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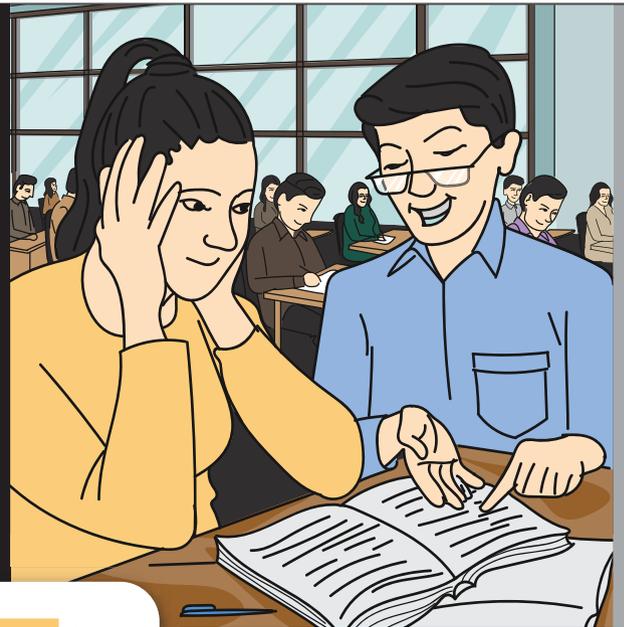
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OFF-SIDE

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YES, THE GENDER GAP IS CLOSING IN OLYMPICS BUT MORE WORK TO BE DONE

For the **XXXIII Olympiad** in 2024, half of the 10,500 Olympians will be women, a slight rise from Tokyo 2020's 47.8 per cent.

Over a hundred years after Paris 1900 gave women a go at the Summer Games, the French capital promises to host the first gender-equal Olympics. For the XXXIII Olympiad in 2024, half of the 10,500 Olympians will be women, a slight rise from Tokyo 2020's 47.8 per cent.

Women will also account for 40 per cent of technical officials, up from 30 per cent in Japan.

The 1900 Games had a measly 2.2 per cent – 22 out of 997 athletes – of women participants, and progress was sluggish until London 2012, grandly dubbed 'The Women's Games', when every participating country finally had female athletes.

"We are about to celebrate one of the most important moments in the history of women at the Olympic Games and in sport overall. This is our contribution to a more gender-equal world," International Olympic Council president Thomas Bach said on this year's International Women's Day on March 8.

The IOC's bid for equality doesn't stop with the athletes, as the organising body has cooked up a more balanced sports programme, with 28 of the 32 sports in Paris achieving full gender parity. Even the medal events are showing signs of fairness, with 152 for women, 157 for men, and 20 mixed-gender events.

According to the United Nations' Global Gender Gap Report 2023, the gender gap across 146 countries is now 68.4 per cent closed. But equal representation between men and women in the economic, political, health, and education sectors is still 131 years away at the current rate of progress. Meanwhile, India, ranked 127th in last year's report, has managed to close 64.3 per cent of the overall gender gap.

At this Olympics, India will have 46 women athletes, making up nearly 40 per cent of the squad. At Tokyo 2021, the country had 53 women athletes among 120 participants. Eight of India's 20 medals from six Olympics since the turn of the century have been won by women.

Women athletes, however, have always had to wade through a swamp of negative publicity and vitriol which social media has only exacerbated. During the Tokyo Olympics, 87% of online abuse on Twitter was targeted at female athletes, according to a study commissioned by World Athletics. The IOC, in a bid to safeguard athletes from online abuse, will implement an AI-powered monitoring system during the Paris Games. Developed in collaboration with the IOC's Athletes' Commission and the Medical and Scientific Commission, the system will monitor posts on all major social media platforms in 35+ languages in real-time and report abusive content to social media platforms.

Despite all these efforts, it's still far from a level playing field.

Only 13 per cent of coaching positions at the Tokyo Games were held by women, and the IOC's executive board boasts a mere 33 per cent of women. According to a 2018 UNESCO study, while 40 per cent of athletes are women, their events receive a pitiful four per cent of global sports coverage. A 2023 study by The Collective found that women's sports get just 15 per cent of total sports media coverage in the US. Even we at Sportstar aren't exempt from this skew. Only two of our 15 covers this year featured female athletes. Last year, it was eight out of 34.

Progress is inching forward, but let's hope it starts sprinting soon.

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HOW **KIIT** & **KISS** ARE NURTURING INDIA'S FUTURE CHAMPIONS



PASSION FOR sports permeates the twin campuses of Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology (KIIT) and Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences (KISS). Situated approximately eight kilometers from Kalinga Stadium in Bhubaneswar, which is rapidly becoming India's 'Sports Capital,' these exceptional educational institutions near the picturesque Sikharchandi Hills have become premier destinations for top athletes from across India. They have the most elaborate and extensive sports infrastructure among educational institutions in the country and are proud to count 14 Olympians and seven Arjuna Award-winning athletes among their students.

Since 1997, and especially after 2005, KIIT and KISS have upheld

the maxim "invest in youth and sports to invest in the future." They have been promoting sports, nurturing athletes, and developing sports infrastructure, becoming a model for other universities in India. Dr. Achyuta Samanta, the Founder of KIIT and KISS, recognized the importance of investing in sports, much like universities in Western countries, from the institutions' early days. Under his vision, KIIT and KISS have built top-notch sports infrastructure of international standards. Remarkably, this entire initiative was ideated, implemented, and monitored by Dr. Samanta, who himself did not have the opportunity to engage in sports during his youth.

State-of-the-Art Sports Facilities

KIIT-KISS offer the largest sporting

infrastructure among all government and private institutes, thus having transformed its campus into a sports hub where sportspersons from across the country including Olympians mingle with each other and share an emotional connect. The facilities include a BCCI-approved Cricket stadium, an FIH-certified Hockey stadium, Football stadiums, Rugby stadiums, an international Archery stadium, an Olympic-size Swimming pool, a 400m synthetic Athletic track, an international-standard Velodrome, an international Shooting arena, and an international Chess hall.

For indoor games, the Biju Patnaik Indoor Stadium offers facilities for handball, volleyball, basketball, badminton, kabaddi, shooting, cricket nets, weightlifting, judo, fencing, and wrestling. ↴

Special Focus

➤ Additionally, there are 18 sports complexes with 15 high-performance gyms, 15 practice pools, synthetic volleyball, basketball, and tennis courts, as well as indoor badminton, billiards, table tennis, yoga, and squash courts. There is also a sports complex exclusively for girls. Notably, KIIT-KISS has distinguished itself as a unique educational hub in India by naming its sports complexes after living sports legends. Over 300 sports personnel, including professionally qualified coaches in various disciplines, work under the Department of Sports at KIIT & KISS. This empowered and decentralized wing is responsible for all sports-related endeavors, including event coordination, facility management, student training, and specialized practice for athletes and sportspersons.

Breeding Ground for Elite Athletes

Currently, KIIT & KISS have over 5000 active sportspersons, with 60% being girls. More than 250 students have represented India in the Olympics, Asian Games, Commonwealth Games, South Asian Federation Games, and other international events across 17 sports disciplines. Over 5500 players have participated in national-level sports meets in 37 sports disciplines. Dr. Samanta, who has always harbored big

KIIT HAS ALSO PRODUCED SEVEN ARJUNA AWARDEES

01 Parul Chaudhary (2023)

02 Amit Rohidas (2021)

03 CA Bhavani Devi (2021)

04 Praveen Kumar (2021)

05 Dutee Chand (2020)

06 Tajinderpal Singh Toor (2019)

07 Sini Aijith Markose (2009)

KIT ACHIEVERS IN 19TH ASIAN GAMES

dreams for sports, aims to send 10 to 15 sportspersons from KIIT-KISS annually to represent India in the Olympics.

In a positive step forward towards realizing this ambitious dream, KIIT has so far produced fourteen Olympians: Dutee Chand (Athletics - Sprinter), Priyanka (Athletics - Race Walk), Shivpal Singh (Athletics - Javelin Throw), Srabani Nanda (Athletics - Sprinter), Kishore Kumar Jena (Athletics - Javelin Throw), Sandeep Kumar (Athletics - Race Walk), Tajinderpal Singh Toor (Athletics - Shot Put), Annu Rani (Athletics - Javelin Throw), Parul Chaudhary (Athletics - 3000M Steeplechase), CA Bhavani Devi (Fencing - Sabre), Sajan Prakash (Swimming), Amit Rohidas (Men's Hockey Team), Lilima Minz (Women's Hockey Team), Sunita Lakra (Women's Hockey Team). Additionally, two Paralympians, Praveen Kumar (Para Athletics - High Jump) and Kashish Lakra (Para Athletics - Club Throw), have represented India in the Tokyo 2020 and Rio 2016 Olympics.

From KIIT to Asian Games Podiums

India showcased outstanding performance at the 19th Asian Games hosted in Hangzhou, China, achieving a remarkable feat with its best-ever medal haul of 107 medals. ➤





Students from KIIT played a vital role in this historic accomplishment, clinching four medals, including two gold medals, and making a significant contribution to the nation's success.

KIIT student, Amit Rohidas's stellar performance led the Indian Hockey team to victory, securing a gold medal at the Asian Games and bringing immense pride to Odisha. The state celebrated this achievement as a testament to its rich hockey tradition. Tajinderpal Singh Toor, a distinguished KIITian, secured gold medal in Shot Put and set the new Asian record.

Kishore Jena, a talented athlete from Odisha and a KIIT student, clinched a silver medal in the Javelin Throw event. His remarkable achievement was celebrated by Odias worldwide. Similarly, Tejaswin Shankar, a dedicated student from KIIT, displayed exceptional talent and determination at the 19th Asian Games by winning a silver medal in the Decathlon event.

In fact, it is a matter of pride for KIIT & KISS and Odisha that 14 sports talents from the

two institutes represented the country in the 19th Asian Games in Hangzhou, China. Besides the medal winners, prominent names include CA Bhavani Devi (Fencing – Women's Sabre and Team Sabre events), Sajan Prakash (Swimming), and Anshika Bharti (Women's Lightweight Double Scull Rowing).

In the field of Athletics, Priyanka & Sandeep Kumar represented India in the 20 km Race Walk Women's & Men's event respectively. For the Rugby 7s Women's Team, Dumuni Marndi, Tarulata Naik, Mama Naik, and Hupi Majhi earned their well-deserved spots. Amlan Borgahain sprinted his way into the Athletics – 200m event. It is a matter of pride that in the Indian Rugby team, four players were from KISS.

Host to High-Profile Sports Events

Due to its excellent sporting facilities in a single complex, KIIT & KISS have hosted many prestigious international and national sporting events. These include: World Junior Chess Championship 2016, T-20 Blind Cricket World Cup (India vs. New Zealand) 2017, Asian Cities

Chess Championship 2017, Asian Petanque Championship 2018, Practice Venue for Junior Hockey World Cup 2021, FIFA Football For Schools 2021.

A highlight for KIIT-KISS was hosting the first Khelo India event in February 2020, which saw more than 4,000 athletes and 1,000 officials from approximately 200 universities across the country participating in over 17 different events held at the KIIT-KISS sports facilities. Additionally, the venues have proudly hosted prestigious competitions such as the Ranji Trophy matches, the National Open Athletic Championship, the All India Forest Sports Meet, and the 81st All India Inter-University Athletics (Women) Championship 2021-22.

KIIT-KISS also had the privilege of hosting the first Janjatiya Khel Mahotsav, organized jointly with the Ministry of Culture and the Odisha Government, from June 9th to 12th, 2023.

This unique event aimed to promote sports among the Janjati (tribal communities) and featured more than 5,000 participants and 1,000 officials representing 26 states.

Promotion of Sports

Dr. Achyuta Samanta has promoted many sports, especially Rugby and Chess, from scratch in Odisha and has placed KIIT & KISS, Odisha and India on the world map with regard to the conduct of those sports. The institutions have also introduced sports in rural areas such as Volleyball in Kandhamal, Phulbani & Boudh and Chess in Kalarabanka. KISS has been promoting Rugby since 2004, and has contributed to popularising the sports all over the country. The KIIT and KISS-DU have entered into an agreement with the Indian Rugby Football Union (IRFU) to promote and popularise Rugby both at the grassroots level and the high-performance level. KIIT-KISS are the only university in India to be the associate sponsor of Rugby India. KIIT Deemed to be University

has significantly contributed in the promotion of Chess in Odisha. KIIT conducts an annual Grandmaster Chess event, which has become one of the top four GM events of the country.

KIIT has also been supporting individual players and have produced several Grandmasters, International Masters, Candidate Masters and Woman Grandmasters in Odisha since 2009. The All India Chess Federation (AICF) has granted institutional membership to KIIT Deemed to be University in recognition of its efforts in the promotion of chess. KIIT is the first and only institution in India to be granted institutional membership by AICF. It is also the first in the country to introduce Chess in school curriculum.

The International Volleyball

Federation (FIVB) has signed an MoU with the KISS for the growth and development of youth volleyball in India and South Asia. The MoU was signed between FIVB President Dr. Ary S. Graça F and Dr. Achyuta Samanta, who is also the President of Volleyball Federation of India (VFI), at the FIVB Headquarters in Lausanne, Switzerland on 14th December 2022. This is the first time that FIVB has forged ties with an educational institute to promote and popularise the game.

Similarly, FIFA has partnered with KISS to launch the world's first FIFA Football for School Program at KISS. Football for Schools (F4S) is an ambitious world-wide programme run by FIFA, which aims to contribute to the education, development and empowerment of around 700 million children.

RECOGNITIONS

KIIT's commitment to promoting sports and sports persons, and fostering a sporting culture on its campus and beyond, has been recognized on both national and international platforms. It has won numerous recognitions and honors over the years. These awards serve as a testament to KIIT's unwavering commitment to excellence in sports and its contribution to the national sports landscape. Some of the recent recognitions are:

❖ "Rashtriya Khel Protsahan Puruskar 2022" in the category of Encouragement to Sports through Corporate Social Responsibility by Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports, Govt. of India.

❖ "CII Sports Business Awards 2023" in the category of Best Sports Facility by Confederation of Indian Industry.

❖ "FICCI India Sports Award 2022" by Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FICCI).

❖ "Sports Star Aces Award 2022" in the category of Best University for promotion of Sports in the Country by Hindu Group.

❖ "Biju Patnaik Sports Award 2019" in the category of best Contribution for promotion of sports and games by Govt. of Odisha.



» WORLD VIEW OF THE FORTNIGHT



« Sometimes I feel that it would have been good if my parents had put me in tennis. There is more money and I had more strength, I think. I could have done better in tennis than badminton.»

– Indian shuttler Saina Nehwal »



« It feels amazing to break the world record. I am in the right direction towards the Paris Olympics.»

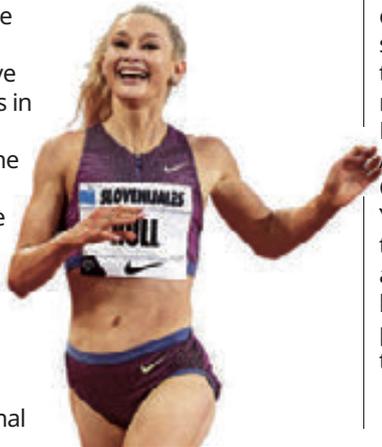
– Kenya's Faith Kipyegon after bettering her own world record in the women's 1500m at the Paris Diamond League meet »

2000m

Jessica Hull of Australia blazed to a world record in the women's 2,000 metres at the Monaco Diamond League meet, making a stunning statement ahead of the Paris Olympics. The 27-year-old Hull ran five minutes 19.70 seconds in the rarely-contested 2,000m to obliterate the previous mark of 5:21.56 set by Francine Niyonsaba of Burundi in 2021.

Hull's first Diamond League victory comes four days after she shaved more than five seconds off her personal

best in the 1,500 metres to finish second behind Kenya's Faith Kipyegon at the Paris Diamond League. Kipyegon clocked a world record in that race with Hull's time being the fifth-fastest ever.



17

Zhang Zhijie, a 17-year-old Chinese badminton player, died after collapsing on court during an international tournament in Indonesia, officials said. Zhang suddenly took ill and fell to the floor during a match against Japan's Kazuma Kawano at the Asia Junior Championships in Yogyakarta. He received treatment at the venue and was taken to hospital by ambulance, but passed away after efforts to resuscitate him failed.

A NEW RECORD!



Ukraine's Yaroslava Mahuchikh gave herself the perfect pre-Olympic tonic by setting a new world record in women's high jump at the Diamond League meet in Paris. The reigning world champion set a new best mark of 2.10 metres. That beat the previous record set by Bulgaria's Stefka Kostadinova in Rome in 1987 by 1 cm. This had been one of track and field's longest-standing records. GETTY IMAGES



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Last laugh: Max Holloway (right) delivered a masterful performance against Justin Gaethje in the most dramatic of finishes. GETTY IMAGES



» FIGHT CLUB

Down to the wire

Holloway's dramatic BMF title victory over Gaethje, sealed with a **last-second knockout**, was one of the most unforgettable finishes in UFC history.

Nigamanth P

nigamanth.p@thehindu.co.in

The Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) this year has provided the fans with an array of edge-of-the-seat thrillers. From the dramatic last-moment finish by Max Holloway to Islam Makhachev's third successive title defence, here are the top fights of the year so far:

An unbelievable finish

Holloway's BMF title win was one for the ages. The American claimed the symbolic belt with a masterful performance against Justin Gaethje in the most dramatic of finishes.

The former featherweight champion was sharp from the start, using his reach advantage to pick at Gaethje early before shattering his nose with a spinning back kick at the buzzer at the end of the first round.

From there, Holloway consistently landed the better shots, hurting Gaethje on multiple occasions while

deflating the counters exceptionally well in the first 15 minutes.

