the best ever result for India in a track event in the competition

Thank you, everyone. It is really cool to be here. Growing up, we've all read Sportstar, and to be awarded by them is a huge deal for us. We are in the august company of many elite athletes, and that is a great honour for us. We would like to thank AFI and SAI for their support. Keep us in your prayers so that we can bring laurels to our countries in the Olympic year." **– Nihal Joel William,** part of the 4x400m team

SPORTSWOMAN OF THE YEAR (TRACK AND FIELD): PARUL CHAUDHARY

In 2023

Ended **2023** with three national records

Won Asian Games silver in **3000m** Steeplechase with a timing of **9:27.63s**

Won Asiad gold in women's **5000m** with a timing of **15:14.75**

Registered NR in **3000m** SC World Championships final with a time of **9:15.31s**

Qualified for Paris Olympics

PARUL CHAUDHARY receives the Sportswoman of the Year (Track and Field) Award from Sumanth Krishna, Director, Casa Grande, and P. T. Usha. EMMANUAL YOGINI

I would like to thank Sportstar for honouring me with this award." **– Parul**

SPORTSWOMAN OF THE YEAR (INDIVIDUAL): RAMESHBABU VAISHALI

In 2023

Won **2023** FIDE Women's Grand Swiss without dropping a single game **(8.5/11)**

Qualified for the **2024** Candidates

Scored **5/9** in the **2023** Qatar Masters to earn her final GM norm while winning the women's prize

Finished 12th in Tata Steel Challengers **2023**

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R. VAISHALI receives the Sportswoman of the Year (Individual) Award from Pravin Thipsay, Chess Grandmaster, during the Sportstar Aces Awards 2024 held in Mumbai. EMMANUAL YOGINI

> It is amazing to be among so many achievers in this hall. It is truly inspiring to be here." – **R. Vaishali**

NATIONAL TEAM OF THE YEAR:
MEN'S CRICKET TEAM

ASHISH SHELAR (Treasurer, BCCI), and Mohammed Shami receive the National Team of the Year Award on behalf of the Indian Men's Cricket Team from Chandu Borde, veteran cricketer, and Jayen Mehta, Managing Director, Amul, during the Sportstar Aces Awards 2024. EMMANUAL YOGINI

In 2023

Became ODI World Cup runner-up

Beat Australia **2-1** in Test series at home and qualified for second consecutive World Test Championship final

Started **2023-25** WTC cycle with **1-0** series win in West Indies

Won the Asia Cup for a record-extending eighth title

Sportstar magazine has a 45-year-long legacy. In any sport, especially cricket, the comments in the magazine from those days and the special features were always a direction not only to cricketers but also to the administrators." **– Ashish Shelar,** Treasurer, BCCI.

CLUB/STATE TEAM OF THE YEAR:
SAURASHTRA CRICKET TEAM

In 2023

Won second Ranji Trophy title in three years

Won maiden Vijay Hazare Trophy

Parth Bhut, Dharmendrasinh Jadeja, Arpit Vasavada were among top performers

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JAYDEV SHAH, President, Saurashtra Cricket Association, receives the Club / State Team of the Year Award from former cricketers, Pravin Amre and Amol Muzumdar, and Nandini Dias, CEO, Lodestar UM. K. R. DEEPAK

"I should thank Mr. Niranjan Shah, who has been the father in making the infrastructure world-class. That has helped the team and it will get better and better. We will always take inspiration from Sunil Gavaskar ji, who has made Mumbai very proud." **– Jaydev Shah**

BEST STATE FOR THE PROMOTION OF SPORT: TAMIL NADU

UDHAYANIDHI STALIN, Minister of Youth Welfare and Sports Development of Tamil Nadu, receives the Best State for the Promotion of Sport from M. M. Somaya and Ramesh Narayan, Founder Canco Advertising, Director Strategy, AFAA. Also seen are (from right) J. Meghanatha Reddy, Member-Secretary, SDAT, and Atulya Misra, Tamil Nadu Sports Secretary. K. R. DEEPAK

In 2023

Sports Budget for **2023: Rs 770.66 CR**
Sports Supported: **38** sports disciplines recognised through Sports Associations; **60** sports disciplines recognised for awarding marks under Sports Quota for college admissions
Number of athletes who won national medals: **361**
Number of athletes who won international medals: **28**
Players who have represented the country: **54**
Youth Development Projects: Dr. Kalaignar Sports Kit, Namma Ooru Vilaiyattu Thidal, Thanthai Periyar Memorial Lecture, Arignar Anna Marathon, Anna Cycle Race
Employees under Sports Quota: **09**
International Tournaments hosted: **05**
National Tournaments hosted: **07**

» I extend my sincere thanks to The Hindu and Sportstar for this prestigious award. I also thank the awards jury led by the esteemed Sunil Gavaskar for taking note of the various national and international sports tournaments hosted by Tamil Nadu. None of this would be possible without the efforts of our Chief Minister M.K. Stalin who believes that sports is an integral part of our curriculum." **– Udhayanidhi Stalin**

SPORT FOR SOCIAL GOOD:
SHRI MATA VAISHNO DEVI SHRINE BOARD

The Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board has extended its influence beyond religious realms, allocating over **Rs. 10** crore in **2016** to establish a comprehensive sports facility in Katra, situated in the Reasi district of Jammu and Kashmir. This initiative reflects the Board's commitment to fostering health, teamwork, and sportsmanship through competitive physical activities.

ANSHUL GARG, CEO, Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board, receives the Chairperson's Choice — Sport for Social Good Award from Nirmala Lakshman, Chairperson, The Hindu Group. RITU RAJ KONWAR

"My gratitude to The Hindu Group and this eminent jury of distinguished sportspersons for recognising the efforts of the Board towards the promotion of sports in a place like Jammu & Kashmir. We've come a long way since 2016. We now have state-of-the-art infrastructure, training, and even residential facilities for our athletes. I am proud that one of our athletes, Sheetal Devi, is here receiving an award, and three of our archers will be representing the country at the Paris Olympics. We need your blessings this year." **– Anshul Garg**

BEST PSU FOR THE PROMOTION OF SPORT: NTPC LTD

In 2023

A total of **10,498** archers, supported by NTPC Limited, have participated in several National Championships/ Tournaments/ NRAT (NTPC National Ranking Archery Tournament) conducted by the Archery Association of India (AAI).

International medals won: **224**

Total funds allocated for sports: **Rs 31.85 CR**

Number of sports academies and details: NTPC is supporting the setting up of the Centre of Excellence (COE) for Archery in Sonipat, Haryana. In addition to this, there is a plan to set up archery training centres in **100** schools across India in collaboration with Sports Authority of India (SAI) and Archery Association of India(AAI).

NEERAJ KAPOOR, General Manager CSR, NTPC LTD (second from right) receives the Best PSU for the Promotion of Sports from Vandana Rao Carvalho (Olympian) and Mrs. Usha Girish, General Manager, United India Insurance. K. R. DEEPAK

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BEST CORPORATE FOR THE PROMOTION OF SPORT: TATA STEEL LTD

In 2023

National medals won in **2023: 195**

International medals won in **2023: 15**

Total funds allocated for sports in **2023: Rs 84.70 CR**

Number of sports academies and details: **6**

Tata Football Academy

Tata Archery Academy

Naval Tata Hockey Academy, Jamshedpur

Naval Tata Hockey Academy, Odisha

Tata Steel Sports Climbing Academy

JJ Irani Cricket Academy.

SARVESH KUMAR, Chief of Corporate Communications, Tata Steel, and Mukul Choudhary, CEO Jamshedpur Football Club & Chief of Sports, receive the Best Corporate for the Promotion of Sport Award from table tennis legend Kamlesh Mehta and Pradeep Dwivedi, Group CEO, Eros Media World Group. K. R. DEEPAK

BEST UNIVERSITY FOR THE PROMOTION OF SPORT: SRM INSTITUTE OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

R. MOHANA KRISHNAN, Director-Sports, SRMIST, receives the Best University for the Promotion of Sport from Binod Kumar Mishra, Deputy Managing Director, State Bank of India and Joaquim Carvalho, former Indian hockey player. EMMANUAL YOGINI

In 2023

Number of students under Sports Quota: **383**
Students who have represented the State: **390**
Students who have represented the Country: **40**
Medals won at the National level: **83**
Medals won at the International level: **10**
Existing sports facilities: Four volleyball courts, five basketball courts, two football fields of **18,000** square metres, a **400m** standard track, a hockey field, five tennis courts of which two are synthetic, a mini indoor stadium of **400** square metres, two cricket nets, an air-conditioned hall for chess, a multipurpose indoor stadium of **1,800** square metres, a FINA-standard swimming, diving and warm-up pool.

OTHER WINNERS

Sportsman of the Year (Team Sports): Hardik Singh (Hockey)
Sportswoman of the Year (Team Sports): Vandana Katariya (Hockey)
Sportsman of the Year (Individual): Satwiksairaj Rankireddy & Chirag Shetty (Badminton)
Sportswoman of the Year (Individual): Sift Kaur Samra (Shooting)
Sportstar of the Year (Male): Neeraj Chopra (Track & Field)

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COACH OF THE YEAR:
RAHUL DRAVID

In 2023

Helped India qualify for the World Cup and World Test Championship final

Oversaw India's **2-1** Border Gavaskar Trophy win against Australia

Coached India to record-extending **8th** Asia Cup title

I am truly honoured to receive the Sportstar Aces Coach of the Year Award. As a coach, I don't score any runs, take any wickets, or any catches. Basically, I am relying on other people to make me look good. So I'd like to accept this award on behalf of the captain and the players who I have been privileged to work with over the last year. It took the efforts of my support staff, our coaches, and all our network of professionals for me to be able to perform to the best of my abilities."
– Dravid, in a video message.

The wise heads: Sportstar Editor Ayon Sengupta, and Chairperson of The Hindu Group Publishing Private Limited, Nirmala Lakshman, felicitate the Sportstar Aces Awards 2024 Jury members — former India cricketer Sunil Gavaskar, former badminton player Aparna Popat, Olympic shooter Anjali Bhagwat, former hockey player M.M. Somaya, and chess Grandmaster Viswanathan Anand, at the Taj Mahal Palace in Mumbai. K. R. DEEPAK

Honouring a legend: N. Ram, Director, The Hindu Group (THG), feting Indian tennis great, Leander Paes, after he was inducted into the Tennis Hall of Fame in the player category. Paes has clinched 18 Grand Slam titles (10 mixed doubles and 8 men's doubles), overall 54 men's doubles crowns, set a Davis Cup record with 45 doubles rubbers victories, and earned an individual Olympic medal.

THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

Fangirl moment: Indian shooter Tilottama Sen in a candid moment with the Sportstar Aces Awards Jury Chairman, Sunil Gavaskar. Tilottama received the Young Achiever of the Year in the female category for her sterling exploits in 2023.
THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

Heart-touching: Para archer Sheetal Devi, who bagged twin honours at the Sportstar Aces Awards, got a pleasant surprise when she was presented with a painting of her by Indian chess great Viswanathan Anand's son Akhil. "You have inspired many people, and Akhil was one of them," Anand said. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

When old friends meet: Former India hockey captain and CEO, Olympic Gold Quest, Viren Rasquinha, exchanging pleasantries with Sportstar Aces jury members, Viswanathan Anand and M.M. Somaya. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

Chit-chat: Sri Lankan spin bowling great Muttiah Muralitharan sharing a light moment with Jayen Mehta, Managing Director, Amul, at the Awards night.

THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

Moment to remember: Award winners, jury members and the Sportstar Editor posing for a group picture during the Sportstar Aces Awards in Mumbai. K. R. DEEPAK

Coming out on top: Anshu Malik, overcoming a knee issue through rehab, secured the 59kg title by beating Worlds medallist, Sarita Mor, in an engrossing final. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

CHAOS AND CONFUSION REIGN SUPREME IN WRESTLING NATIONALS

It would be ideal for the Sports Ministry and the WFI to amicably work towards restoring **normalcy** in the wrestling administration ahead of the Paris Olympics.

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Following the protests by the country's top most wrestlers against the Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) for alleged sexual abuse by its then chief, Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, and other improprieties, the National wrestling championships returned amid utter chaos.

