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2025 DESKTOP SPORTS CALENDAR

BGT REVIEW

Reality check for Rohit Sharma's men

A YEAR OF FEW HIGHS

MANU BHAKER'S DOUBLE BRONZE, D. GUKESH'S WORLD CHESS TITLE AND INDIA'S T20 WC TRIUMPH WERE A FEW HIGHS IN A YEAR OF MANY NEAR-MISSES

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OFF-SIDE

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CHANGE YOUR MINDSET

Celebrating para-athletes as multidimensional individuals, beyond clichéd struggles, could foster genuine connections and progress.

In 2024, India's sporting fortunes were more of a dim flicker, with a few stray fireworks thrown in. While the year was headlined by the high of the ICC T20 World Cup in the USA and the Caribbean, the form and reputation of our cricketers and the national team took a beating as the year rolled on. The Olympic Games also saw the gulf grow further between promise and performance. The hope of a double-digit medal tally ended with six dreaded fourth-place finishes. And after a near miss here and a could-have-been there, suddenly even Tokyo's modest seven medals were a distant dream. India finished 71st with six medals.

The Paralympians were the real heroes in shining armour as they captured a record haul of 29 medals with seven golds at the Paris Games. Their acceptability and the acknowledgement of their star power saw brands collaborating with para-athletes, finally starting to look away from the cricket-cinema nexus. Before the start of the Paris 2024 Paralympics, brands like Mia by Tanishq, Thums Up, Hyundai, IndianOil, Adidas, and Puma actively supported the para movement and para-athletes.

"We supported 11 para-athletes who represented India at the Paralympic Games 2024. Athletes are role models, and it is our responsibility as the leading sports brand in India to strongly back them in their pursuit of excellence — regardless of age, gender, background or circumstance," Karthik Balagopalan, Managing Director of Puma India, said. Puma also signed P.V. Sindhu as its brand ambassador, signalling a gentle pivot away from its earlier cricket-only fixation.

"While cricket's dominance is unlikely to wane significantly, recurring failures at critical moments can open doors for other sports to gain traction. If organisations and stakeholders strategically promote Olympic and para sports during this period, they could carve out a more significant share of sponsorships and audience engagement," says Vinit Karnik, Managing Director, GroupM.

According to Sarvesh Kedia, co-founder and COO of Sportswise India, "The market is improving for para-athletes since the Paris Games. There has been good interest in corporate engagements for double para gold medallist Avani Lekhara."

The GroupM ESP Sporting Nation Report 2024 indicates that the Indian sports industry saw an upward surge of 11 per cent and is now worth Rs 15,766 crore, witnessing a four-fold growth in 10 years. Cricket, however, continues to monopolise more than 80 per cent of this market.

"Athletes who can connect with people on social media and inspire them with their journey are particularly valuable. Companies want to work with athletes who show promise for the future and perform well consistently," says Neerav Tomar, founder and managing director, IOS Sports. "Top stars like Lovlina Borgohain and Sindhu get brand deals throughout the four-year Olympic cycle, but most other athletes only attract brand interest during the Olympics or other major competitions."

Unless you are a Sindhu, a Neeraj Chopra, or a celebrated cricketer, long-term commitment from brands is still wishful thinking for most Indian athletes. While social media is full of heartfelt posts and triumphant hashtags, most brands are still stuck in the old-school mindset that their ambassadors must look and sound a certain way.

Athletes and para-athletes are regular people with regular lives, but blessed with exceptional talent. Brands and the media, perhaps, should stop fixating on just their struggles. We can't seem to decide whether to celebrate the victories of para-athletes or package them as inspirational struggles.

What if we just let them be ordinary? Show them as vibrant, multidimensional humans who love what they do and are brilliant at it. There's nothing more relatable than passion and excellence. And it's bound to connect more genuinely than the same tired, old clichés.

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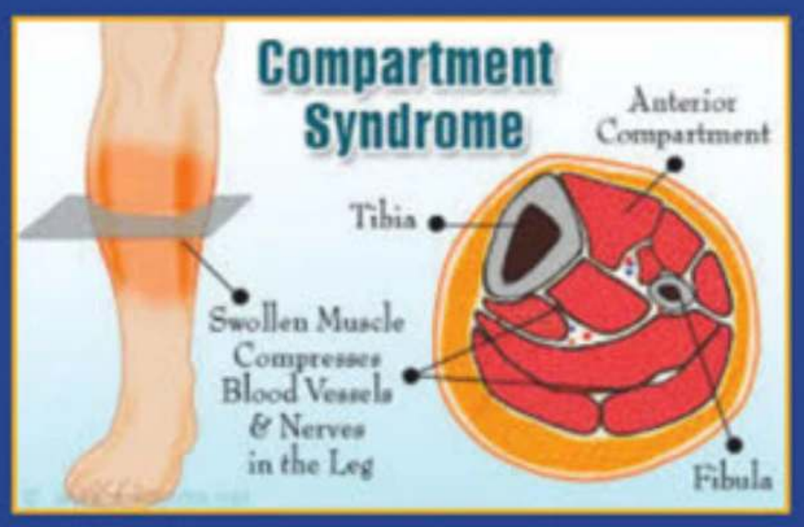

Compartment Syndrome (CS), also known as Chronic Exertional Compartment Syndrome (CECS), is a painful condition arising from increased pressure within a muscle compartment. What are compartments? Imagine your muscles neatly packaged within sturdy, non-stretch sleeves called FASCIA – these are compartments. They contain muscles, nerves, and blood vessels, all encased by the fascia. Now this aforementioned elevated pressure in the com partment restricts blood flow, compresses nerves and causes significant discomfort. While it can occur in various parts of the body, the lower legs are most commonly affected.

THE MECHANISM OF PAIN

During intense exercise, muscles swell. Within the confined space of the compartment, this swelling increases pressure. The inelastic fascia acts like a rigid wall, trapping the excess fluid and further compresses the delicate structures within. This restricted blood flow deprives muscles and nerves of vital oxygen and nutrients, leading to pain, numbness, and potential tissue damage.

Overuse from repetitive high impact activity, Increased muscle bulk, tight fascia can all contribute to the increased pressure and thereby predispose us to CECS.

Symptoms of compartment syndrome include pain, tightness, cramping, burning sensation, numbness, tingling, and swelling in the affected limb.

Treatment typically begins with conservative measures such as rest, modifying activity level, and engaging in regular physical therapy. However, if these approaches fail to alleviate symptoms, surgical intervention may be necessary to relieve the pressure within the com partment.

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MEDALS AND MILESTONES:
TAMIL NADU'S SPORTING LEGACY IN 2024

SPRINGBOARDING ATHLETES TO GLORY

The Government of Tamil Nadu has made remarkable strides in supporting and nurturing talented athletes who aspire to excel on both national and international stages. By hosting a variety of high-profile national and international sporting events, the state not only provides a platform for these athletes to showcase their skills but also enhances the region's visibility in the sports arena.

In addition to organising events, the government actively promotes the welfare of sportspersons through various initiatives aimed at fostering their development. This includes providing high cash incentives, state-of-the-art training facilities, and financial aid through the Tamil Nadu Champions Foundation. Such measures enable athletes to chase their dreams and strive for excellence in sports. Through these efforts, Tamil Nadu is committed to creating an environment where deserving sportspersons can thrive and realize their full potential.

This was evident in the way Government of Tamil Nadu had organised the Chennai Chess Grandmasters 2023 which took place from 15 to 21 December 2023. This prestigious tournament was particularly significant as it served as a launching pad for the rising chess star, D. Gukesh. His impressive performance during the event earned him a spot in the FIDE Candidates Tournament, a key competition that was held in Canada in February 2024. Gukesh's talent shone through in the Candidates Tournament, where he successfully secured his qualification for the highly esteemed World Chess Championship, which took place in Singapore. His remarkable journey culminated in an extraordinary victory at the championship, where he not only triumphed over the seasoned Ding Liren but also became the youngest player ever to win the title.

D. Gukesh is supported by the Sports Development Authority of Tamil Nadu (SDAT) through its ELITE Sportsperson scheme, which provides him with annual financial assistance up to ₹30 lakh. Additionally, following his achievement as the World Chess Champion, he received a high cash incentive of ₹5 crore from the Government of Tamil Nadu.

CATAPULTING PARA ATHLETES

Tamil Nadu has a long-standing reputation for its progressive initiatives aimed at improving accessibility and empowering the differently abled. In a significant move, the state organized the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister's Trophy Games 2024, which featured dedicated sports events tailored specifically for differently abled athletes. These events encompassed a variety of disciplines, including Athletics, Standing Badminton, Wheelchair Table Tennis, Adapted Volleyball, Throwball, Kabaddi, and Football. Each of these sports was meticulously adapted to ensure inclusivity, allowing athletes to showcase their skills and compete in a supportive environment.

Moreover, nearly 600 athletes have benefited from the Tamil Nadu Champions Foundation, with almost half of them being para-athletes. In a pathbreaking initiative for the country, Tamil Nadu is establishing Para Sports Arenas at six locations across the state.

These efforts have yielded impressive results, as four para-athletes from Tamil Nadu—Mariyappan Thangavelu, Manisha Ramadass, Thulasimathi Murugesan, and Nithya Sre Sumathy Sivan—achieved remarkable success at the Paris Paralympics 2024, bringing laurels to both the state and the country.

In a significant milestone for Tamil Nadu, the state has achieved remarkable recognition at the National Sports Awards 2024. For the first time in its history, five sportspersons have been honoured in a single year, with four receiving the prestigious Arjuna Awards and one being awarded the Major Dhyan Chand Khel Ratna Award – the highest sporting honour of the country.

EMPLOYMENT UNDER 3% SPORTS QUOTA

The Government of Tamil Nadu has made remarkable strides in establishing sports as a promising and fulfilling career path for sportspersons. In a groundbreaking initiative, the Government has set a precedent by offering employment opportunities to 84 meritorious sportspersons across various government departments and public sector undertakings under the 3% Sports Quota. This initiative not only acknowledges the exceptional talent and commitment of our athletes but also aims to inspire the younger generation to consider sports as a viable career option. By integrating sports into the employment framework, the Tamil Nadu Government demonstrates its dedication to fostering athletic talent and creating a supportive environment in which athletes can thrive both on and off the field.

HIGH CASH INCENTIVES

The Government of Tamil Nadu has granted high cash incentives amounting to Rs. 144 crores to a record 4,352 victorious athletes. This unprecedented financial support serves as a testament to the state's dedication to both nurturing sports and recognising the hard work and perseverance of its athletes. With this initiative, the government aims to not only provide immediate rewards for their success but also to inspire future generations to pursue excellence in sports. By investing in the athletic fraternity, Tamil Nadu is actively working to create a more robust sports culture, ensuring that its sportspersons have the resources and encouragement they need to thrive on both national and international stages. This initiative reflects a broader vision of securing a brighter future for athletes and contributing to the overall development of sports in the state. From dominating national championships to making a mark on the global stage, the athletes from Tamil Nadu have showcased unparalleled dedication, talent, and resilience. As the state looks ahead, it is poised to nurture even greater talent and continue its legacy of sporting excellence.

ANALYSIS

REALITY CHECK FOR ROHIT SHARMA'S MEN AS TRANSITION BECKONS

If the loss at home against New Zealand was seen as this rare banana peel, the crash in Australia is a **wake-up call** that none should ignore.

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The ball cannoned into the billboards, and with that, a southern summer of cricket found its concluding note under the skies Down Under. Beau Webster had just essayed a lofted drive off Washington Sundar to seize the fifth and final Test at the Sydney Cricket Ground on January 5.

Pat Cummins and his men won by six wickets, and Australia had wrested back the Border-Gavaskar Trophy at 3-1 after a decade. It was a margin that years down the line may look one-sided, but for those who were present to see the action, either at the grounds or on television, this was a series that could have swung either way.

It was cricket driven by relentless fast bowling. Meanwhile, the batters were largely errant, while some offered promise and a few others regained their spark. It was a narrative that was different from the ones whipped up ahead of the contests.

When India landed in November 2024, the Australian media was drumming up hype around Virat Kohli. The package included the use of Indian vernacular languages in features praising Kohli. This was catering to a fandom, which had juxtaposed Kohli into the Sachin Tendulkar zone.

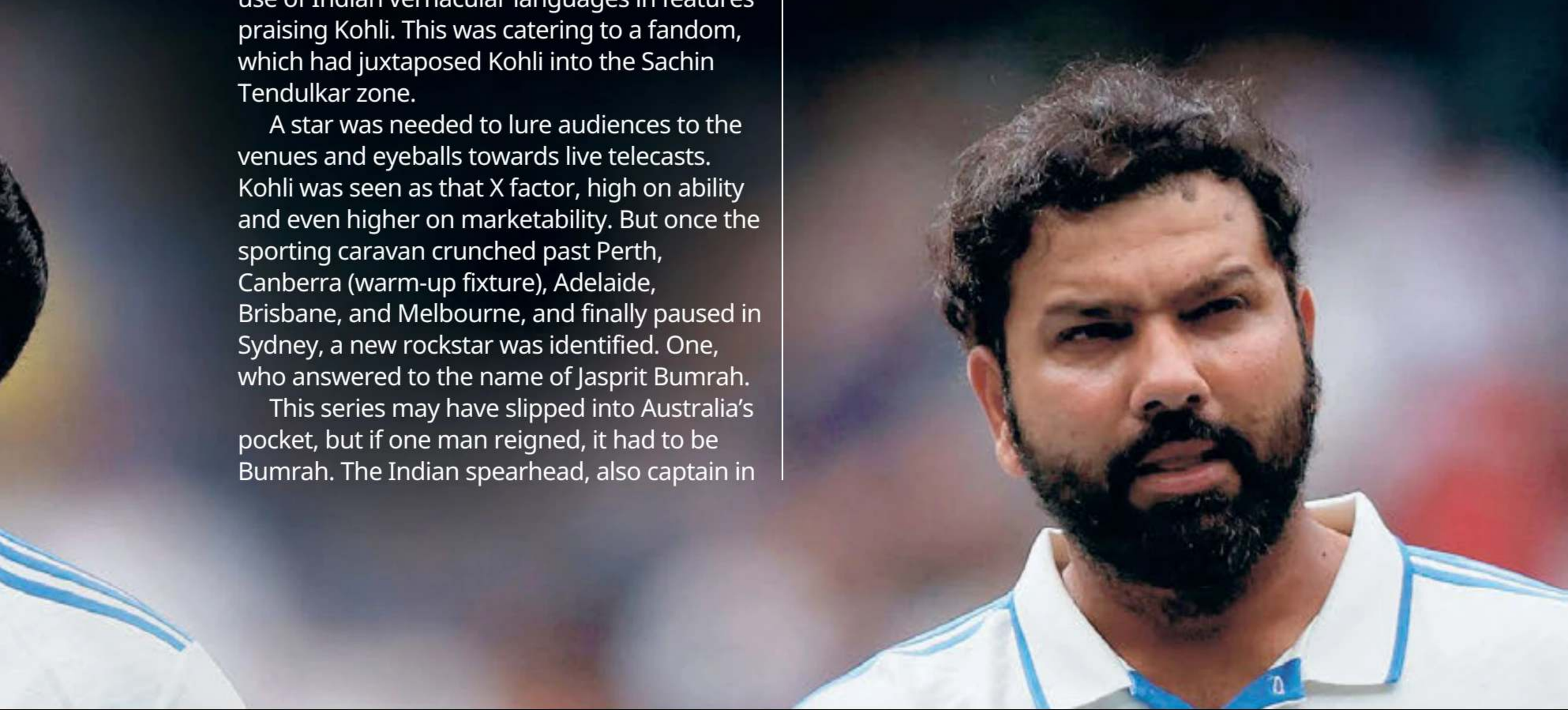
A star was needed to lure audiences to the venues and eyeballs towards live telecasts. Kohli was seen as that X factor, high on ability and even higher on marketability. But once the sporting caravan crunched past Perth, Canberra (warm-up fixture), Adelaide, Brisbane, and Melbourne, and finally paused in Sydney, a new rockstar was identified. One, who answered to the name of Jasprit Bumrah.

This series may have slipped into Australia's pocket, but if one man reigned, it had to be Bumrah. The Indian spearhead, also captain in the first and last Tests in Perth and Sydney, respectively, left a mark so deep that it may also have revived memories of Imran Khan's 40 wickets against the visiting Indians in the 1983 series featuring six Tests. In Bumrah's case, it was 32 scalps over five Tests, and that too at a stunning average of 13.06.

It was no surprise that the Aussies' collective sigh of relief was so evident once a back-spasm-afflicted Bumrah could not bowl in the second innings in Sydney. Perhaps if he had run in and delivered those thunderbolts, India may have drawn level at 2-2 and retained a trophy that it had won during the previous two tours. "I was Bumrah'd," Usman Khawaja wryly said once the dust settled, while his mates were sipping the bubbly inside the change rooms.

If Bumrah was light and pathways, hope and magic, he also in an oblique way revealed

Future tense: In the months ahead, the selectors under Ajit Agarkar have to make some tough calls. A transition is upon the squad. AFP



the fragility in the Indian ranks. A heavy burden was placed on him, while his support cast of bowlers did not exactly set the charts on fire. To be fair, Mohammed Siraj did his best and had 20 scalps to show, while Akash Deep exuded promise.

And in a tussle in which spin was deemed an afterthought, R. Ashwin retired midway, nursing a massive legacy while leaving a huge vacuum. But if a cold appraisal is done, India lost because its batters failed. Yashasvi Jaiswal, K.L. Rahul, Rishabh Pant and Nitish Kumar Reddy had their moments; so did the lower order of Ravindra Jadeja, Sundar, Bumrah, and Akash, but as a collective, the willow wielders became paper boats, soaked and washed away in a downpour.

Kohli had a ton in Perth and subsequently dallied around the off-stump and retreated. Skipper Rohit Sharma missed Perth due to a paternity break, and once he linked up with the squad, he lost his mojo. His batting horrors were so stark (31 runs from five outings) that he opted out in Sydney. It was a piece of information badly handled in the way it was hinted to the world. Never ideal for a team with its back to the wall and trailing 1-2 ahead of the climax.

Usually once past the deep seas, India would lose the opening Test and keep scrambling before finding a semblance of form towards the end. This time around, the reverse

IF BUMRAH WAS LIGHT AND PATHWAYS, HOPE AND MAGIC, HE ALSO IN AN OBLIQUE WAY REVEALED THE FRAGILITY IN THE INDIAN RANKS

happened. The performance in Perth was terrific, and it seemed as if the Aussies were in disarray, and an innocuous line by Josh Hazlewood

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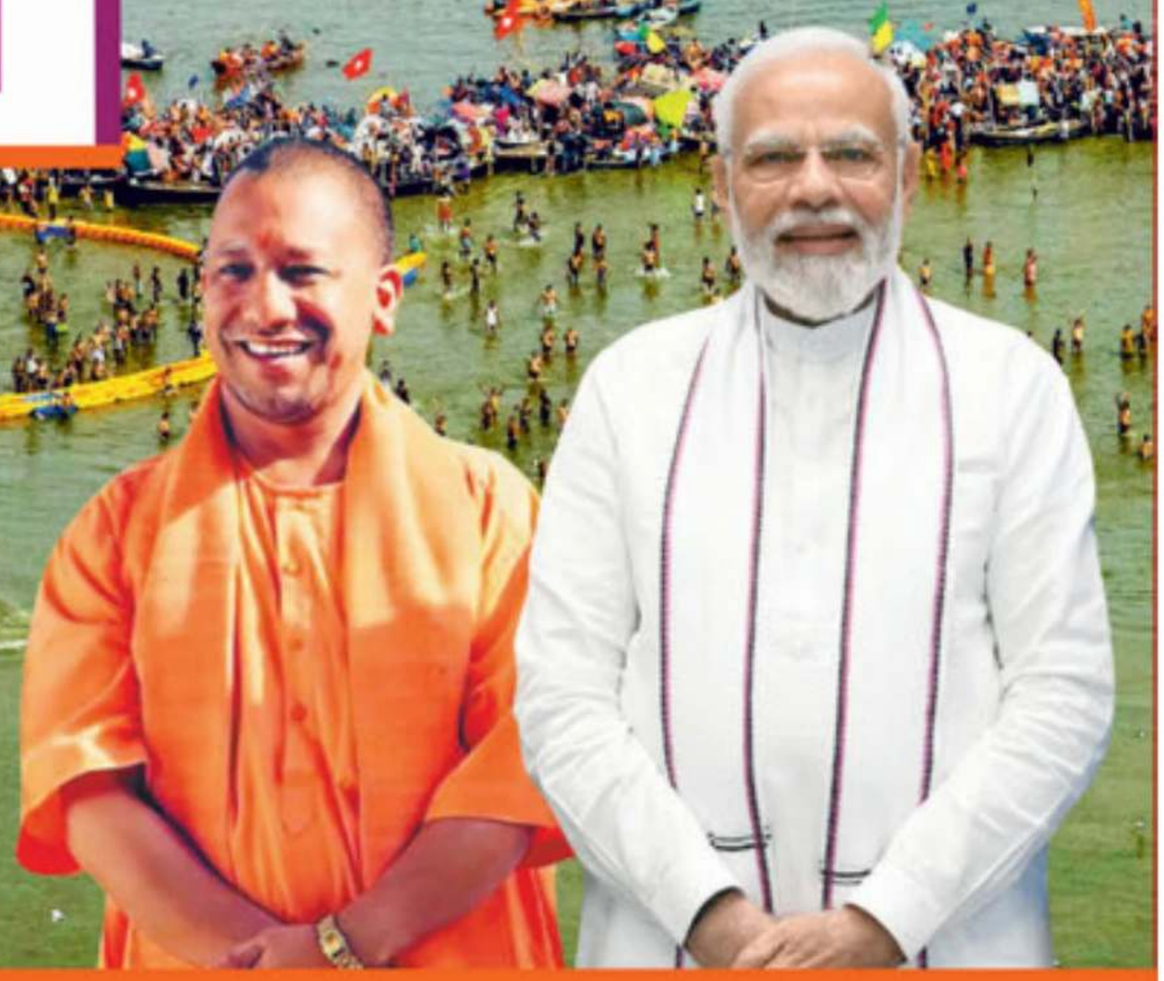

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Thumping victory: The 3-1 series win against India also means Pat Cummins' side qualifies for the World Test Championship final at Lord's in June, when it will face South Africa. REUTERS

was twisted as a knife that he hurled at his teammates. It was so far from the truth, but a section of the local media went to town with it.

India then went to Canberra, eased past the Prime Minister's XI, landed in Adelaide, and perhaps got blinded by the floodlights, and the pink-ball Test was lost. 1-1 and still a lot to play for. Brisbane's Gabba could have slipped into Australia's grasp, but persistent rains and India's tail ensured that a follow-on was averted and an eventual draw was secured.

Test cricket offers the stalemate as one of the result options. However, in this age of instant gratification, the good old draw is deemed an aberration. Conversely, a defeat while pursuing a difficult triumph is seen as a badge of honour. At the Melbourne Cricket Ground, a terrible last session on the final day meant that India lost the face-off. It was a second innings that needed the durable fortresses that were in the Rahul Dravid and Cheteshwar Pujara zone. Instead, India had batters returning to the dressing room like misguided projectiles. Batting time is an art that is seriously on the wane.

This litany of woes may indicate that India was constantly playing the second fiddle, but on the turf, even Australia struggled.

Except for Travis Head in the beginning and Steve Smith and Marnus Labuschagne later, the host too suffered from weak batting. Debutant Sam Konstas did tuck into Bumrah a bit, but it was an exception.

Like Bumrah carrying India along, Australia found its biggest hero in Cummins as the captain grabbed wickets and scored handy runs. Mitchell Starc ably assisted him, and Scott Boland was so accurate around the off-stump that it wore down the patience of rival batters. This was pace-hypnosis of the macabre kind, and the Indians walked into it with tentative bats.

In the months ahead, the selectors under Ajit Agarkar have to make some tough calls. A transition is upon the squad; it is a reality that coach Gautam Gambhir and the rest have to address. Sporting cycles are inevitable; there are the highs and the lows.

If the loss at home against New Zealand was seen as this rare banana peel, the crash in Australia is a wake-up call that none should ignore.

To draw joy from ODI and T20 exploits and then use it as a salve for Test wounds will boomerang. New heroes have to emerge, especially ones invested in the longer format.

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SYDNEY STREETS TO BRADMAN'S BOWRAL: A JOURNEY THROUGH CRICKETING LORE

This diary **captures a cricket lover's journey** through Australia, blending the thrill of the Border-Gavaskar Trophy with Melbourne's cosmopolitan charm and Sydney's dazzling New Year fireworks.

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Melbourne

In sprawling Australia, where a majority of its citizens live on the coastal edges of a vast nation, Melbourne is one city that has the big metropolis vibe. Cosmopolitan to the core and multi-racial at its best, there are some localities that exude a distinct Chinese vibe. There is Chinatown, but even beyond that, the Chinese presence is unmistakable. Restaurants offering oriental cuisine are a dime a dozen, and in high-rises and commercial establishments, the language options are split between English and Mandarin. Many are students, and others are settlers with a Chinese history and an Aussie spirit. In this confluence of civilisations, India takes on Australia in the Boxing Day Test at the spectacular Melbourne Cricket Ground. This venue is pure theatre, and on this stage, debutant Sam Konstas unleashes sixes against Jasprit Bumrah. It is exhilarating to watch. Cheeky with his shots and chirpy with his words, Konstas leaves a mark. Another youngster, Nitish Kumar Reddy, posts a sparkling century. "I wanted to prove a few people wrong," he later says. The Telugu

New Year festivities: All roads led to the Sydney Harbour Bridge to witness the fireworks at the stroke of midnight. AFP

diaspora is thrilled to bits. However, a last session of poor batting leaves India nursing a loss, one that grants a 2-1 lead to Australia in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy series.

Bradman reigns

It is time for Sydney and a tryst with the New Year festivities. All roads lead to the Sydney Harbour Bridge to witness the fireworks at the stroke of midnight. There is a rush, roads get closed, walking is the lone option, and cafes and pubs are packed. A night wanes; suddenly the skies light up. It is 2025, and pictures of the festivities, perhaps the first on earth, will be the preferred page-one snap across the globe.

SPORTS WRITERS, LIKE PHOTOGRAPHERS, HAVE THEIR CODES OF UNITY CUTTING ACROSS THEIR WORK SCHEDULES. THIS IS A TRIBE ALWAYS ON THE MOVE

The return hinges on public transport like trams and cabs. The first dawn of the year is spent in a tizzy. A train is caught to Bowral, a town two hours away and famous for being the place from where Don Bradman emerged. Almost a one-horse outpost, there is warmth and nostalgia, and the people offer instant guidance to the most revered spot in town.