However, Gaethje clawed his way back in the fourth, dropping Holloway and continuing to crash home low kicks to the Hawaiian's battered lead leg. Holloway opted for the waiting game and took the fight to the final round, and the unthinkable happened.

When the final 10-second buzzer sounded, Holloway invited Gaethje to stand in the centre with him, much like he did with Ricardo Lamas at UFC 199. Gaethje obliged, and the two started slinging, with Holloway landing a right hand on Gaethje's jaw, knocking him out cold with just a second remaining on the clock.

What goes around comes around

Just over three months after the win against Benoit Saint Denis, Dustin Poirier was at the receiving end when he faced Russian powerhouse Makhachev. The southpaw extended his 13-fight winning streak with a special

performance to defend the lightweight title for the third time.

The champion put Poirier on the canvas quickly in the first, advancing to his back and staying there for the remainder of the round.

Poirier defended well throughout, and the remainder of the fight was scrappier and more competitive, with the challenger doing well to defend takedowns while Makhachev was forced into the first bloody, gruelling battle of his championship reign.

With both men bloodied by the start of the final round, Makhachev caused Poirier to stumble in the centre of the Octagon midway through the round and pounced.

After momentarily looking for a guillotine choke, the champion switched off to a D'arce choke and quickly drew out the tap.

Makhachev is now tied with four others for the most consecutive successful title defences in the division and sits two wins back of Anderson Silva's record for consecutive UFC victories.

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» OLYMPICS BUMPER PREVIEW – BADMINTON



Putting up a fight: India's recent success in badminton owes much to the emergence of the men's doubles duo Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty. Meanwhile, P.V. Sindhu, aiming for her third Olympic medal, remains a formidable contender. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

SATWIK AND CHIRAG LEAD INDIA GOLD MEDAL HOPES IN PARIS

A major reason for **India's recent achievements** has been the rise of the men's doubles pair of Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty.

Nihit Sachdeva

nihit.sachdeva@thehindu.co.in

India has taken giant steps towards becoming one of the powerhouses in badminton since the 2021 Tokyo Olympics. With unprecedented success at team events such as the

Thomas Cup and Badminton Asia Championships, along with dominance at the Commonwealth Games and breakthroughs at the Asian Games, the country has had plenty to celebrate.

Can the tricolour nation carry all that momentum into the Paris Olympics and produce a

record-breaking medal haul? That's the question.

For only the second time since badminton debuted as a competitive sport at the 1992 Summer Games in Barcelona, India will have as many as seven players across four out of five categories. Led by two-time Olympic medallist P V Sindhu (women's



FOR MORE
STORIES

singles), the squad has H S Prannoy and Lakshya Sen (men's singles), Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty (men's doubles), and Ashwini Ponnappa and Tanisha Crasto (women's doubles).

All eyes on Sat-Chi

A major reason for India's recent achievements has been the rise of the men's doubles pair of Satwik and Chirag.

Under the guidance of Denmark's Mathias Boe, who himself had a highly successful career as a doubles player, Satwik and Chirag have checked all the boxes before Paris. The pair played a significant role in the country's historic Thomas Cup triumph in 2022, as in the past, it was mostly doubles where India would always have a weak link in team competition.

Not only has the pair been consistent on the BWF World Tour, clinching titles from the Super 100 to the Super 1000 level, but it has also been to places where no other Indian men's doubles team has gone before: a World Championships bronze, an Asian Games gold, an Asian Championships title, and, to top it all, the World No. 1 ranking too.

Men's doubles, arguably, is the toughest category in the sport right now, with every pair in the Top 10 almost at the same level. Therefore, despite being World No. 3, Satwik and Chirag can't afford to be complacent in Paris, where in the group stage, every game of every match could make a difference. The duo had missed qualification for the knockout stage in Tokyo after a three-way tie in the group stage was settled based on the difference between the number of games won and lost, where the Indians finished third among four pairs.

Out of Satwik-Chirag's two titles this year, one, the French Open, was clinched at the same venue that will be used for the Olympics. The duo will aim to replicate that run and will be India's biggest medal hope in badminton.

Tough challenge in singles

India's three Olympic medals in badminton have come from singles:

Saina Nehwal (bronze in London 2012) and Sindhu (silver in Rio de Janeiro 2016 and bronze in Tokyo 2021). However, it is going to be an extremely tough task to keep that streak going.

The 29-year-old Sindhu (**below**) has not looked at her imperious best since sustaining a stress fracture on her left ankle during the Commonwealth Games in 2022. However, factors such as training under Indian badminton legend Prakash Padukone, her experience from the last two campaigns, and a favourable draw could help her make another deep run despite the lack of form.

Prannoy, 31, and Lakshya, 22, are set to make their Olympic debuts, and their qualification journeys could not have been more different. For Prannoy, 2023 was the season of his life where he bagged his maiden title on the BWF World Tour, a bronze medal at the World Championships, and a historic bronze at the Asian Games, but 2024 has been a nightmare with health problems and a tremendous loss of form.

Commonwealth Games gold medallist Lakshya struggled for most of the last year and even lost to Kidambi Srikanth in the Asian Games trials, missing out on playing in the singles category in Hangzhou. However, semifinal finishes at the French Open and the All-England Open this year helped Lakshya bounce back in the qualification race for the Olympics and seal his spot.

Both Prannoy and Lakshya are capable of upsetting the best in business on their days, but a deep run at the Olympics will require consistency.

Surprise package

While all eyes were on youngsters Treasa Jolly and Gayatri Gopichand, a new partnership between the experienced Ashwini Ponnappa, 34, and Tanisha Crasto, 20, grew by leaps

and bounds in 2023. The duo made three consecutive finals at tournaments in India in December, and the qualification for Paris, which looked unlikely at one point, turned into a realistic possibility.

The further push provided by reaching the quarterfinals of the Malaysia Open and Madrid Masters eventually got the duo over the line.

Ashwini, who previously played at the Olympics in 2012 and 2016 with Jwala Gutta, has mentored Tanisha well, and the pair could be a surprise package for some higher-ranked teams in Paris.

Badminton will be held at the 8,000-seat Porte de la Chapelle Arena from July 27 to August 5.

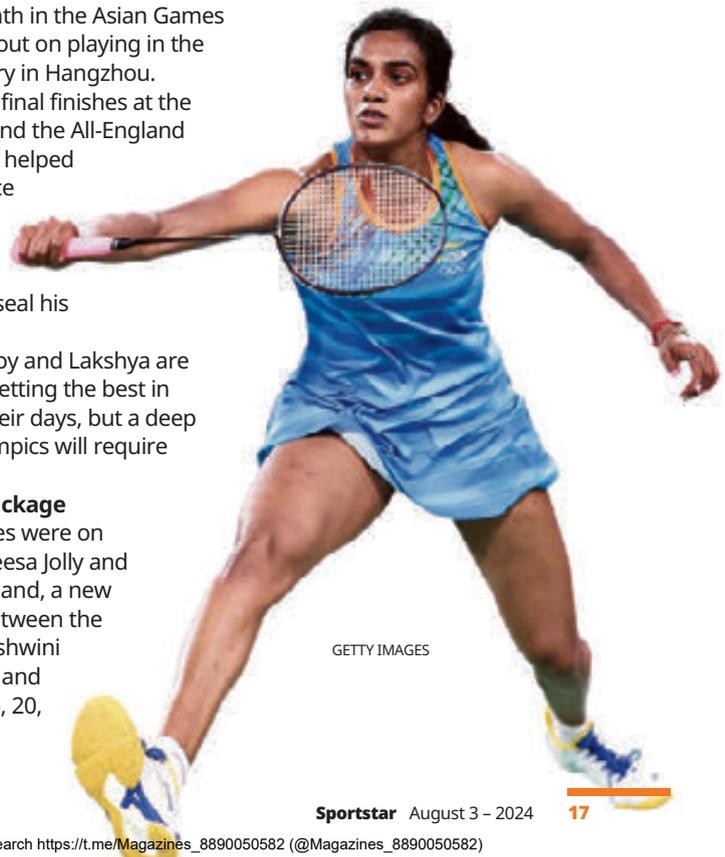


The team: Men: H. S. Prannoy, Lakshya Sen

Men's doubles: Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty

Women: P. V. Sindhu

Women's doubles: Ashwini Ponnappa and Tanisha Crasto



GETTY IMAGES

OUT TO AVENGE TOKYO HUMILIATION

India **earned a record 21 quotas** in shooting this Olympic cycle, sending the most athletes to France, tying with China among the 81 countries that qualified.

Santadeep Dey

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Lock 'n load! It's almost time to climb aboard the hype train to Châteauroux, where 21 Indian shooters will take on the mission of going up against 321 of the world's best to claim the ultimate prize — an Olympic medal.

The National Rifle Association of India (NRAI) announcing the squad way ahead of July 8 — the Paris 2024 entry deadline — felt like the calm before the storm. The shooters have had an acclimatisation and a hard-training camp at Volmerange-Les-Mines, followed by a two-week break while waiting for Judgement Day.

India has never had more shooters representing the country at the Olympics. Tokyo 2020 saw a previous best of 15. This time, among the 81 participating nations and the IOC (International Olympic Committee) Refugee Team, India will send the most shooters to France, tying with China, followed by the Republic of Korea, which has 16.

It is mostly a new-look squad except for familiar faces in pistol star Manu Bhaker and rifle wielders Aishwary Pratap Singh Tomar, Anjum Moudgil and Elavenil Valarivan. Having waded through the choppy waters of Tokyo, they will be up and running soon for a second shot at glory.

While those who have already performed on the biggest stage would believe that past experience will help them fare better this time, the debutants may be thankful for not having to carry any baggage from previous editions.

Let's do a quick recap. After returning empty-handed from Tokyo, Indian shooters experienced a curious mix of highs and lows in the subsequent years. Amid developments like numerous rule changes and overhauls in the coaching set-up, several prominent names such as Saurabh Chaudhary, Abhishek Verma, Apurvi Chandela, and Rahi Sarnobat faded from scorecards for different reasons. A change of guard brought newcomers like Sift Kaur Samra and Sarabjot Singh to the forefront.

Tough ask: World record holder Sift Kaur Samra will face her biggest challenge from reigning world champion Zhang Qiongyue in the women's 50m 3P event.

A. M. FARUQUI



Others, like Bhaker, entered recovery mode, deeply affected by the media scrutiny. However, she appears to have bounced back just in time.

One of the many factors that will work in favour of the Indians this time is the absence of Russia from the roster owing to the strict qualification restrictions in place after the latter invaded Ukraine.

Although the IOC stated that, as of July 13, 15 AINs (*Athlètes Individuels Neutres/Individual Neutral Athletes*)



One of the many factors that will work in favour of the Indians this time is the absence of Russia from the roster owing to the strict qualification restrictions in place after the latter invaded Ukraine.

with Russian passports had qualified for the Summer Games in Paris (with a maximum of 55 eligible to make it), none of them happens to be shooters.

At the 2021 Olympics, out of the 19 countries that managed to bag at least a medal, Russia finished third (2 gold, 4 silver, 2 bronze), behind China (4 gold, 1 silver, 6 bronze), and the United States (3 gold, 2 silver, 1 bronze).

Additionally, the current format of

the Olympic Selection Trials, devised by the selection committee at the NRAI, will be put to the test. While USA's Rio 2016 gold medallist in women's 10m air rifle, Ginny Thrasher, confirmed to former India international Shimon Sharif that the US Olympic trials were open to all athletes who wanted to sign up, India selected its five best shooters to fight for the Paris ticket among themselves. The move saw nine quota winners fail to make the final

squad.

The biggest surprise from this may have come in the men's 10m air rifle discipline, which saw former World Championship gold medallist Rudranksh Balasaheb Patil — only the second-ever Indian to win the title after Abhinav Bindra — miss out on a spot. An unexpected contender, Sandeep Singh, topped the trials in the same event. Previously caught in a doping scandal, Sandeep had competed in three ISSF (International



Primed for Paris: After a disappointing campaign at Tokyo 2021 and the subsequent media scrutiny, Manu Bhaker is now prepared for the challenges ahead. RITU RAJ KONWAR

Shooting Sport Federation) World Cups and an Asian Championship but never reached the finals. An Army man, he was part of the Tokyo reserves but didn't make the final team. His selection surprised many, with a former India coach admitting he hadn't heard much about Sandeep before the trials. Rudranksh didn't take the matter lightly either, urging the selectors to look at 'overall performances' in a letter addressed to the NRAI. However, his appeal fell on deaf ears.

In the shotgun squad, announced after the conclusion of the Lonato World Cup on June 18, Bhowneesh Mendiratta, India's first quota winner during the 2024 Olympic cycle, and two-time Olympian Mairaj Ahmad Khan are the notable misses. Shreyasi Singh, a shooter and member of the Bihar Legislative Assembly, was later included, after the ISSF approved the swap of one of

the women's pistol Olympic quota places for a berth in women's trap.

India's biggest challenge will come from the Chinese contingent, which features multiple Olympic and world champions. Sheng Lihao, who won a silver medal in 10m air rifle on his debut at Tokyo 2020, will return without teammate Yang Haoran. The 28-year-old will be replaced by the sensational Du Linshu, 21, who won

« Although it seems to be a pretty strong squad on paper, India will have the tough task of overcoming a mental block »

« India's biggest challenge will be the Chinese shooting team, featuring multiple Olympic and world champions »



The team Rifle

Men's 10m air rifle: Sandeep Singh, Arjun Babuta

Women's 10m air rifle: Elavenil Valarivan, Ramita Jindal

Women's 50m rifle 3 positions: Sift Kaur Samra, Anjum Moudgil

Men's 50m rifle 3 positions:

Aishwary Pratap Singh Tomar, Swapnil Kusale

10m air rifle mixed team:

Sandeep Singh-Elavenil Valarivan, Arjun Babuta-Ramita Jindal

Pistol

Men's 10m air pistol:

Sarabjot Singh, Arjun Cheema

Women's 10m air pistol:

Manu Bhaker, Rhythm Sangwan

Men's 25m rapid fire pistol: Anish Bhanwala, Vijayveer Sidhu

Women's 25m pistol: Manu Bhaker, Esha Singh

10m air pistol mixed team:

Sarabjot Singh-Manu Bhaker, Arjun Singh Cheema-Rhythm Sangwan

Shotgun

Men's trap: Prithviraj Tondaiman

Women's trap: Rajeshwari Kumari, Shreyasi Singh

Men's skeet: Anantjeet Singh Naruka

Women's skeet: Maheshwari Chauhan, Raiza Dhillon

Skeet mixed team: Anantjeet Singh Naruka-Maheshwari Chauhan

Here we go again: Aishwary Pratap Singh Tomar is one of the familiar faces in a mostly new-look squad. RITU RAJ KONWAR

five gold medals at the Junior World Championship in Cairo in 2022. Du will also feature in the men's 50m rifle 3 positions. In the 10m air pistol, world champions Zhang Bowen and Jiang Ranxin will give the Indians a tough run. Reigning world champion Zhang Qiongyue will be the biggest obstacle for world record holder Sift in the women's 50m 3P event.

India's shooting squad looks

formidable on paper, but they face a significant challenge: overcoming a persistent mental barrier that has often plagued their performances. Dr. Pierre Beauchamp, appointed by former NRAI president Raninder Singh after the disappointing results in Tokyo, aims to bolster their mental resilience.

His role is crucial in shielding them from pressure and external distractions, ensuring they perform their best.

The shooting events will be held at the Chateauroux Shooting Centre between July 27 and August 5.

EYES ON THE MAT AFTER A TOPSY-TURVY 12 MONTHS

Antim Panghal (women's 53kg) and Aman Sehrawat (men's 57kg) **have been seeded** fourth and sixth, respectively, for the Paris 2024 Olympics wrestling competition starting on August 5.

Jonathan Selvaraj

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LISTEN TO OUR
PARIS 2024
PREVIEW

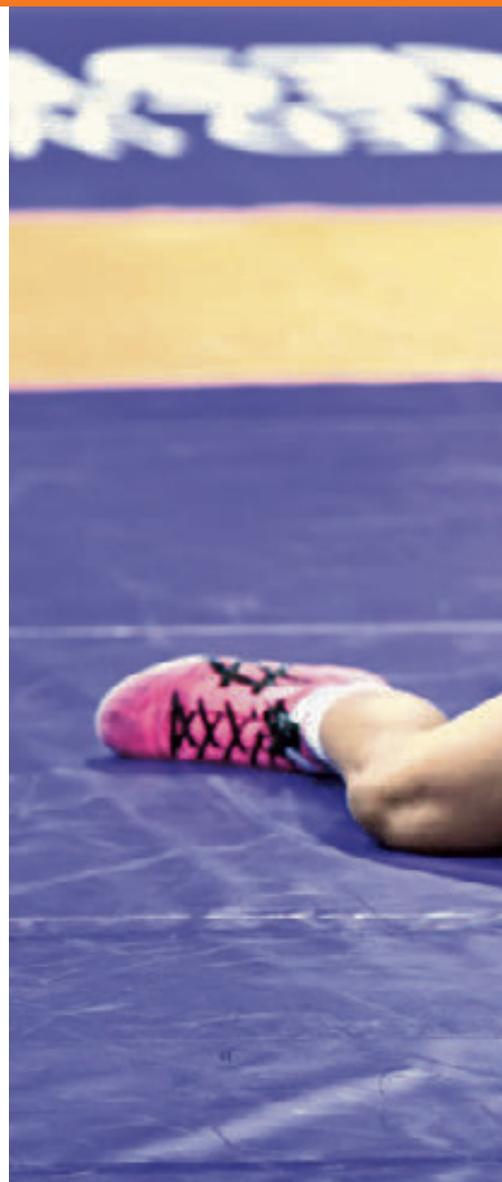
Indian women may have won just one Olympic medal in women's wrestling compared to the six won in the men's freestyle event, but the Paris Olympics could see a significant shift.