Held five months before the Paris Olympics, the two domestic events — one held in Pune by some Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) office-bearers and another in Jaipur by the government-sanctioned Indian Olympic Association-appointed ad hoc committee — served as an instrument of one-upmanship in a detestable battle that hampered the wrestlers' interest.

Despite their suspension and having received warnings from the Union Sports Ministry that their event would not be recognised, the WFI, led by Sanjay Singh from Brij Bhushan's camp, proceeded to conduct the National championships.

The ad hoc body, with the full

Triumphant return: Vinesh Phogat, returning to the mat after 16 months, defeated Jyoti for the 55kg title.
SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

backing of the government but lacking the support of several WFI state units, allowed everyone to compete, irrespective of whether he or she represented an affiliated unit or not.

The Pune Nationals did have the support of a few state units, but it was short on quality due to the absence of some well-known wrestlers.

The Jaipur Nationals saw the absence of several state units, owing allegiance to the WFI. But it attracted elite wrestlers, including World Championship medallists Vinesh Phogat, Anshu Malik, and Sarita Mor, who aspire to compete in the Paris Olympics.

The conduct of two back-to-back National championships created a lot of confusion and insecurity among the athletes and posed more questions than answers.

Many up-and-coming wrestlers were not sure where they should compete. Selection trials conducted by various state unit factions either on identical dates or close to each other forced some athletes to take part in as many as four competitions (two trials and two Nationals) or miss some of these. As per a rough estimate provided by an ad hoc panel official, over 50 wrestlers competed in both Nationals.

There were allegations that some wrestlers were warned not to participate in the government-approved Nationals.

Troubled past

The IOA-appointed ad hoc committee had conducted selection trials for some important international events, including the World Championships and the Asian Games.

Even after the WFI polls last year, the wrestlers objected to the election of Sanjay Singh because of Brij Bhushan's influence on him.

The Sports Ministry, taking note of Sanjay's proximity to Brij Bhushan and some 'arbitrary' decisions taken by the newly-elected body, swiftly 'suspended' the WFI and declared that the competitions conducted by the national federation would not be recognised.

It asked the IOA to form another ad-hoc body to run the WFI.

In this troubled background, with the government-mandated ad hoc committee asserting itself as the rightful body to run wrestling at the moment and the elected WFI not wanting to loosen its grip over the sport's administration, a chaotic scenario emerged.

The Railways, a public sector unit entrusted with holding the government-sanctioned National championships, made all possible efforts and pumped in significant financial resources to make the Jaipur event a success.

Railways Sports Promotion Board (RSPB) secretary Prem Chand Lochab, a wrestlers' sympathiser who was

On course: Asian Games bronze medalist Sunil Kumar (87kg, right) and Gyanender (60kg) were among the notable winners in Greco-Roman competitions, nurturing aspirations of Olympic participation. GETTY IMAGES

VINESH IS EYEING A TICKET TO THE OLYMPICS IN 53KG, WHILE ANSHU AND SARITA WILL BE KEEN FOR THE 57KG SPOT

elected the WFI secretary, oversaw the conduct of the competition as the organisers erected a big makeshift indoor arena on the Railway Stadium ground and fitted all facilities inside it to give it as much 'international' look as possible.

Accommodations for the wrestlers, officials, and guests in various hotels across Jaipur and decent meals served to all of them were part of the elaborate arrangements.

Of course, it would be difficult for any state unit to arrange such large-scale funds to put on an equally matching show.

Even though the arrangements were top-notch because of the Railways' generosity, the confusion could not be avoided. With several state units refraining from assigning athletes for the Jaipur event, one came across claims about the ad hoc body allowing some coaches to send entries on behalf of their states. Altogether, 732 wrestlers took part in the event.

The biggest challenge was when entries poured in for freestyle competitions. A whopping 325 entries, an unusually high number, including an uncharacteristic 32 entries in the 125kg category, were received for freestyle bouts on the final day, which saw the inevitable scenario of the action continuing well past midnight.

Participants from unconventional units like Goa, Tripura, Lakshadweep, Sikkim, Andaman and Nicobar, Puducherry, Arunachal Pradesh, and Meghalaya, along with their medal-winning displays, further amplified the existing fault lines.

Promising start

Performance-wise, the Jaipur Nationals saw the return of Vinesh and Anshu after their injury layoffs. It was a good sign for Indian wrestling ahead of the Olympics.

While Vinesh recovered from her knee surgery to win the 55kg gold medal, Anshu, overcoming a knee issue through rehab, secured the 59kg title by beating another Worlds medallist, Sarita Mor, in an engrossing final.

Vinesh is eyeing a ticket to the Olympics in 53kg, while Anshu and Sarita will be keen for the 57kg spot. World junior bronze medallist Sujeet Kalkal (65kg) and Commonwealth Games gold medallist Naveen Malik (74kg) emerged as deserving winners in important Olympic weights in freestyle. Asian Games bronze medalist Sunil Kumar (87kg) and Gyanender (60kg) were among the notable winners in Greco-Roman competitions, nurturing aspirations of Olympic participation.

It will be interesting to see how the ad hoc committee learns from its experience and handles the National Under-15 and under-20 championships from February 28 to March 5.

Meanwhile, in a much-needed relief, the United World Wrestling (UWW) lifted the suspension on the WFI on February 13, while asking it to adhere to certain conditions related to athletes' welfare. Now, the Indian wrestlers, who had to compete under the UWW flag during the suspension period, will get to compete under the national flag in UWW events.

It would be ideal, now, for the Sports Ministry and the WFI to amicably work towards restoring normalcy in the Indian wrestling administration ahead of Paris 2024.

Triumphant return: Sakshi Malik presents the gold medal to Vinesh Phogat after her win in the 55kg category at the 2023 Senior National Wrestling Championships in Jaipur. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

The many battles of Vinesh Phogat

Despite the **demands** of Olympic preparation, Vinesh Phogat has learned to balance on and off-mat challenges.

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Vinesh Phogat stands at a critical juncture in more ways than one. The only Indian woman wrestler to land two World Championships medals returned to competitive wrestling at the National Championships in Jaipur in February following a knee surgery in August last year. With the Paris Olympics only five months away, 29-year-old Vinesh is running against time to regain her peak form to challenge a much younger Antim Panghal, who has secured the quota in women's freestyle 53kg event.

Vinesh, who took on former Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) president Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh for several improprieties, including sexual harassment, is unsure about the course of their battle against perceived injustices.

But her priority is regaining full fitness after starting serious training in December.

Given her impressive track record as a two-time Olympian and two-time Worlds bronze medallist, winning a National title might not seem significant. However, her mental insecurity, possibly stemming from the uncertainty of her comeback, was

Tough times: Indian wrestler Vinesh Phogat made a shock quarterfinal exit at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics. She was subsequently suspended on grounds of indiscipline following her return from Tokyo. AFP

evident at the National championships.

Vinesh was relieved after securing the 55kg crown, even though the field was a weaker one. "*Operation ke baad aayi hoon toh thoda fear tha* (Since I was returning after my operation, I was a little apprehensive). It was like a test for me. I am feeling good. I think I am on the right track. This is an Olympic year. Hopefully, I will stay fit and healthy and give my best for my country.

"Sometimes, even when you are 100 per cent fit, you may not be able to give your best. I gave my 50 per cent and won here. *Wrestling life ko phir se jee rahe hai* (I have started living a wrestler's life once again)," said Vinesh, wearing a smile that had been missing from her face for the last year.

Vinesh won one bout on technical superiority and two by pinning her rivals. In only one bout, against Tamanna of Haryana, she wrestled cautiously to record a 3-0 win.

"When you go to a competition after recovering from an injury, doubts come to mind. In training, you don't have such doubts. During the rehab phase, for five to six months, I didn't miss a single session. So, I had eliminated that doubt — the fear — from my mind during training. I came here to test myself. In the women's section, there is good competition. I ended with a win at the start of the year, which is a positive sign.

"I will do wrestling training now because, after the surgery, I had limited time to train. I am happy with my performance, considering where I was before. I have not done strength training and conditioning at a high level. I was playing safe here because I did not want to take any risk in the Olympic year. This win was important."

Vinesh, who last competed in the September 2022 World Championships and skipped the Asian Games last year due to fitness

« Since I was returning after my operation, I was a little apprehensive (at the National Championships). It was like a test for me. I am feeling good. I think I am on the right track. This is an Olympic year. Hopefully, I will stay fit and healthy and give my best for my country. Sometimes, even when you are 100 per cent fit, you may not be able to give your best – Vinesh Phogat »

Taking a stand: Vinesh Phogat had earlier returned her Major Dhyan Chand Khel Ratna and Arjuna Award in protest of the issues plaguing Indian wrestling. SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

concerns, wants to transition smoothly into the 53kg category well before the Olympic trials. "I am cutting weight after a long gap, and there is no need to do it [dramatically]. The key is to save energy for the main competitions."

Vinesh, who got injured midway through a bout on her Olympic debut in 2016 and had a forgettable outing in the 2020 edition, is confident that she will be able to raise her game in the next five months.

"Yes, hopefully. I think I will play more freely in the next competition. The doubts are over. I will see how the body reacts after this competition."

Vinesh appeared to have a tentative training plan for the lead-up to the Olympics, but she chose not to reveal whether she would enlist the services of a foreign coach.

"I will go abroad [for training]. My coach is coming. Let's see what kind of planning is done. The support staff is with me. There are so many people working behind the scenes."

Vinesh was excited to see several experienced wrestlers getting back into competition mode ahead of the Olympics.

"It is an Olympic year, and many senior athletes were injured. They are coming back on track now. Ravi (Dahiya) also competed and did well recently. Anshu (Malik) and I have won here. We want other wrestlers to follow the seniors and walk with us shoulder to shoulder. The bigger the team in the Olympics, the better it is."

Meanwhile, Vinesh has not given up her fight for athlete welfare. "We try to combine life on the mat and beyond it because, as senior athletes, our responsibility increases. I was continuously doing rehab after my surgery. If we needed to meet someone, then Bajrang (Punia) and Sakshi (Malik) used to take that responsibility.

"I had stepped back a bit, even though we were together at every step. We are trying to continue our fight against injustice.

"They (the suspended WFI, headed by Brij Bhushan's acolyte Sanjay Singh) have been trying to create problems. Recently, they conducted another national championship in Pune, but the certificates issued for that event don't have any value. It's depressing for the athletes, and the government should take note of this."

Even though it is difficult for an Olympic-bound athlete to divide her attention, Vinesh feels the situation in the last year has taught her to balance her fights on and off the mat to achieve her target as well as a greater common goal.

The next five months should provide Vinesh with more clarity about her future.

YOUNG AND HUNGRY

The Khelo India Youth Games continues to **foster grassroots sports development** by providing a platform for young athletes to shine on the national stage.

Swinging to victory: T.S. Mundra of Madhya Pradesh (front) won gold in squash after beating A.P. Singh of Uttar Pradesh. M. VEDHAN

No margin for error: Mohd. Sazid won the boys long jump with a leap of 7.34m. B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM **Below:** A mallakhamb (rope) competition in full swing. R. SELVAMUTHUKUMAR

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As a concept, the Khelo India Youth Games (KIYG) is far-reaching and impactful as it gives a certain shape and vigour to grassroot sports.

The sixth edition of KIYG, which witnessed over 5000 sportspersons from 26 disciplines taking part in competitions spread across four cities — Chennai, Coimbatore, Madurai and Tiruchirappalli, was a gamechanger in many ways.

It was a huge organisational success with the Tamil Nadu Government and Sports Development Authority of Tamil Nadu (SDAT) deservedly claiming all the accolades. Added to it, the host's athletes did well in the sporting arena, finishing third, its best-ever in the Games.

Mercy Regina, General Manager of SDAT, insisted that without the Government's support the Games wouldn't have been such a huge success. "For almost all the sports and games, we bought new equipment of international and national standard. Several stadiums were also renovated."

She said KIYG has created a lot of awareness about sports and games, which will go a long way in encouraging the next generation of sportspersons to win medals at the Olympics and other major international events.

Regina admitted that the maintenance of stadiums across the state remains a challenge but said that the Government has allocated an amount for its upkeep. "That will not be a problem anymore," she said.

According to her, the selection Committee of KIYG, in consultation with SDAT, has chosen three sports — fencing, boxing and athletics — and has created the State Centre of Excellence inside the Nehru Stadium premises in Chennai. "Our new building will soon be ready. We are in the process of selecting players," she said.