The Bradman Oval is a lovely ground. Fringed by trees and with a distant hill as a signpost, it is rural in heart and eternal in its appeal. Old-timers are more than willing to talk about the great Don, obviously tales they heard from their parents. The Bradman Museum has a duality; it offers homage to the great batter and equally celebrates the willow game, its history, the rules, and the players, who made it what it is today.

The Rohit question

The return to Sydney goes in a blur, and it is time to dip into the fifth and final Test. The Sydney Cricket Ground (SCG) is a stunning venue and seamlessly blends the old wing with the refurbished stands. This is a hat tip to old architecture and modern demands while the aesthetics aren't lost.

On match eve, Gautam Gambhir doesn't commit to whether Rohit Sharma will be part of the playing eleven. This is the captain, but the coach doesn't budge.

All scribes become body-language analysts. Every move of Rohit's is scrutinised. He arrives at the nets, banters with Bumrah, and later returns with his kit and bats against throwdowns.

There is no clue as to whether he will play or not. As the day lapses into night, conflicting reports emerge. He may play, he is dropped, he is rested, and oh, he has opted out. Finally at the toss, Bumrah strides out; the team list doesn't have Rohit's name.

It is bizarre, and the entire incident could have been handled better. India loses the game, and while it is in progress, through a television interview, Rohit says that he opted out. The match has some angst too as Konstas gets under the skin of Bumrah, who in turn dismisses Usman Khawaja.

Old-school charm: The Bradman Oval is rural in heart and eternal in its appeal. K. C. VIJAYA KUMAR

Unfortunately, a back spasm lays Bumrah low, and he cannot bowl in the second innings. This is a sliver of fortune for the Aussie batters. Pat Cummins and his men win the Border-Gavaskar Trophy at 3-1. The dust settles, copies are filed, and a night is spent well, thanks to a party organised by the Australian cricket writers for their Indian counterparts.

Sports writers, like photographers, have their codes of unity cutting across their work schedules. This is a tribe always on the move, quick to write and easy to laugh. And it is time to say goodbye to Australia.

1st

FOR MORE IMAGES

Batting horrors: Opting to bat, India's batting woes in the series persisted as the team managed just 184 runs. Australia, spearheaded by Scott Boland's impressive four-wicket haul, made quick work of the visitor's line-up. AFP

2nd

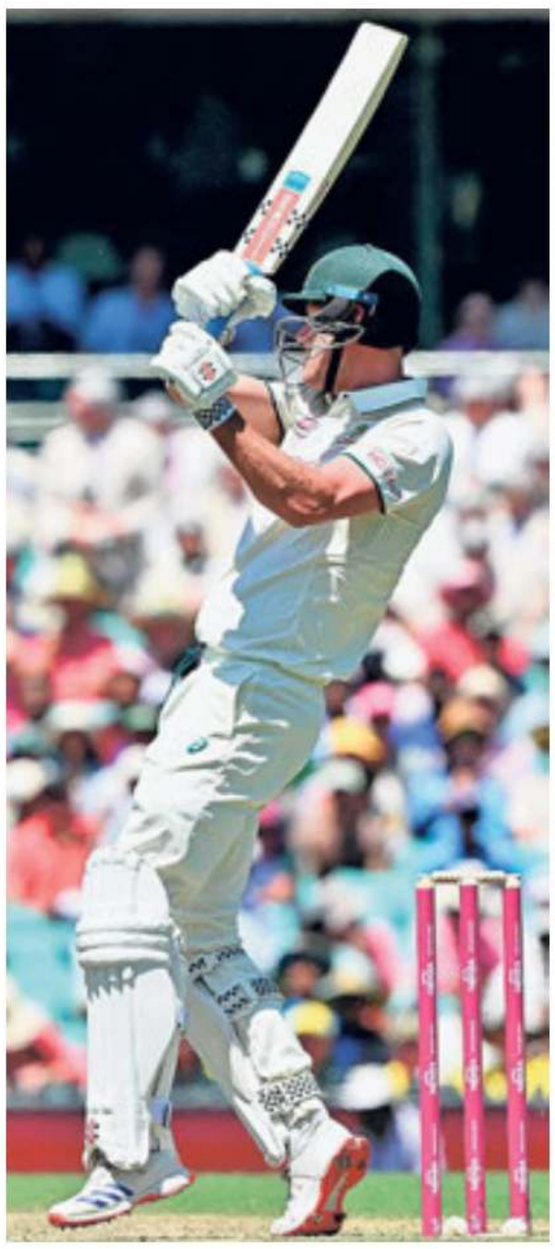
Fired up: The on-field intensity escalated with a fiery confrontation between Sam Konstas and Jasprit Bumrah. The tension reached its peak when Bumrah dismissed Usman Khawaja, igniting an emphatic celebration from the Indian team. AFP

3rd

Counter-attack: The Indian bowlers matched Australia's intensity right from day one, bundling the host out for 181. Jasprit Bumrah impressed with two wickets, while Mohammed Siraj and Prasidh Krishna claimed three scalps each. AFP

4th

Standing out: Debutant Beau Webster scored a fluent half-century (57) and forged crucial partnerships with Steve Smith and Alex Carey to ensure Australia stayed within touching distance of India's first-innings total. AFP



5th

Final fight: Rishabh Pant showcased a stunning display of strokeplay, smashing a blazing 29-ball fifty — the second-fastest in Test cricket by an Indian — to transform India's slender lead into a formidable one. REUTERS

6th

Bow-land: Scott Boland once again dismantled India's batting line-up, claiming six wickets and securing his first 10-wicket haul in Tests as Australia bowled out the visitor for 157 in the second innings. Boland concluded the series with an impressive tally of 21 wickets in just three matches. AFP

7th

Conquered: Australia chased down 162 with six wickets in hand to reclaim the Border-Gavaskar Trophy after 10 years. The Pat Cummins-led side defeated India by a 3-1 margin. GETTY IMAGES

India's First International-Standard Concrete Velodrome Unveiled at KIIT-KISS Campus, a Game-Changer for Indian Cycling and Sports Infrastructure

BHUBANESWAR : JANUARY 10 :

A NEW chapter in India's sporting landscape has been written with the inauguration of the first-ever international-standard concrete velodrome at the KIIT-KISS campus here. The 250-meter Minati Mohapatra Cycling Velodrome, named in honour of Odisha's first Arjuna Awardee in cycling, marks a significant milestone in the country's growing sports infrastructure. The inauguration ceremony on January 8 was graced by Union Minister of Youth Affairs and Sports, Mansukh Mandaviya, who praised the vision behind the creation of this state-of-the-art facility. The velodrome promises to serve as a crucial platform for budding athletes and professionals alike, offering an unparalleled venue for competitive cycling and a springboard for those aspiring to represent India on the global stage, including the Olympics.

The introduction of the velodrome is yet another shining example of KIIT and KISS's steadfast commitment to excellence in sports. The institutions have long been pioneers in creating world-class sporting infrastructure across a wide array of disciplines. From cricket and hockey to football and athletics, KIIT-KISS has consistently raised the bar in terms of providing top-tier facilities for students and athletes.

In addition to the newly inaugurated velodrome, the campus already boasts a comprehensive range of sporting venues. These include a dedicated cricket stadium, a hockey stadium, a football stadium, an athletics stadium, a rugby complex, a badminton complex, and a tennis complex. Furthermore, the campus features an Olympic-sized swimming pool, an indoor volleyball court, and the KIIT-Biju Patnaik Multipurpose Indoor Stadium. Not to mention, the state-of-the-art shooting range and archery stadium that further highlight the breadth of sporting excellence fostered at KIIT-KISS.

Hon'ble Union Minister of Sports Mansukh Mandaviya inaugurated the international-standard Minati Mohapatra Cycling Velodrome at the KIIT-KISS campus in the presence of Founder of KIIT-KISS-KIMS Prof Achyuta Samanta, ShriManinder Pal Singh, Secretary General of the Cycling Federation of India; KIIT Vice Chancellor Prof. Saranjit Singh; KISS Vice Chancellor Prof. Deepak Kumar Behera; and legendary cyclist Minati Mohapatra.

In his address, Dr. Achyuta Samanta, the Founder of KIIT, KISS, and KIMS, reflected on the vision that has driven the establishment of these facilities. He expressed his deep gratitude for the Union Minister's visit and revealed that there are plans to expand the sports infrastructure even further. "With the minister's blessings, we aim to double our sporting facilities in the coming years to create even more opportunities for our athletes," Dr. Samanta shared. KIIT-KISS campus is set to further bolster its sporting legacy with the upcoming inauguration of a second athletics stadium. This new facility will be named after Anuradha Biswal, Odisha's first Olympian, underscoring the state's rich history and deep-rooted connection with sports excellence. The velodrome's inauguration is particularly significant as it provides aspiring Indian cyclists with a world-class facility to train and hone their skills. The importance of such infrastructure cannot be overstated in a nation that is beginning to make its mark in global sports, with cycling emerging as a sport of increasing interest and potential.

Minister Mansukh Mandaviya, who has been a long-time advocate for sports development in India, spoke passionately about the impact of such initiatives. Reflecting on his visit to KIIT and KISS, he shared, "Today is an important day for me. Dr. Achyuta Samanta has often shared his vision with me, and I am glad I took the time to visit and witness the incredible work being done here. This is exactly the kind of model that Prime Minister Narendra Modi envisions for our nation—a place where education and sports go hand in hand, ensuring that our youth are equipped not just academically but also athletically." Quoting the great Acharya Chanakya, the Union Minister emphasized the transformative power of education in shaping a nation's future. He commended the work of Dr. Samanta and his team, noting that KIIT, KISS, and KIMS are nurturing not just students but future responsible citizens of the country. "The future of our country is in capable hands," Mandaviya remarked. "What I have witnessed here will serve as an inspiration to others."

The event also saw a moving address from Minati Mohapatra, who expressed her gratitude for being honoured in such a significant way. "This is the greatest honour of my life," she said. "People say Dr. Samanta is like a god to us. I am speechless and deeply moved." Maninder Pal Singh, the Secretary General of the Cycling Federation of India praised the minister's passion for cycling and his contributions to promoting sports across the nation. Singh also lauded the vision of KIIT-KISS in providing an exceptional platform for athletes to grow and excel. Professor Saranjit Singh, Vice Chancellor of KIIT, highlighted the union minister's transformative work during his tenure as Union Health Minister, acknowledging his continued support for sports development in India. The event concluded with a heartfelt vote of thanks delivered by Professor Deepak Kumar Behera, Vice Chancellor of KISS.

Advertisement

PIONEERING COMPETITIVE EXAM PREPARATION

The Upkar Prakashan and Pratiyogita Darpan Group have become synonymous with educational success of youth, aspiring to lead Indian bureaucracy. Their comprehensive strategy revolves around providing meticulous preparation materials in both English and Hindi, catering to aspirants of competitive examinations in a single masterstroke

The Upkar Prakashan Group needs no introduction, and stands out in the competitive publication landscape, enjoying widespread popularity and acceptance among educated youth shaping their careers in the bureaucratic setup. It enjoys a pan-India popularity and has become a trusted name in competitive publications. The group's offerings include the highly respected Pratiyogita Darpan magazines, focused on UPSC and State Public Service Commission exams, and Upkar career books, which cater to exams conducted by the UPSC, State Public Service Commissions, NTA, SSC, Railway Recruitment Boards, Banking recruitment boards, and other central and state government bodies. The hallmark of their study material is its accuracy and usefulness, giving top priority to relevant subject matter.

Rahul Jain

VISION & MISSION: A LEGACY OF EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE

The Upkar Prakashan and Pratiyogita Darpan Group paves the way for aspirants, embodying the spirit of relentless pursuit of success and educational excellence.

In this regard, managing partner of Pratiyogita Darpan group, Rahul Jain said, "The foundation of the magazines and Upkar Prakashan Group was laid by visionary leader Late Ma-

Advertisement

hendra Jain. He aimed to address the problems of students and competitive exam aspirants by providing authentic, exam-oriented study material covering all sections of competitive examinations. He focussed on generating 'self-educating study material'. His sincere and relentless efforts have culminated in the Pratiyogita Darpan magazines and Upkar career book series."

INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY: EMBRACING THE FUTURE

The Upkar Prakashan group has adopted innovative ideas and technology-driven strategies to enhance performance. By integrating digital platforms, they are enhancing accessibility and providing interactive learning experiences for their readers. Their commitment to staying ahead in the digital age ensures they continue to be a leading resource for competitive exam preparation.

In this regard, Rahul Jain averred, "Despite the digital eras and AI's dominance, the group's magazines and books remain relevant, shining brightly in the competitive examination domain as they did in the seventies. The transition from traditional to digital modes encompasses marketing and content development, with the latest machinery employed for printing and production. Pratiyogita Darpan magazines and Upkar career books are now also available in digital and e-book formats."

UPKAR'S

SUCCESS MANTRA AND COMPANY PHILOSOPHY

The Upkar Prakashan group thrives on its commitment to delivering quality educational materials that cater to the diverse needs of students and aspirants across India. Their success mantra revolves around innovation, clarity, accuracy, relevance, consistency, and understanding the evolving demands of competitive examinations. Upholding a philosophy of inclusivity and accessibility, Upkar Prakashan strives to empower learners with comprehensive, insightful, reliable, up-to-date and in-depth resources, fostering academic excellence and lifelong learning. By prioritizing the needs of aspirants and maintaining rigorous standards, it has established itself as a trusted guide and mentor in the journey towards academic and professional success.

Rahul Jain with Late Mahendra Jain (L-R)

- **Success of Aspirants:** Providing authentic, reliable, and exam-oriented study material
- **Focus on Students:** Emphasizing students' demands and requirements for study material.
- **Continuous Updation:** Keeping study material updated as per changing exam scenarios.

Geeta Jain

GENESIS OF A BRAND

The Upkar Prakashan Group has carved a niche in the competitive exam preparation market in India. Established with a vision to provide comprehensive and accessible educational resources, they have become synonymous with quality and reliability. Their flagship publication, Pratiyogita Darpan, is a go-to resource for students preparing for various competitive exams, offering insightful articles, exam tips, and detailed analysis. It offers hundreds of career books in both Hindi and English for numerous competitive exams, and monthly magazines like Pratiyogita Darpan (Hindi/English), Samanya Gyan Darpan, and Success Mirror (Hindi).

The managing partner, Geeta Jain recounts the group's journey, and said, "The group initiated this journey nearly five decades ago, by visionary leader Late Mahendra Jain, to address the lack of reliable, exam-oriented study material, particularly in the Hindi belt."

FUTURE PLANS: EXPANDING HORIZONS

Looking ahead, the Upkar Prakashan group has ambitious expansion plans, and aims to diversity their offerings by incorporating digital platforms to reach a broader audience. They plan to expand their content, which will further cement their position as a leader in educational publishing.

In this regard, Geeta Jain said, "Sky is the limit for a person or the entity. So is the case with the Upkar Prakashan and Pratiyogita Darpan. We have a blueprint of expansion plans for the future. With a remarkable entry in the notebooks segment under the brand name 'Taj White,' the group, under the leadership of managing director and editor-in-chief, Rahul Jain, plans to launch Pratiyogita Darpan magazines and Upkar career books in regional languages like Bengali, Marathi, and Telugu. Additionally, a new study material website will be launched shortly, further broadening their educational impact."

ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar

FOR MORE STORIES

WHITE-BALL PERFORMANCES SHOULD NOT BLIND US TO THE DEFICIENCIES IN TEST CRICKET

Surprisingly, Wankhede's **Golden Jubilee celebrations** saw little discussion about what happened in Australia, though concerns were raised about the future course of Indian cricket.

What a pleasure it was to be at the start of the celebrations of the Golden Jubilee of the Wankhede Stadium. I actually invited myself for the first day, where the MCA were to felicitate the past captains of both the men's teams as well as the women's teams. The MCA has invited all those from Mumbai who captained India for the last day of the celebrations, which will be something truly memorable. My justification for crashing the opening day felicitation was simply because I was captain of Mumbai first before captaining India, so I could attend the event too. As always, being in the company of cricketers who played with me and some who came a bit later too was an experience to cherish. Over a sumptuous lunch, which can teach the stadiums in Australia what good service is about, it was fun to recount some old incidents and laugh at other stories that one had heard before too.

Surprisingly, there was very little chat about what had happened in Australia, though there was some concern expressed as to where the Indian team was heading. That is also probably what most Indian cricket lovers will be worried about. With two back-to-back Test series losses, and bad ones too, there's a dull feeling about the rest of the international season. The excitement that is usually there in anticipation of a new series doesn't seem to be there, and the listlessness that one saw on the field seems to have been transmitted to the fans too.

Indian cricket needs a new challenge, and with a couple of new administrators on board, it will be interesting to see how that challenge is met.

The first decision to take in such a situation is whether to look at the immediate future or take a long-term view of how to get Indian cricket rocking again. The next few months are all going to be about limited-overs cricket and the IPL. White-ball performances should not blind us to the deficiencies in Test cricket. These need to be addressed too, as the new cycle for the World Test Championship final begins with the five-Test match series against England from mid-June.

The mistakes that were made in Australia should not be repeated. The team should arrive in England in one group and not in four batches as was done in Australia. For the first two days in Australia, the team was without captain, vice-captain and coach. What kind of a message does it send to the home team? That here's a team that has arrived with no leadership group and can be easily broken with a few tough performances. Surely the BCCI will not allow this to happen again. Yes, the odd player who is recovering from injury can join the team later, but the leaders must be the first to arrive to make a statement that the team is ready for battle.

Now that India hasn't qualified for the WTC final, there's an additional week for the team to

acclimatise by playing some practice games. English conditions mean that the ball will swing in the air and seam after pitching. However much one practises in the nets, the knowledge that even if a batter gets out a few times in the net, he can carry on batting doesn't make for good mental preparation. Never mind if the opposition for practice matches isn't top class; the runs scored and wickets taken in a match will boost the confidence considerably.

It was understandable to some extent to have a large squad of around 20 for Australia, as it is not an easy place to reach, and the body clock does take a few days to adjust to the local time zone. This is not so much of a problem in England, but the change in weather conditions from the hot Indian summer to the cool winds in England can be tricky at the best of times. Still, carrying more than 16 players will indicate the selectors are unsure, and that's never a good sign. Just because the BCCI can afford to send a large party doesn't mean the India cap should be given just like that. The usual problem overseas is a lack of practice bowlers, so by all means take a few bowlers over, and they can be given the training and clothing, but not the India cap.

United we stand: "The team should arrive in England in one group and not in four batches as was done in Australia," says the author. AFP

There will be some gaps between the Test matches, and these need to be utilised for practice games. Travel in England is by road almost every time, and the India team will drive down to the next Test venue on the last evening of the previous Test match. Since there won't be a travel day involved, giving the next day off after the Test is understandable, but the next couple should be used for practice. This recent tradition of optional practice should be done away with, and only the coach and captain should decide who gets days off from practice, and this should not be left to the individual player to decide.

Indian cricket has depth, or so we are told, and hopefully, that will be seen in England, where a new India can show they are ready to take on the world.

Now that India hasn't qualified for the WTC final, there's an additional week for the team to acclimatise by playing some practice games in England.

Pycroft's 100!

4 The number of Match Referees who have officiated in over 100 Test matches during their career. In the Boxing Day Test match held in Melbourne, former Zimbabwean batter Andy Pycroft became the latest referee to reach this milestone. He joins three others in this exclusive group.

Most Test matches as Match Referee

Tests	Match Referee (from)	Test debut as referee			
221	Ranjan Madugalle (SL)	Pak	v Zim	(Karachi)	1 Dec 1993
125	Jeff Crowe (NZ)	Pak	v SL	(Faisalabad)	20 Oct 2004
123	Chris Broad (Eng)	NZ	v Pak	(Hamilton)	19 Dec 2003
101	Andy Pycroft (Zim)	Eng	v WI	(Lord's)	6 May 2009

Youngest Indian to register a 100-plus Test score while batting at No. 8 and lower

Age	Batter	Runs	At No#	Opp	Venue	Date
20y-150d	Ajay Ratra	115*	#8	WI	St. John's	12 May 2002
21y-217	Nitish Reddy	114	#8	Aus	Melbourne	28 Dec 2024
23y-29d	Kapil Dev	116	#8	Eng	Kanpur	4 Feb 1982
23y-43d	Irfan Pathan	102	#8	Pak	Bengaluru	9 Dec 2007
23y-306d	Hardik Pandya	108	#8	SL	Pallekele	13 Aug 2017

Youngest to register a 100-plus Test score in Australia while batting at No. 8 and lower

Age	Batter	Runs	At No#	Opp	Venue	Date
21y-217	Nitish Reddy (Ind)	114	#8	Aus	Melbourne	28 Dec 2024
23y-139d	Reggie Duff (Aus)	104	#10	Eng	Melbourne	3 Jan 1902
25y-95d	Ray Lindwall (Aus)	100	#9	Eng	Melbourne	6 Jan 1947
25y-139d	Johnny Gregory (Aus)	100	#9	Eng	Melbourne	31 Dec 1920
28y-33d	Roger Hartigan (Aus)	116	#8	Eng	Adelaide	14 Jan 1908
28y-314d	Matt Prior (Eng)	118	#8	Aus	Sydney	6 Jan 2011

85 The number of bowlers with 200 or more wickets in a Test career. Jasprit Bumrah, in the Melbourne Test match on 29 January 2024, became the latest entrant to join this list of bowlers, with the wicket of Travis Head. He thus became the 12th Indian and sixth Indian pacer to achieve this landmark. Bumrah's achievement is remarkable because he became the first bowler in Test cricket history to take 200 wickets with a bowling average of less than 20 runs. By reaching his 200th Test wicket in his 44th Test, he is now the quickest Indian pace bowler to reach this landmark. Kapil Dev, in 1983, needed 50 Tests. Among Indians, only R. Ashwin (37 Tests) has done it quicker. Ravindra Jadeja, too, needed 44 Tests, same as Bumrah, to 200 wickets. In terms of balls bowled, Bumrah (8484 deliveries) is the fourth-quickest in the history of Test cricket, after Pakistani Waqar Younis (7725) and South Africans Dale Steyn (7848) and Kagiso Rabada (8153).

Test bowlers with the lowest bowling average while claiming their 200th Test wicket

Ave.	Bowler	For	Tests	Balls	Runs	Wkts	S/R	Achieved on
19.43	Jasprit Bumrah	Ind	44	8570	3944	203	42.22	29 Dec 2024
20.29	Shaun Pollock	SA	49	10683	4078	201	53.15	28 Dec 2000
20.33	Joel Garner	WI	44	10142	4067	200	50.71	23 Nov 1984
20.61	Waqar Younis	Pak	38	7733	4122	200	38.67	12 Dec 1995
21.21	Ian Botham	Eng	41	9709	4284	202	48.06	31 Aug 1981
21.21	Curtly Ambrose	WI	45	11056	4306	203	54.46	20 Mar 1994

Note: The figures above are updated to the end of the innings when the bowler claimed his 200th Test wicket.

2 The number of Indian batters below 23 years to register three-figure scores, while batting at #8 and lower. At 21 years and 217 days, Nitish Reddy joins former wicketkeeper Ajay Ratra in achieving this feat during his defiant century at the MCG on 28 December 2024. Reddy, meanwhile, became the youngest to achieve this in a Test match in Australia.

India's Nitish Kumar Reddy. AP

24 The number of bowlers who have taken 100 or more wickets for India in Test matches. Mohd Siraj, the latest entrant, reached this milestone during the Sydney Test match on January 5, 2025, when he dismissed Usman Khawaja in the second innings. With this accomplishment, Siraj became the 10th pace bowler to reach this significant landmark for India. However, although the milestone came in 36 Test matches, he still boasts the third-best strike rate of any Indian bowler in this regard, with only Jasprit Bumrah and Kapil Dev having a better bowling strike-rate when claiming their 100th Test wicket.

Quickest to reach 100 Test wickets (pace or spin) for India with best bowling strike-rates

S/R	Indian Bowler	M	Balls	Runs	Wkts	Ave.	Achieved on	Against	Venue	Result
51.50	Jasprit Bumrah	24	5201	2302	101	22.79	6 Sep 2021	England	The Oval	Won
51.69	Kapil Dev	25	5169	2624	100	26.24	31 Jan 1980	Pakistan	Kolkata	Drawn
53.06	Mohd Siraj	36	5306	3074	100	30.74	5 Jan 2025	Australia	Sydney	Lost
53.91	Mohd Shami	29	5391	3057	100	30.57	14 Jan 2018	South Africa	Centurion	Lost
57.36	Irfan Pathan	23	5756	3141	100	31.41	27 Jan 2008	Australia	Adelaide	Drawn

Note: The figures above are updated to the end of the innings when the bowler claimed his 100th Test wicket.

7 The number of Indian bowlers who have claimed 32 or more wickets in a Test series. Jasprit Bumrah has recently joined this elite group. He is the second Indian paceman, after Kapil Dev, to achieve this milestone and the first to take this many wickets on an away tour. However, it is unfortunate that he is also the only Indian bowler to be part of a losing effort in such a series.

Bowlers with the most wickets in a Test series for India

Wkts	Bowler	Opp	Series	M	Ov	Runs	Ave.	S/R	5/10	Best	Result
35	B. S. Chandrasekhar	Eng	1972/73	5	291.1	662	18.91	49.91	4/0	8/79	Won 2-1
34	Vinoo Mankad	Eng	1951/52	5	370.5	571	16.79	65.44	1/1	8/55	Drawn 1-1
34	Subhash Gupte	NZ	1955/56	5	356.4	669	19.67	62.94	4/0	7//128	Won 2-0
32	Kapil Dev #	Pak	1979/80	6	211.5	566	17.68	39.71	3/1	7/56	Won 2-0
32	Harbhajan Singh	Aus	2000/01	3	178.3	545	17.03	33.46	4/2	8/84	Won 2-1
32	R. Ashwin	Eng	2020/21	4	188.1	471	14.71	35.28	3/0	6/61	Won 3-1
32	Jasprit Bumrah #	Aus	2024/25+	5	151.2	418	13.06	28.37	3/0	6/76	Lost 1-3

+ away Test series; # pace bowler

India's Jasprit Bumrah.
GETTY IMAGES

Indian bowlers with most wickets in a Test series against Australia

Wkts	Bowler	Series	M	Overs	Runs	Ave.	S/R	5/10	Best	Series result
32	Harbhajan Singh	2000/01	3	178.3	545	17.03	33.46	4/2	8/84	Won 2-1
32	Jasprit Bumrah	2024/25+	5	151.2	418	13.06	28.37	3/0	6/76	Lost 1-3
31	Bishan Singh Bedi	1977/78+	5	293.1	740	23.87	56.74	3/1	5/55	Lost 2-3
29	R. Ashwin	2012/13	4	241.2	583	20.10	49.93	4/1	7/103	Won 4-0
28	B. S. Chandrasekhar	1977/78+	5	263.1	704	25.14	56.39	3/1	6/52	Lost 2-3
28	Kapil Dev	1979/80	6	223.1	625	22.32	47.82	2/0	5/74	Won 2-0

Indian bowlers with the most wickets in an away Test series

Wkts	Bowler	In	Series	M	Overs	Runs	Ave.	S/R	5/10	Best	Series result
32	Jasprit Bumrah	Aus	2024/25	5	151.2	418	13.06	28.37	3/0	6/76	Lost 1-3
31	Bishan Singh Bedi	Aus	1977/78	5	293.1	740	23.87	56.74	3/1	5/55	Lost 2-3
28	B. S. Chandrasekhar	Aus	1977/78	5	263.1	704	25.14	56.39	3/1	6/52	Lost 2-3
27	Subhash Gupte	WI	1952/53	5	329.3	789	29.22	73.22	3/0	7/162	Lost 0-1
25	E. A. S. Prasanna	Aus	1967/68	4	263.3	686	27.44	63.24	2/0	6/104	Lost 0-4
25	Kapil Dev	Aus	1991/92	5	284.0	645	25.80	68.16	2/0	5/97	Lost 0-4

Note: The highest number of wickets claimed by an Indian bowler in a won series is 24 by E. A. S. Prasanna in New Zealand in 1967/68 in four Tests (won 3-1); + away Test series; *Bedi was also the captain

All records are correct and updated until 11 January 2025.