A record five women wrestlers — Vinesh Phogat (50kg), Antim Panghal (53kg), Anshu Malik (57kg), Nisha Dahiya (68kg), and Reetika Hooda (76kg) — have qualified for the Paris Olympics. Meanwhile, Aman Sehrawat (57kg) will be the sole representative among the men.

The significance of this record number of female qualifiers is heightened by the fact that three of these wrestlers were part of an unprecedented protest against the Wrestling Federation of India and its former



India's best prospects for a medal in Paris likely come from the two youngest members of the squad — Antim and Reetika.



president, Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, just a year ago on the streets of Delhi.

One of the protest leaders, Vinesh Phogat, stands out. At 29, she is the most senior member of the squad and has made history by qualifying for her third Olympic Games, having previously competed in Rio de Janeiro and Tokyo. Qualifying for the Olympics is a remarkable achievement, especially considering her tumultuous 2023, which involved leading the protest at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi and undergoing major surgery for a torn ACL ligament in her knee.

Vinesh Phogat has plenty of



Trailblazer: Vinesh Phogat is the first Indian woman wrestler ever to qualify for a third Olympics. GETTY IMAGES

Olympic experience, and she will need it. Competing in the women's 50kg category on August 6th and 7th, Vinesh faces a significant challenge. Her first task will be to make weight. Vinesh competed in the women's 48kg category at the Rio Olympics. Still, the difficulty of managing her weight led her to move up to the 50kg category in 2018 and then to the 53kg category the following year. While she won two world championship bronze medals in the 53kg class, even this weight cut sometimes left her disoriented — most notably at the Tokyo Olympics, where she crashed out early despite being one of the favourites to medal.

Unfortunately for Vinesh, with Antim Panghal qualifying in the women's 53kg category, she has to drop down to the 50kg category. This weight cut is even more challenging due to her surgery and subsequent recovery. She managed to make weight at the Asian Olympic qualifiers, but she was fortunate that her draw included wrestlers from Korea, Cambodia, and Kazakhstan — not the most challenging opponents.

Since then, Vinesh has competed in the Hungary Ranking Series, where she beat Olympic qualifier Alisson Cardozo of Colombia but was defeated by China's Jiang Zhu. She also participated in the Grand Prix of



The team

Aman Sehrawat: Men's freestyle 57kg

Vinesh Phogat: Women's 50kg

Anshu Malik: Women's 57kg

Nisha Dahiya: Women's 68kg

Reetika Hooda: Women's 76kg

Antim Panghal: Women's 53kg



History beckons: At 22, Anshu Malik will become one of India's youngest two-time Olympians when she steps on the mat in Paris. GETTY IMAGES

Spain, where she won a morale-boosting gold medal by defeating Pan American champion and Paris qualifier Yusneylis Guzman of Cuba.

Even if Vinesh manages to make weight in Paris, it will only be the first hurdle cleared. The women's 50kg category will be highly competitive at the Olympics. As a relatively recent entrant in this weight class during this Olympic cycle, Vinesh will go in unseeded. Japan's Yui Susaki will be the frontrunner to win gold, while China's Feng Ziqi and Ukrainian-born Azerbaijani female wrestler, and four-time Olympic medallist, Mariya Stadnik are also among the top contenders.

At 22, Anshu will become one of India's youngest two-time Olympians when she steps on the mat in Paris.

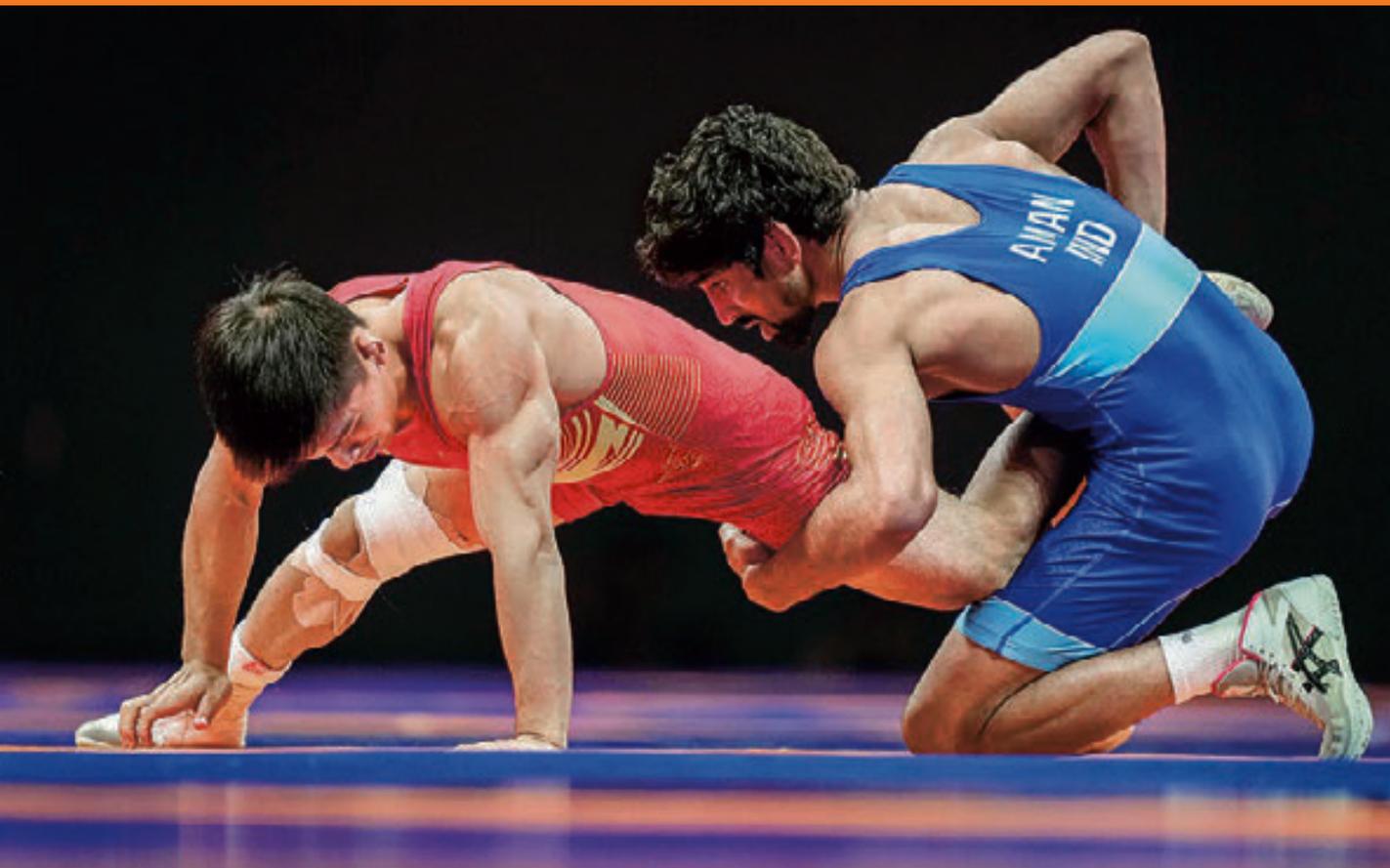
Despite dealing with a shoulder injury sustained at the Hungary Ranking Series last month, Anshu — a former world silver medallist — will be in contention for a medal in the women's 57kg category on August 8 and 9.

A four-week training stint in Japan earlier this year seemed to have an immediate impact on her speed, as seen at the Asian Olympic qualifier and the Hungary Ranking Series, where she beat the 2023 world silver medallist Anastasia Nichita 6-5. However, a 12-1 loss to China's Olympic qualifier, Kexin Hong, in the final serves as a reminder that there is still work to be done. The 57kg category is packed with elite competitors, including Japan's Tsugumi Sakurai, who will be eyeing her maiden Olympic title, and USA's Helen Maroulis, who hopes to reclaim the gold she won in 2016. Four-time world medallist Odunayo Adekuroye of Nigeria, who defeated Anshu in the finals of the 2022 Commonwealth Games, is another

significant threat.

India's best prospects for a medal in Paris likely come from the two youngest members of the squad — Antim and Reetika. At 19 years old, Antim will be the youngest member of the Indian wrestling contingent. Given her competition in the women's 53kg category on August 7th and 8th and her pedigree, she is well-placed to return with a medal.

Antim is one of only two Indian wrestlers to be seeded — the other being Aman in the men's freestyle — meaning she will likely avoid the gold medal favourite, Akari Fujinami of Japan. In 2022, Antim became the first Indian woman to win gold at the Junior World Championships. She also benefits from the withdrawal of Russian and Belarusian wrestlers from the Olympics, as neither Natalia Malysheva of Russia, whom Antim narrowly defeated at the 2023 World Championships, nor Vanesa Kaladzinskaya, who beat Antim in the semifinals of the 2023 Worlds, will be competing. While the field has



Gearing up for action: Out of the six Indian wrestlers who have qualified for the Paris Olympics, Aman (in pic) and Antim are the only ones seeded due to their ranking points.^{PTI}

thinned somewhat, the 53kg category still presents challenges. Sweden's Jonna Malmgren recently defeated Antim while China's Olympic silver medallist Qianyu Pang and Ecuador's Lucia Guzman, who nearly stunned Fujinami at last year's World Championships, will also be strong contenders.

If Antim's field is opening up perfectly for her, Reetika isn't overly concerned about the competition in the women's 76kg category on August 10 and 11. The 21-year-old became the first Indian woman to win gold at the U-23 World Championships last year and has been on an impressive run since, losing just one international match since that competition. Among the Indian contenders for Paris, Reetika

has wrestled more prospective opponents than anyone else over the past year. Of the 15 possible opponents, she's faced seven and beaten six, including the USA's Kennedy Blades, who defeated 2020 Olympic silver medallist Adeline Gray in the USA trials. Her only loss came by one point against 2023 World bronze medallist Tatiana Renteria of Colombia. While Japan's Yuka Kagami and Kyrgyzstan's Aiperi Kyzy — the 2023 World gold and silver medallists — are favourites for the top podium spots in Paris, Reetika remains a formidable contender.

Despite qualifying for the Olympics in the final qualification tournament in Istanbul, neither

Aman nor Nisha will be considered favourites to make the podium in the men's 57kg freestyle category on August 8 and 9 and the women's 68kg category on August 5 and 6, respectively.

Aman won gold at the U-23 World Championships in 2022 but has struggled to fill the shoes of Tokyo silver medallist Ravi Dahiya. He lost early to Zelimkhan Abakarov of Albania at last year's World Championships and was beaten by technical superiority (10-0) by Gulomjon Abdullaev of Uzbekistan. Both of these opponents have qualified for Paris. Indeed, Aman has yet to defeat any of his 15 opponents in Paris.

« Among Indian contenders for Paris, Reetika has faced the most prospective opponents over past year »



REVVING UP FOR THE KNOCKOUT PUNCH

India may have achieved less boxing quotas than in Tokyo 2020, but the **quality of the team** remains high.

Y. B. Sarangi

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Indian boxing experienced a dramatic qualifying period before securing six quota places for Paris 2024. After the male boxers disappointed in the first two qualifying events — the Hangzhou Asian Games and the first World qualifying tournament in Busto Arsizio — the High Performance Director, Bernard Dunne, resigned. Another big blow was the cancellation of the women's

57kg quota place following Parveen Hooda's suspension due to her whereabouts failure.

However, the situation improved when former World Championships silver medallist and Commonwealth Games champion Amit Panghal (51kg) and current Worlds bronze medallist Nishant Dev (71kg), secured quota places. Jaismine Lamboria, too, reclaimed the 57kg berth in the second World qualifying event in Bangkok in June.

India fielded a solid team of six boxers, with women outnumbering

the men for the first time. While the total number of quotas is less than the nine achieved for Tokyo 2020, the quality of the team remains high.

World champions Nikhat Zareen (50kg) and Lovlina Borgohain (75kg), along with Asian under-22 champion Preeti Pawar (54kg), who secured their quota places at the Asian Games in October last year, had ample time to prepare well.

Nikhat is determined to make her Olympic debut memorable. She has been in fine form since winning her second consecutive World title in

Packing a punch: World champions Nikhat Zareen (50kg) and Lovlina Borgohain (75kg) will spearhead India's boxing contingent. A. M. FARUQUI

Delhi and a bronze in the Asian Games last year. Her impressive performance in 2024, including a silver in the Strandja Memorial tournament, and a gold medal in the Florda Cup, underscores her enviable track record.

She may face tough competition from several strong boxers in her weight class, including 2020 Olympic silver medallist and current European champion Buse Naz Cakiroglu, European Games bronze medallist Giordana Sorrentino and World and Olympic medallist Ingrid Valencia.

There are also Worlds bronze medallist Yasmine Moutaqui, Asian Games champion Wu Yu, silver medallist Chuthamat Raksat, and three-time Worlds medallist Nazym Kyzaibay.

Lovlina, the lone Indian boxer to medal in Tokyo, has shown significant improvement since

switching from 69kg to 75kg. Her achievements in the last one year — that includes a silver medal at the Asian Games and a bronze at the Grand Prix 2024 in the Czech Republic — should motivate her for a second consecutive Olympic medal.

In Lovlina's weight class, she may contend with formidable opponents such as Worlds bronze medallist Davina Michel, European Games champion Aoife O'Rourke, World champion Khadija El-Mardi, Asian Games gold medallist Li Qian, Commonwealth Games champion Tammara Thibeault and two-time Worlds medallist Atheyna Bylon.

Promising southpaw Preeti, who impressed in the World championships and went on to secure a bronze in the Asian Games and a gold in the Asian under-22 championships, has excelled due to her strong work ethic.

Preeti may face tough rivals such as European Games champion Stanimira Petrova, former World champion Hatice Akbas, Asian Games champion Pang Chol-mi, Olympic bronze medallist Huang Hsiao-wen, Worlds silver medallist

Yeni Arias and two-time Worlds medallist Jutamas Jitpong.

Commonwealth Games bronze medallist Jaismine, who failed miserably in the Asian Games and the first World qualifier in the 60kg weight class, showed massive improvement by switching to 57kg on short notice and reclaiming the quota India had lost due to Parveen's suspension.

Olympic bronze medallist and World champion Irma Testa, Commonwealth Games champion Michaela Walsh, European Games gold winner Amina Zidani, Asian Games gold medallist Lin Yu-Ting, silver medallist Karina Ibragimova and Olympic silver medallist Nesthy Petecio will pose immense challenges in the 57kg weight class.

After fighting for a spot on the Indian team, Panghal (**in blue, below**), who bagged the Strandja Memorial gold this year, grabbed the lone opportunity and ensured his participation in the Olympics for a second time.

Panghal may be challenged by local favourite Billal Bennama, a three-time Worlds medallist,



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India has fielded a team of six boxers, with women outnumbering the men for the first time.



Booking the ticket: Nishant Dev was the first Indian male boxer to qualify for Paris Olympics. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

European champion Samet Gumus, Asian Games silver medallist Thitisan Panmod, World champion and former Olympic champion Hasanboy Dusmatov and Tokyo Olympic bronze medallist Saken Bibossinov.

Nishant, who showcased his prowess in the World Championships last year by recording a rare victory over a Cuban boxer, demonstrated his resilience by securing a berth in the second World qualifier after previous

unsuccessful attempts.

In his quest for a podium finish, Nishant may face formidable opponents such as European Games silver medallist Vahid Abasov, Asian Games champion Sewon Okazawa, 2023 World welterweight champion Asadkhujja Muydinkhujjaev, World light middleweight champion Aslanbek Shymbergenov, 2021 Worlds silver medallist Omari Jones and 2020 Olympics welterweight bronze medallist Aidan Walsh.

The Indian boxing squad, which trained in Saarbrücken, Germany, to acclimatise before the Games, hopes to see its preparations bear fruit in Paris.



The team

Men: Amit Panghal (51kg), Nishant Dev (71kg)

Women: Nikhat Zareen (50kg), Preeti Pawar (54kg), Jaismine Lamboria (57kg), Lovlina Borgohain (75kg).

Dates: July 27 onwards.



» OLYMPICS BUMPER PREVIEW – HOCKEY

Bouncing back: India's men's hockey team rallied from a two-goal deficit to beat Malaysia 4-3 in the Asian Champions Trophy 2023 final at Chennai's Mayor Radhakrishnan Stadium. M. VEDHAN

SELF-AWARE INDIA GEARS UP IN BID FOR OLYMPIC GLORY

Under head coach Craig Fulton, the men's hockey team has shifted from emphasising attack **to also prioritising defence,** while incorporating more flexibility.

Y. B. Sarangi

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Following the Indian men's hockey team's historic bronze medal win at the Tokyo Olympics in 2021, goalkeeper P.R. Sreejesh's unique celebration became an iconic moment amid the exhilarating

celebrations at the Oi Hockey Stadium. Now, three years later, such cherished moments are preserved as picture galleries in phones and on digital platforms.

Eleven members of that team, which ended the country's 41-year

wait for a medal, are now part of India's next Olympic campaign in Paris. They fully understand the drastic changes the team has undergone in the past year and recognise that their journey starts anew from zero.



One for the album: Goalkeeper P.R. Sreejesh perched atop the goalpost at the Oi Hockey Stadium in Tokyo was an iconic moment in India's first hockey medal win at the Games in 41 years.

GETTY IMAGES

While it is not unreasonable for die-hard Indian fans to expect a second consecutive medal from the national team in Paris, it is crucial to consider the changed scenario and fresh challenges.

Under head coach Craig Fulton, the team decided to shift from emphasising attack to also prioritising defence, while incorporating more flexibility.

This was a significant challenge. The team, which secured direct qualification by winning the Asian Games gold in 2023, has shown decent results in the build-up phase this year against some top teams in gruelling assignments across the globe.

In the Bhubaneswar and Rourkela legs of the FIH Pro League in February, India beat Spain twice, won and lost against the Netherlands once each, went down

against Australia twice, and defeated Ireland twice.

In the Test series in Perth in April, India lost all five matches to Australia but put up a close fight in some.