Cash incentives, which are essential for sportspersons to grow, have been given by SDAT and Khelo

Gritty performance: Anupriya V. S. created a new meet record in girls shot put with a mark of 17.22. B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

Aiming for the stars: In javelin throw, Deepika threw a distance of 56.79m to clinch the gold, breaking her previous meet record in the process. M. VEDHAN

India for the winners and deserving sportspersons. Apart from its numerous schemes, SDAT gives ₹2 lakh, ₹1.50 lakh and ₹1 lakh to the gold, silver and bronze medal winners of KIYG, respectively.

KIYG also awards ₹10,000 per month for three years for sportspersons selected by the KIYG selection committee.

Boxer V. Devarajan, former World Cup medallist and Olympian, said that the boxing venue for KIYG at the Tamil Nadu Physical & Sports University (TNPESU) was world class. "I felt I was walking into an international venue," he told *Sportstar*.

The 50-year-old said that since TNPESU was situated outside Chennai (Kancheepuram district) players and officials had to travel quite a distance to reach the venue, which was indeed a bit taxing for them. "They had to travel 30 kms from their rooms to the venue. Food was a problem initially and there were quite a few other issues too, but slowly the organisers worked on the shortcomings to conduct a wonderful event," he said.

Devarajan said that the Boxing Federation of India and Sports Authority of India should hold talent hunts in TN, Andhra and other South Indian cities like the one they organised in Bengaluru. At various venues of the Games, there wasn't any big response from the public. But for the volleyball final at the Nehru Indoor Stadium, when eventual champion TN clashed with Haryana, a sizeable crowd really enjoyed the match.

S. Dakshinamoorthy, the volleyball coach of SRM University and a veteran talent spotter, said that SAI is doing an excellent job in spotting talent and rewarding them. Even though SAI does routine assessments on the players after picking them, Dakshinamoorthy said an exposure trip for the selected players will do a world of good to their morale.

"KIYG is a turning point for many

Fiery duel: A Kalaripayattu duel at the Khelo India Youth Games.
R. SELVAMUTHUKUMAR

sportspersons. Khelo India Centers have come up in many cities and disciplines. For betterment, I suggest SAI hold a 3-week or a 6-week camp and send the players for exposure tours to foreign countries. It will definitely yield results," he said.

K. K. Mukundan, former National swimming coach, said it is hard to find any loopholes as far as the swimming organisation was concerned at KIYG. "I can't find any. It was near-perfect. I wish they maintain the facilities and continue to do a good job," he said.

A renovated velodrome for cycling at TNPESU was a welcome addition to the Games and proved that the sport has a future in the State.

Maninderpal Singh, Secretary of the Cycling Federation of India, said that KIYG is a good initiative as it sees participants come from remote parts of India. "The Velodrome in Chennai is a big boost to cyclists from TN. Moreover, cyclists from TN did well in certain sections, especially in the girls' category. We have 14 velodromes in India including the one in TNPESU. It will go a long way in promoting cycling," he said.

Former India hockey captain, Md. Riaz, also said, "KIYG is a great platform for youngsters to showcase their skills. It gives them the feeling of being in the Olympics or Asian Games." Riaz suggested the weaker teams in hockey be supported by the Central Government in terms of funding and help the respective States in whatever way it can. "That way, we can improve the quality of the teams and the quality of competition," said the Olympian.

Maintenance and upkeep of stadiums, fair selection and constant monitoring of those selected in SAI/SDAT programmes are important considerations going forward.

The fact remains that KIYG remains a benchmark in terms of organisational excellence on many parameters.

As Anurag Thakur, Union Minister for Youth Affairs & Sports, rightly said at the closing ceremony of the Games, "Well done, TN".

Leaders assemble: Anurag Thakur (L), Union Minister of Youth Affairs & Sports, and Udhayanidhi Stalin (R), Tamil Nadu Sports Minister, greet each other during the closing ceremony. PTI

Challenging road ahead but paddlers show promise

Impressive performances at the WTT Star Contender in Goa signal a **promising shift** in Indian women's table tennis, setting the stage for upcoming challenges like World Table Tennis Team Championships.

Jonathan Selvaraj
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At the WTT Star Contender in Goa, there was a moment in Sreeja Akula's quarterfinal against Cheng I-ching when she would have felt she was a couple of points away from wresting the initiative from her Taiwanese opponent.

After dropping the first game, Sreeja stormed back to claim the second at the Peddem Indoor Stadium in Mapusa. Receiving serve at 5-7 in the third, Sreeja pushed the pace in the rally, twiddling the bat in her hand and making a firm backhand drive. It was a trick that had worked well for the 25-year-old Indian in the second game. But this time Cheng read the return well, countering with a sharp top-spinning backhand that reversed all the pressure back on Sreeja.

She defended Cheng's shot but it was only enough to set up a giant forehand that she was unable to counter. And, just like that, the

WHILE INDIA HAS HAD STRONG RESULTS AT THE WTT CONTENDER BEFORE — BATRA FOR INSTANCE REACHED THE LAST 16 IN GOA LAST YEAR TOO — THE CLUTCH OF PERFORMANCES IN THE 2024 EDITION IS UNPRECEDENTED

The high ground: No Indian women's singles player has ever gone higher than Sreeja Akula at a WTT Star contender event. PTI

moment was lost. Cheng won this game and the next to claim the tie 3-1, and in doing so brought India's campaign to an end.

Sreeja, who isn't a player who visibly shows disappointment, gamely shook hands with her opponent. All in all it was a result that shouldn't have come as a surprise. For, she had only reached a career-high world ranking of 66 at the start of the week following her judicious decision to compete at the WTT Contender in Corpus Christi. Meanwhile Cheng was an Olympic bronze medallist from Tokyo (albeit in mixed doubles) and a former top 10 in singles, who went on to win the title in Goa.

No Indian women's singles player has ever gone higher in a WTT Star contender event than Sreeja, who beat two higher ranked players in her run to the quarterfinals — world no. 30, Hana Goda of Egypt, in the round of 32, and world no. 33, Hoi Kem Doo of Hong Kong, in the pre-quarters.

Given her recent form, particularly her success in Goa, Sreeja's days as an underdog may soon end. Just a week after her impressive performance in Goa, she climbed to a career-best 51st in the global rankings.

However, she wasn't the only Indian women's singles player who got a bump in rankings. Manika Batra, the No. 1 women's singles table tennis player in India, also rose two places to 36th following her progress to the pre-quarters in Goa, beating world no. 53, Suh Hyo-won of South Korea, along the way. Archana Kamath also surged 22 places to 112th in the world rankings after beating world no. 52 Jieni Shao and world no. 62 Maria Xiao to reach the last 16.

While India has had strong results at the WTT Contender before — Batra for instance reached the last 16 in Goa last year too — the clutch of performances in the 2024 edition is unprecedented. "It's a sign of the bench strength of Indian table tennis right now," Batra said, after making it to the pre-quarters.

Indeed, the Indian women's performances shone brighter than that of the Indian men, of whom just one — Snehit Suravajjula — won a match in the main draw, beating a fellow Indian in the round of 64.

While there's something to be said about the tournament featuring a depleted field compared to the 2023 edition (neither China nor Japan sent teams as they focussed on Olympic preparation), there's no denying the fact that India pulled off a surprising set of upsets in women's singles at least.

These results are important in more ways than one. It's also a major shot in the arm for Indian table tennis ahead of the all-important World Table Tennis Team Championships, which is the penultimate chance to secure a spot for the women's team in the Olympic Games, with the final slot given to the highest ranked team. It's a feat that's yet to be accomplished in Indian table tennis history.

India needs to finish inside the top eight of the World Championships for this to happen. India has come close in the past. At the 2020 Olympic team qualifiers, the Indian women's team was just a singles win away from booking their tickets to Tokyo. Unfortunately, Manika Batra was upset by Daniela Dodean Monteiro as India lost 3-2 in the round of 16 stage.

While Batra reprises her role as the talisman of the team heading to Busan, she will be joined by the likes of Archana, Sreeja, Ayhika and Diya Chitale, who will be brimming with confidence this time around.

The results at Peddem would have come as a particular boost to Archana who had a torrid last couple of seasons, compounded by a dispute with the national federation. She has since found a new sense of vigour after shifting her training base from Bangalore to Noida in recent months.

Indeed the likes of Sreeja will be backing themselves to get even better. In her quarterfinal match against Cheng, the 25-year-old year old put on display a new technique that she has been working on — twiddling. It's a technique that involves the player flipping the table tennis bat in their hand to change the rubber facing the ball. But it isn't something new. Batra first used it to great effect en route to her gold medal at the 2018 Commonwealth Games.

Both Manika and Sreeja use smooth 'spinny' rubber on one side and long-pimpled rubber on the other. Normally this means that the

long-pimpled side (conventionally the backhand side for the Indians) is used to dampen the spin while the smooth (forehand side) imparts it. If she doesn't twiddle, Sreeja can become very predictable.

"If I play only with the pimpled side instead of changing the pace of the ball (by flipping the playing side of the bat) then it's not easy for me to beat the top players," she says, while explaining the need to use the technique, which, although challenging to pull off, will keep her opponents off balance trying to adjust to various types of balls coming from both sides.

While Manika is adept in the technique, Sreeja is still perfecting the skill. But as her match against Cheng showed, she's gaining confidence steadily. "I've been practising this for some time but I've not had a lot of confidence while trying it in a match. This time I used it a lot against Cheng. I know I missed a lot of balls because I was trying out something new; I've never done it so much as I did today. But I'm happy that I was bold enough to do it," she said.

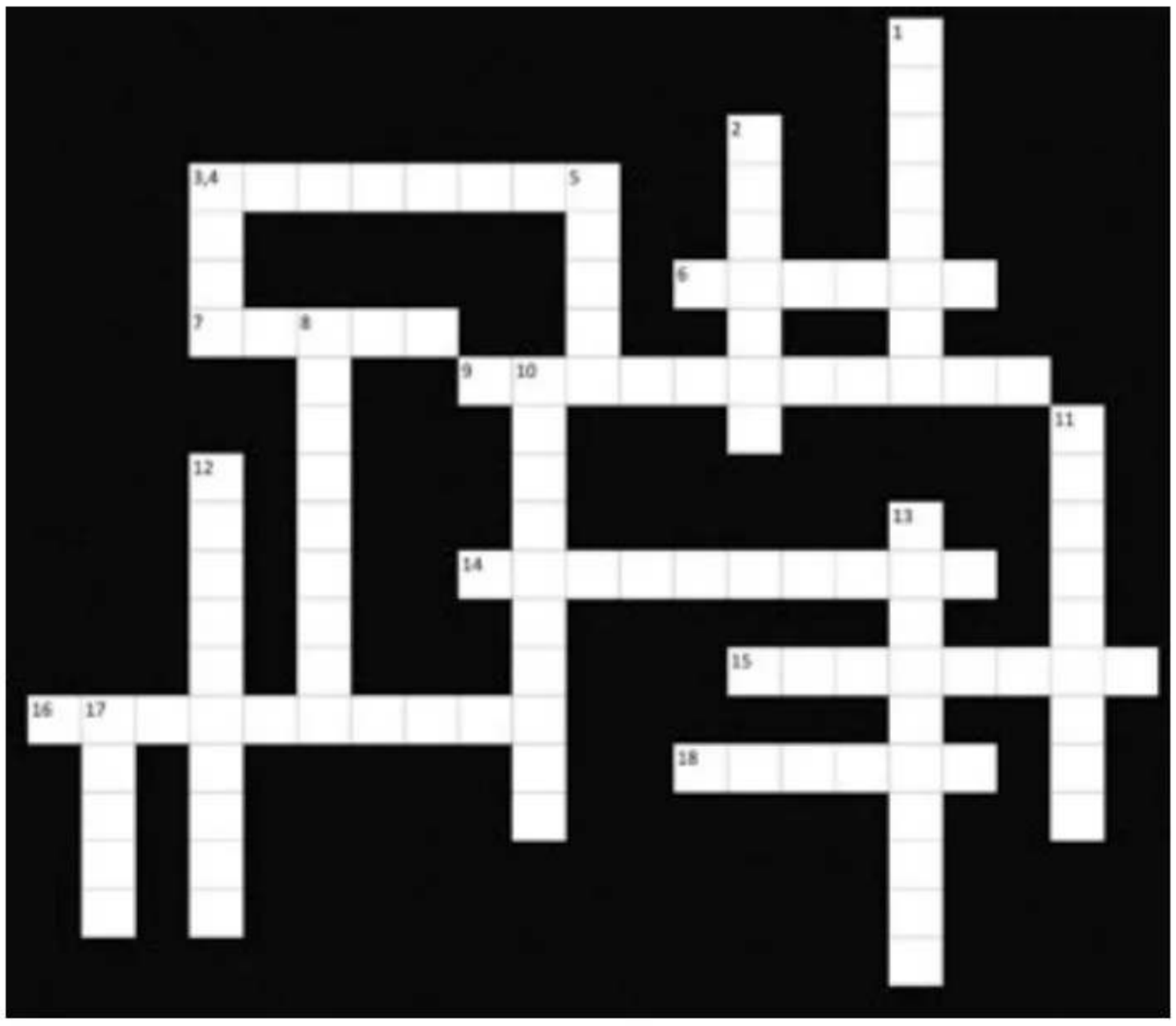
It's not just her twiddling that could create some doubt in the minds of opponents at Busan. "My forehand attack has improved a lot. It's become very powerful. I am also moving really quick. So that's also a positive," she says. As the all-important World Team Championships looms around the corner, India will hope an ever reliable Batra instills a renewed sense of belief in the rest of the team. The results in Goa have gone a long way towards that. It allows the team to focus on putting all their efforts towards that tournament rather than having to think about the singles qualifying tournament they might have to play should they fail to make the cut as a team.