FOR MORE STORIES

End of an agonising wait: The Indian team won the ICC 2024 Men's T20 World Cup with a narrow win over South Africa in Barbados on June 29, 2024. K. R. DEEPAK

From T20 glory to Test woes: India's mixed year

Indian cricket in 2024 saw a T20 World Cup triumph but struggles in Tests, including a historic home series loss to New Zealand. Emerging talents shone in T20s, while ODIs and Test transitions promise to pose challenges for 2025.

Dhruva Prasad & Anish Pathiyil
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The Indian men's cricket team's fortunes ebbed and flowed with the vagaries of different formats in 2024, as Rohit Sharma's men oscillated between the delight of a T20 World Cup win in the Americas and a debilitating Test series defeat against New Zealand at home.

If India laid hands on an International Cricket Council (ICC) trophy after 11 years when it beat South Africa in a nerve-jangling final, it also frittered away a coveted 12-year unbeaten record at home in the longest format by conceding a 0-3 series sweep for the first time in its backyard. Its agony in Tests spilled over on its tour of Australia, where it fell to a 1-2 deficit in the five-match series before relinquishing its hold on the Border-Gavaskar Trophy in the new year for the first time since 2014-15.

The string of losses in Tests, both

At a crossroads: Demoralising Test defeats against New Zealand and Australia have raised questions over the future of Indian stalwarts Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli. AFP

at home and Down Under, put stalwarts Virat Kohli and Rohit under the scanner months after they retired on a high from the shortest format of the game following the T20 World Cup triumph.

Youngsters take over

The star duo's woes against spin bowling at home were emblematic of India's festering malaise, epitomised by the humbling loss to the Kiwis. Rohit's men were handed a jolt in a defeat to England in spin-friendly conditions in Hyderabad earlier in the year, but the team course-corrected in relatively benign conditions to clinch the series 4-1 against the visiting 'Bazballers.'

Even as the year ended on a sour note for the Indians, the genius of Jasprit Bumrah, the top wicket-taker in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy, Nitish Kumar Reddy's all-round potential, and Yashasvi Jaiswal's prolific run with the bat were the silver linings.

In limited-overs cricket, the horizons expanded significantly for India with a host of youngsters ushering in the 'GenNext' era. While the side couldn't register a single win in the three One-Day Internationals it played in 2024, losing to Sri Lanka 0-2 away, the T20I brigade lost just two out of 26 matches, ransacking attacks at an average run rate of 9.55 — the highest for a Full Member in the year.

India also registered its highest total in the format — a scarcely

Inspiring win: The White Ferns had endured a 10-match losing streak before the T20 World Cup. But they've now claimed their first-ever T20 title, ending a wait that included back-to-back final losses in 2009 and 2010. REUTERS

believable 297 for six against Bangladesh in Hyderabad. The architect of that mammoth score, Sanju Samson, would go on to slam two more T20I hundreds in the four-match series against South Africa to finally cement his spot in the team. Samson, Tilak Varma, who also struck twin hundreds on that tour, and opener Abhishek Sharma emerged as the leaders of the newfangled Indian T20I batting set-up.

The wheels for this charge of the young brigade were set in motion during an unprecedented Indian Premier League (IPL) season, which saw the average run rate soar to 9.56 in 2024 from 8.99 in 2023. The Impact Player rule, instituted in 2023, saw teams aim for the stratosphere as eight of the league's top 10 highest team totals were registered in 2024, altering the lexicon of the format and reducing bowlers to hapless bystanders.

This was, however, in stark contrast to the T20 World Cup that followed.

With a large part of the tournament being held on sluggish drop-in pitches in the USA, the average run-scoring plummeted to 7.09 per six balls — the lowest ever run rate for a single edition in the competition's history. Thus, cricket's American experiment was a far cry from the star-spangled spectacle it was billed to be.

All smiles: Temba Bavuma-led South Africa became the first team to reach the final when it beat Pakistan in the Boxing Day Test in Centurion. GETTY IMAGES

T20s for the win

However, T20s continued to be the gateway drug for cricket, with a record 654 contests being played in 2024 — the most in any calendar year, in addition to the relentless cacophony of global franchise leagues. Underdog New Zealand's victorious Women's T20 World Cup campaign in the UAE also added gloss to the format's penchant for unpredictability.

Meanwhile, one-day cricket's status as an orphaned child only grew more acute as just 104 international matches were played in the format, the least since 1994. After the 2023 World Cup, not too many teams wanted to go through the rigours of the 50-over format, with only four of the top eight teams featuring in the top 12 list of teams that played the greatest number of ODIs in 2024.

India and New Zealand, with three games apiece, were placed at the bottom of the 20-team list. Bilateral

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one-day cricket also failed to strike a chord with fans and find context, and the year witnessed a solitary five-match series between England and Australia, despite the ICC Champions Trophy looming.

It was a thrilling year for Test cricket, with just three out of 50 matches being drawn as teams increasingly gunned for result-orientated pitches against the backdrop of the World Test Championship (WTC). The Proteas typified the dramatic year that was for the longest format.

From sending a second-string side to New Zealand owing to the absence of its top stars, who were engaged with the SA20 T20 franchise league, South Africa qualified for its first WTC final after a string of strong performances at home and a series sweep in Bangladesh, setting up a tantalising summit clash with defending champion Australia.

Breakneck speed

Test cricket also witnessed its fastest scoring year ever, with teams going at an average of 3.65 runs an over. England's subversive 'Bazball' style led the way, topping charts by scoring at 4.38 runs an over even if results didn't favour the Brendon McCullum-coached side.

But it wasn't just merrymaking for the batters as bowlers revelled in friendly conditions, with 2024 logging the lowest strike rate (48.6) in a year where at least 10 matches were played. Quite fittingly, the year had started with the shortest completed Test match ever, with India beating South Africa in just 107 overs in Cape Town.

There were as many as 21 away wins, a prized commodity in Test cricket, which included Bangladesh sweeping Pakistan, Sri Lanka winning in England, and New Zealand running riot in India.

These unexpected reverses should serve as a touchstone for the custodians of the game, who are contemplating a two-tier structure for Test cricket that could limit the possibility of these historic upsets that add to the game's folklore.

IN 2025...

India will look for a strong start to the new year in the limited-overs series against England at home, leading into the ICC Champions Trophy taking place for the first time since 2017.

The IPL, beginning in late March, will have an air of novelty as 10 freshly crafted teams will look to dethrone Kolkata Knight Riders.

India will hope to quickly recover from a disappointing end to 2024 in red-ball cricket as a daunting task awaits in the form of a five-Test tour of England in June, where the team will look to go one better than the 2-2 series result last time out. The post-R. Ashwin era of home Tests will get underway later in the year as West Indies and South Africa visit, and India looks to reclaim a place in the next WTC final.

The new year could also throw up some surprise announcements and elevations as a few Indian stalwarts head into the twilight of their careers.

The Indian Women's team will look to zero in on the best possible squad of players through the bilateral series and the Women's Premier League ahead of a home ODI World Cup in the second half of the year.

LOOK OUT FOR...

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NITISH KUMAR REDDY

With a match-winning 34-ball 74 in just his second T20I appearance and a hundred at the iconic MCG in just his fourth Test, you could argue Nitish Kumar Reddy already had a breakout year in 2024. But, with the unique skill set he brings to the table, the 21-year-old could seal his place as an all-format international for his country in 2025. His ability with bat and ball provides more balance to the team in 50-over cricket, and that could see him find a spot in the Indian squad for the ICC Champions Trophy.

FOR MORE STORIES

Tearful exit: 2024 saw the curtains brought down on the illustrious career of Sunil Chhetri, one of India's greatest-ever footballers. GETTY IMAGES

Rollercoaster of emotions

2024 delivered everything we came to expect — renewed hope, heartbreak, and unforgettable additions to the annals of footballing history.

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Another year has gone by, and football continues to live up to its reputation as the 'Beautiful Game'. Here is what 2024 gave us in the world of football.

Winds of change

Indian football reached a nadir in 2024 when the men's national team failed to win a single game in a calendar year — its first such failure in 16 years (having played at least five games).

The Blue Tigers started the year riding on the optimism of winning three trophies the previous year as it built momentum towards the AFC Asian Cup.

What unfolded afterwards was a shock for thousands of Indian fans in Qatar as their side lost all three group-stage games, failed to score a single goal, and made an early exit from the tournament.

India's captain, Sunil Chhetri, shed

a tear or two after the final game, a 0-1 loss to Syria, but the nightmare had just begun. The team lost 1-2 to Afghanistan, a side ranked 41 spots below India — another first on home soil.

A draw with Kuwait at home follwed by a loss to Qatar, marred by controversy, ended India's flickering hopes of securing a spot in the third round of the FIFA World Cup 2026 qualifiers for the first time.

In 2023, India had won the Tri-Nations tournament, the Intercontinental Cup, and the SAFF Championship, eventually rising into the top 100 of the FIFA rankings after five years.

But 2024 felt like reading *Norwegian Wood* just after *The Alchemist* — a sense of perpetual gloom devoid of any hope of light. Upsets in Indian football were not an aberration. They were the norm.

The draw with Kuwait also brought the curtains down on the illustrious career of Chhetri, one of India's greatest-ever footballers with the highest number of goals from the country.

Within weeks, Igor Stimac, the head coach, was shown the door, and Manolo Marquez, the Spanish coach who guided Hyderabad FC to the Indian Super League title in 2022, took over.

Though results continued to be poor, glimpses of hope arrived from new players like Jithin MS, Edmund Lalrindika, Irfan Yadwad, David Lalhlansanga, Vibin Mohanan, and a resurgent Farukh Choudhary.

Farukh made his national team comeback after 1,099 days and scored on his return, a crucial equaliser against Vietnam in Marquez's first away match in charge.

In a post-Chhetri era, what awaits India in 2025 are the Asian Cup qualifiers starting in March, with the most important match being against Hong Kong, China.

Hong Kong is coached by Ashley Westwood, who knows Indian footballers well and guided a depleted Afghan side to triumph over India last year.

Inevitable: Igor Stimac lost his job as coach of the Indian men's football team, replaced by Manolo Marquez. GETTY IMAGES

Drawn with Hong Kong, Bangladesh, and Singapore, India will need to finish as group-toppers in the third qualifying round to seal a spot in the next edition of the continental tournament in Saudi Arabia.

There were changes in women's football too, with Santosh Kashyap succeeding Langam Chaoba Devi as the full-time head coach.

Under the former Aizawl and Salgaocar FC head coach, the Blue Tigresses reached the semifinals of the SAFF Women's Championship but lost 2-4 on penalties to host Nepal.

In December, Joakim Alexandersson — another Swede after Thomas Dennerby — joined the hierarchy of women's team coaches. While he currently manages the under-20 and under-17 sides, he will be a potential candidate to take over from Kashyap in 2025.

European top-flight

Dubbed as the 'toughest league in Europe', the usual script played out in England, where Manchester City reigned supreme and successfully defended the Premier League title.

In doing so, it became the first side to win four titles on the trot. While the club received plaudits for this unprecedented feat, it also garnered attention for all the wrong reasons due to the 115 charges of Premier League rule breaches, a major talking point in the footballing world.

According to the latest reports, the hearing for all the charges has concluded, and the number has risen to 130. The verdict is expected sometime in 2025, though no exact timeline has been conveyed.

Real Madrid grabbed the honours in Spanish top-flight football. Carlo Ancelotti's men cemented their authority and won La Liga with 95 points — 10 more than arch-rival Barcelona, which endured a tumultuous season owing to financial difficulties and changes in the dugout.

Germany saw the rise of a new

Ruthless: Manchester City became the first side to win four Premier League titles on the trot. GETTY IMAGES

force under legendary midfielder Xabi Alonso, who guided Bayer Leverkusen to its first Bundesliga title, breaking Bayern Munich's 11-year reign.

Alonso's men not only won the league but did so with utter dominance, remaining undefeated throughout the season. In 34 matches, Leverkusen won 28 and drew six, finishing with 90 points.

Serie A saw the age-old rivals Inter Milan and AC Milan battle for the Scudetto. In the end, it was the blue side of Milan that prevailed, with Inter clinching the title with 94 points, 19 more than runner-up AC Milan.

Since PSG was injected with Qatari investment, the French top-flight has hardly seen a change in narrative. The 2023-24 season was no different as the Paris-based club cruised to the title, finishing nine points ahead of second-placed Monaco.

However, it was a bittersweet season for PSG, having lost Kylian Mbappe to Real Madrid in a transfer marred by a public fallout over pending salary payments.

In the UEFA Champions League, Real Madrid won a record-extending 15th title **(right)**, beating Borussia Dortmund in the final, reaffirming its dominance as the undisputed king of Europe.

In the Women's Champions League, Barcelona defended its title by beating Lyon 2-0 in the final, taking its overall tally to three.

Spanish dominance and the Albiceleste fairytale

2024 saw two major international tournaments — the European Championships and the Copa America.

In the Euros, new manager Luis de la Fuente guided Spain to its third title. Displaying a brand of flamboyant yet direct football — quite unlike the Luis Enrique era that was criticised for its 'possession-without-result' approach — Spain beat England 2-1 in the final. The Three Lions' wait for a major men's international title since 1966

GETTY IMAGES

continued.

Spain unearthed a new star in La Masia product Lamine Yamal, who, at just 17, was a key player in the forward line.

With one goal and four assists, he won the Young Player of the Tournament Award and became the youngest player to score in the Euros and win the title.

In South America, Lionel Scaloni's Argentina continued its dominance, defending its Copa América title and emulating Spain's feat of winning three major international tournaments on the trot.

Facing a rejuvenated Colombia in the final, boosted by James Rodriguez's form, Argentina toiled before Lautaro Martinez scored the decisive goal in the 112th minute.

Martinez finished as the tournament's top scorer with five goals, while Emiliano Martinez was named Best Goalkeeper. James won the Best Player Award.

Future bright: Spain, featuring young sensation Lamine Yamal (No. 19) and Ballon d'Or winner Rodri (third from right), won the Euros after beating England 2-1 in the final.

GETTY IMAGES

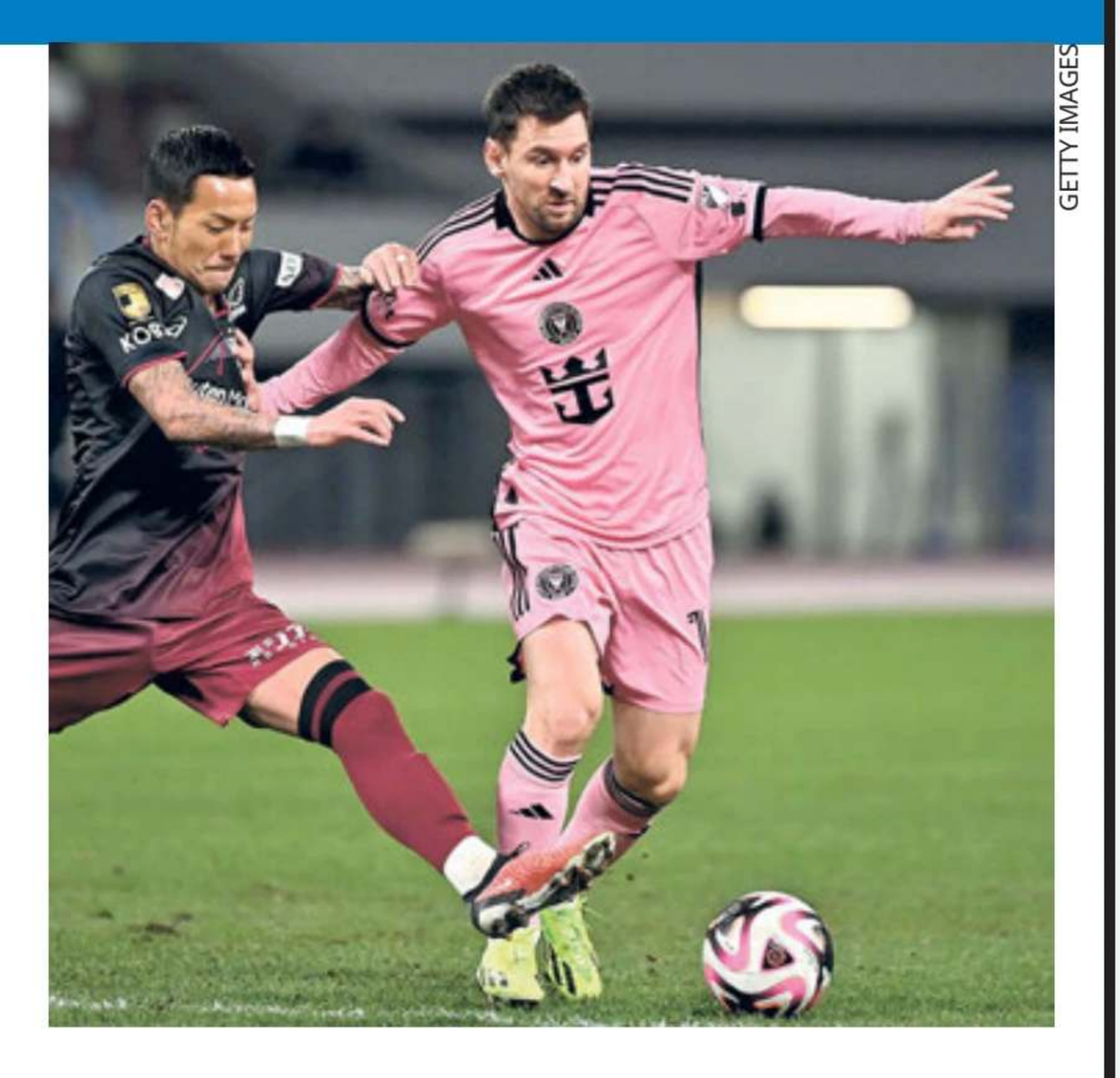
Individual brilliance

After an exceptional season with Manchester City and Spain, Rodri won the Ballon d'Or for the best men's player of the year.

Aitana Bonmati of Barcelona claimed the women's player of the year award for the second consecutive year.

Carlo Ancelotti and Emma Hayes won the men's and women's coaches of the year awards.

Vinicius Jr, despite missing out on the Ballon d'Or, was recognised with FIFA's Men's Player of the Year Award after winning La Liga and the Champions League with Real Madrid. Bonmati won the women's award,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while Ancelotti and Hayes were named the best coaches.

A tale of contrasts

For Lionel Messi, 2024 was a gratifying year. After leading Argentina to Copa America glory, he also captained Inter Miami to its first-ever MLS Supporters' Shield with a record 74 points. The victory secured his record-extending 46th career trophy.

For Cristiano Ronaldo, the wait for a Saudi Pro League title continued as Al Nassr lost to arch-rival Al Hilal, which won the league by 14 points.

However, Ronaldo achieved another milestone, scoring his 900th career goal in a Nations League match against Croatia, which Portugal won 2-1.

GETTY IMAGES

IN 2025...

Apart from the usual club football and international fixtures, the biggest event in the 2025 footballing calendar has to be the FIFA Club World Cup, where Manchester City is the defending champion. Scheduled to be played in the United States from June 14 to July 23, the tournament, which has undergone a major revamp, will now feature 32 teams, including the winners of the four previous continental championships.

Clubs under UEFA have 12 slots, CONMEBOL clubs have six, and four slots each have been allotted for CAF, CONCACAF, and AFC clubs. Host country USA will be represented by Lionel Messi's Inter Miami, which won the MLS Supporters' Shield.

There's also the impending verdict on Manchester City's Premier League rule breaches. While there has been no official confirmation, reports suggest that, if found guilty, punishments could be as harsh as City being stripped of its titles and being relegated to the second division. It remains to be seen what unfolds in this long-drawn saga.

Apart from the usual club competitions, 2025 is a significant year for women's international football. England will defend its European Championship title starting in July. The CAF Women's Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) and CONMEBOL Copa América Femenina are also scheduled for 2025.

The Men's AFCON will commence in December, while the FIFA U-20 World Cup is also scheduled to take place between September and October.

LOOK OUT FOR...

M. VEDHAN

IRFAN YADWAD

The Goa-born player **(in blue)** began his Indian top-flight journey in the 2023-24 season but remained a relatively unknown figure. However, in the ongoing 2024-25 season, he has grabbed the spotlight. Playing for Chennaiyin FC, Yadwad has registered three goals and two assists in 14 appearances. His brilliant form earned him his maiden national team call-up, and he made his India debut in an international friendly against Malaysia.

Standing at 6ft, Irfan's blistering pace and versatility in the forward line make him an asset for coaches. His speed and a penchant for making excellent runs behind the defence — all crucial qualities in an attacker. In terms of creativity, he also demonstrates an ability to deliver incisive passes.

With the Indian football team's forward line desperately craving quality players, Irfan has the potential to become the next big thing in Indian football and cement a permanent place in the Blue Tigers' starting XI.

Young wizard: Indian teenager D. Gukesh shocked the world of chess when he became the youngest world champion at the age of just 18. FIDE/MARIA EMELIANOVA

Gukesh and India dominate chess world in a golden year of success

In 2024, 18-year-old Gukesh became the youngest World Chess Champion, while India's chess stars, including Koneru Humpy, R. Vaishali, and Arjun Erigaisi, dominated global competitions and claimed Olympiad gold.

Gold rush: The women's team of Harika Dronavalli, R. Vaishali, Divya Deshmukh, Vantika Agarwal and Tania Sachdev won gold at the 2024 FIDE Chess Olympiad in Hungary. FIDE/MICHAŁ WALUSZA

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When Ding Liren moved his rook to the f2 square in the 14th and final game of the 2024 World chess championship, it might have appeared to be just another ordinary move from the reigning and 17th World champion. However, for Indian chess, it symbolised a momentous high, the likes of which had not been seen in a long, long time. Leading this remarkable wave of success was none other than a teenager. On December 12, 2024, D. Gukesh realised his dream of becoming the youngest-ever World chess champion. In a dramatic turn of events, a one-move blunder by Ding — which could have otherwise led to tie-breaks — handed the crown to Gukesh in Singapore, making him the new king of the chess world.

The 18-year-old Gukesh, who shattered Garry Kasparov's long-standing record to become the youngest World chess champion, spearheaded Indian chess in 2024, marking a historic year of unparalleled achievements.

The rise of Indian chess wasn't sudden. The seeds of this success had been sown over the years. From a shared gold in the 2020 Online Olympiad to a historic silver medal at the 2021 Women's Team Championship, a bronze medal in the Open section at the 2022 Chennai Olympiad, and R. Praggnanandhaa's run to the 2023 World Cup final — Indian chess had been steadily brewing a storm. With Vidit Gujrathi and R. Vaishali's Grand

Shining star: Arjun Erigaisi transformed his steady rise of 2023 into a disruptive breakthrough in 2024, gaining over 60 Elo points to breach the elusive 2800 rating mark.
FIDE/MICHAŁ WALUSZA

Swiss victories and five Indians qualifying for the Candidates Tournament, 2024 was the year when all the stars aligned, as the Indian chess ecosystem delivered a perfect season.

While Gukesh dominated the year, the brother-sister duo of Praggnanandhaa and Vaishali initially stole the spotlight. In January, Praggnanandhaa surpassed Viswanathan Anand to become the highest-ranked Indian in the live ratings. That same month, Vaishali, only the third Indian woman to earn the GM title after Koneru Humpy and Harika Dronavalli, was conferred the Arjuna Award, while their coach, R.B. Ramesh, received the Dronacharya Award for his years of behind-the-scenes work nurturing Chess Gurukul's talent.

Vaishali's breakthrough came with her triumph at the FIDE Grand Swiss, which earned her a spot in the prestigious Candidates Tournament. For Ramesh, this recognition felt like a validation of his years of tireless effort, marking him as one of the finest contemporary trainers in chess.

Among this wave of success, another name quietly rose to prominence — Arjun Erigaisi. The Warangal GM transformed his steady rise of 2023 into a disruptive breakthrough in 2024, gaining over 60 Elo points to breach the elusive 2800 rating mark. Arjun became only the 16th player in history and the second Indian after Anand to achieve this feat. His relentless, high-risk approach propelled him to a peak rating of 2809.3, making him World No. 2 and the holder of the 14th-highest peak rating in chess history.

Arjun's 2024 campaign was nothing short of sensational. He began with a victory at the Menorca Open in April and continued his streak with a dominant performance at the Stepan Avagyan Memorial 2024, clinching the title with a round to spare.

His stellar year included a second-place finish at the TePe Sigeman Chess Tournament and a joint-fifth spot at the Sharjah Masters Open. His incredible 10/11 performance on Board 3 earned him both individual and team gold for India at the Budapest Chess Olympiad. Arjun capped off his year with a triumph at the WR Chess Masters Cup in London, outplaying an elite field including Anand, Alireza Firouzja, Nodirbek Abdusattorov, Maxime Vachier-Lagrave, Praggnanandhaa, and Vidit.

Gukesh, meanwhile, proved his mettle not once, not twice, but on three high-stakes occasions, cementing his place among the elite in global chess.

The first of these triumphs came

Queen reigns supreme: Koneru Humpy capped off a landmark year for Indian chess by clinching the FIDE World Rapid Championship in New York. FIDE/MICHAŁ WALUSZA

in Toronto, where Gukesh battled against a formidable field in the 2024 Candidates Tournament. Competing against chess heavyweights — like 2018 World championship challenger USA's Fabiano Caruana, World No. 3 USA's Hikaru Nakamura, the youngest-ever to 2800 Elo rating, Firouzja, two-time World championship challenger Russia's Ian Nepomniachtchi, and compatriots Praggnanandhaa and Vidit — Gukesh emerged victorious, earning the right to challenge Ding for the World championship.