The Pro League matches in May in Antwerp and London saw India beat Argentina twice, suffering two losses apiece to Belgium, Germany, and Great Britain.

Again, some of these matches were really close affairs.

"The first phase was all geared around creating squad depth, so we had enough depth to cover all positions. And remember, I've only been here for over a year, and my first assignment was to qualify in three months," says Fulton.

"We had to move very quickly to try and select a team, understand how I would like to play, give players

opportunities to play that style, and then pick a tournament team."

Such changes took time, as the individuals needed to know their roles and how they fit into the structure. Players switching roles from one position to another were also critical.

"You have to put that in mentally first, and then when it happens, it's not such a big thing. It's all based around principles of play, and then you create confidence and trust through that."

Hardik Singh, a key midfielder, explains how it works. "Here, we are more into details. Now I feel that we have an advantage when (suppose) we go to the Olympic quarterfinals. In the last two minutes, we know what we are going to do," says Hardik.

The squad has improved since the Asian Games, featuring a blend of youth and experience. Five debutants (Sukhjeet Singh, Sanjay, Abhishek, Rajkumar Pal, and Jarmanpreet Singh) join veterans Sreejesh and Manpreet Singh, who are approaching their fourth Olympics. Fulton is pleased with the well-rounded squad.

With competition getting tougher each year and any top side capable of beating each other, India's depth of experience could be crucial in crunch situations at the historic Yves-du-Manoir Stadium, the main venue of the 1924 Olympics in Paris.

In addition to experience, a leadership group comprising Sreejesh, Harmanpreet Singh, Manpreet, Hardik, Vivek Sagar Prasad, and Mandeep Singh plays a crucial role in handling tactics and communication, relaying this to the rest of the team.

Having recently played against most teams in Pool B, the Indian side knows where it stands and what it

« Having recently faced most sides in Pool B, the Indian team knows what it takes to reach the knockout stage »



Change at the helm: Craig Fulton, who has nearly 25 years of coaching experience, replaced Graham Reid as the coach of the Indian men's hockey team last year. **K. MURALI KUMAR**

needs to do to reach the knockout stage. Fulton acknowledges that the team is yet to reach its peak fitness and is focused on improving its defence inside the circle to concede fewer penalty corners. "We do well for certain periods, and then we make some mistakes that cost us. That's what we're trying to eliminate."

To improve further, the team will seek help from South African mental conditioning coach Paddy Upton to handle unexpected situations. "It's always about creating that inner belief within the team, having a set goal, knowing your role, and being able to cope when it's not going your way," says Fulton.

In the final weeks of preparation after the Bengaluru camp, the team will play matches against strong opponents, including the Netherlands and Malaysia in the Netherlands, and Great Britain and Germany after moving into the Games Village on July 20. It will then face New Zealand in their Olympic

opener on July 27.

India's last two pool matches against the formidable Belgium and Australia may pose great challenges. Records against these teams (eight wins, seven draws, and 33 losses against Australia; eight wins, six draws, and 16 losses against Belgium) in the last 10 years do not favour India. Still, if the country gets favourable results against the other three sides — New Zealand, Argentina and Ireland — then it can enter the quarterfinals.

A lower-place finish in the pool can pit the team against another strong opponent, such as the Netherlands, Germany, or Great Britain, within a short period of time and impact its journey to the medal round.

As the Harmanpreet-led side aims for consecutive Olympic medals, a feat last achieved by India 52 years ago, it is aware of the extraordinary challenges it must overcome. "To make the top three or the semis, you've got to be doing the right things at the right time. That's why I say it's going to be tight, but it's nice to have players that have gone through that," says Fulton.

The coming weeks will reveal how well India rises to the ultimate challenge in the French capital.



The team

Goalkeepers: P.R. Sreejesh;

Defenders: Jarmanpreet Singh, Amit Rohidas, Harmanpreet Singh, Sumit, Sanjay;

Midfielders: Rajkumar Pal, Shamsher Singh, Manpreet Singh, Hardik Singh, Vivek Sagar Prasad;

Forwards: Abhishek, Sukhjeet Singh, Lalit Kumar Upadhyay,

Mandeep Singh, Gurjant Singh; **Alternate athletes:** Nilakanta Sharma, Jugraj Singh, Krishan Bahadur Pathak.

Main opponents: Australia, Belgium, Argentina, Netherlands, Germany, Great Britain

Dates: Group B (Belgium, India, Australia, Argentina, New Zealand and Ireland): India vs New Zealand (July 27), India vs Argentina (July 29), India vs Ireland (July 30), India vs Belgium (August 1), India vs Australia (August 2); Quarterfinals (August 4), Semifinals (August 6), Final (August 8).

» OLYMPICS BUMPER PREVIEW – TABLE TENNIS



CLOSING ON SLICE OF HISTORY

India's table tennis team for Paris 2024 includes eight players, with a reserve each for men and women, **doubling their previous largest** Olympic contingent.

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HISTORIC.

Even before India's largest table tennis contingent checks into the Olympic Village, that's the one-word summation of its Paris 2024 campaign.

It's going to be a historic fortnight for more reasons than one.

India's men and women have qualified for the team championship at the Olympics for the first time since table tennis became an Olympic sport in 1988.

India's table tennis team for Paris 2024 includes eight players, including a reserve each in men and women, doubling the previous largest contingent of Indian paddlers at the Olympics.

Manika Batra will be the second Indian paddler to compete in three

Leading from the front: Experienced campaigners Sharath Kamal and Manika Batra will spearhead India's challenge in table tennis. PTI

Olympics. A. Sharath Kamal will join a select group of Indian athletes, including Leander Paes, Mahesh Bhupathi, Abhinav Bindra, and Karni Singh, who have participated in five Olympic editions.

The fact that Sharath has been

Fine form: Ahead of the Olympics, Sreeja Akula became the first Indian to win a WTT Contender singles title after defeating Ding Yijie of China 4-1 in Lagos (Nigeria) last month.

GETTY IMAGES



asked to be India's flag-bearer at the opening ceremony is the perfect icing on the cake. It's undoubtedly a historic occasion for Indian table tennis, which, until recently, had its sights set only on Commonwealth Games glory.

However, as the Indian players boarded a plane to Germany for a week-long camp en route to Paris, none appeared in a celebratory mood. Instead, they wore a determined look, eager to prove that they "belong" at the Olympics. This determination reflects the aspirations of 21st-century Indian athletes. Should fans hope for at least one Indian to finish on the podium? You can hope, but it comes with a caveat.

Let's not get ahead of ourselves, but the Indian table tennis contingent is certainly aspiring to make its mark, continuing the good work from Tokyo three years ago. In Tokyo, Sharath surpassed the round of 64 and challenged the legendary Ma Long of China before bowing out in the round of 32. Manika also reached the round of 32, becoming the first Indian female paddler to win two matches at the Olympics. This time, both Sharath and Manika,

along with Harmeet Desai and Sreeja Akula, are aiming to reach at least the round of 16 in singles, if not the quarterfinals. In the team championships, both groups are determined to advance past the pre-quarterfinals and reach the quarterfinals.

"Once you reach the quarterfinals, anything can happen," says Sharath. Everyone knows that there will be no easy matches. The draw will have a huge impact, and the Indian men hope they won't be pitted against mighty China early on. Meanwhile, due to their higher rankings, Manika and Sreeja are unlikely to face China before the round of 32.

The draws for all events will take place on July 24, just three days before the team championship starts.

This will give the players and head coach Massimo Costantini, reappointed after six years, time to strategize. Costantini has had to deal with a controversy that erupted soon after he formally took charge for his third stint.

A revolt by all four female paddlers led to the women's assistant coach being forced to



Men's team: Sharath Kamal, Harmeet Desai, and Manav Thakkar; Reserve player: G. Sathiyam

Men's singles: Sharath Kamal and Harmeet Desai

Women's team: Manika Batra, Sreeja Akula, and Archana Kamath; Reserve player: Ayhika Mukherjee

Women's singles: Manika Batra and Sreeja Akula

withdraw midway through the preparatory camp in Bengaluru in June. However, this has not resulted in a compromised team environment. In that sense, history will not repeat itself from Tokyo, where Manika chose to play her matches without the then national coach to advise her.

The Indian contingent seems focussed on making history at the upcoming Games, aiming to improve upon their performance in Tokyo. Can they do it? Love-all, play!

NEERAJ IN FOCUS AHEAD OF PARIS SHOWDOWN

India is sending 30 track and field athletes to the Paris Olympics – its **largest contingent yet** in any discipline – but the star javelin thrower will be the centre of attention.

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Indian sports fans should keep Neeraj Chopra's adductor muscle in their thoughts and prayers over the coming weeks.

The 25-year-old reigning Olympic champion in the men's javelin throw has been battling recurring issues with his hip and groin over the past couple of years and plans to seek medical advice post the Paris Olympics.

Neeraj has competed just three times this year and opted out of competition following the Paavo Nurmi Games in Finland as a precautionary measure after his adductor began acting up again.

One hopes that the troublesome muscle just stays intact until the evening of August 8 at the Stade de Paris. By then, Neeraj will be done with his men's javelin competition at the Paris Olympics and, hopefully, will be wearing a second Olympic medal around his neck.

India is sending 30 track and field athletes to the Paris Olympics — its largest contingent yet in any discipline — but Neeraj will be the centre of attention, regardless of his not-so-perfect build-up.

Point of concern: Neeraj Chopra has been battling recurring issues with his hip and groin over the past couple of years and plans to seek medical advice post the Paris Olympics. K. R. DEEPAK



As the only Indian athlete to win an Olympic gold medal, he remains the country's best prospect for another podium finish.

Injury concerns aside, what's important is how well he can cope with the pressure. At the Tokyo Games, he wasn't anywhere near Germany's Johannes Vetter, who was shooting 90-plus-metre throws



The team

Men

3000m steeplechase: Avinash Sable

Javelin throw: Neeraj Chopra, Kishore Jena

Shot put: Tajinderpal Singh Toor

Triple jump: Praveen Chithravel, Abdulla Aboobacker

High jump: Sarvesh Kushare

20km race walk: Akshdeep Singh, Vikash Singh, Paramjeet Singh Bisht

4x400m relay: Muhammed Anas, Muhammed Ajmal, Amoj Jacob, Santhosh Kumar Tamilarasan, Rajesh Ramesh, Mijo Chacko Kurian

Race walk mixed marathon:

Suraj Panwar

Long jump: Jeswin Aldrin

Women

400m: Kiran Pahal

3000m steeplechase and 5,000m: Parul Chaudhary

100m hurdles: Jyothi Yarraji

Javelin throw: Annu Rani

4x400m relay: Jyothika Sri Dandi, Subha Venkatesan, Vithya Ramraj, MR Poovamma, Prachi

20km race walk and race walk mixed marathon: Priyanka Goswami

5000m: Ankita Dhyani

almost at will. Neeraj entered the competition having made only the fourth-best throw of the year.

This time there is no Vetter — his season ended due to a recurring elbow injury — but Neeraj is still not the automatic favourite. His best effort this year — 88.36m — is behind that of Max Dehning (90.20m), Jakub Vadlejch (88.65m),

and Julian Weber (88.37m). Vadlejch also had a win over Neeraj at the Doha Diamond League earlier this season.

It's fair to say that the javelin competition at the Paris Games will be very evenly matched. Dehning hasn't come close to replicating his 90m throw, while both Vadlejch and Weber are less than half a metre

ahead of the Indian.

There is no shortage of challengers either further down the field, with 13 athletes crossing the 85m mark this season.

Pakistan's Arshad Nadeem — a silver medallist at the Budapest World Championships — has taken part in only one competition this season after coming back from an injury last year and placed fourth at the Paris Diamond League with a throw of 84.21m.

Should Neeraj be anywhere close to full fitness during qualification rounds or on the day of the finals, he will always back himself to come out on top.

However, since he has to first

make the finals, he will need to qualify quickly to stay injury-free for the final.

Apart from Neeraj, India will be looking to qualify as many athletes as possible into the finals of their respective events.

At the Tokyo Olympics, only two athletes — Neeraj and discus thrower Kamalpreet Kaur — made it through the heats and/or qualification rounds. This time, many more are expected to advance.

Top of the list would be 3000m steeplechaser Avinash Sable, who recently broke his own national record for the ninth time at the Paris Diamond League, clocking 8.09.91. With this time, the 29-year-old

became the 10th fastest in the world this year and ninth among his potential opponents at the Olympics.

There's a good chance Sable might improve on his best during the heats in Paris, just like he did in Tokyo. He may also be hurting after failing to qualify for the final of the Worlds in Budapest last year, where he was caught while trying to coast in the heats. It's unlikely he'll make the same mistake twice.

Should Sable make the final, it would be unwise to count him out of a historic podium finish. Reigning world and Olympic champion Soufiane El Bakkali of Morocco (season's best 8.09.40) is far from his best.

While Lamecha Girma of Ethiopia is well placed at 8.01.63, Sable will be keeping an eye on Abraham Kibiwot. The Kenyan took a surprise third place at the Budapest Worlds with a time of 8.11.98 — a time that Sable believes he can surpass.

However, Kenya has no shortage of fast runners, with 21-year-old Amos Serem (season's best 8.02.36) also among the favourites for a podium finish in Paris.

Other Indians looking to make the finals in Paris include the men's 4x400m relay team — comprising Rajesh Ramesh, Muhammed Anas, Muhammed Ajmal, and Amoj Jacob, who made a historic final at the 2023 World Championships while setting a new national record of 2.59.05.

This is the kind of time that could secure them an unprecedented final in Paris, even though they only clocked 3.03.23 at the Relay Worlds in the Bahamas.

While Anas and Ajmal are running close to their times from last year,



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Parul Chaudhary qualified for the finals at the 2023 World Championships in Budapest, setting a national record in 3000m steeplechase – 9:15.31s.



K. MURALI KUMAR

Amoj has been off the boil. Both he and Rajesh will need to hit their mark.

Among the other possible finalists are Parul Chaudhary in the women's 3000m steeplechase, women's javelin thrower Annu Rani, men's long jumper Jeswin Aldrin, men's shot putter Tajjinderpal Singh Toor, men's javelin thrower Kishore Jena, and either of the men's triple jumpers, Praveen Chithravel and Abdulla Aboobacker (**right**).

Parul qualified for the finals at the 2023 World Championships in Budapest, setting a national record — 9:15.31s. A similar performance can't be ruled out this time.

Annu (season's best 60.68m) may have only the 34th best throw of the year but can pull off the big throws when needed, as she did at the Asian Games last year, winning a surprise gold.



Chase master: Avinash Sable broke his own national record for the ninth time at the 2024 Paris Diamond League, clocking 8.09.91 in 3000m steeplechase. GETTY IMAGES

National record holder Jeswin is far from his personal best this year, with a season's best of 7.99m, but he's not carrying any injury concerns and will back himself to make the finals just as he did at last year's World Championships. The same is true for both Chithravel and Aboobacker.

While the latter touched the 17m mark for the first time since the 2022 Commonwealth Games, Chithravel was just two centimetres behind at the Inter State Championships in June. Anything close to that performance should see them make the finals in Paris.

Making the cut: Dhiraj Bommadevara became the first Indian recurve archer to qualify for the 2024 Paris Olympics by winning silver at the Asian Qualification Tournament in Bangkok last year. GETTY IMAGES



AIMING TO SNAP THE OLYMPIC HOODOO

Although India did not win team quotas in the qualifiers, it **secured berths** through world rankings due to performances in various elite archery events.

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The Indian archery contingent is excited that, after 12 years and for only the third time, the country has obtained men's and women's team quotas for the Paris

Olympics. They are keen to break the jinx in the quadrennial event, the only global competition where the country has yet to open its account.

Rigorous selection trials and numerous competitions kept the archers on their toes and made them battle-ready. They produced good results, including team medals for both men and women in the Asian Games in October and strong finishes in the World Cup stages.

Although India did not win team quotas in the qualifiers, it secured

berths through world rankings due to performances in various elite events.

With three men and three women in the fray, the country will field six athletes in individual competitions, in addition to competing in men's, women's, and mixed team events.

The recent form of the Indian recurve archers has been promising, earning medals in two of the three

Back in the game: Deepika Kumari, a former world number one, returned to the international arena after a 14-month break following the birth of her first child in 2022. GETTY IMAGES

World Cup stages this year. The male archers, B. Dhiraj (making his Olympic debut), Tarundeep Rai (in his fourth Olympics), and Pravin Jadhav (in his second Olympics), inspire confidence, and there is a noticeable difference in their approach to the mega event.

Dhiraj's average arrow score is 9.4, while Rai and Jadhav average 9.3 and 9.2, respectively. This season, all three achieved their career-best scores in a qualification round: Dhiraj with 693, Rai with 684, and Jadhav with 676 out of a maximum of 720. Although these scores are high, they aim to enhance their accuracy for greater consistency. Their upset win over the world champion Korean team in the World Cup Stage-1 final in Shanghai earlier this year shows that the Indians can challenge the best in the world.

Dhiraj also claimed an individual bronze and a mixed team bronze (with Bhajan Kaur) in the World Cup Stage-3 in Antalya. With plenty of experience and determination to change Indian archery's disappointing record, the trio has identified the roadblocks and is taking steps to write a different script at this Olympics.

The women's team, led by the experienced Deepika Kumari (who made a comeback after giving birth to her daughter two years ago and will compete in her fourth Olympics), and consisting of two debutants, Ankita Bhakat and Bhajan, is also eager to give its best.

The women archers' individual stats may not match those of the men. But some encouraging results — including Deepika's silver in Shanghai and Bhajan's mixed team bronze with Dhiraj, and the women's team and Ankita's fourth-place finishes in Antalya — give the team the confidence it needs ahead of the Olympics.

High-performance director



Sanjeeva Singh emphasises the importance of the process. "We are telling them a medal is an outcome. You have to ensure 100 percent process efficiency," says Sanjeeva, advising the archers to shoot fast to keep mental distractions at bay.