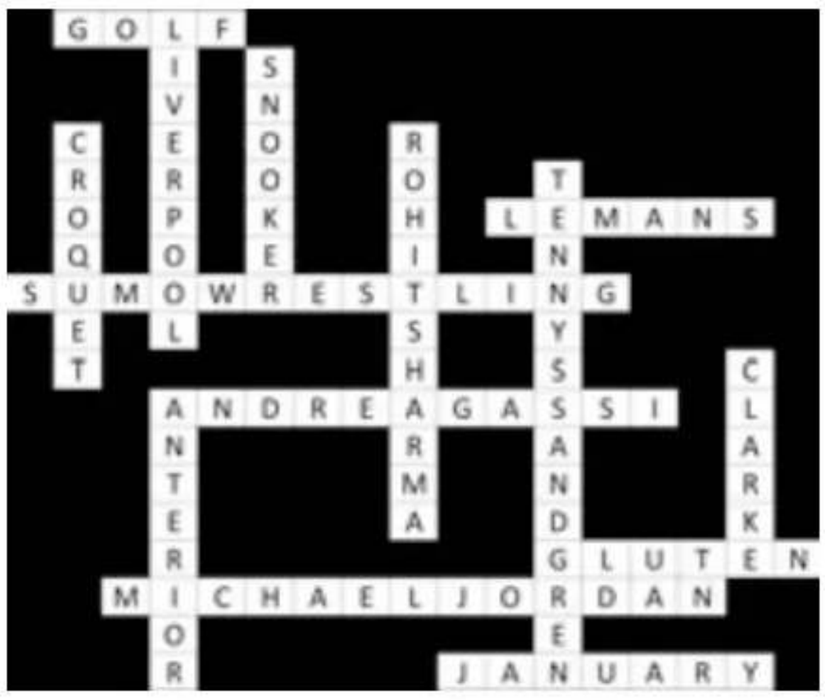
Cornerstone: As the all important World Team Championships looms around the corner, India will hope an ever reliable Manila Batra instills a renewed sense of belief in the rest of the team. PTI

"Because of the increase in our rankings, our seeding will improve not just for the World Team Championships but also for the singles qualifier afterwards (in May). It also gives us a chance to go through (in the final shot at qualifying) based on ranking.

"Because of this we don't have to play any more WTT tournaments. We of course have to play the World Championships and the singles qualifying tournaments, but apart from that we can now focus on our training completely," Sreeja says.

CROSSWORD
KARAN PILLAI





SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

ACROSS

3. The Calcutta Cup is a rugby match between England and which other country? (8)

6 What's common between Eden, Thorgan and Kylian? (6)

7 Sports like skiing and fencing take place on a ... (5)

9 First player to score five goals in a single World Cup match. (4, 7)

14 The fourth player of the Big Four in tennis. (4, 6)

15 Laver Cup is named after this legendary tennis player. (3, 5)

16 James Naismith is credited with inventing which game? (10)

18 What are the indentations on a golf ball called? (6)

DOWN

1 Another name for American football. (8)

2 Which sport has the fastest recorded ball speed of 303 km/hr? (3,4)

4 The captain of a curling team is called a ... (4)

5 40-40 in tennis is called ...? (5)

8 In which cricket shot does a batter reverse their stance? (6, 3)

10 Where will the 2028 Olympics be held? (3, 7)

11 The longest tennis match was played in which tournament? (9)

12 The largest football stadium in the world, Rungrado 1st of May Stadium, is located in which country? (5, 5)

13 New Zealand men's basketball team is also known as ... (4, 6)

17 Ancient Filipino martial art. (5)

ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar

FOR MORE STORIES

WORKLOAD MANAGEMENT A SILLY EXCUSE TO TAKE BREAK FROM THE GAME

The privilege of playing for the country, especially the highest form of the game, Test match cricket, should **never be** taken for granted by anybody.

The subject of this column was two-fold: the ICC Under-19 Men's World Cup Final and the Indian squad for the remaining three Test matches against England. With the Australian junior team walloping the Indian juniors and ensuring that they continued the winning tempo set by their seniors a few months back when they beat India in the ICC Men's World Cup final, the column about that can wait for another time. So here are a few thoughts on the Indian squad for the remaining three Test matches.

Generally, the Indian team for the next Test is announced at the end of the previous Test match. However, since there were a few questions about the fitness of a couple of players who had missed the second Test match, the selection was delayed to get more news about their recovery from these injuries. There was also uncertainty about the availability of Virat Kohli for the rest of the series.

There were also reports in some outlets that Jasprit Bumrah would be rested because of the so-called workload management. Fortunately, that hasn't happened, and Bumrah continues to be the vice-captain of the team. The series is still level, and there's the psychological advantage that Bumrah holds on the English batters with his destructive bowling. So to use that stupid word workload makes zero sense, especially when you see that in the two Test matches that have been played so far, Bumrah has bowled one delivery less than 58 overs. That translates to an average of around 15 overs per innings so far. Now, nobody in their right mind would even suggest that this means he has been over-bowled. Yet these outlets, wanting to fill in the more-than-a-week's gap between the Test matches, wanted some juicy stuff and added some masala to their stories. That nine-day gap between the second and third Tests is enough rest even for a bowler who would have bowled double the number of overs Bumrah has bowled so far. With both Tests ending in four days, the players have had an extra day off as well. So, there really should be no talk of workload.

Bumrah is playing for his country's cricket team, and he as well as the others should be prepared to do the extra work that may be asked of them. The privilege of playing for the country, especially the highest form of the game, Test match cricket, should never be taken for granted by anybody, however big he may be. Bumrah has made it clear he loves playing for India, and he must have been amused by all these reports from armchair experts about his workload. If anything, when the workload factor comes in, then the fitness

Ready to fire: Jasprit Bumrah has made it clear he loves playing for India, and he must have been amused by all these reports from armchair experts about his workload. GETTY IMAGES

of the player should be questioned. If, at the highest level of the game, a player, be a batter or a bowler, is not fit to play all five Test matches with the generous week-long breaks between the second and third Test matches and between the fourth and fifth Tests, then he should not be picked for any of the Tests and a young, hungry-to-make-a-mark player be brought in.

For far too long, some players have taken Indian cricket for granted and taken breaks on a whim, with this silly workload reason as an excuse. All they show by that is an unhealthy disregard for Indian cricket and that they are keeping themselves above Indian cricket. Most of these players are certainties and know that even if they don't play a game or two, their places will be secure, and they can come back immediately if they make themselves available. Oh, for a selection committee that will get up and tell them, 'Ok, take a break, but then, don't expect to be picked when you feel like it. We will decide if we need you or not'. If only these players remembered that they are what they are because of Indian cricket. Their name, fame, wealth, and even millions of fans are because of Indian cricket. So, some loyalty to Indian cricket and their millions of fans should be considered before taking casual leave from the game.

And workload be damned.

Some loyalty to Indian cricket and their millions of fans should be considered before taking casual leave from the game.

Bumrah quickest Indian pacer to 150 Test wickets

34 } The number of Test matches Jasprit Bumrah needed to claim his 150th Test wicket (victim: Ben Stokes) in the first innings of the Visakhapatnam Test on 3 February 2024. He is now the quickest among Indian pacers to reach this milestone. Among Indians, only R. Ashwin (29 Tests in November 2015) and Ravindra Jadeja (32 Tests in August 2017) — both spin bowlers — have done it quicker. For the record, Kapil Dev (39 Tests in June 1982) and Javagal Srinath (40 Tests in October 1999), previously, were the two quickest among Indian pace bowlers. Incidentally, Bumrah is the second fastest to reach this target among Asian pace bowlers. Only Pakistan's Waqar Younis needed fewer Tests (27) while achieving it on 10 February 1994.

Quickest to reach 150 Test wickets among Asian pace bowlers

Tests	Bowler	For	Balls	Runs	Wkts	Ave.	S/R	Achieved on
27	**Waqar Younis**	Pak	5461	2792	152	18.37	35.93	10 Feb 1994
34	**Jasprit Bumrah**	Ind	6802	3084	152	20.29	44.75	3 Feb 2024
37	**Imran Khan**	Pak	9386	4139	152	27.23	61.75	23 Mar 1982
37	**Shoaib Akhtar**	Pak	6624	3717	150	24.78	44.16	16 Nov 2005
39	**Kapil Dev**	Ind	8593	4306	152	28.33	56.53	10 Jun 1982

India's Jasprit Bumrah. K. R. DEEPAK

Notes: * Among pacers, Waqar is second quickest behind Englishman Sydney Barnes (24 Tests in December 1913)
* Bumrah is the 17th Indian bowler to reach 150 Test wickets and the seventh Indian pacer.

2578 } The number of Test runs for Joe Root against India. His tally of runs is now the most by any opponent batter against India. He went past the previous record tally of 2555 runs by Ricky Ponting during the second innings of the Hyderabad Test match. Root achieved the landmark in 47 innings as compared to the Aussie's 51. For the record, eight batters have aggregated 2000 or more runs against India in Tests. The others not listed in the table below are West Indian Shivnarine Chanderpaul (2171), Australians Michael Clarke (2049) and Steve Smith (2042). Clive Lloyd was the first opponent batter to reach 2000 Test runs against India on 12 November 1983, while Javed Miandad was the quickest to do so in just 35 innings, on 15 November 1989.

Leading run-getters against India in Test cricket

Runs	Batter	For	Mts	Inns	Ave.	HS	100	50	Career span against India
2578	**Joe Root**	Eng	27	49	58.59	218	9	10	Dec 2012 to Feb 2024
2555	**Ricky Ponting**	Aus	29	51	54.36	257	8	12	Oct 1996 to Jan 2012
2431	**Alastair Cook**	Eng	30	54	47.67	294	7	9	Mar 2006 to Sep 2018
2344	**Clive Lloyd**	WI	28	44	58.60	242*	7	12	Dec 1966 to Dec 1983
2228	**Javed Miandad**	Pak	28	39	67.52	280*	5	14	Oct 1978 to Dec 1989

England's Joe Root. GETTY IMAGES

190 } The first-innings lead gained by India in the first Test in Hyderabad is now its second-biggest in a defeat. However, this is its most significant lead gained in a home Test defeat. Previously, India had lost the Chennai (at the Corporation Stadium) Test against Australia by 139 runs after taking the first-innings lead of 65 runs, which means that the Hyderabad Test was the first home defeat for India after taking a first-innings lead of 100 or more runs.