The finale in Toronto was a tense four-way contest for the top spot. Gukesh led by half a point heading into the last round, where he faced Nakamura. Meanwhile, Caruana squared off against Nepomniachtchi, with all three chasing Gukesh, needing wins to catch him. In the 14th round, Gukesh held Nakamura to a draw, while Caruana squandered a winning position against Nepomniachtchi. This sealed Gukesh's historic victory, making him the youngest-ever winner of the Candidates and only the second Indian after Anand to claim the prestigious title.

Gukesh's achievements didn't stop there. At the Budapest Chess Olympiad, he led India to its first-ever gold medal in the Open section, delivering a stunning 9/10 performance on Board 1. Gukesh's dominance was unparalleled, with eight wins and a tournament-best 3000+ performance rating. His back-to-back gold medals, mirroring his performance from 2022, leave little doubt about his ability to reign at the top.

A golden year

India's golden run in Budapest wasn't limited to the Open section. The Indian women's team, comprising Harika, Vaishali, Vantika Agrawal, Divya Deshmukh, and Tania Sachdev, also claimed a historic gold. While the men dominated early and secured the top spot with nearly a round to spare, the women faced a tightly contested battle before clinching victory.

Individual brilliance shone through, with Divya and Vantika earning gold medals on their respective boards. The youth of India's contingent made the triumph even more remarkable — six out of the 10 players were under 23, and the average age of the four individual gold medalists was below 20.

The 18 connection

Leon Mendonca, Pranav Venkatesh, Gukesh, and Divya all had a unique way of celebrating their 18th year, leaving an indelible mark on the chess world in 2024.

Gukesh's celebratory tweet after becoming the 18th World Chess Champion — "18th @ 18" — perfectly encapsulated the idea that age is just

a number in chess.

Among these prodigies, Mendonca had a stellar start to the year. He clinched the 2024 Tata Steel Challengers event, a tournament that featured a mix of seasoned veterans and rising talents, including Erwin l'Ami, Hans Niemann, Anton Korobov, Salem Saleh, Divya, and Harika. His triumph secured him a coveted spot in the 2025 Masters event.

Pranav's 18th year was equally remarkable. The 2022 Under-16 World Youth Olympiad gold medallist, Pranav bagged another gold, this time at the FIDE World Youth U-18 Open Rapid. He finished with an impressive 9.5/11 in the Rapid and scored 19.5/22 in the Blitz event.

He also won the Challenger section of the Chennai Grand Masters, earning himself a spot in the 2025 Masters event of the tournament.

Divya added her share of brilliance, complementing her double Olympiad gold with a victory at the 2024 World Junior Girls' Championship, held on home soil in Gandhinagar. Her exceptional performances throughout the year elevated her to India's No. 2 in women's rankings, trailing only Humpy, and brought her closer to achieving the GM title.

While the teenagers dominated headlines, a 25-year-old calmly carved his path to the elite. Aravindh Chithambaram had a phenomenal year, gaining 66.9 Elo points — the highest among all players in the world's top 30. With a live rating of 2728.9, Aravindh surged past renowned names such as Anish Giri, Richard Rapport, Daniil Dubov, and Vidit, cementing his place among chess's elite.

Veteran brilliance

And just when it seemed the year belonged entirely to prodigies, the 37-year-old Humpy reminded everyone of her enduring brilliance by clinching gold at the Women's World Rapid Championship.

India's best female chess player for over two decades, Humpy showcased her class and experience in New York, defeating Indonesia's Irine Kharisma Sukandar in the final round to secure her second World Rapid title.

IN 2025...

The Ding vs Gukesh World Championship marked the first time two Asians competed for the chess crown. With seven spots still open for the 2026 Candidates, the possibility of two Indians vying for the title is growing. Arjun, who narrowly missed qualifying via FIDE Circuit Ratings, aims for a comeback with opportunities through the 2025 World Cup, FIDE Grand Swiss, Circuit Ratings, and rating averages from August 2025 to January 2026.

The World Cup's knockout format will be a key event, with Praggnanandhaa aiming to replicate his 2023 success. However, matching or surpassing 2024's achievements will be a challenge.

Meanwhile, Magnus Carlsen's push for freestyle chess, emphasising creativity over opening theory, is gaining momentum. The 2025 Freestyle Chess Tour, including New Delhi, reflects this shift. Tensions between chess elites and FIDE continue, highlighting the evolving dynamics of the sport as traditional structures face growing dissatisfaction.

LOOK OUT FOR...

B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

PRANAV VENKATESH

Pranav Venkatesh, the 75th Grandmaster from India and 27th from Tamil Nadu, is another prodigious talent emerging from Chennai. Born on October 13 2006, the 18-year-old has already built an impressive resume in chess.

In 2024, Pranav clinched gold at the FIDE World Youth Under-18 Open Rapid, finishing with 9.5/11, and dominated the Blitz event with 19.5/22, four points ahead of his nearest rival.

Earlier, he showcased his skills at the World U-16 Youth Olympiad 2022, remaining undefeated with a score of 8.0/9 to win individual gold on Board 1, helping Team India finish fifth. In the same year, he also won the Challengers Chess Tour by defeating Raunak Sadhwani in the final.

Pranav triumphed in the Challenger section of the Chennai Grand Masters in November 2024, guaranteeing himself a spot at the Masters event of this tournament in 2025. At the 2024 World Rapid and Blitz Championships in New York, Pranav delivered a creditable performance, finishing 44th in the Rapid section (7.5/13) and 29th in the Blitz section (7.0/13) in highly competitive fields.

Currently, with a live Elo rating of 2615.0, Pranav ranks 135th globally and 10th in the junior rankings. His peak rating is 2632, which he achieved in June 2024.

Bronze medalists: The Paris bronze was India's 13th Olympic medal in hockey. It was also the first time since 1972 that India secured back-to-back Olympic medals in the sport. GETTY IMAGES

Indian hockey's revival: A year of triumph and transition

Indian hockey teams achieved success in 2024, with the men's team winning Olympic bronze and Asian Champions Trophy, while the women's team retained the Asian Champions Trophy title.

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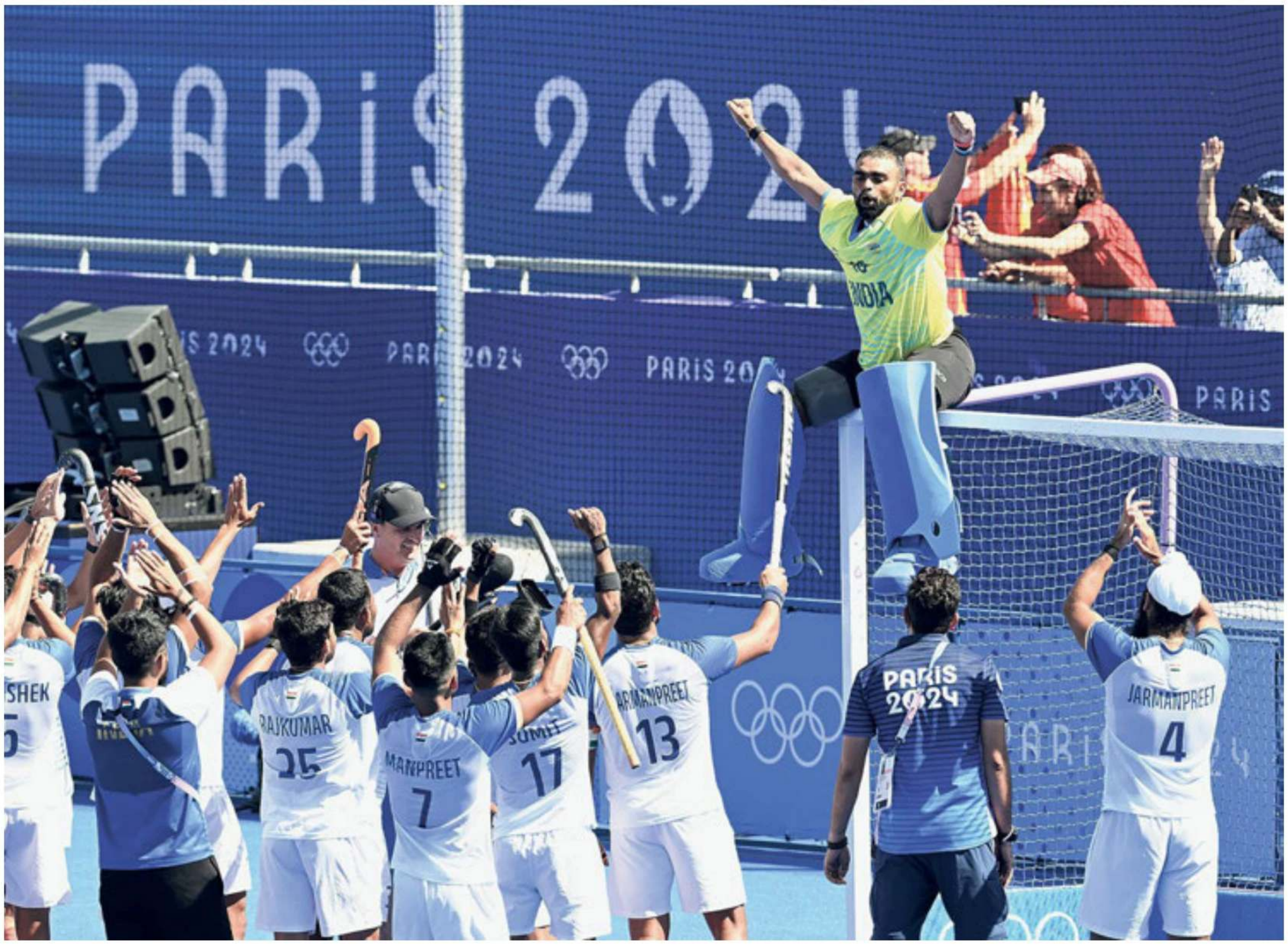
From Olympic glory to the resurgence of the Hockey India League and bidding farewell to some of the sport's greatest pillars, 2024 was an extraordinary year for Indian hockey.

After an underwhelming first half of the year, both the men's and women's teams bounced back to secure titles on the international stage.

Indian men's hockey team coach Craig Fulton's 'defend to win' philosophy was in full flow, while Harendra Singh returned for a second stint as head coach of the women's team, turning around its fortunes after a string of disappointing results under Janneke Schopman.

Despite securing a spot in the Summer Games, Craig Fulton's men had a bumpy and punishing journey towards their medal aspirations in Paris. The side ended its FIH Pro League 2023-24 campaign in a



Doyen of the sport: Hockey India has retired the jersey number of legendary goalkeeper P.R. Sreejesh, who played a key role in securing India's second consecutive Olympic bronze medal at the Paris Games. RITU RAJ KONWAR

dispiriting seventh place, recording only five wins from 16 matches, despite playing eight at home.

Olympic triumph

Indian men's hockey team goalkeeper P.R. Sreejesh's announcement that he would hang up his shirt after the Paris Games drew all eyes to the team as it began its campaign with a win against New Zealand. Growing stronger as the group-stage games progressed, the team unlocked its true potential by defeating powerhouse Australia for the first time since 1972.

A 10-man India then showed remarkable character to overcome Great Britain in a dramatic quarterfinal tie. However, all its hard work was undone by a clinical German performance in the semifinal.

All was not lost, though, as team captain Harmanpreet Singh rallied his side with two goals against Spain in the bronze medal match, breaking a four-decade-long jinx and securing back-to-back Olympic podium finishes. Harmanpreet ended the tournament as the top scorer with 10 goals, seven of which came from penalty corners.

Sreejesh received a fitting farewell to his illustrious international career, which included two Commonwealth Games silver medals, three Asian Games medals (two of them gold), a World League bronze, two Champions Trophy silvers, and two Olympic bronze medals.

Continental success

Following Schopman's resignation as head coach of the Indian women's hockey team, Harendra Singh faced a tough start in his new role during the away leg of the FIH Pro League 2023–24.

The challenges continued in January as the team failed to qualify for the Paris Games during the Olympic Qualifiers. In the Pro League, it managed only eight points from 16 matches, finishing eighth out of nine teams and narrowly avoiding relegation to the Nations Cup.

Calling it a day: Rani Rampal, who debuted as a 14-year-old at the 2008 Olympic Qualifiers in Kazan, announced her retirement on October 24, 2024, at a felicitation in New Delhi, concluding a remarkable 14-year career as the undisputed queen of Indian women's hockey. RITU RAJ KONWAR

However, ahead of the Asian Champions Trophy in November, Harendra promised fans that they would witness a "new side of Indian women's hockey."

True to his word, the team rose to the occasion, delivering an impressive performance by scoring 27 goals in a seven-match unbeaten run to retain the title.

Deepika Kumari topped the scoring charts with 11 goals, including the decisive strike in the final against China, and was deservedly named Player of the Tournament.

Meanwhile, just over a month after its Olympic success, the Indian

Trophy stays home: The Indian women registered a 1-0 win over China in the final to successfully defend the Asian Champions Trophy at the Rajgir Sports Complex in Bihar. R. V. MOORTHY

men's hockey team extended its golden run, successfully defending its Asian Champions Trophy title. Coach Craig Fulton retained 10 players and three reserves from the squad that competed in Paris, integrating promising young talent to strengthen the team further.

Harmanpreet once again led from the front, scoring seven goals. Valuable contributions came from Uttam Singh (4), Raj Kumar Pal (3), Araijeet Singh Hundal (3), and Sukhjeet Singh (3).

In goal, Krishan Pathak and Suraj Karkera admirably filled the void left by Sreejesh, conceding only five goals across the tournament while seamlessly rotating between matches.

Stalwarts bid farewell

In October, the 'queen of Indian hockey,' Rani Rampal, announced her retirement, bringing an end to an illustrious 16-year career. Since making her debut in 2008, the former captain played pivotal roles in India's Asian Games medal-winning campaigns in 2014 and 2018.

Rani was also a senior member of the history-making team that finished fourth at the Tokyo Olympics, a performance highlighted by its stunning quarterfinal victory over tournament favourite Australia.

However, Rani's journey with hockey is far from over. She will return to the field, this time as a coach, after being named the Indian coach and mentor of the Soorma Hockey Club women's team for the Hockey India League 2024–25 season.

Earlier in the year, defender and penalty corner specialist Deep Grace Ekka also bid farewell to the sport after over 12 years of being a cornerstone of the Indian team's defence.

Young guns dazzle

The Indian junior men's hockey team, led by newly appointed head coach Sreejesh, secured the bronze

medal at the Sultan of Johor Cup.

Sreejesh quickly found his footing in his new role, achieving his maiden title as the India Colts triumphed in the Men's Junior Asia Cup, defeating arch-rival Pakistan 5-3 in a thrilling final.

With this victory, India extended its record, winning the tournament for the fifth time, having previously claimed the title in 2023, 2015, 2008, and 2004.

Similarly, the Indian women's team successfully defended its Junior Asia Cup title, edging out China 3-2 in a dramatic penalty shootout in the final.

Resurgence of Hockey India League

The Hockey India League made its comeback after a seven-year hiatus, with a new women's competition also making its debut, creating fervour for the sport in the country.

Eight men's and four women's teams were officially announced, making it the first professional franchise league to have both men and women playing concurrently.

Harmanpreet and Udita Duhan were the top picks in their respective auction pools, going for Rs 78 lakh to Soorma Hockey Club and Rs 32 lakh to Shrachi Rarh Bengal Tigers, respectively.

Senior National Championships

Odisha made history by winning the 14th Hockey India Senior Men's National Championship 2024, claiming the title in its maiden final appearance. Odisha triumphed over two-time champion Haryana with a commanding 5-1 victory to secure the top honour.

In the women's competition, Hockey Haryana emerged victorious against Hockey Maharashtra in a thrilling final, clinching the title with a 3-0 win in a penalty shootout.

IN 2025...

While the full impact of the HIL 2024-25 season remains to be seen, players – particularly the younger ones – will look to leverage the competition as a testing ground to establish themselves as key contributors at the international level.

The new Olympic cycle will commence with the opening leg of the men's and women's FIH Pro League 2024-25 seasons, set to begin in February in Bhubaneswar. With qualification spots for the 2026 Hockey World Cup and the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics at stake for the league winners, both teams will aim to identify and nurture emerging talent from domestic competitions.

Rajgir will host the Men's Asia Cup 2025 from August 27 to September 7, where Craig Fulton's team will seek to reclaim the title after finishing third in the previous edition in 2022. Meanwhile, the India Colts will take centre stage as the host nation of the FIH Junior Men's World Cup 2025 in December, with the exact dates yet to be announced. On the domestic front, the 15th edition of the Senior Women's National Championship is scheduled for March, followed by the men's tournament in April.

LOOK OUT FOR...

BISWARANJAN ROUT

ARAIJEET SINGH HUNDAL

Araijeet Singh made his senior team debut early last year, following a standout performance at the 2023 Junior World Cup in Kuala Lumpur.

The talented drag flicker and forward quickly made his mark, featuring in the FIH Pro League 2023–24 season and contributing to India's title-winning campaigns at the Asian Champions Trophy 2024 and the Men's Junior Asia Cup 2024.

The 20-year-old further cemented his rising star status by becoming one of the most expensive young players at the Hockey India League auction, securing a spot with Team Gonasika for an impressive Rs 42 lakh.

With his growing reputation, Araijeet will look to solidify his place as one of the leading stars of the next generation of Indian hockey.

Shuttling between brilliance and despair

Even though 2024 was a mixed bag for Indian shuttlers, promising achievements by youngsters and para-athletes offer hope for a brighter future.

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Badminton's exclusion from the upcoming 2026 Commonwealth Games (CWG) in Glasgow, Scotland, was perhaps the biggest news from the sport last year.

This move copped flak from some of India's prominent names in badminton, given the country's impressive tally of 31 medals in the racquet sport at the CWG.

Apart from this revelation, the year witnessed retirements, heartbreaks, and athletes criticising their federations.

Before looking ahead, it is worthwhile to reflect on the major moments in badminton from the past year.

The dichotomy of the Paris Games

The Paris Olympics proved disappointing for Indian shuttlers, with the exception of Lakshya Sen **(right)**, who had an impressive run in the tournament. The men's doubles pair of Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty entered as firm favourites to win a medal but crashed out at the quarterfinal stage.

Two-time medallist PV Sindhu arrived in Paris out of form, which became evident at the La

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Shock exit: Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty entered the Paris Games as firm favourites to win a medal but crashed out at the quarterfinal stage. GETTY IMAGES

Chapelle Arena during the knockouts. After overpowering lesser opponents in the group stage, Sindhu succumbed to China's He Bingjiao in straight games.

In women's doubles, the contrasting duo of Ashwini Ponnappa — an epitome of experience and composure — and Tanisha Crasto, a symbol of youthful exuberance, failed to advance beyond the group stage.

The men's singles category, however, did spark some hope in this dull campaign.

Lakshya became the first Indian man to qualify for the semifinals at the Games.

While he fell short of securing a silver medal, his journey included defeating compatriot HS Prannoy. Unfortunately, Lakshya finished fourth after losing to Malaysia's Lee Zii Jia in the bronze-medal match.

Not all was doom and gloom for Indian shuttlers in Paris.

The para badminton contingent delivered a stellar performance, bagging five medals, including one gold, clinched by Nitesh Kumar in the men's singles SL3 category.

Other medallists included Suhas Yathiraj (silver - men's singles SL4), Thulasimathi Murugesan (silver - women's singles SU5), Manisha Ramdass (bronze - women's singles SU5), and Nithya Sre Sivan (bronze - women's singles SH6).

However, the team undoubtedly missed the presence of World Champion and reigning Paralympics gold medallist Pramod Bhagat, who was ruled out of the Paris Games after being found guilty of breaching anti-doping regulations by the Badminton World Federation (BWF).

Youngsters on the rise

While the seniors fell short of expectations, several youngsters seized the spotlight. Early in the year, Anmol Kharb played a key role in helping the Indian women's team clinch a historic gold medal at the Badminton Asia Team Championships by defeating Thailand 3–2. The 17-year-old triumphed over Pornpicha Choeikeewong in straight games in the deciding match.

In July, Priyanshu Rajawat stunned

Comeback: After a dismal Paris Games, PV Sindhu won the Syed Modi International singles crown. GETTY IMAGES

then World No. 4 Anders Antonsen of Denmark to reach the semifinals of the Canada Open — one of the biggest wins in his young career.

Soon after the Olympics, teenager Tanvi Patri claimed the U-15 girls' singles title at the Badminton Asia U-17 & U-15 Junior Championships, becoming the third Indian to achieve the feat after Samiya Imad Farooqui and Tasnim Mir in 2017 and 2019, respectively.

Meanwhile, Malvika Bansod made waves at the China Open by upsetting Paris Olympics bronze medallist Gregoria Mariska Tunjung of Indonesia in her opening match. However, her campaign ended in the quarterfinals against fourth seed Akane Yamaguchi of Japan.

Unhappy shuttlers

While there was plenty of high-octane action on the court, there was no shortage of drama off it. Numerous players — Indian and international, active and retired — voiced criticism against their respective national badminton federations.

Former Malaysian shuttler Lee Chong Wei issued a stern warning ahead of the Paris Olympics, calling for drastic changes to rescue the sport in his country.

He expressed deep frustration, admitting he felt like "giving up" on Malaysian badminton after the men's team suffered a 0–3 defeat to China at the Asia Team Championships.

South Korea's An Se-Young, fresh off her Olympic gold triumph, criticised her federation for compelling her to compete despite injuries. She further lambasted the country's training methods, labelling them outdated.

Nitesh, shortly after his Paralympics gold win, openly expressed dissatisfaction with the Badminton Association of India (BAI). He called for Indian para-badminton to come under the governance of the Paralympic Committee of India (PCI). Towards the end of 2024, former Indian shuttler Parupalli Kashyap made a bold statement, claiming badminton in India had not grown significantly and that the sport merely revolved around its superstars and financial gains.

Historic: Gayatri Gopichand and Treesa Jolly became the first Indian women's pair to clinch the doubles title at Syed Modi International. GETTY IMAGES

Usual suspects, goodbyes, and some respite

For some, 2024 was business as usual.

India celebrated three world champions at the Para World Badminton Championships: Pramod Bhagat, Suhas Yathiraj, and Krishna Nagar. The Indian contingent wrapped up the tournament with 18 medals. At the All England Open, Indonesia's Jonatan Christie secured his maiden title, while Spain's Carolina Marin clinched her second, ending a nine-year gap since her first win.

China dominated both the Thomas and Uber Cups, defeating Indonesia in the finals of both competitions to assert dominance.

The year was also an emotional one for many in the badminton world.

Tai Tzu Ying began the final season of her illustrious career with a title win at the India Open, held at New Delhi's KD Jadhav Indoor Stadium. At just 29, Japan's Kento Momota, a two-time world champion, announced his retirement from international badminton, though he plans to continue competing in Japan's domestic circuit.

India's B. Sai Praneeth, a 2019 World Championship bronze medallist, also decided to step away from international badminton. Similarly, China's He Bingjiao, after clinching silver at the Paris Olympics, announced her retirement from the sport at the highest level.

Another notable departure came from Mathias Boe, whose retirement from coaching marked the end of a significant chapter. Boe, an Olympic silver medallist and the coach of Satwik-Chirag, made his decision public after the Indian duo's quarterfinal exit at the Paris Olympics, a moment that surely left both players emotional.

But the year ended on a positive note for Indian badminton.

Satwik and Chirag returned to action after a three-month break following their Olympic disappointment. The pair reached the semifinals of the China Masters and had a mixed year overall, regaining the World No. 1 ranking at one stage and clinching titles at the French and

Well deserved: Carolina Marin clinched her second title at the All England Open. **Below:** Paris singles gold medallist An Se-Young. GETTY IMAGES

Thailand Opens.

Sindhu ended her two-year title drought by clinching the Syed Modi International singles crown. Elsewhere, the women's doubles pair of Treesa Jolly and Gayatri Gopichand — India's sole representatives at the BWF World Tour Finals — secured their maiden Super 300 title while Lakshya Sen also concluded the year on a high, winning the men's singles title at the same tournament.

IN 2025...

Whether the much-loved Premier Badminton League (PBL) will return remains uncertain. Discussions about reviving the tournament surfaced early last year, but the final decision now rests with BAI secretary Sanjay Mishra.

Moreover, BWF announced India as the host for this year's World Junior Championships. The tournament will be held in Guwahati, marking the second time India will host the event, the first instance being in Pune in 2008.

A rejuvenated Sindhu, fresh off her long-awaited title win, could potentially return to her best form. Similarly, Lakshya Sen, following his stellar run at the Olympics, may continue to shine on the global stage. The women's doubles duo of Treesa Jolly and Gayatri Gopichand could also carry forward their momentum from their impressive performances at the World Tour Finals.

With major tournaments like the All England Open and the World Championships on the calendar, the focus will be on which Indian shuttlers – or perhaps a rising foreign star – will rise to the occasion and deliver standout performances.

LOOK OUT FOR...

SANDEEP SAXENA

MALVIKA BANSOD

One Indian shuttler to keep an eye on is Malvika Bansod. The 23-year-old from Nagpur had a promising 2024 on the BWF World Tour, racking up consistent results that included a runner-up finish at the Hylo Open and a quarterfinal appearance at the China Open.

Ranked just outside the top 30 in singles at the start of 2025, Malvika has shown consistent improvement and the potential to make a breakthrough.

She has already started the year on a strong note, securing a first-round victory over local player Goh Jin Wei at the Malaysia Open.

Double delight: Manu Bhaker and Sarabjot Singh clinched bronze in the 10m air pistol mixed team event at the Paris 2024 Olympics, held at the Châteauroux shooting range. RITU RAJ KONWAR

Manu Bhaker leading the charge in Indian shooting's revival

The 22-year-old's twin Olympic medals, Paralympic successes, the emergence of 16-year-old Parth Mane and the upcoming Shooting League of India highlight a transformative year for the sport.

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In 2024, the Year of the Dragon, Manu Bhaker almost slew one.

A mere 0.1 separated internet sensation Yeji Kim and the Indian shooting star on the tally when the latter was forced to settle for a bronze medal during the 10m air pistol final of the Paris Olympics. The point difference, when scaled on the scoring ring, is about 1 mm. To put matters into perspective, that's approximately the diameter of the tip of the graphite lead of a sharp pencil!

If Yeji were to get the raw deal, maybe Manu, in imperious form on the said day, would have gone on to put the other Korean and eventual winner Oh Ye Jin to the sword as well. Indeed, she would have had her work cut out should the events have unfolded in the said manner, given Oh ended up registering an Olympic record score of 243.2. But a little wishful thinking never hurts.

Despite having pocketed India's first shooting medal in 12 years since Vijay Kumar's silver in the 25m rapid fire pistol in London, Manu, in all probability, would have thought about the same when she decided to retire for that night. The 22-year-old was yet to participate in two more events.