The archers are aware they need high scores and top ranks in the qualification round to get favourable draws and avoid facing archers from strong teams such as Korea, Turkey, Japan, Chinese Taipei, France, Italy, and Mexico in the initial rounds. India will eye the team events, where 12 countries will compete in each gender and 16 in the mixed team, as the draws will be shorter than the individual events, where 64 archers per gender will compete.

Paris has been a favourable venue for Indian archers, as they have won medals in each World Cup stage held in the French capital over the last three years.

"We are not comfortable in strong windy conditions because of the poundage (of bows) we are using.

But now the men's poundage has increased considerably. We are shooting with bows weighing 48 to 52 pounds. But the women's poundage is still less, 40 to 44. Luckily, in Paris, the wind will be similar to what we are practising with in Pune or Sonipat," says Sanjeeva.

For the Indians, it will be heartening to see their archers break a 52-year jinx in their 'lucky' city.



The team:

Men: B. Dhiraj, Tarundeep Rai, Pravin Jadhav; **Women:** Deepika Kumari, Ankita Bhakat, Bhajan Kaur.

Main opponents: Korea, Turkey, Japan, Chinese Taipei, France, Italy or Mexico.

Dates: July 25 onwards.



SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

» OLYMPICS BUMPER
PREVIEW – OTHER SPORTS

MIRABAI READY TO LIFT WEIGHT OF A NATION, AGAIN

While Mirabai Chanu is one of India's leading medal prospects for Paris, there are other athletes who will also **put up a strong fight** and potentially spring a few surprises.

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In the Paris Olympics, there are several disciplines in which India will be represented by just one or a few athletes. Some of them have a chance to win medals, while most will be competing to give their best in the biggest sporting event. Let's take a

look at the athletes in these disciplines.

Weightlifting

Mirabai Chanu (**pic, above**), who won a silver medal for India on the opening day of the Tokyo Olympics, will be competing in her third consecutive Games. Despite recent

injuries, she has recovered well from a hip injury she sustained during the Asian Games last year. She is determined to replicate her performance in the women's 49kg weight class in Paris.

In April, Mirabai totalled 184kg upon her return to competition at the

IWF World Cup after a five-month injury layoff. To secure a medal in the Olympics, she will need to lift more than 200kg. Although China's Hou Zhihui is a strong favourite for the gold, the competition for the remaining two medals is expected to be tough among four athletes: Mirabai, Thailand's Surodchana Khambao, the USA's Jourdan Elizabeth Delacruz, and Romania's Mihaela-Valentina Cambei, who are all capable of lifting around 200kg.

Mirabai's primary concern is to avoid further injuries to have a chance at winning her second Olympic medal on August 7.

Tennis

Indian tennis player Rohan Bopanna, a top-10 doubles star, will be a key attraction at Stade Roland Garros. Earlier this year, Bopanna, the oldest man to win a Grand Slam, triumphed at the Australian Open with partner Matthew Ebden. He has chosen Sriram Balaji as his partner, considering Balaji's expertise on clay courts and playing style, which may complement Bopanna's. Another member of the tennis squad is singles player Sumit Nagal, who has demonstrated good form in previous Grand Slam tournaments and has achieved a career-best world ranking of 71. Nagal has also secured his spot in the Olympics for the second time after winning the Heilbronn Challenger and reaching the final of another Challenger event in Perugia.

The Indians will be in action between July 27 and August 4.

Golf

India has four experienced golfers for the upcoming Olympics, including two men (Shubhankar Sharma and Gaganjeet Bhullar) and two women (Aditi Ashok and Diksha Dagar). Aditi, participating in her third Olympics, is expected to perform well after finishing fourth at the Tokyo Games. With seven professional titles and an Asian Games silver under her belt, she is determined to improve her performance and make history.

Diksha, a Deaflympics gold medallist and a two-time Ladies European Tour winner, will also rely on her experience from the Tokyo

Games to excel in the upcoming event. Sharma and Bhullar, both with multiple professional wins, are expected to adapt well to the competitive environment of the Games.

The competition will feature top stars such as Scottie Scheffler and Rory McIlroy among men and Nelly Korda and Lilia Vu among women. The men's event will commence on August 1, and the women's event will start on August 7.

Sailing

Vishnu Saravanan and Nethra Kumanan will take part in men's and women's one-person dinghy, respectively, in the waters of Marseille. Both will take part in their second Olympics. Races 1-10 are scheduled for August 1, while the medal race is on August 7.

Swimming

Srihari Natraj and 14-year-old girl Dhinidhi Desinghu have been selected to represent India under the universality quota. Srihari (men's 100m backstroke) will appear in his second Olympics, while Dhinidhi (women's 200m freestyle) is all set to make her debut. Their heats have been scheduled for July 28.

Equestrian

Anush Agarwalla, a member of the Asian Games gold medal-winning team and an individual bronze medallist in dressage, will be the lone rider from the country. His event is on July 30, 31, and August 4.

Rowing

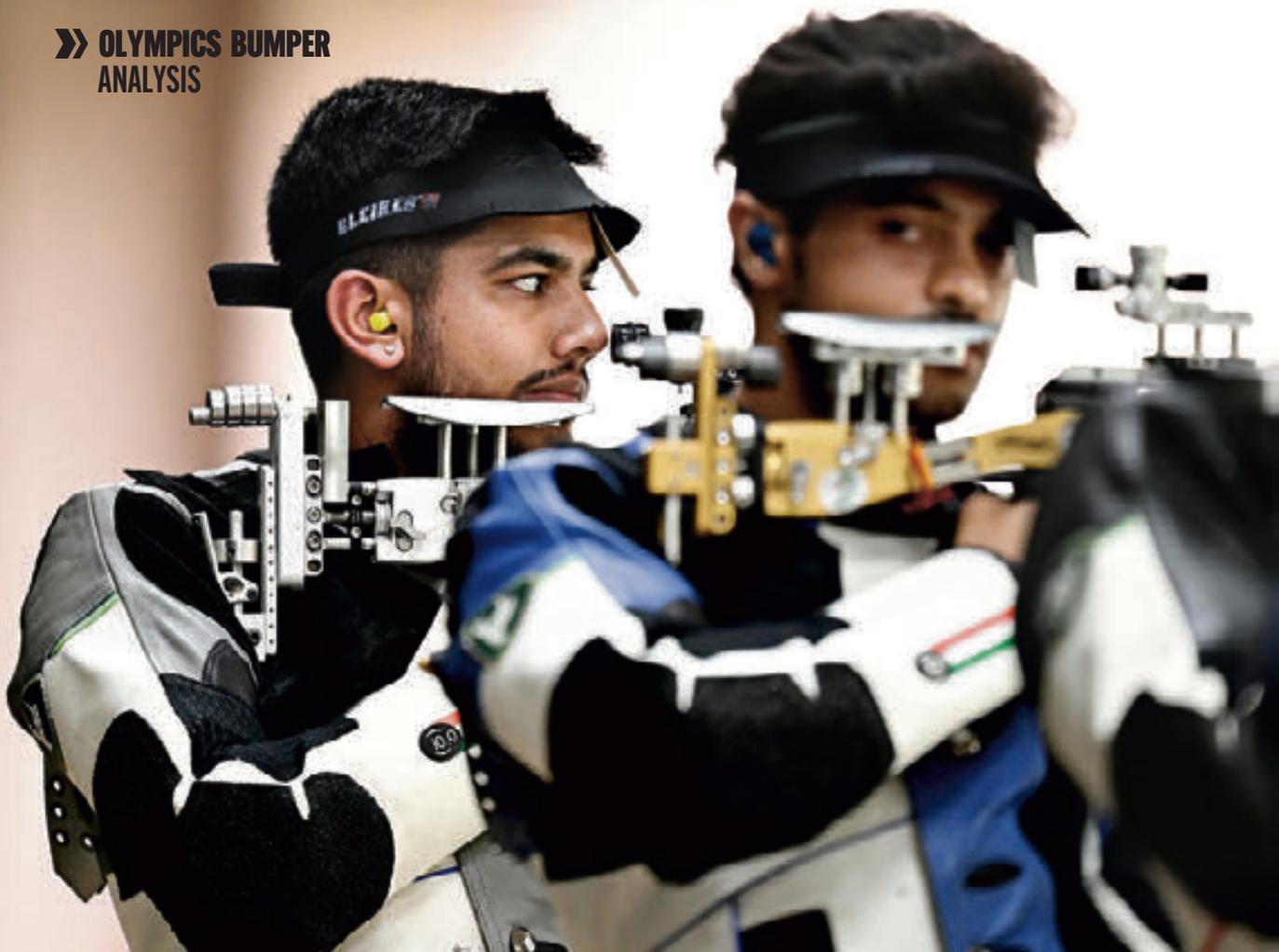
Balraj Panwar will be the only Indian representative in rowing. He will compete in the men's single sculls category from July 27 onwards.

Commonwealth Games silver medallist, Tulika Maan, competing in women's +78kg, will be the solitary Indian judoka in the Games. She will be seen in action on August 1.



Age no bar: Rohan Bopanna became the oldest man to win a Grand Slam title as he and partner Mathew Ebden lifted the Australian Open men's doubles title in January this year. AP

« Anush Agarwalla will represent the country in the dressage event after pipping close contender Shruti Vora »



THE CAPAPIE EFFECT

The game-changing impact of modern shooting suits has led to a **significant rise** in global air rifle scores, sparking debates about the influence of technology on the sport.

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Back in the summer of 2019, at his academy in Dortmund, German coach Heinz Reinkemeier was overseeing a practice session by the Indian junior rifle team when he was astonished by the scores that the young shooters were posting.

Reinkemeier, regarded as one of the finest minds in air rifling and the former coach of Abhinav Bindra, suspected that the impressive shooting may have something to do with their

attire. "I asked Elavenil Valarivan — who seemed to be about the same size and weight as me — if I could wear her jacket and shoot a few series myself," says Reinkemeier, in a conversation with *Sportstar*.

Using the old scoring system instead of the current decimal point one, he shot a remarkable 390 out of 400. His hunch proved correct.

"It's been nearly 40 years since I shot competitively, and despite my age and the time away from the sport, 30 out of my 40 shots landed inside the 10-point ring. I felt an incredible advantage," says Reinkemeier, who

Top gear: Capapie's technologically advanced jackets are worn by almost all shooters worldwide, including the likes of Aishwary Pratap Singh Tomar (left). RITU RAJ KONWAR

immediately asked his German students to use the same brand of jackets the Indians were using.

He also made a bold prediction. "I remember saying that scores in air rifle events were going to rise very high in the next few years."

How true he was.

Rapid improvement

As we approach the 2024 Olympics, the average scores in the prestigious 10m air rifle event have been steadily climbing, reaching levels that seemed impossible just a few years ago.

The world record scores in qualification rounds have surged to 637.9 for men and 636.3 for women, compared to 633.5 and 634 before the Tokyo Olympics.

At the ISSF World Cup in Munich this year, the final major competition before the Paris Olympics, the cutoff scores to reach the finals in the men's and women's 10m air rifle events were 632.6 and 632.5, respectively. This required shooters to average over 105.4 per series of 10 shots to make the finals.

In contrast, at the 2021 edition in Osijek, the last major event before the Tokyo Olympics, the final qualification scores were 627.7 for men and 628.2 for women, averaging 104.5 and 104.7 per series. At the Tokyo Olympics, the cutoff scores were 629.2 for men and 628.5 for women, averaging about 104.9 and 104.8 per series.

Although the difference of less than 1 point per series between Tokyo and Munich may not seem a lot, it has impacted the overall standings, leading to notable improvements in world shooting standards.

Those with Tokyo-level scores would have placed 31st in the men's event and 49th in the women's event at the Munich World Cup, far from making the finals. Coaches and

players anticipate even higher standards at the Paris Olympics.

Comparing these scores to the 2016 Olympics, where decimal scoring was first introduced in qualification rounds, the last finalist in the men's 10m rifle qualified with a score of 625.5.

"There's no margin for error currently. You need to be on top of your game and you also have to be lucky," says István Péni, who placed fifth in the men's 10m air rifle event at the Tokyo Olympics.

While improved training has contributed to higher scores, shooters and coaches agree that it's not the breakthrough factor. "Scores naturally go up over time with technological advancements and more knowledge of training, but the rise in the last five years in shooting has been extraordinary. It is undoubtedly because of the changes in suits," says Ginny Thrasher, gold medallist in the women's 10m air rifle competition at the Rio Olympics. "They have become stiff to a point where the results of people without a suit with the new material...are noticeably lower."

Thrasher backs her point by comparing air rifle scores to air pistol scores. At the Munich World Cup, the qualification score to make the final of the men's 10m air pistol event was 584, while for women it was 578.

At the World Cup in Osijek, the qualification scores were 580 and 578, respectively, whereas for the Tokyo Olympics, they were 578 for men and 577 for women.

"When you look at other events like air pistol between the same ranges, they don't have the same increase. This shows that suits are the dominant factor in the increase of scores since 2019," says Thrasher.

Differentiating factor

Unlike pistol shooters, competitors in the 10m air rifle events are permitted to wear specialised suits. "Shooting suits are like running cleats in track. You can run barefoot, but cleats make it more comfortable, help you run faster, and reduce the chance of injury. Our suits offer the same benefits in rifle shooting," says Thrasher.

The main function of the shooting jacket is to support the shooter's body. While this may seem like a no-brainer at face value, rifle shooters maintain static positions that can lead to injuries. "Staying in those positions for long periods is not healthy," says Joydeep Karmakar, who placed fourth in the 50m three-position event at the London Olympics and is now one of the top coaches in the sport. "I know many shooters who have had to undergo surgery on their back and neck due to long-term stress on those areas."

Reinkemeier further explains, "In rifle events, shooters lean back away from the target toward their heels, which is an unnatural position. Jackets were introduced to relieve stress on muscles, tendons, and bones. A properly fitting jacket supports the back and reduces the effort needed to hold that position."

While shooting jackets primarily reduce stress on the spine, they also provide critical stability for aiming at tiny targets, like the bullseye (10.9), which is about the size of a period at the end of this sentence in size 12 Times New Roman font. "Compared to regular sportswear, a good jacket reduces movement by about 80 to 90 per cent," says Reinkemeier. "The latest generation of jackets further cut that movement by an additional 10 to 20 per cent. If an old jacket allows for 30mm of movement per second on your rifle, the new ones

« The main function of a jacket is to support the shooter's body in static positions over long periods of time »



Tough act: Anjum Moudgil at the Olympics selection trials in Bhopal wearing a Capapie jacket. The increased stiffness of modern jackets makes the sport more forgiving for shooters. RITU RAJ KONWAR

reduce it to about 15 to 20mm. That's a tremendous advantage," adds Reinkemeier.

The jacket he is referring to is the Capapie NSG Top Line (**right, below**). Introduced by the Mumbai-based company Capapie Sports in 2018, it has become ubiquitous in elite shooting, entirely replacing previous favourites from Germany and Korea.

For Reinkemeier, it's easy to see why. "A shooting jacket is different from a regular one. The one made by Capapie has around 25 segments, each designed with specific materials for different purposes. For example, the elbow of the trigger arm has a rubber layer to improve grip against the abdomen. However, the most important parts are the stiff sections

in the lower back and the right flank of right-handed shooters. These areas provide maximum resistance to movement. These bands determine the jacket's strength and, combined with reinforced seams, create a sturdy framework. When the jacket is closed around the upper body, it forms a tube-like architecture that is hard to bend," explains Reinkemeier.

For rifle jacket manufacturers, the challenge has been to pass the ISSF's thickness and stiffness tests. According to the rules, all parts of the back — the segment that provides the maximum support — must have a maximum thickness of 2.5mm and a minimum stiffness of 3.0mm on ISSF's own measuring device.

Worldwide presence

For a long time, rifle suits were made of leather (**left**), which was later replaced by treated canvas. According to Nilesh Rane, the founder of Capapie, his company

pioneered a canvas-synthetic hybrid called Capapix that meets ISSF standards while providing improved stiffness compared to previous jackets. Capapix also offers bespoke tailoring to fit individual shooters perfectly. "The material is the most important factor. The quality, measurements, and individual shaping of Capapix are quite good," says Reinkemeier, whose opinion is shared by many.

In Tokyo, every medal winner in the men's and women's air rifle events wore a Capapix jacket, and that trend has only grown. "Today, 99% of athletes are using it, including shooters from China. If you don't wear it, you can't compete," says Bindra. The same jackets were worn by medallists at the 2022 and 2023 World Championships.

Bindra is no stranger to Capapix, having worn its jacket during the 2007 World Championships, where he won gold. But even he admits that there are significant differences in the jackets used today. "Back in 2007, it felt almost like wearing pyjamas. The material was very soft. Now, it's very rigid, but it still passes the testing standards, so you can't blame the manufacturer," says Bindra.

The increased stiffness of the jacket makes the sport more forgiving for shooters. Reinkemeier says, "It's like comparing a carbon fibre cycle to a metal one. If you could go 35 kmph on a metal bike, you might reach 40 kmph with the same effort on a carbon fibre one. Similarly, in the past, 80 to 90 percent of a shooter's effort went into maintaining position for maximum stability. Now it's probably closer to 70 percent, meaning 30 percent of their energy and focus can go towards other aspects of shooting."

Experience no longer required?

This means that experience no longer holds the same significance in contemporary shooting as it once did, with the average age of shooters dipping. In India alone, those who are consistently posting record scores are getting younger by the year. "One of the hardest aspects of air rifle shooting is developing a



Game of luck: "There's no margin for error currently. You need to be on top of your game and also have to be lucky," says István Péni, who placed fifth in the men's 10m air rifle event at the Tokyo Olympics. GETTY IMAGES

standing position that provides the most stability. It's not something that comes easily; it takes years to perfect," explains Karmakar.