Highest first innings leads for India in lost Test matches

Lead	Team1		Team2	Opponent's winning margin	Venue	Date
192	**Sri Lanka** (183 & 367)	beat	India (375 & 112)	63 runs	Galle	15 Aug 2015
190	**England** (246 & 420)	beat	India (436 & 202)	28 runs	Hyderabad	28 Jan 2024
132	India (416 & 245)	lost to	**England** (284 & 378/3)	7 wickets	Birmingham	5 Jul 2022
80	**Australia** (145 & 451)	beat	India (225 & 333)	38 runs	Adelaide	29 Jan 1992
69	**Australia** (463 & 401/7d)	beat	India (532 & 210)	122 runs	Sydney	6 Jan 2008

Note: Since that Galle defeat, India's head-to-head match results in Tests against Sri Lanka read: won 8, drawn 2, loss nil.

184 } The number of wickets claimed by England's James Anderson across all international formats against India. His tally makes him the opponent bowler with maximum international wickets against India.

Most international wickets against India

Wkts	Bowler	For	Mts	Inns	Balls	Runs	Ave.	S/R	Summary of international wickets: Tests	ODIs	T20Is
184	James Anderson	Eng	69	101	9472	4935	26.82	51.48	144	40	0
179	M. Muralitharan	SL	85	91	10317	5777	32.27	57.64	105	74	–
129	Imran Khan	Pak	52	65	6291	3039	23.55	48.77	94	35	–
125	Nathan Lyon	Aus	35	57	7909	4210	33.68	63.27	121	4	0
111	Brett Lee	Aus	49	59	4680	2983	26.87	42.16	53	55	3

Note: 13 bowlers have claimed 100 or more wickets in international cricket against India.

22 } Yashasvi Jaiswal's age when he registered the maiden double ton during his 209 in the second Test match in Visakhapatnam on 3 February 2024. Only three other double centuries involving two Indians (Vinod Kambli twice and Sunil Gavaskar) have been recorded while they were younger than Jaiswal.

India's youngest Test double-century makers

Age	Batter	Runs	Opp	Venue	Date	Result
21y-35d	Vinod Kambli	224	Eng	Mumbai	22 Feb 1993	Won
21y-55d	Vinod Kambli	227	Zim	Delhi	14 Mar 1993	Won
21y-283d	Sunil Gavaskar	220	WI	Port of Spain	19 Apr 1971	Drawn
22y-37d	Yashasvi Jaiswal	209	Eng	Visakhapatnam	3 Feb 2024	Won
23y-39d	Mansur Ali Khan Pataudi	203*	Eng	Delhi	13 Feb 1964	Drawn

Note: Pataudi and Gavaskar made their 200+ scores in the second innings

Youngest to score 200-plus Test scores against England

Age	Batter	Runs	For	Venue	Date	Result
20y-315d	George Headley	223	WI	Kingston	10 Apr 1930	
21y-35d	Vinod Kambli	224	Ind	Mumbai	22 Feb 1993	Won
21y-307d	Don Bradman	254	Aus	Lord's	30 Jun 1930	
21y-318d	Don Bradman	334	Aus	Leeds	11 Jul 1930	
21y-358d	Don Bradman	232	Aus	The Oval	20 Aug 1930	
22y-37d	Yashasvi Jaiswal	209	Ind	Visakhapatnam	3 Feb 2024	Won

India's Yashasvi Jaiswal. K. R. DEEPAK

Youngest openers to make 200-plus Test scores

Age	Batter	Runs	For	Opp	Venue	Date	Result
21y-259d	Graeme Smith	200	SA	Ban	East London	18 Oct 2002	Won
21y-279d	Kraigg Brathwaite	212	WI	Ban	Kingstown	6 Sep 2014	Won
21y-283d	Sunil Gavaskar	220	Ind	WI	Port of Spain	19 Apr 1971	Drawn
22y-37d	Yashasvi Jaiswal	209	Ind	Eng	Visakhapatnam	3 Feb 2024	Won
22y-60d	Len Hutton	364	Eng	Aus	The Oval	22 Aug 1938	Won

5 } The number of visiting batters to aggregate 1000 or more Test runs on Indian soil. In the second innings of the Visakhapatnam Test match on 5 February 2024, England's Joe Root became the latest entrant to join an elite band of visiting players. West Indian Clive Lloyd was the first batter to do so in November 1983, and following him were teammate Gordon Greenidge (in December 1987), Australian Matthew Hayden (in November 2008) and Englishman Alastair Cook (in November 2016).

1000-plus Test runs on Indian soil by visiting batters

Runs	Batter	For	Mts	Inns	Ave.	HS	100	50	Innings to reach landmark
1359	Clive Lloyd	WI	14	22	75.50	242*	4	5	17
1235	Alastair Cook	Eng	13	26	51.46	190	5	4	18
1042	Gordon Greenidge	WI	14	25	45.30	194	3	4	25
1027	Matthew Hayden	Aus	11	22	51.35	203	2	5	22
1004	Joe Root	Eng	12	24	43.65	218	2	5	24

All records are correct and updated until 7 February 2024.

AFP

Australia clinches under-19 World Cup title

1 This victory marked Australia's first Under-19 World Cup win since 2010.

Australia secured its fourth Under-19 World Cup title with a 79-run triumph over India in the final.

Posting a competitive 253-7 in 50 overs, Harjas Singh led the scoring with 55, while Raj Limbani claimed 3-38 for India. Despite a patient 47 from India opener Adarsh Singh, the team struggled as only three other batters reached double figures, ultimately being dismissed for 174. Mahli Beardman stood out among the Aussie bowlers with figures of 3–15.

This victory marked Australia's first Under-19 World Cup win since 2010.

2

AFP

Kane Williamson followed his first-innings 118 off 289 balls in the first Test against South Africa at Mount Maunganui with a fluent 109 off 132 in the second to power New Zealand to a 281-run win. This was New Zealand's second highest victory in terms of runs. Rachin Ravindra, for his 240 in the first innings, was named Player of the Match.

3

AFP

South Africa women claimed their maiden ODI victory against Australia, winning the second game in North Sydney by 84 runs (DLS method) and levelling the three-match series 1-1 **(Marizanne Kapp in pic)**. This was South Africa's first win over Australia in the 50-over format in 17 matches, having lost 15 previously and tied one. However, the Aussies bounced back in the last game, clinching the series 2-1.

4

AFP

Australian all-rounder Glenn Maxwell equalled India captain Rohit Sharma's record for the most Men's T20I hundreds (five) with an unbeaten 120 off 55 balls against the West Indies in the second game. Australia posted 241-4, its highest Twenty20 total on home soil. The West Indies finished on 207-9 in response as Australia clinched the series 2-0 with one match to play. Maxwell's 120 was also the highest score made in a T20 International at the Adelaide Oval.

5

AFP

Pathum Nissanka became the first Sri Lankan batter to score an ODI double hundred in a 42-run win over Afghanistan in Pallekele. Nissanka's unbeaten 210, which was studded with 20 fours and eight sixes from 139 balls, is the joint fifth-highest individual score in ODIs. He went past Sanath Jayasuriya's long-standing ODI record score of 189 for Sri Lanka against India in 2000. Nissanka's total is also the highest for any batter in ODIs against Afghanistan.

6

TWITTER SA_20 LEAGUE

Sunrisers Eastern Cape, led by Marco Jansen's five-wicket haul, dominated Durban's Super Giants, securing an 89-run victory to clinch consecutive SA20 titles in a powerful team display at Newlands. Captain Aiden Markram said after the win: "It's a great feeling; to be in the final was a proud moment, and to rock up here and play that game of cricket was a testament to where we're going as a team. The competition is tough; every game you have to be at your best. It was nice to have some momentum and carry that through, but today was a fresh start, and luckily we put together a good performance. The bowlers were the shining light, and the batters got us over the line. Incredibly proud of this group."

FOR MORE IMAGES

1st

Young gun: Yashasvi Jaiswal became the third youngest Indian men's cricketer to score a double century in Tests. K. R. DEEPAK

2nd

Castled: Player of the Match Jasprit Bumrah bowled a lethal yorker to uproot the middle and leg stump of England's Ollie Pope in the first innings. K. R. DEEPAK

3rd

In disbelief: England captain Ben Stokes is left flummoxed after Jasprit Bumrah knocked down his off stump with one that sliced through his defence.
GETTY IMAGES

4th

Standing tall: England opener Zak Crawley was the best batter for his team, scoring 76 and 73 in the two innings. K. R. DEEPAK

VISAKHAPATNAM TEST PHOTOLINE
INDIA-ENGLAND

5th

Ageless: James Anderson, 41, was at his lethal best, picking five wickets in 35 overs at an economy of 2.17 across the two innings. K. R. DEEPAK

6th

Redemption: Shubman Gill scored his third Test century to end a lean run of scores and help India set a target of 399. K. R. DEEPAK

7th

Jubilation: Indian team celebrates after Shreyas Iyer runs out England captain Ben Stokes in the second innings. K. R. DEEPAK

Salazar, a reversal theme

By C.G.S.Narayanan

The concept of try play in the modern two-mover opened up new vistas for many reversal themes involving different combinations of the four basic components-the threat, mate, defence and refutation. While the popular themes like Dombrovskis and Hannelius are capable of being shown only in three phases i.e in two tries and key, le Grand and Salazar can be presented in two phases and of the two,le Grand is decidedly more popular.

In Salazar the try and the key are interchanged as mates after a particular black defence in either of the phases e.g Try 1.A? a 2.B and key 1.B! a 2.A.The problem for study this week is a rare example which doubles the Salazar theme in fine style incidentally completing a three phase zagoruyko.

Vasyl Dyachuk

3 prize, wola Golowska 1999

Mate in two moves

The two prominent defences are 1…Qd5 and 1…Rxf7 which are met by white in three phases. The first try 1.Nge5 (A)? threatens 2.Nd8 and after 1…Qd5 2.Bh3 (B)and also mate 2.Qxf7 provided for 1…Rxf7 and this try fails to 1…Qa8!.The second try 1.Ngf6? (C) threatens the same Nd8 and after 1…Rxf7 2.Bh3(B) and the other defence 1…Qd5 is also provided with a new mate 2.Bxd5 but the try fails to 1…Kxf7! The **key 1.Bh3(B)** forces a unique threat 2.Ne3 and after 1…Qd5/Rxf7 the tries reappear as mates 2.Nge5 (A)/Ngf6 (C).A highly original Salazar in three phases.

The second problem below shows Salazar reversal between the second try Qxh7? and solution.

P.Murashev

1 prize,Pat a mat 2018

Mate in two moves

1.Rxd6? A (Qxh7 B)1…Nd4 2.Nc3 Bxd5!;1.Qxh7? Bxd5 2.Re6 Nd4!;
Key:1.Re6!(2.Nc3)1…Bxd52.Qxh7;
1..Kxd5 2.Rxe5(2.Qb7?)

Finally a Salazar by the inventor himself for solving.

F.Salazar

2 prize, Die Schwalbe 1968

Mate in two moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article 'Strategic three-movers':
Key:1.Bc6!(2.Re3+ dxe3 3.d4)
Quaternary correction by BNf4.1…N any 2.Rxe7 3.Rxe6.;1….Ng6 2.c3 3.cxd4 1….Ne6 2.Kxb2 3.Nc4;1…Nd5 2.Nb5 3.Bxd4

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

Ready to fly: Leon Mendonca's victory with a score of 9.5/13 in the Challengers section and his invitation to the prestigious 2025 Tata Steel Masters underscore the fearlessness of Indian competitors, undeterred by reputations. HARRY GIELEN

Mendonca books ticket to next Masters

The consistency of D. Gukesh, Vidit, and an unbeaten R. Praggnanandhaa in the Tata Steel Masters in the Netherlands was **another fine advertisement** for Indian chess.

Rakesh Rao
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From the era of Viswanathan Anand challenging world chess giants to today's immensely gifted youngsters making waves against elite players, Indian chess is giving fans more reasons to rejoice than ever.

After the 2022 Chess Olympiad and the 2023 World Cup highlighted the growth of Indian chess, news of five Indians qualifying for the 2024 Candidates tournaments solidified India as a new force.

If the twin triumphs of Vidit Gujrathi and R. Vaishali in the premier Grand Swiss event last year underlined the increasing chess strength of India, the consistency of D. Gukesh, Vidit, and an unbeaten R. Praggnanandhaa in the Tata Steel Masters in Wijk aan Zee, the Netherlands, was another fine advertisement for Indian chess.