Only one more podium finish would have made her independent India's first athlete to win two medals in a single edition of the Olympic Games. She would also become only the second Indian female athlete to bag multiple Olympic medals after badminton ace P. V. Sindhu.

Manu sped past these milestones when help arrived in the shape of another 22-year-old in Sarabjot Singh only a day later, on July 29.

In the bronze medal match of the 10m air pistol mixed team event, Manu went up against a very familiar face — that of Oh!

Accompanying the OR holder was Asian Games silver medallist Lee Wonho. Although Sarabjot dropped 11 points in his three series, a 291 from Manu, coupled with a slew of 9s from Lee and Oh, saw South Korea sink to a 16-10 defeat and take a bite of the humble pie. This victory saw Sarabjot heave a sigh of relief, with the shooter having missed out on a place in the 10m air pistol final three days earlier after he shot one 'x' (inner-10) less than the eighth-placed Robin Walter of Germany.

Historic feat: Swapnil Kusale made history by winning India's first Olympic bronze in the 50m men's three-position event at Châteauroux, becoming Maharashtra's first individual medallist since KD Jadhav's 1952 wrestling bronze. RITU RAJ KONWAR

Going purely by count and not the colour of medals, India had already equalled its London 2012 showing. But Swapnil Kusale's chef d'oeuvre in smallbore ensured India went above and beyond.

Although the 50m 3 positions rifle shooter from Maharashtra somehow managed to squeeze through to the final with a seventh-place finish during qualifying, he consistently fired at the 10-ring in 'Standing' later to ensure another medal — a bronze.

So close yet so far

India, which had failed to open its account in Tokyo 2020, finished 14th on the shooting medal tally. China defended the top spot, finishing with

Heartbreak: Arjun Babuta narrowly missed out on a medal, finishing fourth in the men's air rifle final at the Paris Olympics, after remaining in contention for a podium spot throughout the competition.

RITU RAJ KONWAR

10 medals (five gold, two silver, and three bronze). Meanwhile, South Korea (three gold, three silver) displaced the United States of America (one gold, three silver, one bronze) from the second spot.

There were other highlights from the Olympic campaign that suggest that a true watershed moment for Indian shooting may not be far. In fact, it could be a little over three years and around 9,000 km away (the distance between Paris and Los Angeles).

Manu herself came painstakingly close to another bronze medal in the 25m sports pistol. When the curtains fell on 'Rapid' in the qualification round, only Veronika Major of Hungary had a better score than Manu. And it was Major again, who trumped the Indian in a shoot-off for bronze in the final by registering an extra hit (10.2-plus shot).

Arjun Babuta also missed out on a podium finish after shooting a rare 9.5 in his final attempt on target. Croatia's Miran Maricic, who eventually won the bronze medal, was only 0.2 ahead of Babuta until the deciding shot was fired.

Another fourth-place finish came back to haunt the Indian contingent, albeit this time in the shotgun arena. In the skeet mixed team bronze medal match, the Chinese duo of Jiang Yiting and Lyu Jianlin pipped Anant Jeet Singh Naruka and Maheshwari Chauhan 44-43, with Jianlin registering a perfect series!

The party continues in Paris...

The Olympic success was reflected in India's Paralympic campaign as well, where Avani Lekhara became the first Indian woman to win two gold medals at the Games, defending her title in the women's 10m air rifle standing SH1 shooting event with a world record score. Mona Agarwal won a bronze in the same discipline.

Pride of the nation: Avani Lekhara successfully defended her title, setting a new Paralympic record at the 2024 Paris Paralympics. This triumph makes her only the second Indian para-athlete to achieve the remarkable feat of winning multiple Paralympic gold medals.
RITU RAJ KONWAR

After Manish Narwal added a silver medal to the tally in men's 10m air pistol SH1, Rubina Francis capped off the show with a bronze medal in women's air pistol SH1.

The birth of a league

Immediately after the conclusion of the Summer Games, the National Rifle Association of India (NRAI), the body that governs shooting in India, elected Kalikesh Narayan Singh Deo as its president at the General Body meeting held at the Constitution Club in New Delhi in September.

One of Kalikesh's first steps was to announce the launch of a franchise league under the moniker Shooting League of India (SLI). The proposal has received approval from the Governing Body, and the inaugural edition is likely to take place in March 2025. But even as shooting gears up to receive a massive boost in India, thanks to the SLI, its fortunes globally took a severe beating after its exclusion from the multi-discipline rosters of the 2026 Commonwealth Games in Glasgow and the Youth Olympics in Dakar.

IN 2025...

Although the sport's exclusion from the CWG and the Youth Olympics would have the shooting fraternity largely disappointed, the onset of a new Olympic cycle only means there's plenty to look forward to in 2025.

Most shooters would be eager to work towards the World Championships in October-November in Malakasa (shotgun) and Cairo (rifle, pistol). The Asian Championship between August 16 and 30 in Shymkent, Kazakhstan, is another event that would have them keenly interested.

The Paris Olympians would return to action at the selection trials around mid-February. These trials would decide one's eligibility for making the national team ahead of the season's first World Cups in rifle, pistol, and shotgun in Buenos Aires and Lima in April.

India is also set to host a Junior World Cup this year. The ISSF, in a written communication, has mentioned two possible windows in the calendar to slot the competition between September and early November.

LOOK OUT FOR...

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PARTH MANE

Even as the country celebrates a new high in shooting at the Olympics, a 16-year-old continues to bloom far away from the media spotlight.

For Parth Mane, it didn't matter that he was going up against the likes of Paris 2024 silver medallist Victor Lindgren and reigning junior Asian champion Huang Liwanlin in the 24-shot air rifle final of the Junior World Championship in September. For that moment in Mane's 'mind palace,' all he found was himself and the 10 rings located 10 metres up ahead. Eventually, he shot 250.7 to take home his first major international title.

Parth's compatriots Ajay Malik and Abhinav Shaw finished fifth and seventh, respectively, to help the India men's team finish top and claim a second gold.

Mane also opened his Junior World Cup account with a silver medal in Granada in 2024. At the Asian Championships in Jakarta, he won a bronze medal in the junior section of the 10m air rifle.

In a league of his own: The 25-year-old Armand Duplantis retained his Olympic title in Paris - becoming the first back-to-back champion in men's pole vault since the 1950s. REUTERS

Duplantis soars, Neeraj shines: Athletics powerhouses stand out again

Armand Duplantis dominated 2024 athletics, breaking pole vault records while Neeraj Chopra continued to be India's flagbearer with an Olympic silver.

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The defining image of athletics in 2024 must surely be Armand Duplantis repeatedly breaking his pole vault world record.

The Swedish athlete dominated the spotlight in an Olympic year that saw a series of world records shattered.

Duplantis' first record-breaking vault came in April at the Xiamen Diamond League meet, where he cleared 6.24 meters.

At the Paris Olympics, he clinched the gold with an Olympic-record leap of 6.10m, celebrating with a pose inspired by Yusuf Dikec, the Turkish shooter known for his nonchalant stance earlier in the Games.

Duplantis then raised the stakes, improving his world record by a centimetre, to 6.25m, in front of an ecstatic Parisian crowd.

With his victories in Paris, the 25-year-old became the second man to win two Olympic gold medals in pole vault, following in the footsteps of America's Bob Richards (1952 and 1956).

But Duplantis wasn't finished. Just 20 days after his Paris triumph, he set a new world record of 6.26m at the Silesia Diamond League meeting.

Duplantis' 2024 achievements weren't confined to the pole vault mat. In an exhibition race in Zurich in September, he outpaced 400m hurdler Karsten Warholm over 100 meters, clocking a personal best time of 10.37 seconds.

Paris showdown

The athletics showdown at the Paris Olympics, held at the Stade de France, lived up to expectations as records tumbled amidst high-quality action.

In the men's 100m race, the USA's Noah Lyles claimed gold in a thrilling photo finish, edging out Jamaica's Kishane Thompson by just five-thousandths of a second.

Saint Lucia secured its first-ever Olympic medal through Julian Alfred,

Lone fighter: Neeraj Chopra's second consecutive Olympic medal wasn't enough to overshadow the underwhelming performance of the rest of the Indian athletics contingent. PTI

who raced to gold in the women's 100m event.

The USA's Sydney McLaughlin-Levrone successfully defended her 400m hurdles Olympic title, shattering her own world record with a time of 50.37 seconds.

Belgium's Nafissatou Thiam achieved a rare hat-trick, becoming the first woman to clinch three consecutive Olympic heptathlon crowns.

Kenya's Faith Kipyegon also completed a historic triple, becoming the first woman to secure three successive Olympic gold medals in the 1,500m.

The athletics events of the Paris Games concluded on a high note as the Netherlands' Sifan Hassan won the women's marathon, becoming the first athlete since Emil Zatopek to win medals in the 5,000m, 10,000m, and marathon in a single Olympics.

Dual glory: Sydney McLaughlin-Levrone secured two gold medals at the 2024 Paris Olympics, playing a key role in Team USA's triumph in the 4x400m relay and dominating the 400m hurdles. REUTERS

The USA finished the Paris Games as the most successful nation in athletics, with 34 medals, including 14 gold. Kenya took second place with 11 medals, four of which were gold, bolstered by its dominance in long-distance races.

Among individual athletes, the USA's Gabrielle Thomas earned the most silverware, claiming three gold medals in the women's 200m, 4x100m relay, and 4x400m relay.

The Indian angle

From an Indian perspective, the year's highlight was the Paris Olympics javelin throw final, with the country's hopes for a gold medal resting on the shoulders of reigning champion Neeraj Chopra.

However, Pakistan's Arshad Nadeem emerged as the dark horse, setting a competition record twice on his way to a historic first-ever individual Olympic gold medal for Pakistan, while Neeraj settled for silver. Neeraj's second consecutive Olympic medal wasn't enough to overshadow the underwhelming performance of the rest of the Indian athletics contingent. Only one other athlete, Avinash Sable in the men's 3,000m steeplechase, reached a final, as India endured a frustrating campaign at the Stade de France.

Outside the Olympics, long-distance runner Gulveer Singh became the talk of the town in Indian athletics.

The 26-year-old began 2024 by

Remarkable feat: Gulveer Singh set a national record in the men's 10,000m event at the Hachioji Long Distance 2024 athletics meet in Japan, emerging as the fastest runner across eight groups with a time of 27:14.88. RITU RAJ KONWAR

shattering a 16-year-old Indian national record in the men's 10,000m, finishing second in his heat at The Ten in San Juan Capistrano, California. Gulveer then broke his own national record in the men's 5,000m, clocking 13:11.82 to win gold at the World Athletics Continental Tour in Niigata, Japan.

The Uttar Pradesh native capped off the year by improving his 10,000m record again, posting 27:14.88 to win gold at the Hachioji Long Distance 2024 athletics meet in Japan.

The pattern of near-misses continued for Neeraj beyond the Olympics, with the 27-year-old finishing second in three Diamond League events — first in Doha, then in Lausanne, followed by the final in Brussels.

He ended an injury-hindered year by changing coaches, opting to train under triple Olympic champion Jan Zelezny.

IN 2025...

The World Athletics Championship, scheduled to take place in Tokyo in September, is the event to watch out for. With no other major events on the calendar, it is nearly certain that the cream of world athletics will make its presence felt in Tokyo.

Closer on the calendar is the World Indoor Championship, slated for March in Nanjing, China. The Asian nation will also host the World Athletics Relays in May, in Guangzhou.

Additionally, 2025 will feature 15 Diamond League meets, starting with Xiamen on April 26. The league will conclude with the final in Zurich in August.

India's hopes in these global events will continue to rest heavily on Neeraj, who will rely on a prolonged recovery period as he continues his hunt for the elusive 90m mark.

For a better test of their capabilities, Indian athletes will focus on the Asian Athletics Championships, set to be hosted by South Korea from May 27 to 31.

On the domestic front, Chennai is set to host the National Inter-State Senior Athletics Championships in August, while the National Federation Senior Athletics Championships will take place in Kochi in April.

LOOK OUT FOR...

K. R. DEEPAK

ANIMESH KUJUR

With a timing of 10.27 seconds, Animesh Kujur was the fastest Indian in the men's 100 metres in 2024. Animesh's personal best effort came in Spain in June. He missed the national record by just 0.04 seconds.

The 21-year-old, hailing from Odisha, also came close to claiming the national record in the 200 metres last year. At the Federation Cup in Bhubaneswar, he crossed the line in 20.62 seconds (another PB), narrowly missing out on Amlan Borgohain's national mark.

In 2025, Animesh will aim to break both records and make a global impression.

Verstappen cements legacy as one of the greatest

It was a golden 12 months of racing as drivers and teams pushed the limits of performance across various disciplines.

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In 2024, the world of motorsport witnessed several thrilling races, monumental achievements, and memorable events that captivated fans worldwide.

Formula One

The F1 fraternity endured yet another record-breaking season, during which competitiveness, on-track battles, and paddock drama scaled new heights. The year 2024 marked the return of McLaren as it ended a 26-year win-less drought to seal the Constructors' Championship.

Lando Norris and Oscar Piastri ensured the Woking-based team was a strong contender, especially after updates to its cars. With six wins, multiple podium finishes, and points every weekend, McLaren's consistency paid off as it leapfrogged Red Bull and kept Ferrari at bay to ascend to the throne.

While Ferrari witnessed a terrific comeback during the latter part of the season, Red Bull had to contend with poor performance and Sergio Perez's struggles.

However, the Milton Keynes-based side stayed afloat thanks to defending champion Max Verstappen's efforts. The Dutchman

Leading the way: Max Verstappen thwarted Lando Norris' attempt to catch him, grabbing a fourth successive drivers' crown. GETTY IMAGES

thwarted Norris' attempt to catch him, grabbing a fourth successive drivers' crown. Verstappen, after a brilliant comeback in Brazil and an anti-climactic sixth-place finish in Las Vegas, protected his position and established himself among the greatest in the sport.

While Verstappen won nine of the 24 races, seven different drivers won more than a race apiece, making it a dynamic season. Some of the major podium wins included Lando Norris' first F1 win (Miami), Ferrari's Charles Leclerc breaking his Monaco curse, and Mercedes' Lewis Hamilton standing on the top step after 945 days, securing a record ninth victory at Silverstone.

However, there were plenty of moments apart from race results that stole the spotlight. Only into the second race weekend, super-sub Oliver Bearman **(left)** was the talk of the town after filling in for a recovering Carlos Sainz in Saudi Arabia and finishing in the points on debut. The F2 driver was also part of another successful race for Haas — after Kevin Magnussen was handed a race ban — and will start his first full season with the team in 2025.

Often referred to as the 'silly season', the driver swap phenomenon continued as veteran

GETTY IMAGES

A close contest: While Verstappen won nine of the 24 races, seven different drivers won more than a race apiece, making it a dynamic season.

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Champion club: The fight for the MotoGP crown went on until the very end, with Jorge Martin (right) of Prima Pramac finishing on top, staving off a firm challenge from Ducati's Francesco Bagnaia (left). GETTY IMAGES

Daniel Ricciardo departed Racing Bulls, making way for Liam Lawson. The Kiwi garnered the attention of Red Bull at the right time, resulting in his promotion after only 11 F1 races. The finale in Abu Dhabi also saw 2025 driver Jack Doohan get his first race under his belt, replacing Alpine's Esteban Ocon, who moves to Haas.

Adrian Newey, the acclaimed British designer and the man behind much of Red Bull's success, revealed that he would be leaving the team after 18 years to start a new chapter with Aston Martin. Other significant announcements were always around the corner — erratic driver penalties, including one for swearing which Verstappen served, the reveal and subsequent changes to the 2026 F1 rules, and even the possible addition of an 11th team, Cadillac.

MotoGP

The 2024 MotoGP season featured 20 rounds of fierce on-track battles, with Jorge Martin and Francesco Bagnaia leading the way. However, the premier two-wheeler championship also saw several races cancelled, postponed, or rescheduled.

Kazakhstan — introduced in place

B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

of the Indian Grand Prix — and Argentina were excluded from the calendar, while the finale in Valencia had to be relocated to Barcelona due to floods in the region. Nevertheless, the fight for the ultimate crown went on until the very end, with Martin and his No. 89 Prima Pramac finishing on top.

The Spaniard's consistency helped him edge defending champion Bagnaia in the season-ending race. Martin also became the first rider from an independent team to win the championship in the modern MotoGP era. While Martin bid farewell to the Ducati team, he did so with a historic win before switching to Aprilia.

Indian motorsport events

India continued to improve its motorsport infrastructure and establish itself as a growing hub for the sport. The Federation of Motor Sports Clubs of India (FMSCI), the country's governing body, continued to organise multiple National Championships for two-wheelers, four-wheelers, karts, and more.

The Indian Racing Festival — featuring the Indian Racing League (IRL) and the FIA Formula 4 Indian Championship (F4IC) — went ahead with its third season. There were five rounds of racing, including India's first night street race: a 3.5-kilometre stretch around the Island Grounds, transformed into the Chennai Formula Racing Circuit **(above)**. This

19-turn track, winding through iconic landmarks like Napier Bridge and the Victoria War Memorial, saw thousands in attendance.

Indians in motorsports

It was yet another successful year for India in world motorsport, with several drivers and riders finishing on the podium and flying the flag high. Kush Maini, an Alpine Academy driver competing in his second F2 season, became the first Indian to win a sprint race, secure a pole position, and help his team (Invicta Racing) secure the Constructors' Championship.

Rally rider Aishwarya Pissay **(below)**, the first Indian to win a world motorsport title (2019 FIM Bajas World Cup), had another solid year and claimed a record-breaking third World Cup medal. Johann Emmanuel scripted history by becoming the first Indian to win all three races in the 300 SSP category of the Qatar Superbike and Superstock Championship at the Lusail International Circuit in Qatar.

In the karting division, Atiqa Mir powered through the field and won several laurels. She became the first female racer to win a race at the Rotax Challenge International Trophy at Le Mans and the first Indian to finish on the podium in the Mini U10 category in the history of the Champions of the Future Academy Program, an initiative supported by the F1 Academy.

IN 2025...

The 2025 Formula One caravan will be gearing up for fresh battles, with only 10 drivers staying with their respective teams, and five F2 graduates added to the mix. The F1 bandwagon will set off on another 24-race-long season, with Hamilton beginning a new journey with Ferrari and Lawson facing a tough challenge in Red Bull's second seat.

MotoGP has scheduled a record 22 rounds for the second successive year, with Hungary making its debut and Thailand hosting the opening round.

Martin, the new Aprilia rider, will be on a mission to defend his crown against Bagnaia, who will be joined by six-time champion Marc Marquez at Ducati Lenovo.

Among Indian motorsport athletes, Bengaluru-born Maini will drive for DAMS in his third F2 season, with eyes set on the top spot. Ace rider Pissay will compete in the upcoming Baja World Cup, aiming for a place in the prestigious Dakar Challenge.

The Indian motorsport events are expected to continue fostering talent through national championships, which have consistently identified and propelled skilled racers to the international stage.

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

LOOK OUT FOR...

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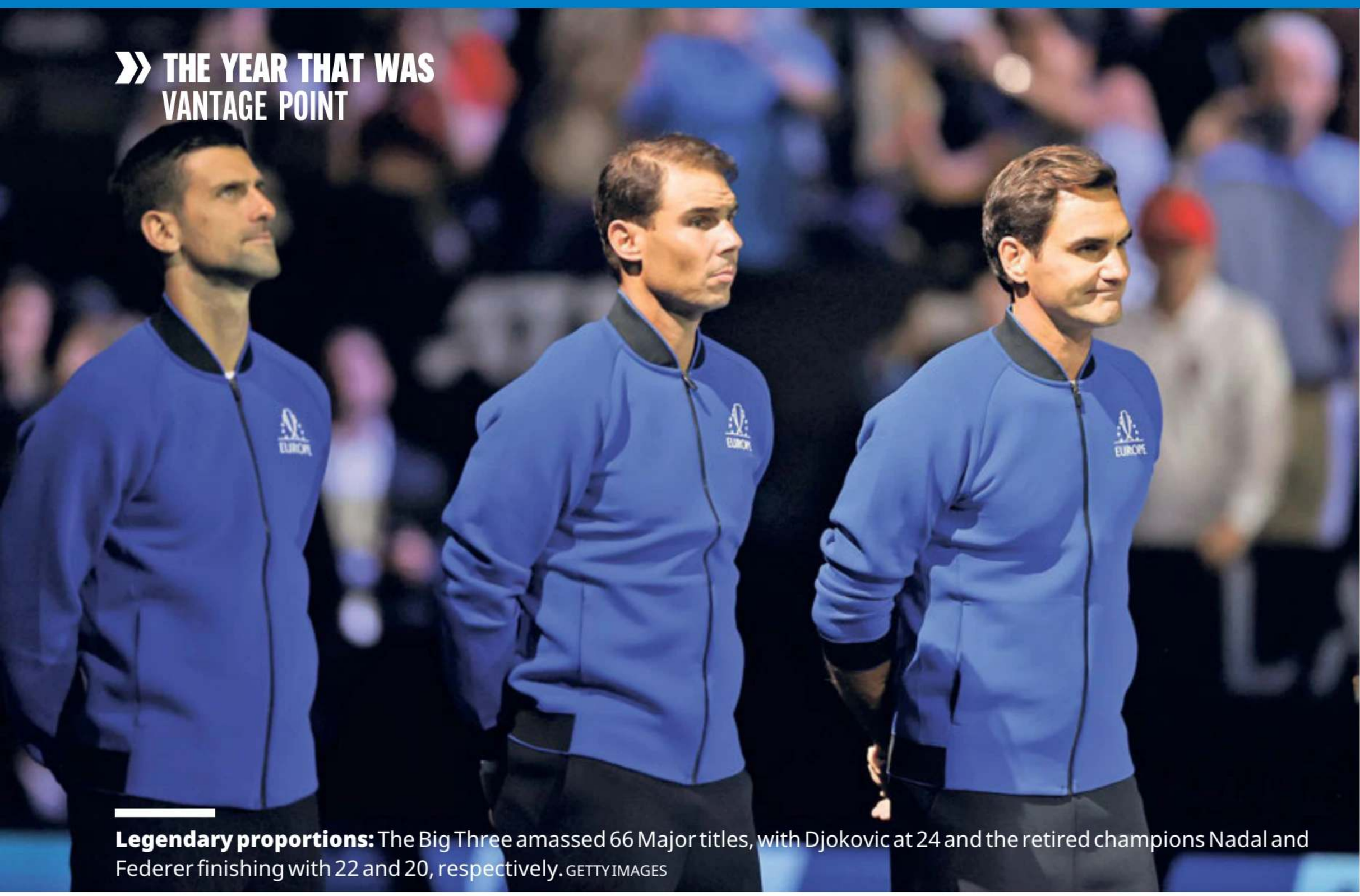
KUSH MAINI

The latest Indian driver making waves in the top tiers of motorsport, showcased his skill and talent in recent months. After becoming an Alpine Academy driver in 2023, the 24-year-old secured multiple opportunities to test Alpine's Formula 1 cars, frequently impressing with his timings. He is set to compete in his third Formula 2 season where a better outing could potentially land him a coveted seat among the big-league drivers in Formula One.



Legendary proportions: The Big Three amassed 66 Major titles, with Djokovic at 24 and the retired champions Nadal and Federer finishing with 22 and 20, respectively. GETTY IMAGES

Big Two dominance marks start of a new dawn

Two spectacular young superstars dominated men's tennis in 2024. Novak Djokovic salvaged a tough year with a prestigious title, while Rafael Nadal retired after an unforgettable career.

Paul Fein

FOR MORE STORIES

For the first time since 2002, none of the iconic Big Three — Novak Djokovic, Rafael Nadal, and Roger Federer — captured a Grand Slam singles title. This triumvirate, by far the most accomplished players in men's tennis history, amassed 66 Major titles, with Djokovic at 24 and the retired champions Nadal and Federer finishing with 22 and 20, respectively. The age-defying Serb proved he's not washed up at 37 by securing gold at the Paris Olympics.

The new Big Two — Jannik Sinner and Carlos Alcaraz — confirmed Federer's maxim, much like Steffi Graf and Monica Seles did 35 years ago when they dethroned legendary queens Martina Navratilova and Chris Evert.

Contrasting personalities and styles have already ignited the Alcaraz-Sinner rivalry. Fire vs Ice. Bold Creativity vs Relentless Power. Sinner finished the year ranked No. 1, but Alcaraz defeated him in all three encounters, most

notably in semifinal thrillers at the French Open and Indian Wells.

In 2024, the Big Two dominated the Grand Slam events as greedily as the Big Three once did. Sinner triumphed in the hard-court Majors at the Australian and US Opens, while Alcaraz prevailed on the French Open clay and Wimbledon grass.

Sinner needed every ounce of his preternatural equanimity during his breakthrough season. In the Australian Open final, Daniil Medvedev came within six points of the title, with Sinner serving at 4-all, 40-all in the third set. But the Russian choked, making two unforced forehand errors, and the momentum abruptly shifted. Serving for the championship at 5-3, 30-all in the deciding set, the 22-year-old Italian calmly unleashed two point-winning forehands to secure a 3-6, 3-6, 6-4, 6-4, 6-3 victory and his first Grand Slam title.

If Sinner's passionate fans were nervous wrecks during these crises, their hero wasn't. "I like to dance in the pressure storm," he said afterwards. "I like it because that's where most of the time I bring out my best tennis."

Sinner won eight tournaments, led Italy to its second consecutive Davis Cup title, and racked up an amazing 73-6 match record, but the stress took its toll. In November, he confided, "I've kept thinking about where we went wrong and what we could have done better. I had days where I wasn't feeling great; nights when I didn't sleep well."