"In the past, shooters had superior internal body position, where the architecture of their stance along with support from their jackets helped them remain stable. Now, it's the other way around: the jacket is like an exoskeleton, an outer shell controlling positioning from the outside. It's fairly clear that shooters





of today rely less on muscle memory and more on their jackets. However, if the scores are improving and following all the rules, then I'm not really sure what the problem is," Karmakar adds.

Péni who will compete in Paris after finishing fifth in the 10m air rifle event at Tokyo, remarks that this shift has narrowed the gap between shooters. "The new jacket technology has helped the second line of shooters catch up with the first. The gap between the top shooters and those who were once considered to be in the middle isn't nearly as pronounced as it used to be," he says.

As stability — once the defining factor among shooters — has

increased, Thrasher points out that other skills have become more important.

"Shooters all over the world have adapted well to the advancements and have quickly adopted the new technology. They understand that the current suits place less emphasis on perfect positions and more on technique and mental strength, so they train accordingly. A great athlete's mindset involves looking at changes positively and finding ways to make them work for them," she explains.

However, some believe the technology may have gone too far, reducing the skill aspect required in the sport. Bindra is among them. "What we're witnessing in shooting

All suited up: (R-L) India's Mehuli Ghosh and Ramita (first and third from right) compete with China's Han Jiayu and Huang Yuting in the final of the women's 10m air rifle event at the 2022 Asian Games, Hangzhou. GETTY IMAGES

right now isn't a healthy sign for the sport, to be very honest," he argues. "We are in a situation where an athlete can come in after just eight or nine months and score 630, suggesting that the element of skill and effort needed to reach a world-class level is somehow being bypassed."

"For any sport to do well, there has to be some level of uncertainty. There should be ups and downs throughout a competition, right? That is what makes sports inherently interesting. But today, you could shoot a 630 and still not make the top 15. It just gets so boring to watch. Every sport needs to strike a balance between technological support that enhances performance and the actual skill, resilience, and training of the athlete," he adds.

Technological doping?

Bindra compares the current scoring at the elite level to a T20 cricket match, where shorter boundaries and bigger bats allow batters to hit every ball for six. "If you

WORLD RECORD QUALIFICATION SCORES

**MEN
2024**

637.9

2020

633.5

**WOMEN
2024**

636.3

2020

634

look back a decade, a score of 10 or 9 on the final shot could mean the difference between winning and making it to the finals. It was neck-and-neck and interesting in that sense. But now, with scores like 636 and 637, that averages out to a little over 10.6 per shot, it's starting to feel more like a video game," says Bindra.

Reinkemeier adds that as long as the jackets are legal and available to all shooters, they will need to adapt. "Right now everyone is using Capapie jackets, so there's no real advantage. I think this is a step forward for everyone. The competition will remain as hard as before." But technique will become an important factor once again, feels Reinkemeier. "The one who has better triggering and control of nerves under pressure will be the winner."

There are some, though, who worry that the technological edge provided by the latest jackets might end up hurting the sport in the long run. Thrasher reveals that the cost of these custom-made jackets for elite shooters exceeds a thousand dollars each, creating an unavoidable financial burden for the shooters.

"At the lower levels it has turned into an arms race. Athletes who once competed with minimal investment can no longer do so. Those investing thousands on custom suits now have an insurmountable advantage. This raises concerns about the accessibility and future of our sport,"

« Abhinav Bindra wants balance between technological advancement and maintaining the integrity of the sport »

she says. Bindra says there is a precedent in international swimming that shooting might eventually have to follow. In 2008, after 94 per cent of races at the Beijing Olympics were won by swimmers in Speedo's patented LZR racer swimsuits, the international federation banned full-length bodysuits and instituted changes to fabric types. At that time, the 'super suits' were even labelled as a form of 'technical doping.'

Although Bindra isn't equating modern-day shooting with 'technical doping', he believes a balance must be struck. "I know that the technological aspects of these jackets aren't illegal right now. But I am fairly certain that if we switch back to the old ones, everyone will be shooting a lot more modest scores. It's not just me; many shooters, coaches, and officials are seriously thinking about this issue.

"I think it's an important thing that the administrators of the sport need to reconsider after the Paris Games. The question is — where do they want the sport to really go?"

What's the hype?



Reduces movement

By about 80 to 90 per cent, with newer jackets reducing it by an additional 10 to 20 per cent.



Reinforced areas

Present in the lower back and right flank for maximum resistance to movement.



Bespoke tailoring

Ensures optimal movement.



Meets ISSF standards

Maximum thickness of 2.5mm and minimum stiffness of 3.0mm.



Over 1000 dollars

The cost of custom-made jackets for elite shooters.



NEED FOR SPEED: THE EVOLUTION OF THE OLYMPIC SPRINT

Not many expected Usain Bolt to achieve the **world record of 9.58s in 100m** at the 2009 Worlds in Berlin, with some feeling that it came at least 20 years too early. Here's a look at the evolution of the Olympics sprint event.

Team Sportstar

When Coroebus, a cook, won the first recorded event at the Ancient Olympic Games in 776 B.C., one could imagine the crowd that rushed to embrace him. In those days, the athletes ran naked at Olympia in Greece, and Coroebus ran something like 200 yards on a sanded course to come up with the most glorious moment of his life. There is something fascinating about the sprint, for the 630-foot race, which roughly comes to 192 metres, or about a length of the stadium those days, was the lone event at the Olympiad, held every four years for some 13 editions. The race was called the 'stade' and the word stadium came from that.

Centuries later, when the modern Olympics came into being in 1896 in Athens, Greece, the first race in the Games was the 100m and American Francis Lane won the first heat, becoming the first man to win a race at the Olympics. Another American, Thomas Burke — basically a quartermiler — became the fastest man at the first Olympics, winning in 12.0s after clocking 11.8s in the

semifinal. He was one of the few men using the crouching start then.

Frank Jarvis, a descendant of the first U.S.A President George Washington, beat Burke's time, clocking 11.0s for the gold at the next Olympics in 1900 after timing a world record-equalling 10.8s in his heat.

Digging a 'launch pad'

Starting blocks, which helped sprinters accelerate quickly by giving them an extra push off the ground at the start of the race, were introduced in the Olympics only in 1948, but even before that, athletes used to dig their own 'launch pad' into the ground at the starting line.

Jesse Owens, the legend

The legendary American sprinter Jesse Owens, who entered Berlin as the world record holder in the 100m, 200m and long jump, won a historic four gold medals at the 1936 Berlin Olympics in front of an unimpressed Adolf Hitler. Later, he was forced to run against horses and trains after being banned from amateur competitions by Avery Brudage, the president of the US Olympic Committee and the Amateur Athletics Union then, for refusing to fulfill commercial obligations.

For those looking for landmarks, American Jim Hines broke the 10-second barrier in the 100m at the 1968 Mexico Olympics, where he took gold. It came 72 years after the first Olympics, and it took another 42 years for a white man to do a sub-10s run when Frenchman Christophe Lemaitre clocked 9.98s in 2010.

A phenomenon

Still, not many expected Usain Bolt — the greatest sprinter ever — to achieve the world record of 9.58s in 100m at the 2009 Worlds in Berlin. Many felt that it came at least 20 years too early.

But Bolt is one of a kind, a phenomenon, and probably the greatest track and field athlete of all time. Despite his 6'5" frame, which many felt was not ideal for the short sprint, Bolt made it look so easy, and he completed a hat-trick of Olympic titles in the 100m and 200m (in 2008, 2012 and 2016).

The dirtiest race in history

The greatest 100m rivalry could be the one between the legendary American Carl Lewis, who finished with nine Olympic golds, and Canadian Ben Johnson at the 1988 Seoul Games. But it turned out to be



Fast and furious: Usain Bolt was crowned Olympic 100m and 200m champion at three successive Games - Beijing 2008, London 2012 and Rio 2016. REUTERS

the dirtiest race in history after Johnson, who won the 100m with a world record, failed a dope test and was stripped of his gold.

That makes many look at some of the event's biggest stars with suspicion. And if one runs through the all-time list in the men's 100m, six of the top 10 sprinters — Tyson Gay (US, 9.69m), Yohan Blake (Jamaica, 9.69), Asafa Powell (Jamaica, 9.72), Justin Gatlin (US, 9.74), Christian Coleman (US, 9.76) and Ferdinand Omanyala (Kenya, 9.77) — have either failed dope tests or been banned for whereabouts failure at some point in their career.

West African high

Coloured athletes enjoy a huge advantage when it comes to track events, and runners of West African descent are among the fastest on the planet. It's probably in their genes. And the records and the all-time ranking lists vouch for that.

Incidentally, China's Su Bingtian became the first Asian-born sprinter to go below the 10s barrier in 2015. Even Sri Lanka's Yupun Abeykoon went sub-10 (9.96s) in 2022, but India is still waiting for somebody to achieve the same.

Long wait for women

Women came late to track and

field at the Olympics, in 1928 in Amsterdam, and even Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the modern Olympics, was not keen on them competing in the Games. American Elizabeth Robinson, then only 16, won the gold in a world record-equalling 12.2s. She almost died in a plane crash three years later, and when they found her, her legs were twisted and broken in three places, and her left arm was injured badly too. But still, she came back and helped the American 4x100m relay team win gold in the 1936 Berlin Olympics.

Amazing Blankers-Koen

There were some very colourful



Bitter competition: Ben Johnson (right), the Canadian sprinter with a fierce rivalry with Carl Lewis (left), won the 100m at the Seoul Olympics but was disqualified for testing positive for steroids. AFP

characters too, like Francina Blankers-Koen. The Dutchwoman made her Olympic debut in 1936, finishing sixth in the high jump, but made a stunning comeback 12 years

later at the 1948 Games in London, where she won the 100m, the newly-introduced 200m, and the 80m hurdles and became the first triple gold winner in history.

This despite the fact that she was not competing in the long jump and high jump, where she was the world record-holder, as athletes could only take part in three individual events.

A fight against all odds

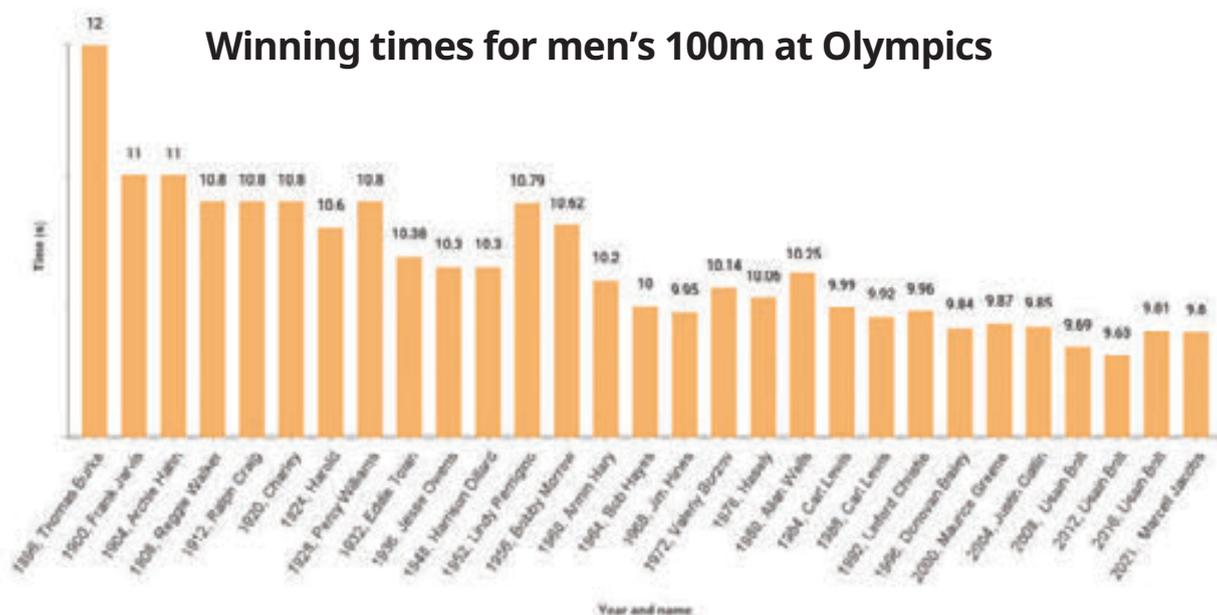
And in 1960, at the Rome Olympics, the amazing Wilma Rudolph had the stage all to herself. The 20th of her father's 22 children, Rudolph, was born prematurely and suffered from pneumonia and polio, which left her crippled, and she was fitted with metal braces at six.

But with her brother and sisters massaging her crippled left leg, Rudolph was out of her braces three years later and began excelling in basketball. Her school coach felt that she was too fast, and a little later, she found she loved running too. At the Rome Olympics, Rudolph emerged as the fastest woman and also became the first American woman to win three golds in a single Olympics in the 100, 200 and 4x100m events.

Wilma inspires Griffith Joyner

Wilma Rudolph's remarkable story inspired many young African-American athletes, including Florence Griffith-Joyner, who became the first American woman to win four golds in one Olympics in 1988 in Seoul. Joyner, who still holds the women's 100m world record, looked like a pop star with her shiny

Winning times for men's 100m at Olympics



JUL 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 AUG 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11

Athletics – 100m

Stade de France PARIS 2024

Event ■ Medal ■

FORMAT
Preliminaries plus heats, semi-final and final

ORIGINS
Thomas Burke (USA) is first Olympic champion in 1896. **Betty Robinson** (USA) takes inaugural women's 100m in 1928

LEGACY
Multiple medallists are rare – **Usain Bolt** is sole three-time champion, **Carl Lewis** won two, while **Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce** has two golds, one silver and one bronze

2020 GOLD
Marcell Jacobs (ITA), and **Elaine Thompson-Herah** (JAM), who retained 2016 title

Record Type	Athlete (Country)	Year	Time
Olympic record	Usain Bolt (JAM)	London 2012	9.63
	Elaine Thompson-Herah (JAM)	Tokyo 2020	10.61
World record	Usain Bolt (JAM)	Berlin 2009	9.58
	Florence Griffith Joyner (USA)	Indianapolis 1988	10.49

Sources: IOC, IAAF Pictures: Getty Images © GRAPHIC NEWS

leggings, brightly coloured hair, and long painted nails.

However, Joyner's death at 38 from an epileptic seizure in her sleep, 10 years after her Seoul show, triggered allegations of doping, though she had never failed a dope test.

Confessions of a champ

Twelve years later, Marion Jones emerged as the star and walked away with a golden treble, winning the 100m, 200m and 4x400m relay at the Sydney Olympics.

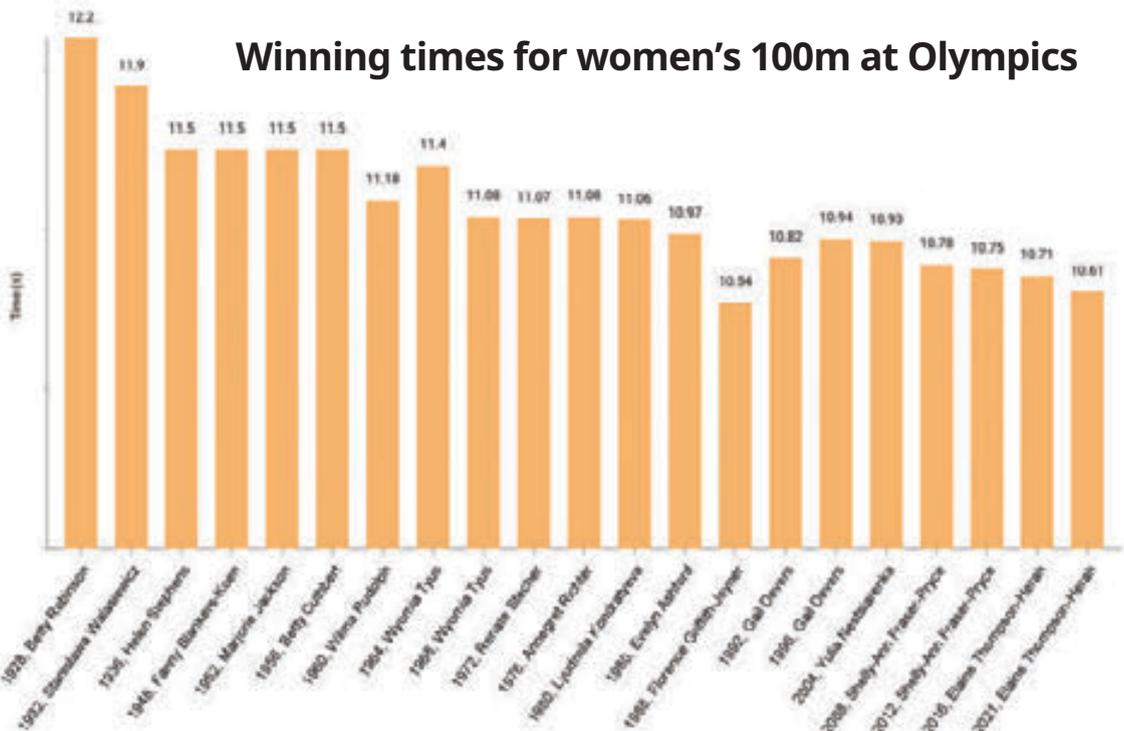
But seven years later, she confessed to doping before Sydney, was stripped of her medals, and was also jailed for lying to federal prosecutors.

Current leaders

Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce (2008 and 2012) and Elaine Thompson-Herah (2016 and 2021) have ensured Jamaica's dominance at the last four Olympics in the women's 100m. Thompson-Herah (10.54s) and Fraser-Pryce (10.60s) also have the second and third fastest times, respectively, in history.

With Thompson-Herah set to miss the Paris Olympics and Fraser-Pryce in the final stages of her career, can someone like the USA's Sha'Carri Richardson become the new sprint queen and break new ground? Only time will time!