Leon Mendonca's (9.5/13) win in the Challengers section and his invite to the esteemed 2025 Tata Steel Masters highlight Indians as bold competitors unswayed by reputations.

Gukesh continues to thrill. He overcame an ordinary start to display his class and tied for the Masters title with eventual champions Wei Yi, Anish Giri, and Nodirbek Abdusattorov at 8.5 points from 13 rounds in the 14-player field.

Until 2018, those tied for titles were considered joint champions. Since then, tie-break games have been introduced to ascertain the winner.

For instance, five-time winner Anand won twice and tied thrice between 1989 and 2006. For the record, eight-time winner Magnus Carlsen's only shared title was also his first in 2008, with Armenian Levon

Unfazed by challenges: The consistency of D. Gukesh and Vidit Gujrathi in the Tata Steel Masters in Wijk aan Zee, the Netherlands, was a fine advertisement for Indian chess.
HARRY GIELEN

Aronian. He beat the field in 2010, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2018, 2019, and 2022.

So, coming back to the competition in 2024, four-man knockout blitz tie-break games were needed to decide the champion. The players were given a standard starting time of three minutes plus a two-second increment per move. In the sudden death, the player with white pieces got 2.5 minutes.

Gukesh battled back from a 0-1 deficit against Anish by winning the second game and taking out the defending champion in sudden death for a place in the final.

In the other semifinal, Wei Yi was lucky to escape with a draw in the first game against Abdusattorov and then came through sudden death.

In the final, Wei's cool composure and Gukesh's subpar time management combined to make him the first Chinese champion since the inception of the event in 1938. Gukesh had his chances in the first game, which ended in a draw, but in the second, he stayed low on time and finally blundered a rook.

Wei, who lost the second round to Gukesh, was playing only his second tournament outside China after the pandemic. He bounced back into title contention by winning the last three games, including the final round against Vidit.

Seeded eighth in a strong field of 14 players, Wei surprised himself by winning the strongest tournament of his career. Tenth seed Gukesh, the lowest ranked among the three Indians, won six games, starting with his second-round conquest of Wei.

Though defeats to World Champion Ding Liren and Anish in succession set him back, he responded brilliantly by winning the following three rounds against Russian Ian Nepomniachtchi and the Dutch duo Jorden van Foreest and Max Warmerdam.

Thereafter, among others, Gukesh drew with Vidit and allowed Praggnanandhaa to slip away with a draw.

Praggnanandhaa's alertness ended the contest when he claimed a third-time repetition of the position in the presence of an arbiter.

Gukesh did not allow this disappointment to dampen his spirits, and he won an exciting final round against flashy Iranian Parham Maghsoodloo to tie for the title. A gain of 18 rating points underlined his superlative showing in such a strong field.

A lot of credit is due to Vidit for the crowded first place at the end of 13 rounds. Triumphant over the fancied Alireza Firouzja in the seventh round, Vidit opened the title race with a penultimate-round win over leader Abdusattorov before losing to Wei.

Praggnanandhaa was the epitome of consistency. He defeated the two Chinese World Champions, Ding Liren and Ju Wenjun, drew against the rest, and marginally raised his rating by four points.

Overall, it was a terrific performance from the three Indians preparing for their biggest test when

Rock steady: Praggnanandhaa was the epitome of consistency. He defeated the two Chinese World Champions, Ding Liren (in pic) and Ju Wenjun, drew against the rest, and marginally raised his rating by four points. FRANS PEETERS

they make their Candidates debut in April.

In the Challengers section, Mendonca punched way above his weight to emerge champion. Seeded seventh in the field of 14, the youngster started with an expected victory over lowest-ranked Dutch Eline Roebers before drawing with lower-rated French Marc'Andria Maurizzi and Belgian Daniel Dardha. This slow start was followed by two losses in the space of three rounds that included a victory against D. Harika.

With three points from six rounds, Mendonca was far from his winning form. But what followed was a dramatic transformation.

He won the next three rounds, drew with top-seeded American Hans Moke Neimeann, and finished the home run with another hat-trick of victories, ending with the conquest of Divya Deshmukh.

Starting the event with a rating of 2608, Mendonca performed at 2742 to gain a whopping 23 rating points. Creditably, out of the eight victories, four came against higher-rated rivals.

Mendonca's title win came following a late twist to the tale. Maurizzi remained a long-time leader and, with two rounds to go, enjoyed a one-point lead over Mendonca.

In the penultimate round, Dardha defeated Maurizzi, and Mendonca beat the UAE's Salem Saleh to catch up. In the final round, the experienced Dutch Erwin L'ami held Maurizzi, while Mendonca capitalised on a blunder from Divya to win and claim qualification to the 2025 Masters section.

Harika and Divya, rated among the last four players, managed to play marginally above their ratings.

Seeded 11th, Harika finished ninth after scoring two victories over lower-rated players, losing four and drawing the rest to add five rating points. Divya, seeded 13th, won three, lost seven, and drew three to gain four rating points.

Overall, the Indians had a good outing, with all six on view performing above their ratings.

RESULTS

Final standing (after 13 rounds): Masters: 1-4. Wei Yi (Chn, 8.5), D. Gukesh (8.5), Anish Giri (8.5), Nodirbek Abdusattorov (Uzb, 8.5), 5-7. Alireza Firouzja (Fra, 7.5), Vidit Gujrathi (7.5), R. Praggnanandhaa (7.5), 8. Ian Nepomniachtchi (FIDE, 6.5), 9. Ding Liren (Chn, 6), 10-13. Ju Wenjun (Chn, 4.5), Alexander Donchenko (Ger, 4.5), Jorden van Foreest (Ned, 4.5), 14. Max Warmerdam (Ned, 4).

Challengers:
1. Leon Mendonca (9.5 points), 2-3. Daniel Dardha (Bel, 9), Marc Andria Maurizzi (Fra, 9), 4-5. Erwin L'Ami (Ned, 8.5), Anton Korobov (Ukr, 8.5), 6, Saleh Salem (UAE, 7.5), 7-8. Hans Moke Niemann (USA, 7), Jaime Santos Latasa (Esp, 7), 9-10. Liam Vrolijk (Ned, 5.5), D. Harika (5.5), 11. Mustafa Yilmaz (Tur, 5), 12. Divya Deshmukh (4.5), 13. Stefan Beukema (Bel, 2.5), 14. Eline Roebers (Ned, 2).

NERVY AT THE TOP

Mohammedan SC is **clinging to their lead** in the I-League, with Real Kashmir trailing just five points behind.

Hot pursuit: Real Kashmir defeated Mohammedan SC 3-0 only to lose its next match and stay five points behind the league leaders. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

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It hasn't been the smoothest return to competition for the I-League leader, Mohammedan SC, which lost 0-3 to Real Kashmir before it was held to a goalless draw away to Aizwal FC.

Real Kashmir, however, failed to capitalise on the slip-up by losing 0-1 to Rajasthan FC after a stoppage-time winner from Marin Mudrazija. That defeat left Kashmir trailing Mohammedan by five points at the end of 13 matches.

Third-placed Sreenidi Deccan, which has a game in hand, closed the gap at the top after its nervy 2-1 win away against Churchill Brothers. El Hadji Karim pegged Sreenidi back with an 88th-minute equaliser before a dramatic winner from Eli Sabia in the fourth minute of stoppage time lifted the side to within five points off Mohammedan.

Sreenidi's away game to NEROCA in Shillong was postponed due to operational difficulties with NEROCA likely to play the second half of its season in the capital of Meghalaya. Bottom-placed Namdhari, Neroca and TRAU remain in the relegation berths.

Indian Women's League

Gokulam Kerala inflicted Odisha FC's first defeat of the campaign in Kozhikode in a 2-1 comeback win. Odisha got off to a perfect start thanks to a goal in the opening minute from Indumathi Kathiresan before Fazila Ikwaput scored a brace in the opening half to propel the team to the top of the table.

The defeat coupled with Kickstart's two successive wins has pushed Odisha to third in the table, with a game in hand on both Gokulam and Kickstart. At the end of nine rounds, Sports Odisha remains the only winless team in the league.

The league will now resume on March 1 as the players head off to international duties. India will participate in the Turkish Women's Cup in Alanya starting February 21.

FOR MORE STORIES

QATAR CROWNED THE KING OF ASIA, AGAIN

The 2023 Asian Cup became Qatar's **redemption ground**, as it exorcised its World Cup demons through a relentless title defence.

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'Football, bloody hell.' Sir Alex Ferguson's famous aphorism has been iterated so much that it feels too trite to recall. But it still emerges as a phoenix, absolving the sport of any figment of predictability.

At the Asian Cup 2023, the biggest tournament in Asia after the World Cup, that became the norm rather than an aberration.

As compared to the 2019 edition, the only other 24-team Asian Cup before this, it had more goals, double the number of penalty shootouts, and thrice the number of decisive stoppage time goals in knockouts.

This tournament had everything — a leaf out of the World Cup's book of grandeur, the congregation of the Arab world to support their teams, the seduction of politics into the beautiful game, and also a fair share of controversies with the refereeing.

While Jurgen Klinsmann complained about the referee giving 'too many yellow cards' to his players (South Korea), Iraq's star goalscorer Aymen Hussein was sent off for time-wasting after his second yellow card — a decision that saw Jordan ultimately win that game 3-2.

The Asian Cup came a full circle on February 10, with Qatar winning consecutive titles — the first in the tournament since Japan in 2004 — at the same venue where it began its campaign, the Lusail Stadium.

Akram Afif, the architect of its title run four years ago — with the maximum number of assists (10) — scored a hat-trick of penalties to

« I would like to thank all Qataris. Congratulations to the coach and the fans. I can't really express what we feel but the coach worked really hard for us – Akram Afif of Qatar »

Worth every penny: Qatar did not turn heads only by hosting the tournament. It did so by winning it too. AFP

disarm Jordan 3-1 and win the title where Lionel Messi won the World Cup in 2022.

Qatar, in that tournament, had made itself a laughing stock, losing all three games and finishing as the worst-performing host.

Nearly 14 months later, it has become the King of Asia in style, with Afif putting on the hat of Houdini and celebrating with magic, literally, after scoring.

Tintin Marquez, taking charge of Qatar weeks before the tournament, helped the side play using through balls, quick attacks, and set-pieces. And the rousing reception at every home game added further seasoning.

The host started with a 3-0 win against Lebanon and maintained clean sheets throughout the group stage, beating Tajikistan and China 1-0. It showed its pedigree in the knockouts, beating Uzbekistan on penalties, pulling off a comeback win against Iran and finally sealing the title against Jordan from a 1-1 position.

Qatar did not turn heads only by hosting the tournament. It did so by winning it too.

This Asian Cup pushed the old notions of clear-cut winners and

AWARDS

Most Valuable Player
Akram Afif

Highest Goalscorer
Akram Afif (8 goals)

Best Goalkeeper
Meshaal Barsham

Fairplay Award
Qatar

losers, in the realm of teams with European experience and high-profile stars, into oblivion. Instead, the errant nature of the sport made way for stories of fortitude and joy from unexpected corners.

Palestine — a country in peril through constant bombardment from Israel, and with families of several of its players facing an uncertain fate — scripted history. It beat Hong Kong 3-0 in its final group-stage match and made it to the round of 16, earning a win and a knockout spot for the first time.

Jordan, one of the lowest-ranked sides to ever reach the final (87th), beat sides ranked 24 and 54 spots higher (Iraq and South Korea, respectively) on its way.

The Nashama did not have Son Heung Mins or Mehdi Taremis but still persevered, working as a well-oiled machine under coach Hussein Ammouta despite a debilitated infrastructure back home.

Showstopper: Qatar saw different leaders step up in different games, starting with Akram Afif, who scored a hat-trick in the final, making runs along flanks and feeding long balls for set-pieces. AFP

The most prominent story, however, was that of Tajikistan, the only debutant and one of the lowest-ranked teams. With its record goalscorer Manuchekhr Dzhalilov out with cancer and veteran midfielder Amirbek Juraboev injured, the team came in as a minnow on paper. But, playing as a unit, the team, ranked 106, punched way above its weight, reaching the quarterfinals with a win against the United Arab Emirates — ranked 64 — on penalties.