Alcaraz also had his mettle tested in an up-and-down year. At the French Open, he needed a painkiller and a massage from the trainer in the fourth set of the final against Alexander Zverev but pulled off a 6-3, 2-6, 5-7, 6-1, 6-2 triumph. At 21, the Spanish sorcerer became the youngest man to win Grand Slam titles on hard, clay, and grass courts, edging Nadal, who achieved the feat at 22 during the 2009 Australian Open. The dramatic final

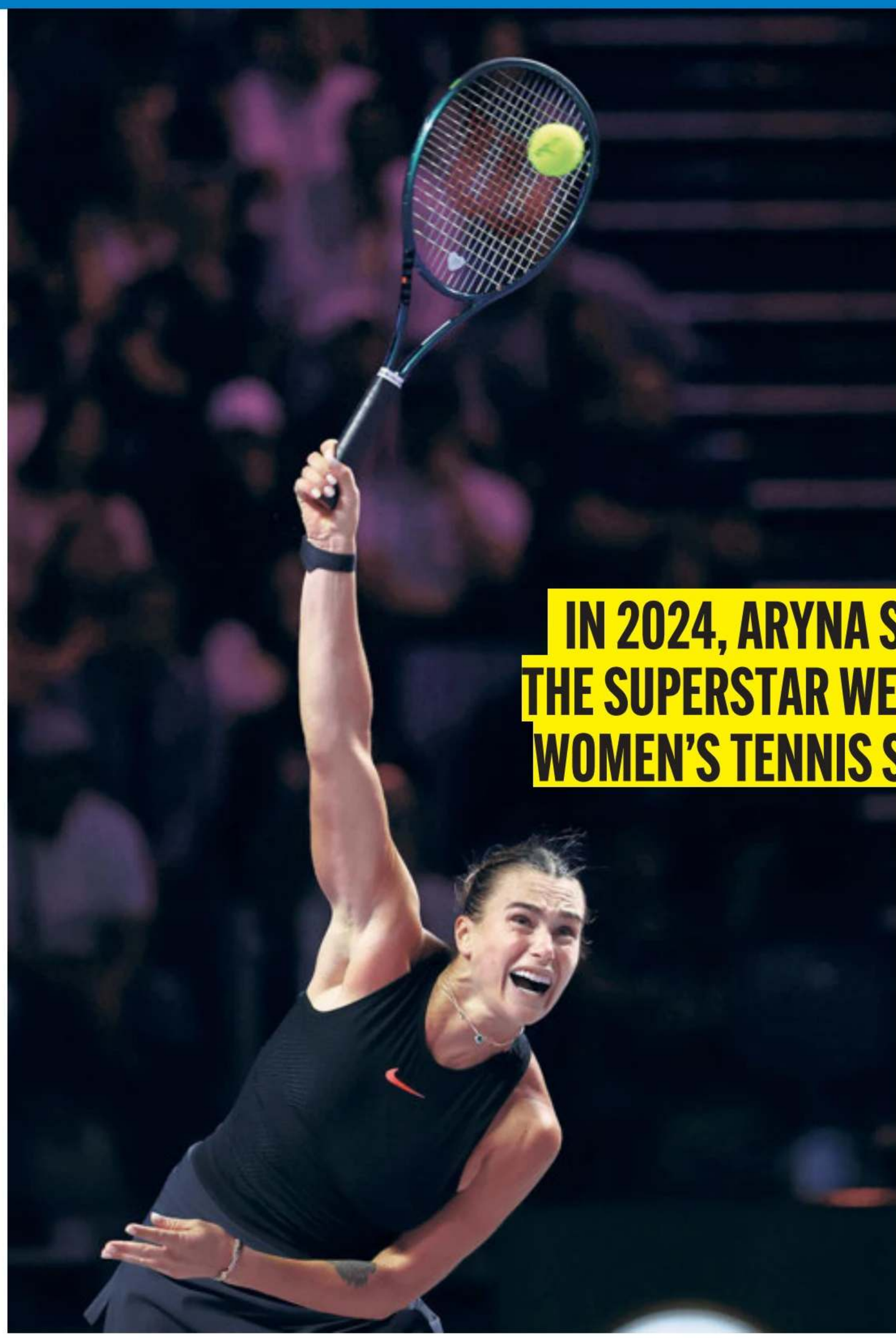
Flourishing rivalry: Sinner (above) won eight tournaments, led Italy to its second consecutive Davis Cup title, and racked up an amazing 73-6 match record. Meanwhile, Alcaraz (right) won four titles overall, including the French Open and Wimbledon, beating Sinner multiple times along the way.

GETTY IMAGES

overshadowed an even closer, higher-quality semifinal, where Alcaraz overcame Sinner 2-6, 6-3, 3-6, 6-4, 6-3. Afterwards, Alcaraz channelled his boyhood idol Nadal when he told the crowd, "You have to find the joy in suffering. That's the key."

Changing of the guard

Before the Wimbledon final, *ESPN* analyst Patrick McEnroe correctly predicted, "The changing of the guard becomes official today." How fitting that on the 150th anniversary of modern tennis — which began on grass in Victorian England — the sport's undisputed GOAT faced a



GETTY IMAGES

IN 2024, ARYNA SABALENKA LOOKED LIKE THE SUPERSTAR WE'D BEEN WAITING FOR IN WOMEN'S TENNIS SINCE SERENA WILLIAMS

worthy successor in defending champion Alcaraz. As Djokovic said during the fortnight, "History is on the line."

On June 5, Djokovic underwent surgery to repair a torn meniscus suffered at the French Open and wasn't sure he'd participate in Wimbledon until four days before the start of the revered tournament he'd captured seven times.

Alcaraz whacked winners from every conceivable angle in the first two sets and then weathered a mini comeback in the third set by Djokovic to notch a 6-2, 6-2, 7-6(4) victory in what the Spaniard rated as "probably the best match of my career."

ESPN analyst John McEnroe said, "The mental strength after he blew the 40-love lead [three championship points serving at 5-4] is one of the many reasons we love this guy."

Another reason is the graciousness Alcaraz shows towards his opponents. "I'm still believing that Novak is Superman because of what he has done in this tournament with surgery just a few weeks before the tournament began. It is amazing."

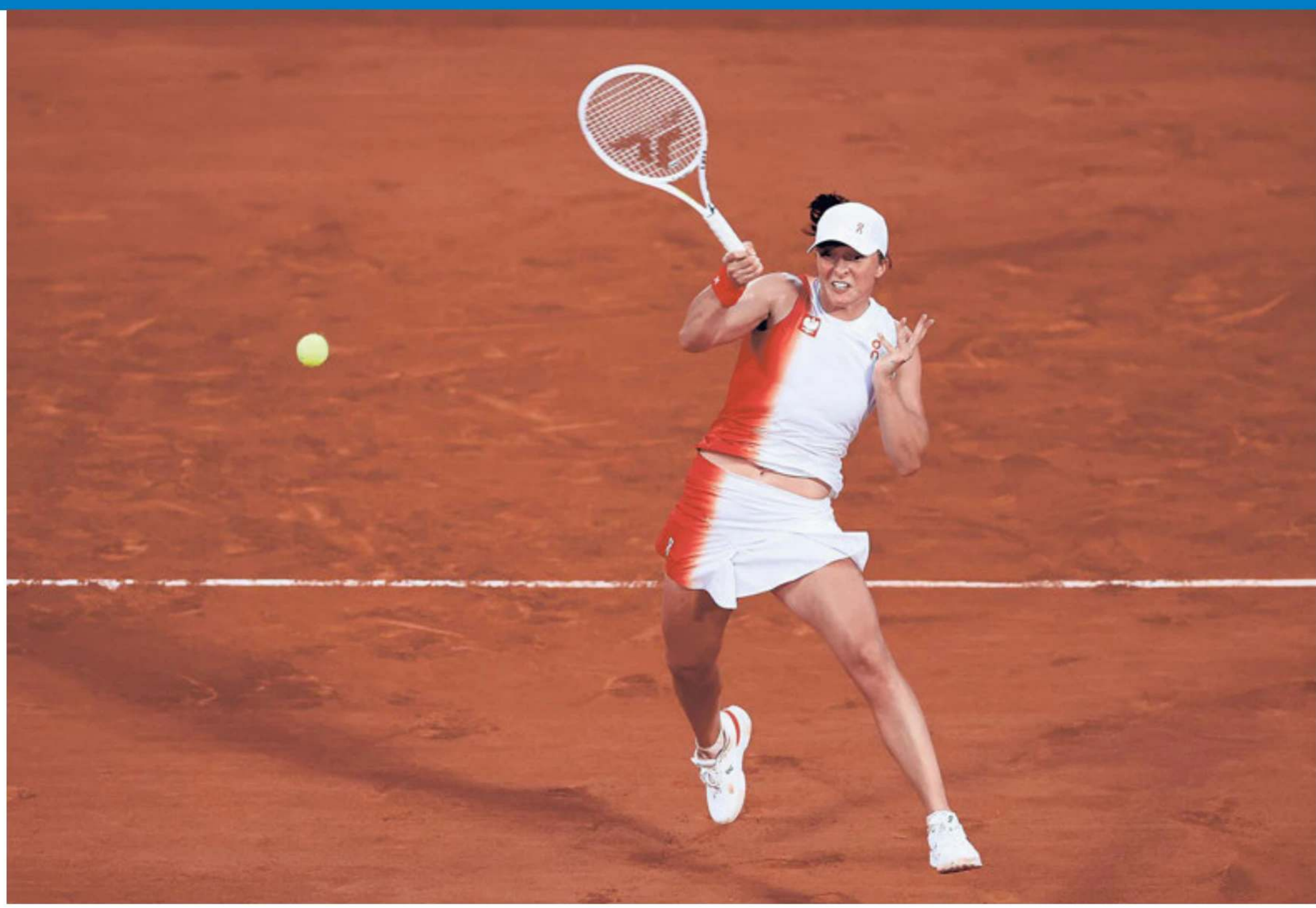
Djokovic hadn't exactly been Superman in 2024, failing to win a tournament going into the Paris Olympics. People wondered whether he could somehow use his Wimbledon momentum to capture the only prestigious title missing from his incomparable résumé?

In a nostalgic, throwback match, Novak defeated Nadal 6-1, 6-4 in the second round and outclassed Stefanos Tsitsipas 6-3, 7-6(3) and Lorenzo Musetti 6-4, 6-2 to reach the final. Then he avenged his Wimbledon loss by edging Alcaraz 7-6(3), 7-6(2) in the greatest straight-sets men's match in history.

At the US Open, both Alcaraz and Djokovic faltered. Carlos succumbed 6-1, 7-5, 6-4 to 74th-ranked Botic van de Zandschulp, a Dutchman who had contemplated retiring at the end of the year due to a lack of motivation. "You talk about a shocker," said John McEnroe. "It has to be at the top of the all-time shockers." Meanwhile, the 28th-seeded Alexei Popyrin, a late-blooming Aussie with a big serve and potent forehand, upset a sluggish Djokovic 6-4, 6-4, 2-6, 6-4 with 50 winners to reach the fourth round at a Major for the first time. Of far greater historical significance, it marked the first time since 2002 that none of the legendary Big Three won a Major.

Instead, Sinner ensured that the remaining half of the new Big Two reigned supreme. The 23-year-old Italian eliminated a quartet of Americans, plus No. 5 Daniil Medvedev — who had beaten Sinner at Wimbledon — and fast-rising Englishman Jack Draper.

Taylor Fritz defeated No. 8 Casper Ruud 3-6, 6-4, 6-3, 6-2 and No. 4 Alexander Zverev 7-6(2), 3-6, 6-4, 7-6(3) to reach his first Grand Slam



Queen of clay: By her high standards, Iga Swiatek's season was disappointing, yet she still claimed her fourth French Open and fifth Grand Slam title, winning titles in Madrid and Rome, and securing a bronze medal at the Paris Olympics, all on her favoured surface. GETTY IMAGES

semifinal where he outlasted No. 20 Frances Tiafoe, a muscle-flexing showman, 4-6, 7-5, 4-6, 6-4, 6-1 to become the first American man since Andy Roddick in 2006 to reach the US Open final. Roddick was also the last American man to win a Grand Slam singles title, way back in 2003 at Flushing Meadows.

The good-looking, soft-spoken California Kid sounded confident he could end the 21-year drought. "I have a feeling I'm going to come out and play really well and win," Fritz said. "When I play good tennis, I think that level is good enough to win."

It certainly wasn't anywhere near "good enough," as Sinner outplayed Fritz 6-3, 6-4, 7-5 to become only the fourth man in 50 years to win his first two Majors in the same calendar year. (Jimmy Connors won three Majors in 1974!)

Patrick McEnroe sounded cautiously optimistic about current American standouts Fritz, Tiafoe, and Tommy Paul. "You're close, but you're still pretty far [from winning a Major]. They still have to improve a lot of little things in their games."

McEnroe was more certain about Sinner and Alcaraz. "Are these two guys going to dominate the way the Big Three did? Yes."

Sinner went on to win 18 of his last 19 matches, losing only to Alcaraz 6-7 (6), 6-4, 7-6 (3) in a sensational Beijing final. "Alcaraz has a gear that goes to 11 [out of 10], even against Sinner," said former No. 1 Jim Courier.

In the season-ending ATP Finals, Sinner put an exclamation point on his tremendous year there, decisively defeating De Minaur, Medvedev, Ruud, and Fritz (twice).

SABALENKA DETHRONES SWIATEK IN NEW TENNIS WORLD ORDER

Ever since Serena Williams won her 23rd and final Grand Slam singles title eight years ago, no dominant women's superstar has emerged in a sport that thrives on great players and riveting rivalries.

Iga Swiatek came closest with five Majors, but her reign was mainly on clay, as her four French Open victories attested. The intense Pole, limited by a one-dimensional game, has reached the semifinals just twice in the past eight Majors. Before her, Naomi Osaka appeared to be Serena's heir apparent with a similar high-powered game. Alas, the Japanese player's success was limited to four Major titles on hard courts. Following a hiatus during which she gave birth to a daughter in July 2023, she has yet to regain her championship form. Australian Ash Barty, the best pure athlete since Justine Henin, captured a Major on each surface, only to retire abruptly after winning her home Slam three years ago.

In 2024, Aryna Sabalenka increasingly looked like the superstar

Ending on a high: Coco Gauff, who split with Brad Gilbert and hired Matt Daley after the US Open, salvaged her otherwise disappointing year at the WTA Finals. GETTY IMAGES

we'd been waiting for — and the one her late father Sergey, a former ice hockey player, had predicted she would become. Sabalenka recalled, "He told me then that I had everything I needed to achieve this goal: I just had to learn myself better, learn how to control my emotions, and one day I'd be world number one. It was like our dream."

Their dream came true on September 11, 2023, though Sabalenka finished the year ranked No. 2 behind Swiatek. Indeed, the lean, 5'11", broad-shouldered Belarusian has everything: an ideal tennis physique, superb strokes and footwork, athleticism, and newly added finesse to complement her tremendous power.

However, doubts persisted about her mental toughness even after Sabalenka overcame Elena Rybakina in the 2023 Australian Open final for her first Grand Slam title. She subsequently suffered disappointing three-set upset losses to Karolina Muchova at Roland Garros, Ons Jabeur at Wimbledon, and, most dishearteningly, Coco Gauff in the memorable US Open final.

At the 2024 Australian Open, a more relaxed and confident Sabalenka pummeled No. 9 seed Barbora Krejcikova 6-2, 6-3 in the quarterfinals and then spoke about a score to settle with rising star Gauff. "I love it. After [the 2023] US Open, I really wanted that revenge," Sabalenka said. "It's always great battles against Coco, with really great fights. I'm happy to play her, and I'm super excited to play that semifinal."

Highly animated but far less agitated this season, the new Sabalenka relentlessly attacked Gauff's second serve, claimed the critical first-set tiebreak 7–2, and prevailed 7-6 (2), 6-4.

Major upsets decimated the top seeds in the other half of the draw. Swiatek, who struggles against power players, was ousted by Linda Noskova, a 19-year-old Czech, 3-6, 6-3, 6-4. Russia's unheralded Anna Blinkova outlasted No. 3 seed and 2022 Wimbledon champion Elena Rybakina 6-4, 4-6, 7-6 (20). The fluctuating tiebreak — in which Blinkova fended off six match points before prevailing on her tenth — prompted *ESPN* analyst Pam Shriver to remark, "You don't see 16 match points, maybe once in a lifetime."

The carnage opened up the draw for No. 12 Zheng Qinwen to reach the final without facing a seeded player. The tournament invited China's Li Na, Zheng's childhood idol, to honour her on the 10th anniversary of her historic title there, and she surprised the delighted Zheng in the clubhouse lounge. The Hall of Famer and the blossoming star hugged and chatted, with Li advising her to "keep it simple and not overthink."

Neither that good advice nor vocal front-row Chinese spectators in red hats were enough to help Zheng dethrone Sabalenka in the final. Both finalists played "first-strike" power tennis, though Sabalenka did it much better. Opponents could no longer rely on her double faults — once her bête noire — as Sabalenka committed just 10 in her first six matches and none in the final. Summing up Sabalenka's 6–3, 6–2 masterclass, *ESPN* analyst Mary Joe Fernandez commented, "There are no holes in Sabalenka's game. This is as dominant a performance as you'll see in a Grand Slam final."

Zheng Qinwen won the Paris Olympics gold medal at Roland Garros after upsetting the Queen of Clay, Iga Swiatek, in a shocking semifinal.

Czechmate by Krejcikova

No one predicted that two long shots would make the Wimbledon final — least of all themselves.

Jasmine Paolini, the Cinderella story of the French Open but dismissed here with 50-1 odds, had never won a main-draw match on Wimbledon grass. "Two Grand Slam finals in a row was crazy to believe, I think, no?" admitted the little Italian, who was overpowered by Swiatek 6-2, 6-1 in the French Open final.

Barbora Krejcikova, dismissed at 100-1 odds despite being the 2021 Roland Garros champion, had an unimpressive 13-11 career record on grass and an abysmal 7-9 match record leading into Wimbledon, due to illness, a back injury, and rust. Yet the low-key Czech reignited her singles career — she had amassed seven doubles and three mixed doubles Slam titles — at the world's most prestigious tennis tournament.

Known for her savvy tactics and versatility, the resourceful Krejcikova defused powerful Elena Rybakina 3-6, 6-3, 6-4 and exclaimed in surprise, "I'm in the finals. Wow!" After recovering from a mid-match collapse to defeat Paolini 6-2, 2-6, 6-4, the jubilant champion exulted, "Nobody believes that I got to the final. And I think nobody's going to believe that I won Wimbledon. I still cannot believe it. It's unbelievable."

Sabalenka, seeded third at Wimbledon, withdrew when the rotator cuff injury she sustained in Berlin made serving difficult. Swiatek suffered a disappointing 3-6, 6-1, 6-2 loss to No. 35 Yulia Putintseva, while Gauff was eliminated by the steadily improving 19th-seeded American, Emma Navarro, 6-4, 6-3.

Entering the Paris Olympics, Swiatek, the firm favourite, had not lost on the Roland Garros clay since 2021, and Zheng had never beaten Swiatek in six career encounters. Driven by "sheer determination," the Chinese star achieved an impressive 6-2, 7-5 upset in the semifinals.

Surprise package: Barbora Krejcikova, the 2021 Roland Garros champion, won Wimbledon against all odds. GETTY IMAGES

Zheng then seized the gold medal with an almost anti-climactic 6-2, 6-3 victory over 21st-ranked Donna Vekic of Croatia. "To be honest, I always dreamed of one day joining the likes of Yao, Liu, and Li, and being as successful and influential as they were as athletes," an ecstatic Zheng, the first Chinese and Asian singles gold medallist, told China Daily. "I've been working so hard toward that goal, and [have] finally proved that I have what it takes to become the new leader of Chinese tennis. ... I feel so privileged and honoured."

Maintaining control of her volatile emotions has always been key to Sabalenka controlling her high-velocity shots. That was of paramount importance at the US Open, where she had endured heartbreaking three-set losses over the previous three years to Gauff, Swiatek, and Leylah Fernandez.

Everything went right for the Belarusian Basher at the US Open. She overwhelmed Zheng 6-1, 6-2 with a spectacular quarterfinal display of power tennis. Sabalenka exorcised her semifinal demons, beating Navarro 6-3, 7-6(2). In the on-court interview, Shriver asked Sabalenka if she was thinking about last year's meltdown in the final. Sabalenka answered honestly, "I was thinking a lot." And defiantly, "Not this time."

Smacking 40 winners and playing the big points better, Sabalenka edged Jessica Pegula 7-5, 7-5 for her first US Open and third Grand Slam crown. During the trophy ceremony, the thoroughly impressed Pegula said, "She's super powerful. She goes for her shots."

A year after smashing two rackets in the locker room following her loss to Gauff, Sabalenka hugged and kissed her silver trophy and told *ESPN*, "I think I'm the happiest person in the world now."

Gauff, who split with Brad Gilbert and hired Matt Daley after the US Open, salvaged her otherwise disappointing year at the WTA Finals. With a more consistent serve, she outplayed Pegula 6-3, 6-2, Świątek 6-3, 6-4, and Sabalenka 7-6 (4), 6-3 before outlasting Zheng 3-6, 6-4, 7-6 (2) in the thrilling final. Gauff became the first American to win the tournament since Serena in 2014.

Strong showing: Sreeja Akula won singles titles in both the WTT Feeder and Contender series and also defeated World No. 2 Chinese player Wang Yidi during the ITTF World Team Championships. GETTY IMAGES

In the spotlight

While the pre-eminent Indian sports brought out the most celebrated moments in the past year, the lesser-followed ones unveiled jubilation and despair in equal measure from the sporting community.

Fight for the ages: Jake Paul vs Mike Tyson at the AT&T Stadium in Texas, USA, was one of the biggest highlights of 2024. Even though the veteran started strong, the much younger and fitter Paul ultimately won by unamimous decision. GETTY IMAGES

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The news of table tennis being excluded from the Glasgow 2026 Commonwealth Games struck a sour note, but the paddlers delivered several inspiring performances over the past year.

Sreeja Akula had her best year on the international circuit yet, winning singles titles in both the WTT Feeder and Contender series. She also registered an impressive win over World No. 2 Chinese player Wang Yidi during the ITTF World Team Championships.

Ayhika Mukherjee also braved the odds to beat World Number 1 Sun Yingsha, but the Chinese team proved too strong over the entire tie. Ayhika and Sutirtha Mukherjee rounded off a successful year with bronze medals in the women's doubles and team events at the ATTU Asian Championships.

Italy's Massimo Costantini returned for a third spell as head coach of the national team as the men's and women's teams waded through their maiden Olympic campaign. The women's team of Sreeja, Manika Batra, and Archana Kamath made it to the quarterfinal stage, while the men's team lost in the opening round.

There was a fair share of farewell announcements too. Legendary Chinese paddler Ma Long called time on his Olympic career after helping his team secure the top spot in the

Shocking twist: In Paris, Vinesh Phogat was disqualified from the women's 50kg wrestling final for exceeding the weight limit by 100 grams, despite defeating reigning Olympic champion Yui Susaki en route to the final. GETTY IMAGES

men's event, sealing his sixth gold medal. Archana announced a shock retirement from the sport after the Games, opting to pursue higher education instead.

There was more anguish in store for fans of kabaddi. The International Kabaddi Federation banned India from participating in international events due to the lack of clarity in the running of the Amateur Kabaddi Federation of India (AKFI).

The court-appointed administrator running the AKFI for the past five years has yet to delegate powers back to the newly elected body of officials. The confusion surrounding the apex body meant India missed out on the first-ever World Beach Kabaddi Championship in Iran.

The event proved to be a resounding success for the host nation, which emerged as the champion after defeating Pakistan 41-34 in the final. Iraq and Kenya were awarded joint bronze medals.

Despite the unfortunate circumstances surrounding the international arena, the Pro Kabaddi League flourished, producing two first-time winners in two editions — Puneri Paltan and Haryana Steelers.

The 70th Senior National Men's Kabaddi Championship was held in Ahmednagar, Maharashtra, where Railways' four-year title run was brought to a halt by Haryana.

There were many high-profile bouts in the world of boxing, none more eagerly anticipated than the clash between former heavyweight champion Mike Tyson and celebrity Jake Paul in Texas.

The 58-year-old came out strong in the initial rounds but eventually faded in his first bout in 20 years as Paul sealed a convincing win. Riyadh hosted another marquee event of the year as Oleksandr Usyk retained his WBA (Super), WBO, and WBC world heavyweight titles after a unanimous decision win over Tyson Fury.

There was a tinge of desi flavour ahead of the Tyson-Paul showdown as Neeraj Goyat defeated Whindersson Nunes in a super-middleweight undercard bout. Neeraj, who was the first Indian boxer to make the WBC rankings, dominated the fight to secure a unanimous decision victory with a 60-54 scoreline.

The world of amateur boxing wasn't as fruitful from an Indian standpoint, as none of the pugilists managed to win a medal at the Paris 2024 Olympics. Lovlina Borgohain and Nishant Dev were one step away from a podium finish, losing in the quarterfinal stage. Nikhat Zareen, Preeti Pawar, and Amit Panghal suffered defeats in the round of 16.

The Summer Games were also mired in a gender controversy after calls were made to disqualify Algeria's Imane Khelif and Taiwan's Lin Yu-Ting on the grounds that they supposedly failed a gender test. The International

Olympic Committee (IOC) adhered to the rule book, allowing the athletes to compete as they complied with the required criteria. Khelif eventually went on to win gold in the welterweight category, while Lin claimed gold in the featherweight grouping.

During the year, India also decided to switch allegiance from the International Boxing Association (IBA) to World Boxing, following the former's tussle with the IOC.

Wrestling in India has been embroiled in a continuous spate of controversies over the past couple of years, and 2024 was no different. The National Wrestling Championships returned amid utter confusion — one event was held in Pune by some WFI officials, while another was conducted in Jaipur by the IOA-appointed ad hoc committee.

Double World Championship bronze medallist Vinesh Phogat competed in two weight categories in the Asian Olympic Games qualifier held in Patiala, emerging the winner in the lighter division. Bajrang Punia did not make it to the quadrennial event and was placed under suspension by the National Anti-Doping Agency (NADA) and United World Wrestling for his 'refusal' to provide a urine sample.

Aman Sehrawat won India's only wrestling medal at Paris 2024 in the 57kg category, becoming India's youngest Olympic medallist in the process. However, the wrestling competition in Paris was clouded by the unfortunate circumstances surrounding Vinesh.

The 30-year-old pulled off a major upset against reigning Olympic champion Yui Susaki of Japan on her way to becoming the first Indian woman wrestler to qualify for a final, securing at least a silver medal. But fate had other plans.

During the weigh-in ahead of the final, Vinesh was found to be 100 grams over the prescribed weight, disqualifying her from the competition. An appeal to the Court of Arbitration for Sport also did not bear fruit. The excruciating circumstances had a profound impact on the wrestler, leading her to announce her retirement from the sport at the end of the Games. She went on to contest the Assembly Elections in Haryana, beginning her political career with a victory in the Julana constituency.

It was a case of too close yet too far for Mirabai Chanu in Paris, as the veteran weightlifter finished an agonising fourth in the women's 49kg event. The Tokyo 2020 silver medallist ended her attempts just one kilogram short of bronze medallist Surodchana Khambao of Thailand. India's Preetismita Bhoi and Bedabrat Bharali were declared the best lifters at the 2024 IWF Youth World Weightlifting Championships in Lima. Preetismita broke the world record in the women's 40kg clean & jerk, while Bharali won gold in the 67kg category. In all, India won six gold, four silver, and eight bronze medals.

The inclusion of squash in the roster for the Los Angeles Olympics in 2028 was the highlight of the racquet sport in 2024. Veteran Saurav

Ascent against dissent: Despite calls to disqualify Algeria's Imane Khelif (in pic) and Taiwan's Lin Yu-Ting on the grounds that they supposedly failed a gender test, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) allowed them to compete. Both went on to win golds.