Winning times for women's 100m at Olympics



« I am deeply committed to ensuring a safe and secure environment for all athletes, especially women »

P. T. USHA

Vijay Lokapally & Ayon Sengupta
sportstar@thehindu.co.in

P. T. Usha is in a tearing hurry, as she was on the track, to bring in professionalism in the Indian sports administration at the Indian Olympic Association (IOA). Usha, winner of 23 medals, including 14 golds, at Asian track and field events, took over as the IOA's first female president in December 2022.

Her tenure, however, has been far from easy, as she has been engaged in a bitter battle with her executive council regarding the appointment of professionals to the country's Olympic body.

The former sprinter remains undeterred, and in a chat with *Sportstar*, she says she is committed to "making the IOA the true apex body for sports nationwide".

Please share your views on the development of sprint over the years.

In 1980s, I ran 11.39 seconds [in 100m at Asian Championships]. Despite the lack of sports science and proper coaching back then, I clocked that time. How many athletes are doing the same time now with all the advanced facilities? One girl did set a

national record, but she was caught doping and banned.

Why have we struggled to produce top-class hurdlers even though you showed the way much earlier?

You're right. I was close to winning an Olympic medal because of my speed, not my hurdles clearance, which could have been better. The 400m hurdles is a very tough event — it is a tactical race with a lot of technical aspects. Nowadays, athletes choose events that offer a more significant participation platform. They prefer the 400m over the 400m hurdles.

Why do you think Indian sprint has not evolved? Why have we yet to see another sprinter emerge?

For sprinting, you need to be born with talent. While endurance can be pushed in other events, clocking times like 11.3, 11.2, or 11.1 seconds requires inborn talent. That's the main reason.

Doping has been a big problem in Indian sports. Recently, India lost a boxing quota slot due to the whereabouts clause. How can we control doping in India, and how

can we educate Indian athletes?

The whereabouts clause requires players to disclose their location; failure to do so will be interpreted as doping. We are making players aware of their responsibilities with guidance from the IOA and the Sports Authority of India. Players should realise they have a life beyond sports, but many are taking shortcuts, believing there is no sports science, something other countries are giving a lot of importance to.

We should treat doping as a criminal offence with exemplary punishment such as job loss or imprisonment. Some countries are taking bold steps, and we should too. When players win, we appreciate them along with their coach and physio. However, when a player does not do well, only the coach is blamed.

They are all aware of doping regulations; you can't always blame the coach alone. Sometimes, players do it without the coach's knowledge. This is happening at the junior level, where some coaches may be involved. This problem will stop once we introduce punishment. Russia was once No. 1 and India No. 2 in doping offences. Now we are No. 1. I am worried about it.



A strong message: "We should treat doping as a criminal offence, with exemplary punishment such as job loss or imprisonment," says P. T. Usha.

SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

How do you look at TOPS (Target Olympic Podium Scheme)? You tell the Sports Ministry what you want for advanced training, and your choice of coach. There was nothing like TOPS in your time.

It is perfect for elite athletes. The funding for exposure, equipment, and coaching is excellent. But what about those participating in domestic competitions? That support is missing for them. TOPS needs to extend its help to national-level competitions. There can be no comparison with my time — I ran two races here and then went to the Olympics. Today, athletes have a terrific support staff to guide them.

Do you see a more significant role for corporates and sponsors?

They should come forward for the sake of sports. More sponsors and support staff are needed for athletes.

What is your long-term vision for the IOA?

The IOA can be a vital body doing many things for sports in the country. However, team support is essential; it would help if there was a professional team in the IOA. Having been involved in sports since 1977, I know what happens both inside and outside. I've only missed attending three Olympics (Beijing, Tokyo, and Barcelona). The Prime Minister envisions hosting the Olympics in our country in 2036. By then, India should be among the top 10 nations. Hosting the event is a top priority, but we must also perform well.

What have you learned as a sports administrator?

Running on the track, coaching, and handling administration are entirely different from each other. That's why I am repeatedly asking for a professional team. The team should be dedicated and passionate. Sadly, in the IOA, we are spending vast amounts of money on litigation. We need a CFO (Chief financial officer) and should strive to have good governance.

You have faced a lot of challenges in the IOA. What is your take and how do you deal with them?

It is challenging, but I have no agenda other than making the IOA a truly apex body for sports nationwide. We can do it with the



support of the Sports Minister. I won't bow to pressures and challenges, nor will I run away. With good governance, I will deliver.

How confident are you about India hosting the Olympics?

When our Prime Minister announced it, the IOC president was also happy and supported it. We need to have many more dialogues, but everyone believes in our Prime Minister. When he announces something, it will happen.

What are your expectations for Paris? Aside from Neeraj Chopra, are there any other athletes to watch?

I am expecting Neeraj to give a good performance. There are other promising javelin throwers, too. The 400m relay team did so well at the World Athletics (in 2023), though they haven't given any sign recently that they are in the same form. However, they didn't show their best form before the World Athletics either. I remain optimistic. Our athletes should reach the finals.

What are your views on foreign coaches?

The best coaches are not coming to India. Coaching is more complex, as I know from experience. I follow their workouts and monitor how much load they can handle each day, as

well as their recovery. The coach must understand the athlete well. Foreign coaches often don't know the athletes well, and this can result in injuries.

Coaches are also under pressure because they have to deliver results. Sometimes, athletes ignore injuries and end up harming themselves. This is where sports science becomes crucial. Giving a foreign coach one year's time and putting pressure on them to deliver can be challenging.

Can you tell us about the India House in Paris?

It is the first time that we will have an India House. Our players can come to the House to watch live programmes. We will felicitate the winners there. Other people can also come. The media can go and conduct interviews there. A variety of food will also be available.

Would cricket in the Olympics help the movement in India?

It will be good for the cricketers and, of course, the Olympics.

How can the IOA ensure greater relevance for the National Games? It doesn't help if they are held at the end of the year.

It should be held every two years. The next Games will be held in Uttarakhand in 2025, when there are no Olympics or Asian Games. All

Dressed to win: Usha at the launch of India's ceremonial dress and playing kit for the Paris Olympics. PTI

prominent athletes will be able to participate.

What is the current state of Indian sports?

The infrastructure and facilities have improved tremendously. We are doing well at the Asian Games, and we have Khelo India, too. We should also look at how a 13-year-old winner can secure sponsorship. We need to focus on tapping into raw talent.

Women's safety remains a concern in sports. What steps is the IOA taking to ensure a safe environment for our athletes?

I am deeply committed to ensuring a safe and secure environment for all athletes, especially women.

The IOA has established a committee to oversee their safety and well-being. I am available by phone or email to ensure that complaints are handled discreetly and promptly.

The IOA remains vigilant and committed to providing a safe environment for all athletes, ensuring their focus remains on achieving excellence in their respective sports.

As we reorganise the IOA, I intend to set up a dedicated section within

the organisation tasked with conducting regular workshops and training sessions to educate athletes, coaches, and support staff on gender sensitivity, harassment, and the importance of fostering a respectful environment.

We are in advanced talks with an organisation that will provide psychological counselling and support services to athletes who may have experienced harassment or abuse.

These services aim to help athletes cope with the emotional and psychological impact of such incidents.

Only two of 58 recognised national sports federations in India have women presidents.

Representation of women in executive councils of sports bodies is less than 10 per cent. What steps should the IOA and the Sports Minister take to address this?

To address the gender disparity in the leadership and Executive Councils of our National Sports Federations, we need to first organise leadership and management training programmes specifically designed for women in sports.

These will help build the skills and confidence required for executive roles. I intend to introduce an agenda at the next AGM of the IOA, proposing financial incentives or additional grants to NSFs that meet or exceed gender representation targets.

During the wrestlers' protest last year, it was often felt that the administration and the IOA lacked adequate empathy and came across as insensitive while dealing with the serious complaints of the women wrestlers against the then WFI president. In hindsight, do you think the situation could have been handled better?

The events surrounding the wrestlers' protest last year were undoubtedly challenging and have been a significant learning experience for all of us.

Firstly, I want to express my deep regret for any perception of



insensitivity or lack of empathy during that period. The welfare and well-being of our athletes are paramount, and I am committed to ensuring their voices are heard and respected.

In hindsight, certain aspects of the situation could have been handled better. Communication is crucial in such sensitive matters, but I believe the wrestlers could have approached us first to discuss their concerns rather than resorting to a street protest.

When can we expect an athlete of your calibre?

I have always looked at obstacles to motivate myself. I did it out of

Top notch: No sprinter from India has managed to come close to the brilliance of Usha. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

passion. The new generation is different — their focus comes down once they win something. They should look at how Neeraj motivates himself and continues to improve.

Lastly, what are your thoughts on *Sportstar*?

When I was growing up, *Sportstar* was the magazine I looked up to. It was such a tremendous honour to be featured in the magazine, and I dreamed that one day, my photo would appear in the magazine.

« The new generation should look at how Neeraj motivates himself and continues to improve. »



Getting battle ready:
Neeraj Chopra has not competed since winning the Paavo Nurmi Games last month, focussing on fitness ahead of the Paris Games. K. R. DEEPAK

« Need to compete with *hosh* and *josh* at the Olympics »

NEERAJ CHOPRA

Jonathan Selvaraj

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As the clock ticks down to the Paris Olympics, Neeraj Chopra is morphing into a very familiar, lean, mean, and hungry avatar as he bids to defend his title in the men's javelin. He goes in as one of India's favourites. In an interview with *Sportstar*, he addresses concerns over his adductor muscle that's kept him from competing for much of the season, the challenge of having a target on his back, talking to himself between throws, and the need to throw with both *hosh* and *josh* (awareness and energy).

What's it with your short hair and the Olympics? You had a similar style ahead of Tokyo as well!

I got a new short haircut because it's so hot here in Gloria (the training base in Turkey where Neeraj is preparing for the Olympics). It was getting difficult to manage my long hair in this heat. It won't grow back in time for the Paris Olympics!

How is Gloria treating you? What does your room look like?

I like being in Gloria. I have a painting of hurdlers, tennis players, and gymnasts in my room, and there is even a picture of Andreas Thorkildsen (the 2004 and 2008 Olympic champion in the men's javelin). Right outside my window is

the athletics track and throwing area. This is the best view for an athlete.

In the previous Olympics, the talk was all about whether you would hit the 90m mark. This time, the focus is on your adductor muscle due to rumours of an injury. What's worse?

I believe the previous discussion about throwing 90m was much better. I don't even want to think about getting an injury. That's why I tried to explain why I was absent from that tournament. There are many Diamond League competitions, but I don't need to participate in all of them or incorporate them into my training plan. I didn't even register for the Paris Diamond League, but despite that, when people saw that I wasn't participating, it became a big story that I had suffered an injury. That's why I felt the need to clarify the situation. Right now, everything is good, and I believe that as the Olympics draw closer, other things will improve and fall into place.

What are you most looking forward to about Paris?

I hope everyone follows the Olympics this time. Hopefully, this time too, we'll be able to achieve something great. All our athletes have a lot of energy and belief this

year. I also think a lot of people will come from India to Paris to watch the Olympic Games.

Also, unlike Tokyo, where the stands were empty (due to COVID-19), the galleries will be full this time, and there will be a lot of people present. I find it very thrilling to perform in front of a big crowd.

Life seems to have changed a lot for you since Tokyo. Do you still eat the same thing? Do you still listen to the same Ragini music, or is it more English songs these days?

I recently trained in Saarbrücken, Germany, with the Indian boxing team. During their stay, they had a personal chef from Patiala with them. Thanks to this, I was able to enjoy the same kind of food that I used to eat when I trained as an athlete in Patiala after so many days.

Taste-wise, I will always be inclined towards Indian food because that's what I enjoy the most. But now I'm not adamant about only eating Indian food. I can adjust, and I'm fine with eating whatever is available. But it'd be nice if I got to eat Indian food occasionally when I'm outside of the country.

But on a daily basis, I'd prefer to eat the kind of food that is available outside of India. I try not to eat Indian food daily, as it's not ideal to



Dynamic duo: Neeraj Chopra and Kishore Jena wave the national flag after securing gold and silver medals, respectively, in the men's javelin throw final event at the 19th Asian Games in Hangzhou, China, in 2023. PTT

train after eating masala-filled Indian food. I try to eat more simple and boiled food before training, as it's better for my body. Back in Patiala, I had the habit of eating Indian food daily, but now I've changed that habit for quite some time.

And the second thing regarding Ragini music... I listen to it occasionally nowadays. The main reason is that there are not many new songs that I like that much. Maybe because my mind is stuck in the past, I still have a special preference for the older songs on my playlist. I very rarely listen to new releases, whether they be Ragini or English songs. I find myself understanding the lyrics of English songs a bit more nowadays. Initially, I didn't understand anything. But if you ask me, I still have my favourite Ragini songs like *Karke Haar Shringar*, which I have been listening to since I first joined the sports hostel in Patiala.

You weren't the favourite going into the Tokyo Olympics. This time, you are the defending champion. What difference does it make in your mindset?

At that Olympics, (Johannes) Vetter was the favourite. I admit that there was more attention on the other athletes. I was focussed on myself, but I was under much less pressure because it was my first Olympics.

But despite that, javelin was on the last day of the competition, so all that pressure kept building up, and it still came down to me. Everyone else was done. That meant that everyone's attention was just on me because I was the last Indian in action.

This time, it's different because I'll be defending my title. I got a little experience of what that's like at last year's Asian Games [Hangzhou], where I had to defend my title from 2018. However, I can't compare that

to the Olympics. The fact is that there will be extra expectations from me. It will be more than it was last time. It's impossible to call it anything other than pressure.

But the goal is clear to me: it is to defend the title. How to deal with that pressure is up to me. I always remind myself not to think about the fact that I am an Olympic champion. Every time I compete, I approach it as if it were my first time. I think that is very important. If I dwell on my past gold medal win and feel the need to repeat it, I'll unnecessarily put extra pressure on myself. So, I focus on what I have to do on the day of the competition. I am trying my best to keep myself fit. I don't have time to take risks or do something new.

For a long time, you usually did enough to win competitions in the first couple of throws, but at last year's Asian Games, you had to push yourself in the finals. What



THE ONLY PERSON YOU CAN TALK WITH IS YOURSELF! IF I THINK THE LAST THROW WAS GOOD, I'LL TELL MYSELF I CAN DO EVEN BETTER. IF IT WASN'T GOOD, I WOULD TELL MYSELF THAT I NEEDED TO DO BETTER

does it take to push yourself even more, considering you are already competing at your limit?

Even in the end, if you continue to push yourself, you can still get your best throw. At the Asian Games, I was trying to play it a little safe because it was the last competition of the season, but as soon as Kishore (Jena) took the lead with his third attempt, I immediately felt I had to push myself. When you get that feeling of competition, you always feel that you have to give everything on that day.

Even in Doha (the Diamond League, where he made his season's best throw of 88.36m in his final throw of the competition), something changed from the inside when I knew I had to make that final push. It's not that I'm consciously running faster or throwing harder; it's something that switches on automatically.

I always give the example of the 2017 Asian Championships in

Bhubaneswar, where I won the competition with my final throw. At that point, I felt I had nothing more left to give. I didn't think I had any energy for that final throw. At that time, there were 18 throwers in the final. The competition lasted for 1.5 or two hours, and I was tired because of the heat and humidity. But I learned that day that there is something inside me and maybe all of us. You can call it a mindset that



propels you to the finish line. All you need is that mindset and that trust in yourself that you can still do it.

Neeraj, you look a lot leaner right now compared to the start of the season. Is this accurate?

Yes, you are right. I was a little bulky at the start of the season in Doha. I don't know if I get extra focussed or if my body takes more energy now that we are so close to the Olympics, but automatically, I seem to start getting a lot leaner. Perhaps I'm a lot more focussed on what I'm eating. I've also become very particular about my training and recovery. Everything has to be perfect, and because of that, I think I've become leaner. I am also taking care of my recovery.

Right now, I weigh about 88 or 89 kg. I prefer staying in this range. I don't like weighing more than 90 kg. If I go above that weight, then I don't feel like I am as fast as I want to be. When I'm on the runway and feeling good, I feel as if there is a current running through my body. But if I am even a couple of kilos heavier than what I consider my ideal weight, then I feel like speed and energy are

missing. It's not that I don't feel strong, but I don't feel as quick.

It's not as if I don't make good throws. At last year's World Championships and Asian Games, I was a little over 90 kg, but at the last Olympics, I was about the same weight as now — about 87 or 88 kg.

While you look leaner, when we see your Instagram posts, it seems you are lifting as heavy as possible.

My speed and elasticity have indeed been my strong points, but there are some things I have been doing differently in this Olympic cycle. I have added a lot of strength training as well. There is a shot putter from Germany named David Storl, and he was telling me that you can't expect anything new if you keep repeating the same things. If you do the same thing again and again, don't expect that you will get an amazing result. So, I tried to get stronger this Olympic cycle. At the same time, I strove to increase my strength without sacrificing my flexibility and speed. I can't compromise on those things. The other athletes might have a lot of power, and that might be their strong point. I have a combination of speed and flexibility, and I am trying to combine it with some more strength and power. After the Tokyo Olympics, it's not just that I've become stronger; I have thrown further as well. I know a good throw will come. I'm not worried about that at all. There are also a few technical areas I am working on. The problem is that if I start feeling a problem in my groin, then I can't throw as much. I can't push myself as much. So I can't do more technical work.

Maybe not to others, but do you talk to yourself between the throws?