Qatar, too, saw different leaders step up in different games, starting with Afif making runs along flanks and feeding long balls for set-pieces to captain Hassan Al-Haydos scoring the winner against China through a brilliant volley. Goalkeeper Meshaal

STAT PACK

2019 AFC Asian Cup
130 goals in 51 matches
Knockouts — 2 extra-time, 2 penalty shootout
Stoppage time goals in knockouts — 5 (2 decisive)

2023 AFC Asian Cup
132 goals in 51 matches
Knockouts — 1 extra-time, 4 penalty shootout
Stoppage time goals in knockouts — 8 (6 decisive)

Barsham became the star in the quarterfinal through three crucial saves in the penalty shootout.

Two of the biggest shocks of this Asian Cup were the exits of Japan, the highest-ranked and the most successful side in the tournament, and South Korea, led by Tottenham Hotspur's captain Son.

Japan was first humbled by Iraq in the group stage and then, Alireza Jahanbakhsh's stoppage-time penalty showed Hajime Moriyasu's side the door in the quarterfinals.

South Korea, on the other hand, almost emulated 'Fergie Time', pulling off an equaliser or even a winner on the verge of full-time to snatch success from the jaws of defeat multiple times.

The approach, deemed as 'Zombie Ball' by the Korean press, saw Son score the winner against Australia in the quarterfinal but Jordan saw it out in their battle for the summit clash.

The Asian Cup's theme song, *Hadaf*, revolves around what exactly should a goal ideally be. After nearly a month of the contest, it ended with the answers — joy, empathy and patience, all that constitutes not just the beautiful game but also life. And that's where the tournament was truly successful.

Night of heroes: Yazan Al-Naimat scored the only goal for Jordan in the final. **Right:** Nizar Al-Rashdan of Jordan and Jassem Gaber of Qatar battle for possession in the final.

PICS: GETTY IMAGES

COASTING TO GLORY

Ivory Coast overcame Nigeria in a **pulsating final** to win the Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) 2023.

Anish Pathiyil
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A nation actively recruiting players through a social networking site. A Premier League shot-stopper benched in favour of his cousin who plays in the French third division. All eight quarterfinalists from the previous edition, failing to do so this time out. These are just some of the quips that the Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) 2023 phenomenon had in store for football fans.

The competition might be the nemesis of top European leagues (ask Jurgen Klopp) — with teams missing out on key players during the intense period of fixtures in January. But, when it comes to on-field unpredictability and entertainment, no other competition comes close to the African Cup of Nations.

Host Ivory Coast's journey to the title was nothing short of a movie screenplay. The Elephants looked to be heading out after a humiliating 4-0 loss to Equatorial Guinea in its final group-stage encounter. It even went to the extent of sacking manager Jean-Louis Gasset after the loss before sneaking into the playoff rounds as the fourth-best third-placed team.

The knockout rounds also had plenty of drama in store. The team came back from a goal down to force extra time before edging powerhouse Senegal through penalties in the round of 16.

The difficulty level rose a notch in the quarterfinal against Mali after defender Odilon Kossounou was sent off in the 43rd minute. Ivory Coast's fate looked to be sealed when Nene Dorgeles put Mali in front. But a 90th-minute equaliser followed by an added-time winner at the end of 120 minutes sealed a comeback for the ages.

The script then set up a fitting climax in the final against Nigeria as Franck Kessie and cancer survivor Sebastian Haller scored two goals in the last half-hour to complete yet another comeback and help the nation to its third African Cup of Nations trophy.

"It is more than a fairytale. I am

Sweet taste of victory: Host Ivory Coast's journey to the title was nothing short of a movie screenplay. In the final, Franck Kessie and Sebastian Haller scored two goals in the last half-hour to complete a remarkable comeback. PICS: AP

struggling to take it all in," said coach Emerse Fae, who was brought in just ahead of the round of 16.

"When I think about all we have been through, we are miracle survivors. I can't properly express my joy. It is massive," said Fae.

Another nation that surpassed expectations was Cape Verde. The group of islands off the coast of West Africa, with a population of just 5.8 lakh, topped Group B consisting of title-favourite Egypt and Ghana.

Cape Verdean defender Roberto Lopes, who plies his trade for Shamrock Rovers in Ireland initially thought the invite to play for his dad's country, from former coach Rui Aguas on *LinkedIn* (written in Portuguese), was a spam message!

The Blue Sharks beat Mauritania in the round of 16 to qualify for the quarterfinal for only the second time but ran into third-place finisher South Africa and its keeper Ronwen Williams, who kept out four penalty kicks in the shootout.

Keeping the fun and frolic aside, the continental competition also gave rise to stories of togetherness, hope and perseverance.

DR Congo players put up a hand signal — a gun pointing to their heads with their mouths covered — ahead of its semifinal against Ivory Coast, in protest against the civilian attacks orchestrated by the M23 rebels and other Islamic groups in their country.

Mauritania, a team that skipped AFCON and World Cup qualifying tournaments in the past due to a lack of funding, managed to win its first-ever game at the tournament, even progressing to the knockouts.

The role that the Cup of Nations plays in bringing out lesser-known talent is what makes it stand apart and all eyes will be focussed on what new tales it has in store 11 months from now in Morocco.

Joyous ride: "It is more than a fairytale. I am struggling to take it all in," said Ivory Coast's coach Emerse Fae, who was brought in just ahead of the round of 16.

Keeping the fun and frolic aside, the continental competition also gave rise to stories of togetherness, hope and perseverance.

1

Real Madrid zooms ahead
In another top-of-the-table clash in European football, Real Madrid humbled surprise title contender Girona 4-0 to take a five-point lead atop La Liga.
The Los Blancos were powered by a brace from star midfielder Jude Bellingham (in pic), whose goals were sandwiched by strikes from Vinicius Jr. and Rodrygo.
Brazilian winger Vinicius put in a scintillating shift, finding the opener with a rasping shot from outside the box and then setting up Bellingham with a magical, outside-of-the-boot pass.

REUTERS

2

AFP

PSG's house-hunting
Paris St. Germain is on the lookout for a new home ground after Paris' Deputy Mayor for Sports, Pierre Rabadan, ruled out the possibility of the sale of the Parc des Princes (in pic) to the Ligue 1 side.
"We know what we want, we wasted years to try and buy it. It's easier for us now, we know what we want. It's over for us. We want to move out of the Parc," said club president Nasser Al-Khelaifi.
The Parc des Princes has been home to PSG for nearly fifty years, with the club moving into the ground four years after its formation.

3

GETTY IMAGES

Out of the blue
The International Football Association Board, the global body that sets football's rules, is considering the introduction of the concept of sin-bins, which will be indicated by a blue card.
Sin-bins, a concept popularly used in rugby (in pic) and hockey, will allow the referee to send a player off the ground for a certain period for certain fouls, such as dissent.
The blue card will thus be of lesser consequence than a red card, but more than the yellow one.
Sin-bins were introduced in grass-root level football in 2019.
The rule, if adopted, will start from the lower level of the sport, on a trial basis.

Bayern's reign under threat
Xabi Alonso's Bayer Leverkusen crushed 11-time defending champion Bayern Munich 3-0 at home to go five points clear at the top of the Bundesliga.
Leverkusen outclassed its title rivals with goals from Josip Stanisic, Alejandro Grimaldo and Jeremie Frimpong as it intensified its hunt for a first-ever German league title.
The win also boosted the credentials of Alonso, who has eased into his managerial career after a long, distinguished playing stint, which included a spell at Bayern.

4

AP

5

GETTY IMAGES

Haaland is back and firing
Manchester City's Erling Haaland celebrated his return to fitness with a second-half brace against Everton as Pep Guardiola's men intensified their hunt for a record-breaking fourth Premier League title.
Everton proved to be a tough nut to crack until the 70th minute when the 23-year-old Haaland — who missed nearly two months of action due to a leg injury — rifled in a right-footed shot following a corner. The Norwegian striker rounded up the win with a composed finish after he was set through on goal by Kevin de Bruyne, another injury returnee.

6

AP

No Olympic hat-trick for Brazil
Brazil's dreams of completing a hat-trick of Olympic gold medals in men's football suffered a premature collapse after it failed to make it past the South American Olympic qualifiers.
To make it worse for the Selecao, their fate was sealed by a defeat to arch-nemesis Argentina.
Coached by Javier Mascherano, Argentina scored the only goal of the game in the 78th minute through a Luciano Gondou header to book its ticket for the Paris Olympics.

Fitting end: Kobbie Mainoo (left) matched his astute dribbling skills with an equally beautiful finish as he went for a low curler at the far-post to score the winner. GETTY IMAGES

MAINOO MAGIC

WOLVES
3
Pablo Sarabia 71′ (P)
Max Kilman 85
Pedro Neto 90+5′

MANCHESTER UNITED
4
Marcus Rashford 5′
Rasmus Højlund 22
Scott McTominay 75
Kobbie Mainoo 90+7′

Manchester United seals **a late win** against Wolves in a seven-goal thriller.

It was a fast start for Manchester United as Marcus Rashford opened the face of his boot to rattle the net with a brilliant first-time finish in the fifth minute.

While Wolves created the occasional attacking chances, United's defence held firm and it wasn't long before the Red Devils doubled its lead, courtesy of Rasmus Hojlund in the 22nd minute with a slick finish, in a move that saw him combine with Alejandro Garnacho, Rashford and Luke Shaw.

Enjoying a healthy 2-0 lead at half-time, it seemed like it would be an easy day at the office for Erik Ten Hag and his men.

However, Wolves won a penalty in the 68th minute after Pedro Neto was tripped inside the box. Pablo Sarabia converted the spot-kick, sending Andre Onana the wrong way.

A one-goal lead is always nervy, and there were some concerned looks among the United faithful. But that changed when second-half substitute Scott Mctominay made a late dash at the near post to convert a Bruno Fernandes cross from a United corner. 3-1 up in the 75th minute, and Manchester United was breathing easy again.

But, when it is a Premier League classic, the script is bound to throw late twists.

In the 85th minute, Max Kilman took advantage of a scramble in the United box and tapped the ball home from close range, with Onana being helpless to stop the shot.

Harry Maguire and Johny Evans were brought in late to add to the defensive solidity. But, Ten Hag's option to play it safe backfired.

In the fifth minute of added time, United was caught out of possession and Wolves launched a counter-attack. Matheus Cunha spread the ball to Pedro Neto, who kept his composure to cut inside Shaw and squeezed the ball at the near-post to make it 3-3.

With the roof coming down at the Molineux and just four minutes of play left, Omari Forson passed the ball to Kobbie Mainoo, who went on a talismanic run past three Wolves players.

Once inside the box, he matched his astute dribbling skills with an equally beautiful finish as he went for a low curler at the far-post.

Jose Sa dived at full stretch but could not get a hand to it as the ball rippled the net to make it 4-3 in United's favour.

Aneesh Dey & Pranay Rajiv

B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

Sumit Nagal enters top 100 in ATP rankings

Sumit Nagal became the first Indian man in five years to make his Top 100 debut when the latest ATP Rankings were released on February 12. The 26-year-old broke the Top 100 barrier to No. 98 after beating Italy's Luca Nardi to win the Chennai Open title, an ATP Challenger Tour event. Before Nagal, the last Indian man to enter the Top 100 was Prajnesh Gunneswaran in 2019.

After a tough 2022 season, the Indian was ranked outside the Top 500 and needed a wildcard to even enter the qualifying round of the same event last year.

However, three titles and two runner-up finishes on the Challenger Tour in the last 12 months have helped him make the big jump.

"Every tennis player's dream is to at least be in the Top 100. The last few years have been tough with me being ranked 500, getting surgery done, and not having financial support. I'm very happy that I found a way to push every single day and gave myself a chance to be here," he said.

Sania Mirza is the only Indian woman to have ever made it to the Top 100 in the WTA Rankings. She achieved a career-high ranking of 27 in 2007.

NIHIT SACHDEVA

SPORTOON

1 **India's Aditi Swami was awarded the Breakthrough Archer of the Year 2023** award by World Archery.

At 17, Aditi became India's first-ever world champion in archery and also won gold in the women's team and an individual bronze medal at the Hangzhou Asian Games.

Indian national compound team coach Sergio Pagni won the 'Best Coach of the Year' award. Under his guidance, India clean swept the medal tally at the Asian Games and won three world championship golds.

TEAM SPORTSTAR

2 **Indian veteran paddler Sharath Kamal has outlined his post-2024 Paris Olympics plans.** Confirming that the 2024 Olympics will mark his farewell, the 41-year-old is gearing up for a future role as an administrator or mentor.