GETTY IMAGES

Small margins: Mirabai Chanu finished an agonising fourth in the women's 49kg event in Paris. The Tokyo 2020 silver medallist ended her attempts just one kilogram short of bronze medallist Surodchana Khambao of Thailand.
GETTY IMAGES

Ghoshal announced his retirement from professional squash in April after a 22-year career.

Anahat Singh and Abhay Singh had breakthrough seasons in 2024. The 16-year-old Anahat won nine PSA Challenger titles during the year, while Abhay clinched his tenth PSA title with the Tuanku Muhriz Trophy in Kuala Lumpur.

In the world of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA), India's Puja Tomar became the first-ever Indian fighter to register a win in the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) after a split-decision victory over Brazil's Rayanne dos Santos in Louisville.

Dricus Du Plessis had a year to remember, claiming the middleweight title with a split-decision win over Sean Strickland in January. The South African retained the title in August, forcing Israel Adesanya into submission with a chokehold.

IN 2025...

The Indian sports bandwagon will carry over from the frenetic Olympic year to a relatively low-key year in 2025. The Indian paddlers will be in action in the WTT Feeder and Contender series during the early part of the year, leading up to the all-important World Table Tennis Championships in Doha in May.

With the Pro Kabaddi League concluding before the start of the new year, kabaddi enthusiasts will be looking forward to the Senior Nationals for the first major kabaddi action of the year. The impasse between the AKFI and the world body must be resolved for India to participate in the home World Cup later in the year. Bajrang's suspension and Vinesh's retirement leave Indian wrestling in need of new heroes, and the younger generation will aim to fill the void with strong performances at the upcoming Asian and World Championships.

The standoff between the IOC and the two world bodies – IBA and World Boxing – puts boxing in a state of limbo ahead of Los Angeles 2028. Indian pugilists will be hoping for a quick resolution and clarity on the LA roster, as well as seeking to put behind their Olympic medal drought by bagging a few at the men's and women's World Championships this year. Anshul Jubli will aim for his first UFC win when he faces Quillan Salkilld in a lightweight bout, while Puja Tomar will look to build on a positive 2024 as she prepares to take on Shauna Bannon in a strawweight fight.

LOOK OUT FOR

DIYA CHITALE

The 21-year-old opened her new year with a 3-0 win over senior and higher-ranked Ayhika Mukherjee in the qualifiers of the WTT Star Contender in Doha to make the main draw. This could very well be the harbinger of good things for the young paddler. Last year, she even defeated Manika Batra in the Ultimate Table Tennis, showing that she's not afraid to take on experienced players. As of January 7, Diya is ranked 122nd in the world. 2025 may very well be the season she breaks into the top 100, or beyond.

M. VEDHAN

PKL

AYAN LOHCHAB

Ayan Lohchab made a sensational Pro Kabaddi League (PKL) debut in the recently concluded Season 11, earning the coveted New Young Player award while playing for runner-up Patna Pirates.

This youngster showcased exceptional composure and skill throughout the season, amassing 184 raid points in 25 matches. Ayan dominated the mat, leaving defenders bewildered with his speed, agility, and precision. He recorded seven Super 10s while contributing nine valuable tackle points to his team's defence.

Ayan's fearless spirit and impressive adaptability have established him as a rising star in the world of Kabaddi.

PUJA TOMAR

2024 was an eventful year for Puja Tomar. She became one of the few Indians to secure a UFC contract and made history as the first from the country to win a bout in the promotion. She beat Rayanne dos Santos in her maiden bout via split decision. In the first quarter of 2025, the UP-born fighter will take on Ireland's Shauna Bannon. Puja's powerful jabs and strong ground-and-pound technique will help mitigate her reach disadvantage, giving her an excellent opportunity to register consecutive wins in the UFC.

GETTY IMAGES

MANU BHAKER EXORCISED HER TOKYO DEMONS en route to a historic double bronze at the Paris Olympics. From a 19-year-old in Tokyo who struggled to make the finals in all three of her events, Manu's journey in Paris was a testament to her resilience and relentless pursuit of excellence. The 22-year-old Manu became independent India's first athlete to win two medals in a single edition of the Olympics with her bronze-winning show in the 10m air pistol individual and 10m air pistol mixed team events. RITU RAJ KONWAR

THIS STRIKING IMAGE CAPTURES THE DRAMATIC MOMENT when Tanzanian driver Yasin Nasser loses control of his Ford Fiesta Mk II, sending it into a roll during the World Rally Championship Safari Rally in Kenya. Although it's a moment Nasser would likely prefer to forget, both he and co-driver Ali Katumba emerged unharmed, despite the car being completely destroyed. AFP

US SPRINT STAR NOAH LYLES CLINCHED THE OLYMPIC 100M TITLE by a razor-thin margin of five-thousandths of a second, edging out Jamaica's Kishane Thompson in a dramatic photo finish at Paris 2024. The showman Lyles powered ahead in the second half of the race, securing victory in a personal best of 9.79 seconds. Lyles had come into the race as the reigning world champion in both the 100m and 200m. REUTERS

NOVAK DJOKOVIC EMBRACED HIS DAUGHTER TARA after defeating Spain's Carlos Alcaraz in the men's singles final at the 2024 Summer Olympics in Paris. The Serbian star, with a record 24 Grand Slam titles, clinched his first Olympic gold at his fifth attempt, beating Alcaraz 7-6 (7-3), 7-6 (7-2) in front of a packed Roland Garros crowd. AP

BRAZIL'S GABRIEL MEDINA EMERGED TRIUMPHANTLY FROM A MASSIVE BARREL WAVE IN THE MEN'S SURFING round three at the Paris Olympic Games, held at Teahupo'o on the French Polynesian Island of Tahiti. His stunning performance earned him a record-breaking single-wave score of 9.9. AFP

P.R. SREEJESH'S NAME WILL FOREVER BE ETCHED IN HISTORY for helping the Indian men's hockey team end a 40-year Olympic medal drought. The goalkeeper's heroics were pivotal, first at the Tokyo Games and then in Paris, where he capped off his illustrious career with another stellar performance before bidding farewell to the sport. PTI

IN THE LAST OVER OF THE T20 WORLD CUP FINAL, Suryakumar Yadav produced a breathtaking, juggling catch on the boundary to dismiss South Africa's David Miller. Miller (21 off 17) thought he had sent Hardik Pandya's full toss sailing for six. However, Suryakumar, with remarkable agility, caught the ball at long-off, threw it back into play as his momentum carried him over the boundary rope, then, after returning to the field, caught it again — a moment as astonishing as it was crucial. K. R. DEEPAK

VINESH PHOGAT WAS DETERMINATION PERSONIFIED as she stunned Japan's World and Olympic champion Yui Susaki 3-2 in her opening bout, advancing to the semifinals at the Paris Olympics. This marked Yui's first loss in an international competition, ending an 82-match unbeaten streak. With this victory, the 29-year-old Vinesh also became the first Indian woman wrestler to reach an Olympic final. However, Vinesh missed out on an Olympic medal after failing the weigh-in for the 50kg final event. GETTY IMAGES

BAYER LEVERKUSEN SUPPORTERS FLOODED THE PITCH at full-time as it was confirmed that the club had won its first-ever German Bundesliga title. On a cool April evening, Bayer Leverkusen defeated Werder Bremen 5-0 to become Bundesliga champion for the first time in its 120-year history. In doing so, it also broke Bayern Munich's 11-year stranglehold on the league. REUTERS

HISTORY WAS MADE ON THE SMALL ISLAND OF SENTOSA IN SINGAPORE as D. Gukesh became the youngest world chess champion ever after defeating Ding Liren of China in the final game of their match. The 18-year-old from Chennai broke the record held by Russia's Garry Kasparov for nearly four decades. FIDE/ENG CHIN AN

YOUTUBER-TURNED-BOXER JAKE PAUL DEALT A STUNNING BLOW to the legacy of two-time heavyweight champion Mike Tyson (L), securing a points victory in a highly anticipated bout. The underwhelming contest, watched by 70,000 fans in Texas and millions more on Netflix, left a lasting blemish on Tyson's storied boxing career. AP

RAFAEL NADAL SEEN DURING THE OPENING CEREMONY OF THE PARIS 2024 OLYMPIC GAMES IN PARIS. Few months later, Nadal retired as the second-most successful men's singles player of all time, behind only long-time rival Novak Djokovic. The 22-time Grand Slam champion's 23-year career came to an end in Malaga after Spain was beaten by the Netherlands in the Davis Cup quarterfinals. GETTY IMAGES

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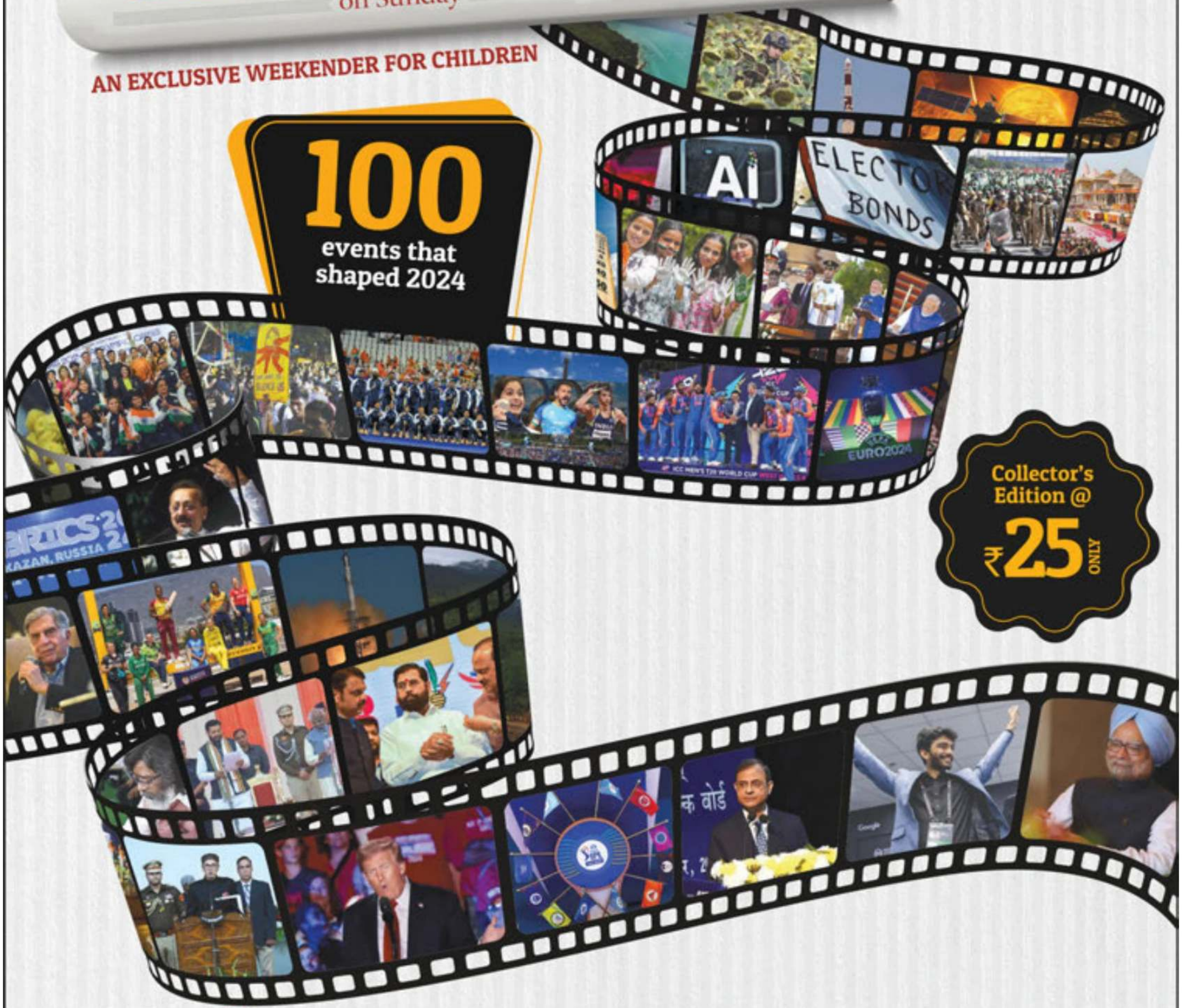

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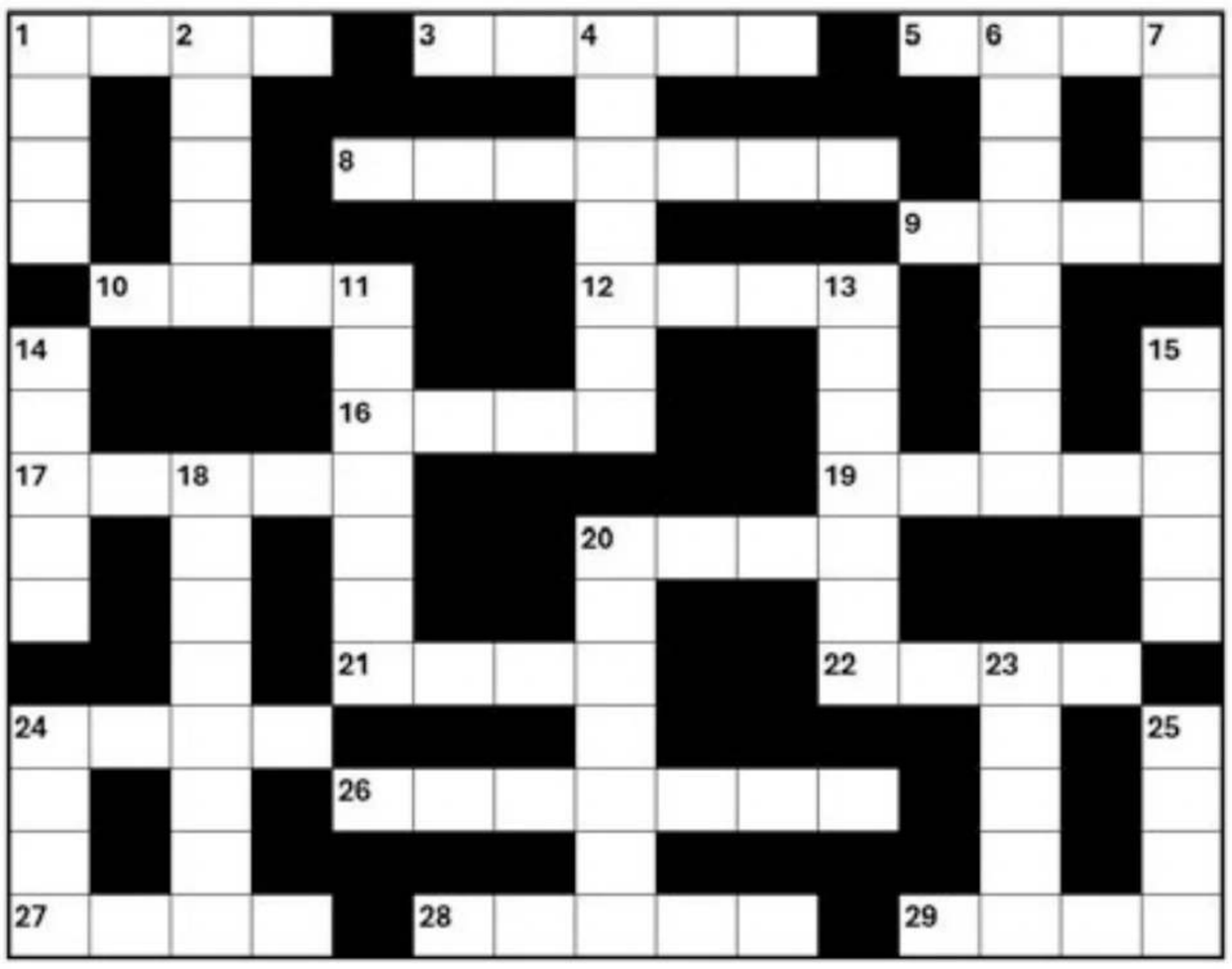
CROSSWORD
N. SOORYA PRAKASH



SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

ACROSS

1 Who is the only player from Zimbabwe to score a hundred in T20 Internationals in 2024? (4)

3 & 25 Who replaced Harshit Rana in the Indian team and played the third and fourth Tests in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy? (5,4)

5 & Down 25 Who became the first woman footballer from India to score 50 International goals during the SAFF Championship held in October 2024? (4,4)

8 Who not only scored a hundred but also took five wickets in an innings in the first Test between Zimbabwe and Afghanistan? (7)

9 Identify this Dutch footballer, who is playing for Liverpool in the Premier League. He also won the Golden Boot in EURO 2024? (4)

10 Which reigning World champion lost to Gukesh in the World chess championship in December 2024? (4)

12 Who is the current president of the International Olympic Committee? (4)

16 Who is the CEO of FIDE? (4)

17 & 29 Who recently scored the fastest 50 in women's T20 Internationals in December 2024? (5,5)

19 Who made a T20I comeback for South Africa after four years and won the player of the match award in the first T20I against Pakistan in December 2024? (5)

20 Who is the wicketeeper-batter for Uttarakhand Ranji Team? (4)

22 Identify this current ODI captain of the West Indies team who has scored two Test centuries, both in the same Test? (4)

23 Who scored the first hat-trick for Chelsea in the current Premier League season? (4)

28 Who scored a hat-trick for Newcastle United in the Premier League match against Ipswich Town in December 2024? (4)

30 Which city hosted the third leg and play-offs matches of the Pro-Kabbadi League 2024? (4)

DOWN

1 Who scored the most number of goals in the Santosh Trophy football held recently? (4)

2 Which Chinese badminton player won the women's singles crown at the BWF World Tour Finals in December 2024? (5)

4 Which Australian woman cricketer was the player of the series in the three-match ODI series against India in December 2024? (7)

6 Who is ranked world number one in badminton men's singles as on 1st January 2025? He had lost the BWF World tour finals. (8)

7 & Across 27 Who officiated in his 100th Test as match referee in the fourth Test of the BGT series at the MCG recently? (4,7)

11 Who won the player of the match award in the first Test between West Indies and Bangladesh in November 2024? (7)

13 Which Indian woman cricketer scored her maiden hundred in the second ODI against the West Indies in December 2024? (7)

14 Which Australian city hosted the Group A, C & E matches and two quarterfinals of the United Cup for Tennis recently? (5)

15 Who finished as runner-up in the WTA Final in November 2024? (5)

18 In which city did the Indian cricket team play its only tour match in its tour Down Under recently? (8)

21 Who scored a hat-trick for Villarreal in December 2024? (7)

24 Which former Indian cricketer was inducted to the ICC Hall of Fame in 2024? (5)

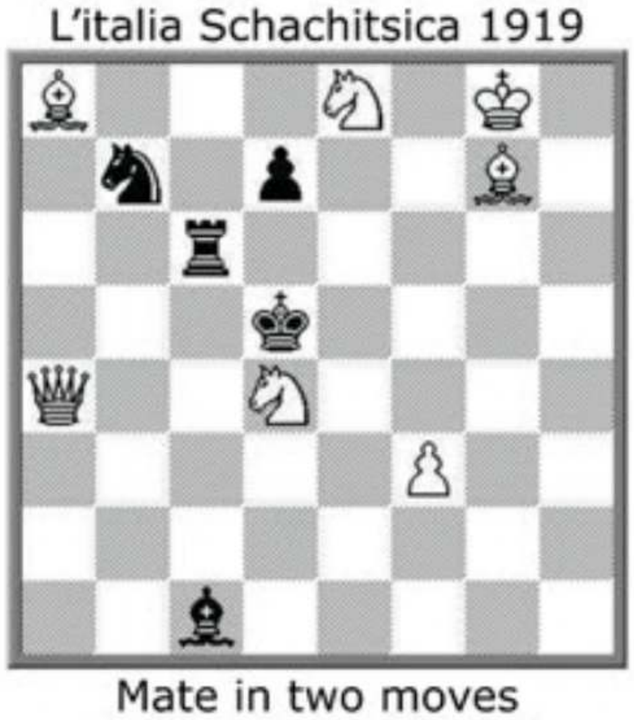
26 Who has scored three hat-tricks in the current Bundesliga season till 31st December 2024? (4)

Half-pin in combinations

By C.G.S.Narayanan

Of all the ideas that lend themselves to thematic ccombinaton, the half-pin is the most fruitful. In a half-pin set up two black pieces are positioned in between the Black king and a white line piece. When either of the black men moves off the line during the course of the play, the other gets fully pinned, and this immobility is then exploited by white to deliver a pin mate. Half pin problems generally involve pinning of each of the two black pieces in turn to produce harmonious effect of the pin mates. The half-pin lines can be either lateral or diagonal and the pieces pinned can be homogeneous i.e similar pieces like two knights or heterogeneous with different kinds of pieces. Such problems are often complex without without being crowded.

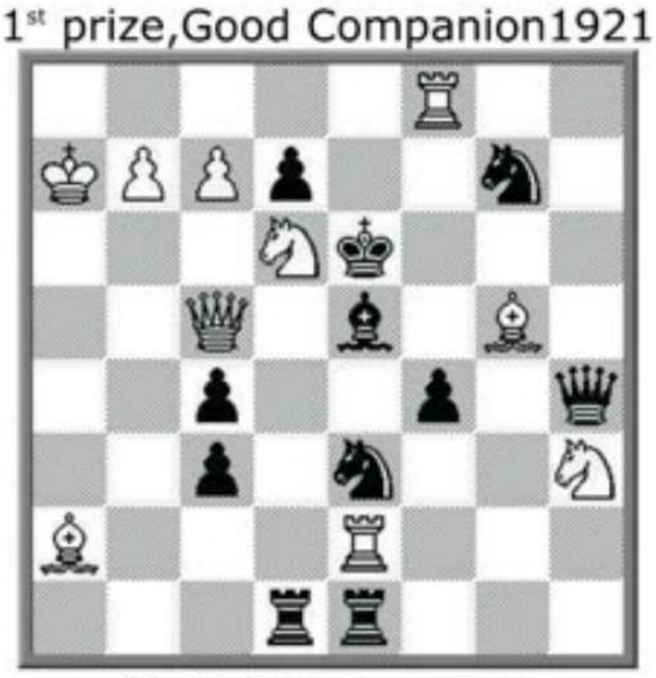
A.Bottachi
L'italia Schachitsica 1919



Mate in two moves
Key 1.Ne6! (2.Qe4)
1...Rxe6 2.Qb5;1...dxe6 2.Qd4
1...Rc5 Qxd7;1...Nc5 2.N(e)c7
1.....Nd6 2.N(5)c7

This meredith has four variaions involvng half-pin and self-block with an excellent triple-sacrifice key albeit with a give and take key. However there is a mate provided for the flight 1...Kc5 2.Qb5.

A.Mari
1st prize,Good Companion1921



Mate in two moves

In the splendid problem above the Italian maestro achieved four thematic variations with interferences, two by each half-pinned piece and with some fair by play.The variation 1...Bd4 2.Nd6 is called switchback. **Key 1.Nxc4!** (threat 2.Qxe5) 1...Bd6 2.Nd2;1...Ng4 2.Nxf4;1..Nd5 2.Qd6.
In the problem for solving given below each of the half-pinned black pieces is induced to free WQ by interference unpin.

Comins Mansfield
2 Pr,8th American Congress 1921

Mate in two moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article 'BCPS Centenary Review'

Key 1.Qc2! waiting (1....bN any 2.Rd6;1...bNd4 2.Bc4;1...eN any 2.Rc5;1...eNd4 2.Re5;1...B any 2.Qc5
1....Bd4 2.Qc4;1....Re4 2.Qxe4
1...Rd4 2.Qf5

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

SCAN TO VOTE

The annual Sportstar Aces Awards is back to honour a number of incredible performances across the spectrum of sports. Here are the nominations for the remaining Popular Choice categories.
The voting lines are open till January 31.
Visit https://sportstar.thehindu.com/aces-awards/popular-awards/

SPORTSTAR ACES 2025 INDIA TRIUMPHS #SSaces2025

NATIONAL TEAM OF THE YEAR

India men's cricket team

Discipline: Cricket

2024 was a successful year for the Indian men's cricket team. It won the T20 World Cup in the West Indies and the USA, ending the nation's 11-year drought for an ICC title. India remained unbeaten throughout the tournament, making it the only side to do so in nine editions of the competition. In Tests, India put on a strong show by winning the match in South Africa to level the series 1-1 before overcoming a 0-1 deficit to dominate England 4-1 in the home series. India also beat Bangladesh 2-0 at home. India also defeated Zimbabwe and Sri Lanka in away T20I series and only lost an ODI series in Sri Lanka.

Achievements in the 2024 season:

✪ Won the ICC Men's T20 World Cup 2024, held in the West Indies and USA

✪ Jasprit Bumrah was named player of the tournament at the T20 World Cup

✪ Beat England 4-1 and Bangladesh 2-0 in home Test series, drew 1-1 in South Africa

NATIONAL TEAM OF THE YEAR

Indian men's hockey team

Discipline: Hockey

The Indian men's hockey team backed up a successful 2023 by winning the bronze medal at the Paris Olympics. It was the first time in 52 years that India won back-to-back medals at the Olympics after clinching bronze in Tokyo three years earlier. India beat Australia in Olympic hockey for the first time in 52 years and followed it up with a thrilling penalty shootout win over Great Britain in the quarterfinals, despite being a man down for nearly 42 minutes. India fell agonisingly short of making the final, losing 2-3 in the semifinals to Germany. But it bounced back in the third-place match to beat Spain. India also successfully defended its Asian Champions Trophy crown by defeating host China 1-0 in the final.

Achievements in the 2024 season:

✪ Won Olympic bronze medal in Paris
✪ Successive Olympic medals for the first time in 52 years
✪ Beat Australia in the Olympics for the first time in 52 years
✪ Defended Asian Champions Trophy title in China

Indian women's table tennis team

Discipline: Table Tennis

The Indian women's table tennis team had a memorable 2024 season. The team comprising Manika Batra, Sreeja Akula, and Ayhika Mukherjee finished second behind China in its group at the World Team Championships in Busan in February. In its 2-3 group-stage loss to China, the team had two shocking wins as Ayhika beat World No. 1 Sun Yingsha while Sreeja upset World No. 2 Wang Yidi. The team eventually lost 1-3 to Chinese Taipei in the round of 16, but the result played a crucial role in its historic first-ever qualification for the Olympics. At the Paris Olympics, the Indian team of Manika, Sreeja, and Archana Kamath reached the quarterfinals after beating Romania 3-2. The team - Manika, Sreeja, Ayhika, Diya Chitale, and Sutirtha Mukherjee - won its first-ever medal - a bronze - at the Asian Championships in Astana after beating South Korea 3-2 to reach the semifinals.

Achievements in the 2024 season:

✪ Reached the round of 16 at the World Championships in Busan
✪ Qualified for the team event at the Olympics for the first time
✪ Reached the quarterfinals at the Paris Olympics
✪ Won its first-ever medal - a bronze - at the Asian Championships

NATIONAL TEAM OF THE YEAR

Indian men's chess team

Discipline: Chess

The Indian men's team comprising R. Praggnanandhaa, Vidit Gujrathi, D. Gukesh, Arjun Erigaisi, and Harikrishna Pentala made history as it secured the country's first-ever gold medal in the open section at the Chess Olympiad in Budapest. The team, led by skipper Srinath Narayanan, had a stellar run in the Hungarian capital as it finished with a total of 21 points out of 22 after winning 10 rounds while drawing just one. Gukesh and Arjun also clinched individual gold medals with their impressive performances.

Achievements in the 2024 season:

✪ Won India's first-ever gold medal in the open section at the Chess Olympiad

✪ D. Gukesh and Arjun Erigaisi won individual gold medals at the Chess Olympiad

✪ Helped retain the Gaprindashvili Cup, awarded to the country with the best overall performance across both open and women's categories

Indian women's chess team

Discipline: Chess

The Indian women's team, comprising Divya Deshmukh, D. Harika, R. Vaishali, Tanya Sachdeva, and Vantika Agarwal, had a historic run at the Chess Olympiad in Budapest, finishing with the country claiming its first-ever gold medal in the women's section. India was clinical throughout the tournament. The team, led by the experienced Abhijit Kunte, won nine out of 11 rounds while dropping only one round against Poland. Divya and Vantika also bagged individual gold medals.

Achievements in the 2024 season:

✪ Won India's first-ever gold medal in the women's section at the Chess Olympiad

✪ Divya Deshmukh and Vantika Agarwal won individual gold medals at the Chess Olympiad

✪ Helped retain the Gaprindashvili Cup, awarded to the country with the best overall performance across both open and women's categories.

CLUB/STATE TEAM OF THE YEAR

Mohun Bagan Super Giant

Discipline: Football

Mohun Bagan Super Giant had a memorable 2023-24 season as it won its maiden Indian Super League Shield and was the runner-up in the cup final. It maintained an Indian core throughout the season, employing India's national team regulars Manvir Singh, Sahal Abdul Samad, and Subhasish Bose in the starting XI under head coach Antonio Lopez Habas. Its midfielder, Dimitri Petratos, won the Golden Ball (best player) in the ISL while its goalkeeper, Vishal Kaith, bagged the Golden Glove in the Durand Cup. The Mariners started the season with silverware in style, beating arch-rival East Bengal in the Durand Cup final in Kolkata and becoming the most successful team in the tournament, with 17 titles. In the middle of the season, however, it changed coaches to steady the ship steady with Habas taking over as head coach. In the regular season, it scored the most goals by a team – 47 – which was five more than its closest contender, Mumbai City FC. After winning the Shield, Mohun Bagan secured qualification for Asia, playing in the AFC Cup, now rebranded as the AFC Champions League Two.

Achievements in the 2023-24 season:

✪ Won the Durand Cup 2023, beating East Bengal in the final
✪ MBSG goalkeeper Vishal Kaith won the Golden Glove in the Durand Cup 2023
✪ Won maiden Indian Super League Shield
✪ MBSG midfielder Dimitri Petratos won the Golden Ball in ISL
✪ Qualified for AFC Champions League Two for the fourth consecutive time.

Mumbai Ranji Team

Discipline: Cricket

The Ranji Team of Mumbai, under captain Ajinkya Rahane, saw several stars emerge through the 2023-24 season as it clinched its record-extending 42nd title, beating Vidarbha in the final. It was the first Ranji title for Mumbai in nearly a decade, ending its eight-year drought for the coveted trophy. While the top order of Prithvi Shaw, Bhupen Lalwani, and Musheer Khan created a foundation for runs, the resilience of the lower order, Shardul Thakur, Tanush Kotian, and Tushar Deshpande, along with their wicket-taking ability, created a formidable unit for the eventual champion. In the quarterfinal, Mumbai came agonisingly close to a new record, with Kotian and Deshpande scoring a century each while putting up 232 runs together yet falling just one run shy of the highest partnership for the 10th wicket. Kotian won the Player of the Series with over 500 runs to his name and 29 wickets. Mumbai, with a major chunk of the Ranji side, also finished as a quarterfinalist at the Vijay Hazare Trophy and the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy.

Achievements in the 2023-24 season:

✪ Won the Ranji Trophy after eight years, beating Vidarbha in the final
✪ Tanush Kotian and Tushar Deshpande scored the second-highest partnership for the 10th wicket in the Ranji quarterfinal
✪ Reached the quarterfinals of the Vijay Hazare Trophy
✪ Reached the quarterfinals of the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy

CLUB/STATE TEAM OF THE YEAR

Puneri Paltan

Discipline: Kabaddi

Puneri Paltan was often the underachiever of the Pro Kabaddi League with bottom-of-the-table and mid-table finishes over the years. But its faith in its academy system started providing results when it finished runner-up in the 2022 season before it went all the way in 2023-24 to clinch its maiden PKL title. Such was its dominance last year that it only lost twice – the least number of defeats since the introduction of the 22-game league stage in 2017 – in the entire campaign. Puneri Paltan's strong showing over the season put the team in the argument for being the greatest in the league's history.

Achievements in the 2023-24 season:

✪ Won its maiden PKL title with a league-record 96 points in the round-robin stage

✪ Paltan lost just twice in the campaign – a league record.

Goa Challengers TTC

Discipline: Table Tennis

Goa Challengers TTC became the first team in Ultimate Table Tennis history to win the title in two consecutive seasons. With two new teams in the fray, the Harmeet Desai-led Goa rode the pressure of defending champions to make it to the playoffs, despite scoring just 37 points in the league stage. During the final, Goa lost key paddler Diya Chitale to injury and didn't have an injury replacement. But her teammates didn't let the side feel her absence as they wrapped up the title by the second match of the night.

Achievements in the 2023-24 season:

✪ First UTT team to win successive titles

✪ Won the title despite scoring just 37 points and finishing fourth in the league stage

CLUB/STATE TEAM OF THE YEAR

Kolkata Knight Riders

Discipline: Cricket

Kolkata Knight Riders won the Indian Premier League 2024 title after an eight-wicket win over Sunrisers Hyderabad in the final. Having finished top of the group, victory in Chennai secured a third IPL title for KKR and its first since 2014. Only Mumbai Indians and Chennai Super Kings have won more titles — five each. To top it off, KKR pace spearhead Mitchell Starc, who was the then most expensive signing ever in the history of the IPL, became the first player to win the Player of the Match award twice in the playoffs of an IPL season.

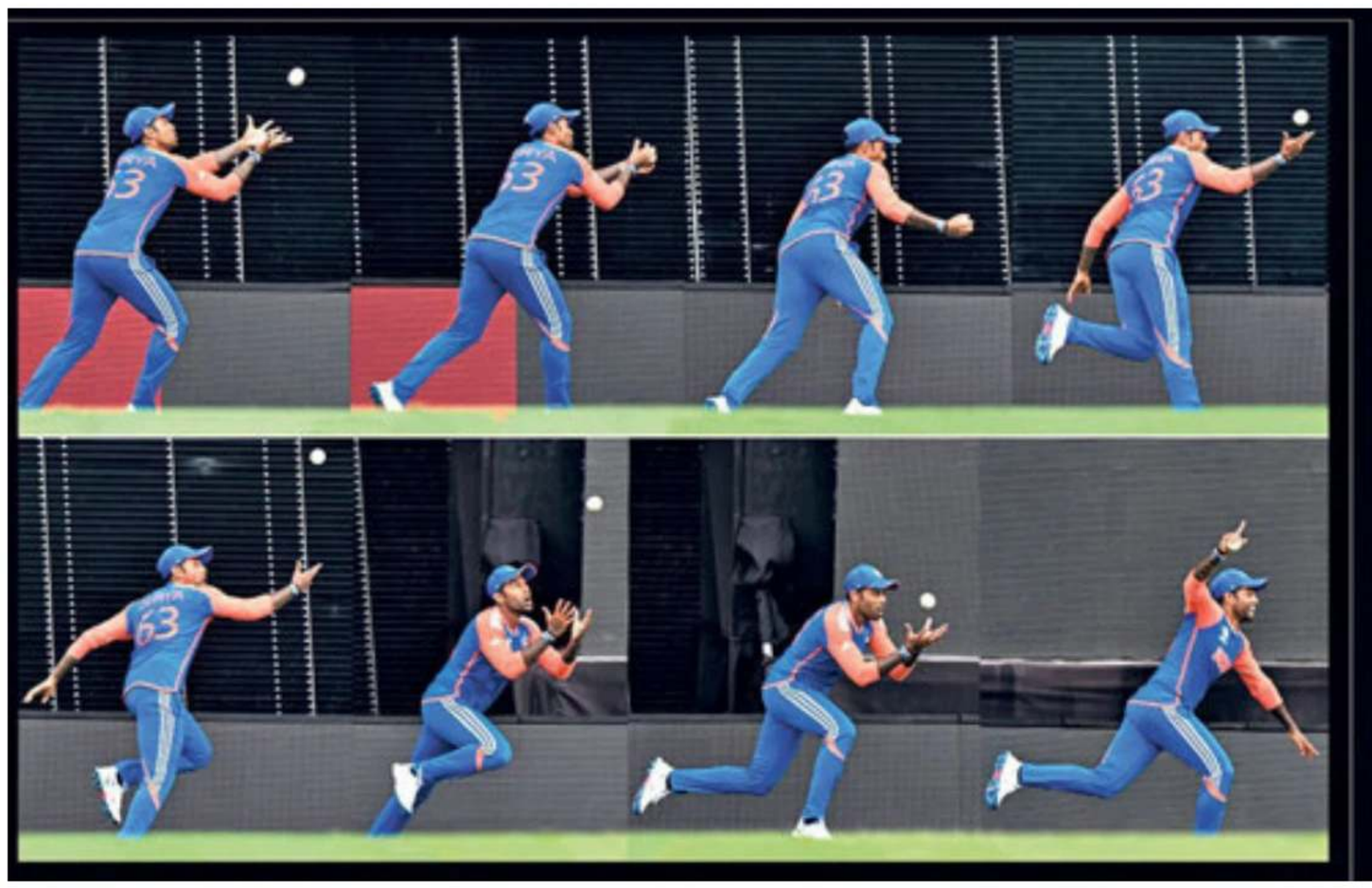
Achievements in 2024:

✪ Won the title while losing the fewest number of matches in an IPL season — just three
✪ It was KKR's third IPL title
✪ KKR won the final with 57 balls to spare - the biggest margin in an IPL playoff game.

SPORTING MOMENT OF THE YEAR

Suryakumar Yadav's catch in the T20 World Cup final

With 16 runs needed off the last over of the T20 World Cup final and the dangerous David Miller on strike, it was anyone's game. That is, until Suryakumar Yadav pulled off a stunning catch at long-off to send Miller back to the pavilion and the Indian fans into raptures. Suryakumar caught the ball inside the rope, and just as he was teetering over the boundary, he threw the ball into the air and came back inside the field of play in the nick of time to complete the catch, effectively sealing the title for the Men in Blue.



SPORTING MOMENT OF THE YEAR

India's historic victory over Australia in Hockey at Paris 2024

The Indian men's hockey team defeated Australia, the silver medallist from the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, 3-2 in its final Pool B match at the Paris 2024 Olympics. This was India's first victory against Australia in Olympic hockey since Munich 1972 – 52 years ago. Since then, the two teams had played each other seven times, with India losing five of those matches before their victory in Paris. India got off to a strong start, building a 2-0 lead by the end of the first quarter. P. R. Sreejesh kept the Aussies quiet for the most part. Australia narrowed the lead to 2-1 at half-time with a goal in the 25th minute. In the third quarter, Harmanpreet Singh extended India's advantage to 3-1 by converting a penalty stroke following a successful video referral. Australia fought hard in the final quarter and gave India a scare when Blake Govers made it 3-2 from a penalty stroke. However, India held its nerve to finish the group stage on a high note with a historic win.

Gukesh winning the Candidates

D. Gukesh became the youngest winner of the FIDE Candidates 2024 tournament and the second Indian to qualify for a World Championship final in the classical format. He held fellow title-contender Hikaru Nakamura to a draw in the final round and will face Ding Liren in the Championship final in November. The 17-year-old received a grand welcome at Chennai airport on his return from Canada, with fans and media gathering in the early hours of April 25. Amidst all the commotion, Gukesh spotted his mother and relatives and immediately went to embrace them.

SPORTING MOMENT OF THE YEAR

Vinesh Phogat beating Yui Susaki at Paris 2024

In one of the most memorable moments in Indian sporting history, wrestler Vinesh Phogat defeated Yui Susaki in her first-round bout at the Paris Olympics, ending the Japanese wrestler's astounding 82-0 win record at the international level. Vinesh executed a perfectly timed takedown in the dying seconds of the match, and just like that, Susaki's perfect record was gone. The moment was even more significant as it ended a streak that had lasted seven years since Susaki made her international debut, encompassing the Olympics and four World Championships. Moreover, at the previous Olympics, no one had even been able to score a point against the Japanese wrestler.

Sheetal Devi and Rakesh Kumar's bronze win in Paralympics

In a heart-stopping finale, Sheetal Devi and Rakesh Kumar clinched the bronze medal in the mixed compound archery event at the 2024 Paris Paralympics. Trailing 116-117, the Indian duo staged a dramatic comeback, shooting four perfect tens in the final set to win 156-155 against Italy's Eleonara Sarti and Matteo Bonacina. Sheetal, the world's only female armless archer, has taken the Paralympics by storm. Her remarkable debut has equaled the Paralympic record in the bronze medal match, inspiring millions with her courage and determination. This bronze medal is a testament to her rapid rise and a proud moment for India.

Bahadur Singh Sagoo elected Athletics Federation of India president

Asian Games gold medallist shot-putter and Padma Shri awardee Bahadur Singh Sagoo has been elected as the new president of the Athletics Federation of India (AFI) on the opening day of its two-day Annual General Meeting in Chandigarh. Outgoing president Adille Sumariwalla, stepping down after three consecutive terms, announced new events and future plans for the federation.

With no other contenders, Bahadur, who won gold at the 2002 Asian Games, was unanimously elected to succeed Sumariwalla.

Delhi Athletics secretary Sandeep Mehta was elected as the new AFI secretary general, replacing Ravinder Chaudhary. The most significant announcement, however, was the launch of a major javelin competition aimed at fostering and capitalising on the country's growing interest in the sport.

"It will be an invitational event featuring the world's top 10 throwers. Neeraj (Chopra) is also involved in organising it, alongside AFI, JSW, and a foreign firm working together to create this new competition," Sumariwalla revealed.

"It will be held sometime later in the year," he added.

UTHRA GANESAN

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1 Champions Tamil Nadu and Railways comfortably defended their title in the men's and women's sections, respectively, in the 74th National Basketball Championship at the Sidsar Sports Complex in Bhavnagar, Gujarat.

Tamil Nadu men won 80-56 against Punjab after leading 48-26 at halftime. Equally, Railways was assertive in its 86-53 victory over Kerala in the women's final, after leading 46-36 at the interval.

The 'Most Valuable Player' awards, with a Maruti WagonR car as a prize, were bagged by Pranav Prince of Tamil Nadu and Dharshini Thirunavukkarasu of Railways.

The champion teams received Rs 5 lakh each, and the runner-up, Rs 3 lakh. Railways men and Tamil Nadu women won third place and collected two lakh rupees each.

R. Sreekala of Kerala and Kanwar Gurbaz Singh Sandhu were presented Rs. 50,000 each for their prowess in shooting three-pointers.

The results:

Men (final): Tamil Nadu 80 bt Punjab 56.

Third place: Railways 71 bt Karnataka 50.

Women (final): Railways 86 bt Kerala 53;

Third place: Tamil Nadu 86 bt Delhi 64.

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FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Ryan Fernando

FOR MORE STORIES

Sticking to your health resolutions

Here's a nutritionist's guide to **turning intentions into actions** in 2025.

Happy New Year! The air is thick with resolutions. From "This year, I'll finally run that marathon" to "I'll quit sugar (except maybe for birthdays, holidays, and weekends)," we all know the January energy that's often left behind in February's dust.

But what if this year could be different? What if we didn't just make health resolutions but actually stuck to them?

As a nutritionist with over 20 years of experience, I've seen it all: the enthusiasm, the struggle, and the eventual "next year, maybe" promises. Let me tell you a secret — making health resolutions work isn't about willpower. It's about strategy, support, and a little help from technology.

Common hurdles

1. Overambitious goals that backfire

We've all been there. January 1: you decide to eat perfectly balanced meals, work out every day, sleep eight hours, and meditate for an hour — all while juggling work, family, and *Netflix.* By January 15, you're so overwhelmed that the only "resolution" left is a pile of takeaway boxes.

Instead of overloading yourself, focus on one manageable goal. My mantra? "Small changes, big impact." For example, start by drinking more water or adding a vegetable to every meal. It's about progress, not perfection.

2. Meal planning paralysis

Planning meals can feel like solving a Rubik's Cube — on fire. What's healthy? What's quick? What will everyone eat? It's no wonder many people give up and revert to quick-fix junk food.

Here's where technology becomes your best friend. My app takes the guesswork out of meal planning. With personalised diet plans tailored to your goals, tastes, and even your grocery list, it's like having a nutritionist in your pocket. Whether you're looking for quick recipes or a structured weekly plan, it's got you covered.

3. Unrealistic expectations

"If I'm not down five kilos by the end of January, what's the point?" Sounds familiar? The pressure for instant results often leads to frustration and burnout.

Health is a marathon, not a sprint. My app's tracking feature will help you celebrate small wins, like improved energy or better sleep, rather than fixating on the scale. It's about feeling better, not just looking better.

4. The all-or-nothing mindset

"I ate a slice of pizza, so I've ruined my diet. Might as well have the cake too." This perfectionist mindset is one of the biggest roadblocks to long-term success. Life's too short to ban pizza forever.

My app encourages balance, offering strategies to enjoy your favourite foods while staying on track. Think guilt-free eating, not endless restrictions.

5. Not knowing where to start

With so much information out there, starting a health journey can feel like navigating a maze. Keto or vegan? Gym or yoga? It's overwhelming, to say the least.

When you open my app, you'll find easy-to-follow roadmaps based on proven nutrition science. Whether your goal is weight loss, muscle gain, or managing a condition like diabetes, you'll get a clear, personalised starting point.

6. Losing motivation over time

Even the most dedicated people hit a plateau. Without motivation, it's easy to slide back into old habits.

The Fix: Keep it fun and engaging. From weekly challenges to gamified milestones, my app is designed to keep you hooked.

Plus, the real-time progress tracker lets you see how far you've come, reigniting your drive every step of the way.

My personal tips for 2025

1. Hydrate like it's your job

Water is the simplest yet most overlooked health hack. Start your day with a glass of water and carry a bottle wherever you go.

2. Prep, don't stress

Meal prepping on weekends saves time, money, and sanity. My app's prep tips will turn this chore into a breeze.

3. Move daily

No need for a gym membership. Dancing in your living room or walking your dog counts too. Find what you enjoy and stick to it.

4. Sleep like a pro

No amount of green smoothies can outdo poor sleep. Aim for consistency — same bedtime, same wake time.

5. Don't go it alone

Having a coach, friend, or app can make all the difference. Support systems turn resolutions into habits.

The final word

Health resolutions don't have to be daunting. With the right mindset, tools, and support, 2025 can be the year you not only make but also stick to your health goals. And remember, you're not alone in this journey.

As a nutritionist, I've always believed in empowering people with the right knowledge and tools to transform their health. While I love connecting with clients one-on-one, I realised that not everyone can reach me directly.

That's why I created this app — an AI-powered diet planning tool designed to bring my personalised approach to anyone, anywhere. Whether it's customised meal plans, tracking your progress, or staying motivated, my app is like having me right there with you, guiding you every step of the way.

You can find it on my website — *ryanfernando.in*. It's your first step towards making 2025 should be the year you take charge of your health like never before.

So, as you jot down your resolutions this year, make them bold but realistic, ambitious but achievable. Here's to a healthier, happier you in 2025. Let's make it happen — together.

Eat right: Health resolutions don't have to be daunting. With the right mindset, tools, and support, 2025 can be the year you not only make but also stick to your health goals. GETTY IMAGES

Ryan Fernando's new health app encourages balance, offering strategies to enjoy our favourite foods while staying on track.

Fact-checking is important

It is painful when books by important sportsmen, which add to the **history of the game** and give us insights into their lives, are shoddily done.

Suresh Menon

Recent memoirs by two of India's finest cricketers and heroes of the 1983 World Cup suffer from flaws that could have been easily eliminated. Mohinder Amarnath's *Fearless* is better written, a good read overall and has a wealth of anecdotes. Syed Kirmani's *Stumped* has its moments, too.

But what is astonishing is the disregard for fact-checking. We are told by Kirmani's ghostwriter that Sunil Gavaskar made his debut in the West Indies in 1970-71 against the "mighty squad" of Michael Holding, Andy Roberts, Vanburn Holder and Keith Boyce. But Roberts didn't make his debut until 1973-74, while Holding arrived two seasons later. At one point, the names are combined, and we get "such greats" as 'Robert Holding'.

Memoirs: Mohinder Amarnath's *Fearless* is better written, a good read overall and has a wealth of anecdotes, while Syed Kirmani's *Stumped* has its moments, too.

THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

It is painful when books by important sportsmen, which add to the history of the game and give us insights into their lives, are shoddily done. The players tell their stories to their ghostwriters who ought to check them out with the editors.

Amarnath has fresh stories to tell. About players meeting with Kerry Packer's man Lynton Taylor, for instance. The group showed "excitement of playing World Series Cricket." Interestingly, in the foreword to Kirmani's book, Sunil Gavaskar says, "There were other players who claim they were also approached... but they were only interested in the two of us." Meaning Kirmani and himself. Turns out Amarnath actually signed the contract and sent it (when he was dropped again from the Indian team), but concludes that maybe it was all just Asif Iqbal taking the Indians for a ride.

He too has anachronistic passages, with Hrishikesh Kanitkar playing alongside him when it was Hemant Kanitkar, the father who did. Sometimes the "sun shines brightly on the horizon" at another time, 'Tony Cozier' takes a catch in Australia" when it was Gary Cosier and not the West Indies commentator who did so! A reluctance to name names ruins some terrific stories.

The love for his father, former India captain Lala Amarnath, and the enormous debt he owes him runs like a much-repeated pattern through the book. Amarnath takes us into the dressing room, where team meetings were sometimes not so much about tactics as about how to share the prize money.

There are tales about tight-fisted managers inviting the team out for dinner and then claiming refunds from the players, and about how his father's machinations prepared him for the Indian team and possibly for a benefit at the CBFS in Sharjah.

When few Indian sportsmen write memoirs, the ghostwriters (and editors) of those who do have a responsibility to get everything right. Factual errors are annoying when information is easily available. The myth about Kapil Dev's 175 not being telecast owing to a BBC strike, or Bishan Bedi's "declaration" in Jamaica when actually India were all out with five batters absent hurt, is repeated.

Kirmani's portion of his memoir ends on page 74. The remaining 100 pages are given over to "a journalist's perspective" and quotes from teammates. Kirmani, one of our great wicketkeepers, deserved better.

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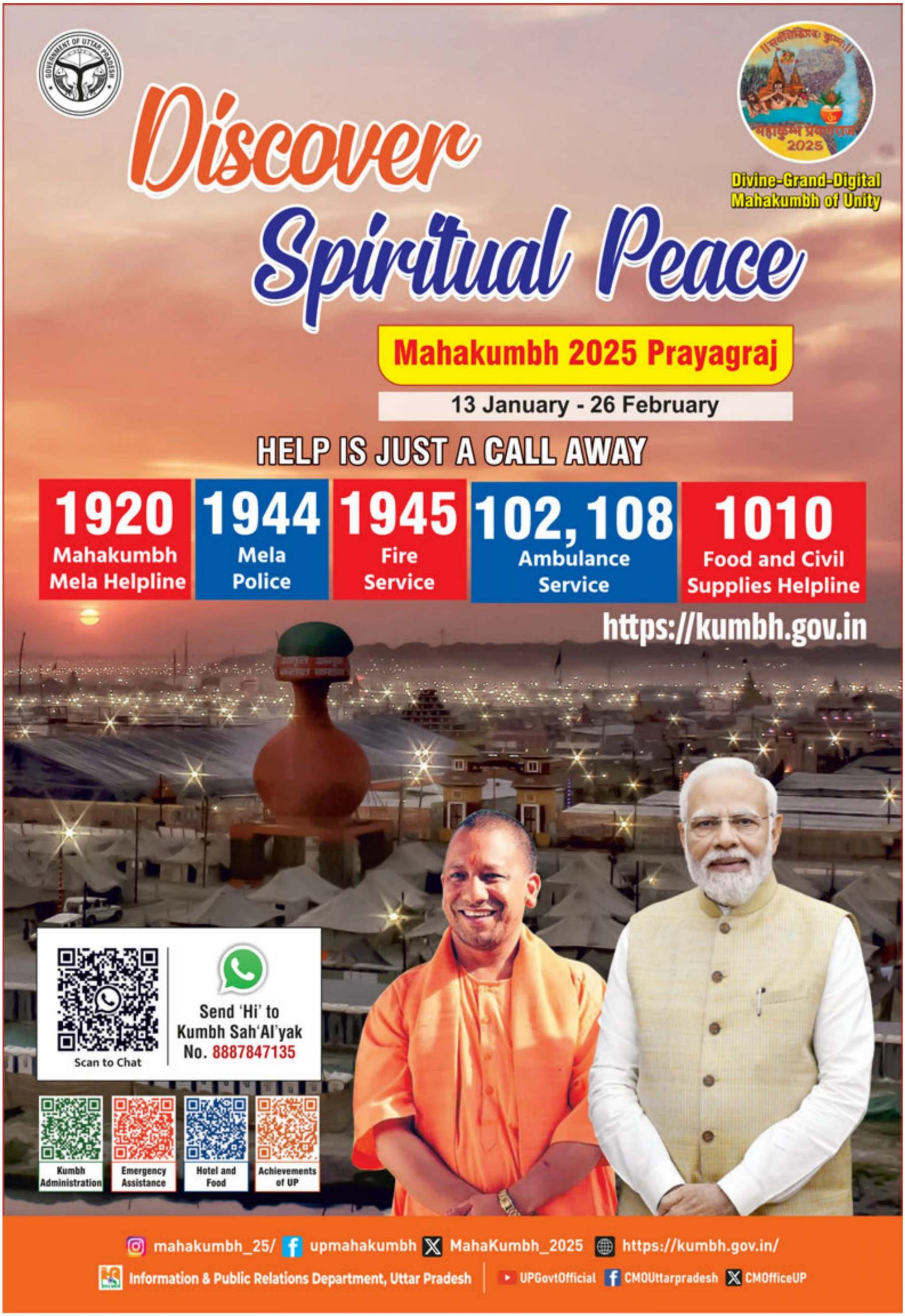
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