He has secured a position at the Tamil Nadu Physical and Education Sports University (TNPESU) in Melakottaiyur, Kancheepuram District.

Sharath envisions this as a potential regional or national training center in the long run.

K. KEERTHIVASAN

PUNERI PALTAN HAS ALREADY QUALIFIED FOR THE SEMIFINALS, WITH THREE GAMES REMAINING

PUSHING THE ENVELOPE, IN PUNERI STYLE

Brains trust: Puneri Paltan's vice-captain Mohammadreza Chiyaneh (L) and captain Aslam Mustafa Inamdar during a PKL 10 match. PKL

Puneri Paltan isn't just competing for the PKL title; it is **reshaping the sport** by discarding the traditional playbook and embracing a distinctive style.

Saikat Chakraborty
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The Puneri Paltan is a rising force in the high-octane arena of Pro Kabaddi League Season 10. It is not just another team vying for the title but redefining the essence of the sport by throwing out the conventional playbook and embracing a unique style.

Last season, the team suffered a heartbreaking loss to Jaipur Pink Panthers in the summit clash. In its quest for a maiden PKL title, coach B.C. Ramesh and the management decided took a few audacious calls during the auction ahead of the ongoing edition.

The team bid farewell to the seasoned Iranian duo of Fazel Atrachali and Mohammad Nabibakhsh and welcomed the young and versatile Mohammadreza Chiyaneh Shadloui. In their effort to place faith in the talent they have moulded, the captaincy reins were entrusted to Aslam Mustafa Inamdar, a young talent who has blossomed in the Paltan fold over three seasons.

As of February 12, the side has played 19 matches, won 14, drawn two and collected 81 points. It boasts an impressive score difference of 233. The second-best score difference is a faraway 88, belonging to the Panthers.

"Like every sport, kabaddi is also evolving. There's no set pattern; new ideas and approaches take it forward. I wanted a team of hungry youngsters with the right mindset," Ramesh tells *Sportstar*.

All-round modus operandi

The Puneri Paltan brand of kabaddi has always valued allrounders. This season, the side has managed to broadbase the preference to the entire playing pool, with every player seamlessly transitioning between offence and defence. Led by the dynamic Inamdar, raiders like Mohit Goyat and Pankaj Mohite actively contribute to the team's defensive capabilities, often catching opponents off guard with their anticipation and cover skills.

The team's offensive strategy is well-distributed and multipronged. Players such as Aditya Shinde and Akash Shinde offer a good second wave to back the primary arsenal. Even a 'defender' like Chiyaneh consistently delivers crucial raids, keeping the opposition uncertain and their back line guessing.

Inamdar is the perfect prototype for the franchise's preferred gameplan. The 23-year-old humbly attributes the team's success to their collective effort.

"We're playing like a team. We know we have to help each other in defence. Kabaddi is a team game where you have to hold the hands of your teammates," says Inamdar, who played a vital part in India's victorious Asian Kabbadi Championship and the Asian Games campaigns in 2023.

The results speak for themselves. Of the six teams that make the playoffs, Paltan has already qualified for the semifinals (top two teams automatically make the semis, while the other four battle it out in playoffs), with three games to spare.

Distributed defensive dominance

Versatility and high skills aside, what keeps the Paltan ticking is teamwork and a conscious effort to work on strengthening that element. This has led to the side's rise as the best defensive unit this season, with a success rate of 56.06 per cent and a total of 257 tackle points from 245 successful tackles, averaging 13.61 tackle points per match.

One of the key players in the team's defence is vice-captain and left-corner Chiyaneh. He is currently leading the individual defensive matrix with 72 tackle points along with 25 raid points. Inamdar's relief to have the towering Iranian in his quarter is understandable.

On the prowl: Puneri Paltan's defensive unit in action against U Mumba in the ongoing season of PKL. PKL

"He is a brilliant all-rounder, one of the best defenders in the league, and a fierce competitor. He's always hungry on the mat, and I'm constantly learning from him. I'm very happy that he's my teammate and not an opponent," he says.

A new wave

Ramesh's preference for experimentation can be risky, but the team has welcomed the strategy with open arms by a young fearless bunch of talented players.

He says, "With dedication to skill development and innovative fitness regimens, young athletes are pushing the boundaries of the sport. Scouts seek multi-dimensional talent, valuing adaptability over one-dimensional expertise."

Puneri Paltan's journey is far from over. Its dominant showing this season makes it a favourite to make the final and potentially even lift the title for the first time.

With a fearless coach who is happy to innovate and a bunch of players who have bought into that brand of operation, the trophy is Puneri Paltan's to lose.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Ryan Fernando

FOR MORE STORIES

The good choice: Fruits should have an appealing hue that matches their variety. For instance, ripe bananas have a yellow skin with brown speckles. GETTY IMAGES

A NUTRIENT-RICH ADVENTURE

Here's a guide to selecting the freshest and most flavourful fruits and veggies for a **vibrant and healthy** lifestyle.

The path to a healthy lifestyle begins with choices we make at the market. Consuming fresh and vibrant veggies and fruits is not only a key component of a balanced diet but also an enjoyable culinary experience. In this guide, we explore the art of choosing and buying a variety of veggies and fruits, ensuring you bring home the best that nature has to offer.

Understanding seasonality

One of the fundamental aspects of selecting high-quality produce is understanding the concept of seasonality. Different fruits and vegetables thrive in different seasons and buying them during their peak season ensures optimal freshness, flavour, and nutritional value. Familiarise yourself with the local growing seasons or consult with seasonal produce guides like nutritionists to make informed choices.

Assessing appearance and colour

Visual cues play a crucial role in determining the freshness and quality. When selecting vegetables, look for vibrant colours and firm texture. Avoid those with signs of wilting, discolouration, or bruising. For example, when buying spinach, avoid those that are wilted and go for dark green and crisp ones. For bell peppers, opt for firm and brightly coloured ones.

Fruits, on the other hand, should have an appealing hue that matches their variety. For instance, ripe bananas have a yellow skin with brown speckles, while a ripe watermelon should sound hollow when tapped and have a uniform, deep green colour. Pay attention to any blemishes, mold, or soft spots, as these could indicate overripeness or spoilage.

Feel the texture

The texture of fruits and vegetables provides valuable information about their ripeness and freshness. When choosing vegetables, aim for a crisp texture and avoid any that feel limp or rubbery. For instance, fresh carrots should snap easily, and cucumbers should be firm without any soft spots. For fruits, gently squeeze them to assess their ripeness. A ripe avocado yields slightly to gentle pressure, while a firm one needs

more time to ripen. Apples and peaches should feel firm but yield slightly to pressure when squeezed. Berries should be plump, indicating juiciness and sweetness.

Smell the aroma

Aroma is an underrated yet powerful factor in selecting the best produce. A fresh, sweet fragrance is often a sign of ripeness and flavour. For instance, ripe melons should emit a sweet aroma, and fresh herbs like basil and mint should have a strong, aromatic scent.

When choosing fruits, bring them close to your nose and inhale. A ripe pineapple, for example, has a sweet, tropical fragrance, while a ripe mango exudes a distinctive fruity aroma. If a fruit lacks a discernible scent, it may not be fully ripe or could be overripe. I sometimes smell the produce to get earthy smells. If it smells of bleach or any other chemical, I do not buy.

Check for consistency

Consistency is key when choosing and buying veggies and fruits. Ensure that the produce is uniform in size and shape, indicating even ripening and good quality. Irregularities such as lumps, bumps, or deformities might suggest damage or uneven ripening.

Inspect the entire batch of the chosen item to maintain consistency. This is particularly important for items sold in bulk, such as tomatoes or apples. Choose fruits and vegetables that have a consistent colour and size for a more reliable and enjoyable culinary experience.

Local and organic options

Opting for local and organic produce can offer additional benefits. Locally sourced fruits and vegetables are likely to be fresher, as they haven't travelled long distances, and you'll be supporting local farmers. Organic options, grown without synthetic pesticides and fertilizers, can be a healthier choice both for you and the environment.

Check for local farmers' markets or grocery stores that emphasise locally grown and organic produce. Keep in mind that while organic choices can be more expensive, the long-term health benefits may outweigh the extra cost.

Understanding labels

Reading and understanding labels is essential when navigating the world of veggies and fruits. Familiarise yourself with different labeling terms, such as 'organic', 'non-GMO', and 'locally sourced'. This knowledge empowers you to make choices that align with your preferences and values.

The 'organic' label indicates that the produce is grown without synthetic pesticides and fertilizers, while 'non-GMO' signifies that the item has not been genetically modified. If supporting local farmers is a priority, look for 'locally sourced' or 'locally grown' labels. Knowing how to interpret these labels ensures that you make informed decisions when selecting your fruits and vegetables. Choosing fresh veggies and fruits is not just a mundane task; it's an opportunity to engage with nature's bounty and nourish your body with wholesome goodness.

By understanding seasonality, assessing appearance, feeling texture, smelling aroma, checking for consistency, exploring local and organic options, and deciphering labels, you embark on a journey to create vibrant, nutrient-rich meals. As you make mindful choices at the grocery store, you not only prioritise your health but also contribute to sustainable agriculture and support local communities. Happy shopping and happy eating!

A simple tip: Gently squeeze fruits to assess their ripeness. Fruits like apples and peaches should feel firm but yield slightly to pressure when squeezed.
GETTY IMAGES

Organic produce grown without synthetic pesticides and fertilizers is a healthier choice. Check for local farmers' markets or grocery stores that emphasise locally-grown and organic produce.

Dreaming up dangerous, surreal sports

David Kirke, a pioneer of the Dangerous Sports Club, is credited with the **first modern bungee jumping** which he accomplished wearing a top hat and tails and holding a bottle of champagne.

Suresh Menon

If you think about it, all sports can be dangerous. Boxers, cricketers, footballers, tennis players have been among those killed in action. Some sports, however, are by definition dangerous. The Dangerous Sports Club (DSC) was popular in the 1970s and 80s for dreaming up dangerous, surreal sports.

David Kirke, a pioneer, is credited with the first modern bungee jumping which he accomplished wearing a top hat and tails and holding a bottle of champagne. It said everything you needed to know about the DSC, an Oxford creation, peopled by the rich and bored who dressed in a particular way, spoke in a particular way and drank tankloads of champagne. It was also the forerunner of alternative sports and extreme sports.

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

The DSC's stunts included steering a carousel horse down a ski slope in the Swiss Alps, piloting an inflatable kangaroo suspended by balloons over the English Channel, skateboarding among the running bulls of Pamplona, and organising a sit-down meal on the rim of an erupting volcano on a Caribbean island.

These are exhilarating to participate in, fun to read about, and irritating if not illegal for those who have a certain concept of sports. Each was a good enough reason for the popularity of the DSC in the years it lasted. The abiding principle, said Kirke, was "one-third recklessness of innocence, tempered with two-thirds recklessness of contempt."

There was something unmanly (these capers were mostly undertaken by men) about safety and security. Kirke used an elastic rope (borrowed from the military) for that inaugural bungee jump. Years later he said, "We hadn't tested it or anything like that. We were called the Dangerous Sports Club, and testing it first wouldn't have been particularly dangerous."

Bungee jumping (in pic) was inspired by a television documentary about young men jumping off bamboo platforms in Vanuatu, with only a vine tied round one ankle to break their fall. It was a coming-of-age ritual, and the Oxford eccentrics didn't see any reason not to adapt the practice to establish their manhood. One of the members of the DSC was the New Zealander A. J. Hackett who took it to his country where it has found its home.

There was a small temptation to try bungee jumping when I was in New Zealand; in fact one of my journalist-friends did bungee jump — I watched him go and then listened to his tale of valour and thrill. But I chickened out. The main thing going through his mind on that first jump in Bristol, said Kirke, was "Whoooppeee!" I prefer my whoooppees on the ground.

When Kirke died last year (at his home in Oxford, proving once again that often adventurers die in their own beds), he had already been recognised as the father of extreme sports, defined as sporting events or pursuits characterised by high speeds and high risk, operating outside traditional sports and celebrated for their adrenaline-pumping thrills.

All very exciting, no doubt. But give me moderate sports any day; happy to leave my adrenaline unpumped.

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