The only person you can talk with is yourself! If I think the last throw was good, I'll tell myself I can do even better. If it wasn't good, I would tell myself that I needed to do better. I'm usually telling myself to do better now because at both the Budapest World Championships and then at

the Doha Diamond League, I really didn't start well. People think I'll always make winning throws on my first attempt, but it isn't like that. I try my best, but it takes time for things to come together. Most of my conversations are internal, although sometimes I'll also go up to the coach to ask for advice on changes I can make. Those internal conversations are very blunt; they are said with some amount of *khundak* (ill will). I don't curse myself or anything, but I'll tell myself in *Haryanvi*, *Tu itna bhi nahi kar sakta?* (You can't even do this much.) I'll motivate myself by telling myself that I must do this. I can't go without completing what I am there for. Whatever I have inside me, I must give it out on the field. I'll remind myself to keep my focus on throwing with proper technique. If my technique on the runway isn't good, then that will mean I'll have to compensate by increasing the speed of my arm, which isn't the best way to throw.

Perhaps you can go all out in a competition that only lasts one day, like at the Diamond League or Asian Games. What do you do when you have to perform on two separate days — at the Olympics?

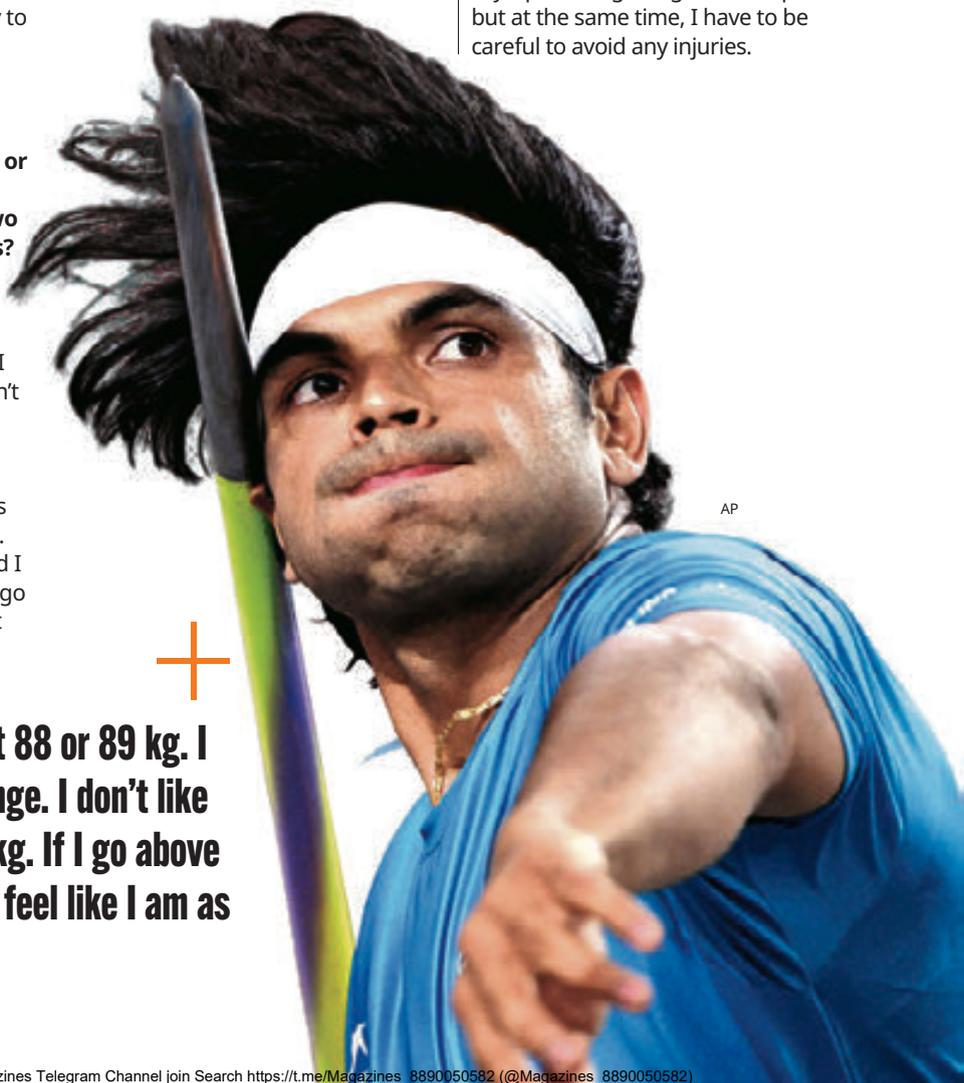
Even though the first day is a qualification round, I learned the hard way at the London World Championships (and it's good that I learned this very early on) that I can't take it lightly. At that point, the qualification standard for the final was 83 meters. I thought, at that time, I could do this easily. So, I was relaxed and focussing on the finals. My first throw didn't touch 83m and I started to panic. The second didn't go well, and neither did the third. That turned out to be one of the few

competitions where more than 12 throwers made it to the final. There were 13 automatic qualifiers. I think it's a little easier to make the final now — if you throw over 82m, you will probably do so. But I learned from that competition not to take qualification lightly. It's vital because you'll also get a boost going into the final. I felt really good at the last Olympics as well because I qualified for the final with my first throw. It was the same at the Budapest World Championships as well. I felt really good that I had it in my body to throw even better. So now I focus a lot on the qualification round and try to qualify in my first throw there so that I can start to focus on my final and go in with a strong mindset.

You have had a few injury concerns this year. You have also said that your health is now your

priority. So when you train, how do you determine how much effort to put in?

It depends on your energy level that day. If I'm throwing and don't feel energetic, and if it's hot, I focus more on my technique. The throw might only be around 70–75 metres, but I look at improving the techniques and making the runway approach smoother. There are also times when you start to feel overly enthusiastic, and that's when you must also stop because, at such times, you become prone to injuries. When you're preparing for a big competition, you are very excited, you feel you can do maximum workouts, and you always feel ready, but you must use your brains, learn to follow your plan, and be a little calm. If I compare my workouts now to what I was doing four to five months ago, it is a lot more. As I'm getting closer to the Olympics, I'm getting a lot sharper, but at the same time, I have to be careful to avoid any injuries.



Right now, I weigh about 88 or 89 kg. I prefer staying in this range. I don't like weighing more than 90 kg. If I go above that weight, then I don't feel like I am as fast as I want to be.

SHOWSTOPPERS TAKE CENTRESTAGE

With the Paris Olympics approaching, anticipation is growing for the world's top athletes to take the global stage once again. From track and field to swimming, gymnastics to tennis, these sportspeople have captured headlines and inspired millions. We take a look at **10 athletes who are set to shine** at the 33rd Olympic Games.

Team Sportstar



AFP

Armand Duplantis

Breaking a world record once is daunting, but Armand Duplantis has done it eight times. Since 2020, when he surpassed Renaud Lavillenie's 6.16m mark, Duplantis has repeatedly broken his own record, most recently clearing 6.24m at the Xiamen Diamond League in April 2024. At just 21, the Swedish athlete won his first Olympic gold at the Tokyo Games and followed up with World Championship golds in 2022 and 2023. Now 24, Duplantis aims for his second Olympic gold in Paris and hopes to set another world record.



AFP

Noah Lyles

Noah Lyles aims to win four gold medals on the track in Paris, hoping to replicate his 2023 World Championship form in the 100m, 200m, and 4x100m relay: the first man to do so since Usain Bolt in 2015. Since winning bronze in the 200m at the Tokyo Olympics, Lyles has excelled, breaking Michael Johnson's American 200m record of 19.32 by 0.01 seconds at the 2022 World Athletics Championships. While the 200m remains his favorite event, Lyles also dreams of winning an Olympic gold in the 4x400m relay.



AP

Katie Ledecky

Katie Ledecky, a legend in long-distance swimming, has an impressive record with seven Olympic golds and 21 World titles. She won her first Olympic gold at 15 in the 800m freestyle at the 2012 London Games and has since added nine more Olympic medals. Ledecky holds the record for the most individual titles (200m, 400m, and 800m freestyle) and won gold in the 4x200m freestyle relay at the 2016 Rio Olympics. In Paris, Ledecky aims to increase her gold medal count, needing two more to surpass Jenny Thompson for the most Olympic golds by a female swimmer. She also aims to become the most decorated female Olympic swimmer, needing three more medals. If her performance in Paris matches her success in the 800m and 1500m freestyle events at the Tokyo Olympics, Ledecky will likely achieve these goals.

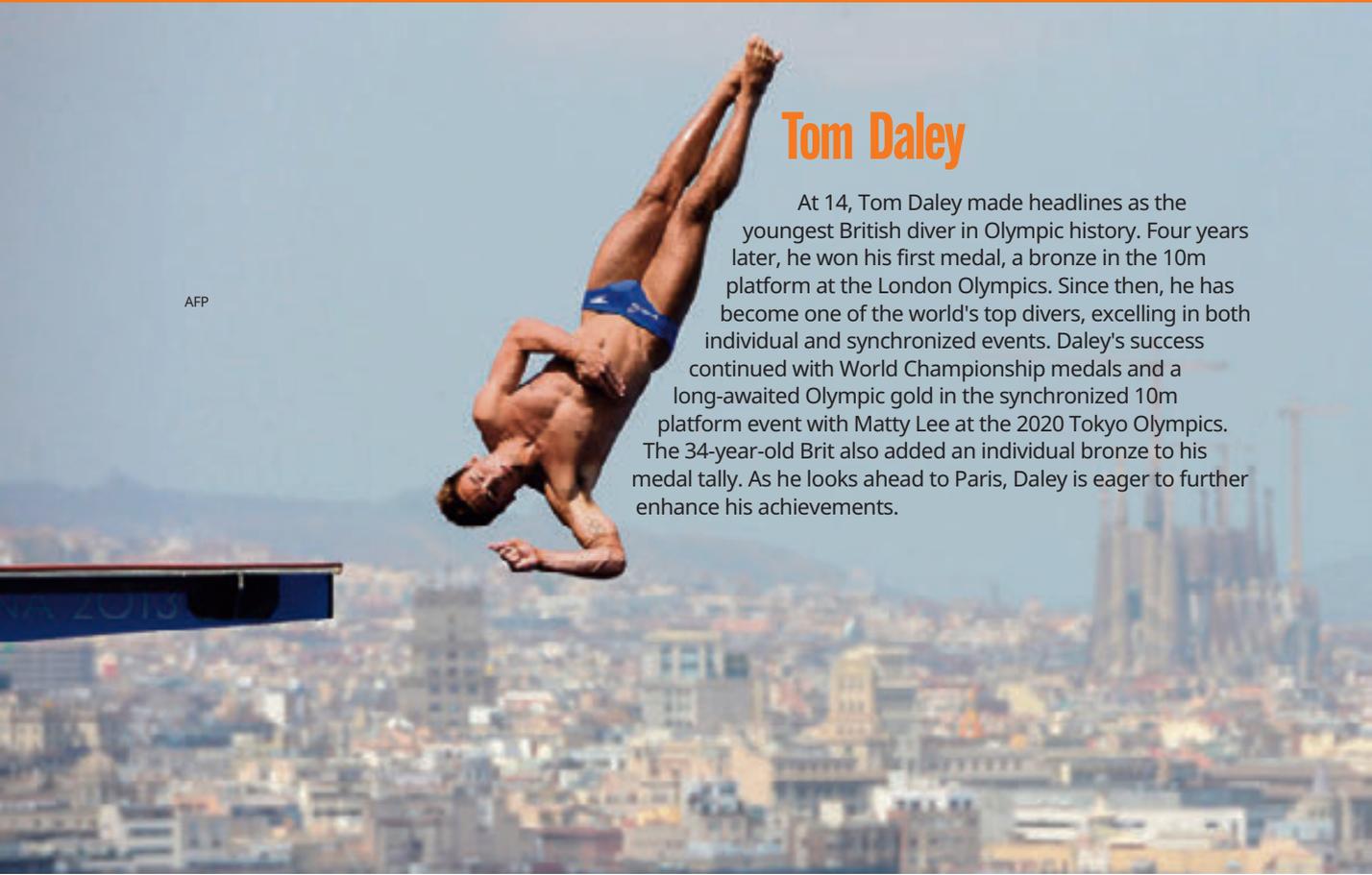


AFP

Simone Biles

Debuting at the 2016 Rio Games, Simone Biles won four gold medals—team, all-around, vault, and floor exercise—and a bronze on the balance beam. Her performance was historic, marked by sheer dominance and a 2.100-point lead over her closest competitor, Aly Raisman. A strong advocate for mental health, Biles withdrew from several events at the Tokyo Olympics due to her struggles with the twisties, a kind of mental block.

After a two-year break, Biles returned to compete at the 2023 World Championship, becoming the only gymnast since Kohei Uchimura to win the all-around title six times and surpassing Vitaly Scherbo as the most successful gymnast of all time at the Olympics and Worlds. In Paris, Biles is expected to dominate, especially in her signature events — the all-around and vault.



AFP

Tom Daley

At 14, Tom Daley made headlines as the youngest British diver in Olympic history. Four years later, he won his first medal, a bronze in the 10m platform at the London Olympics. Since then, he has become one of the world's top divers, excelling in both individual and synchronized events. Daley's success continued with World Championship medals and a long-awaited Olympic gold in the synchronized 10m platform event with Matty Lee at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. The 34-year-old Brit also added an individual bronze to his medal tally. As he looks ahead to Paris, Daley is eager to further enhance his achievements.



REUTERS

Ma Long

Ma Long, nicknamed "The Dragon," is widely regarded as one of the greatest table tennis players of all time. The Chinese paddler has earned this reputation by becoming the first male player to win two singles gold medals at the Olympics. A 14-time world champion, Ma Long, now 35, has also clinched team golds at all his previous Games and secured consecutive men's singles titles in Rio and Tokyo. This remarkable feat solidified his status as the most successful Olympic table tennis player in history. Although he won't be able to pursue a third consecutive singles title at his fourth Summer Games, he still has the chance to compete for a sixth Olympic gold medal in the team event in Paris.



Rafael Nadal

Rafael Nadal, the iconic Spanish tennis star, has made a lasting impact on the Olympic Games over the past decade. His journey began at the 2004 Athens Games, where he competed alongside Tommy Robredo in doubles. At the 2008 Beijing Olympics, while he didn't secure a medal in doubles, he won gold in the singles event, defeating Chile's Fernando Gonzalez in the final.

Nadal missed the 2012 London Games due to a knee injury but returned in Rio 2016, overcoming a wrist injury to win gold in doubles with Marc Lopez. Although he opted out of the Tokyo Olympics for health reasons, Nadal aims to secure his third Olympic gold in Paris, teaming up with Carlos Alcaraz.

AP

Sydney McLaughlin-Levrone

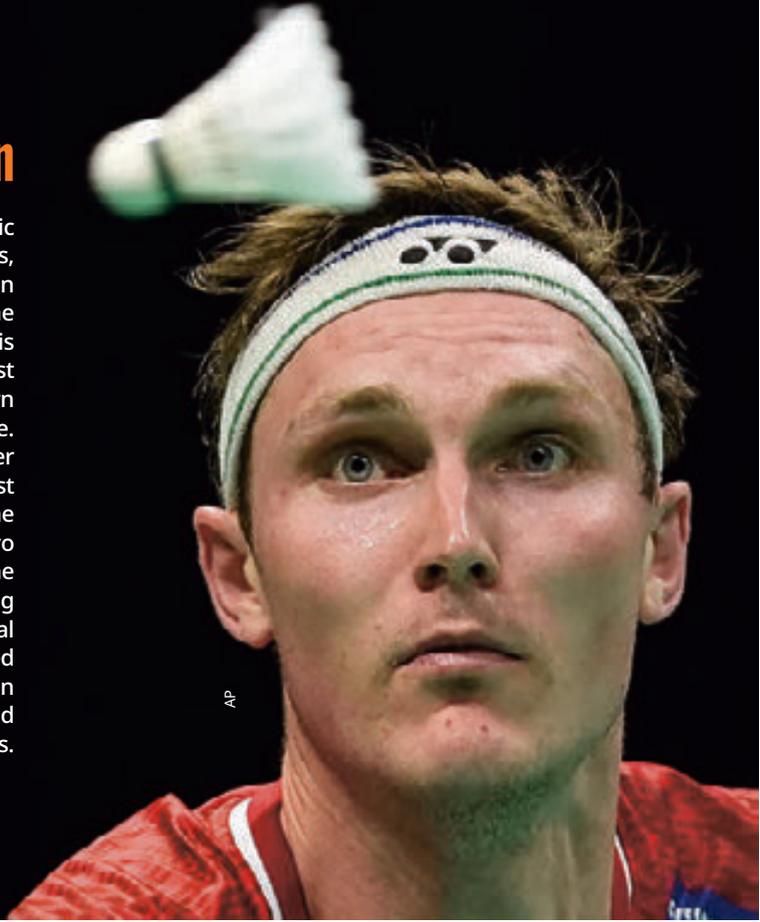
Sydney McLaughlin-Levrone made her Olympic debut at the 2016 Rio Games as the youngest athlete to qualify for the American track and field team since Carol Lewis and Denean Howard did so for the Moscow Olympics in 1980. Though she didn't make the finals in Rio, she finished second at the 2019 World Championships, behind Dalilah Muhammad. In 2021, she triumphed over Muhammad at the Tokyo Olympics, setting a world record of 51.46 to claim gold. Since then, McLaughlin-Levrone has continued to dominate, breaking her own records, most recently achieving a new world record of 50.65 at the United States Olympic Trials. At 24, she has secured her spot in Paris.

REUTERS



Viktor Axelsen

Viktor Axelsen made his Olympic debut at the 2016 Rio Olympics, where he won a bronze medal in men's singles by defeating two-time Olympic champion Lin Dan. This achievement made him the first European player in 20 years to earn an Olympic medal in the discipline. However, the pinnacle of his career came five years after his first Olympic medal when he secured the men's singles gold at the Tokyo Olympics. The Dane defeated the defending champion Chen Long from China, avenging his semifinal loss from Rio. Currently ranked second in the world by BWF, Axelsen aims to improve his ranking and add to his medal tally in Paris.



AP

GETTY IMAGES



Kim Woojin

Kim Woojin made headlines during the 2016 Rio Olympics when he set a new world record in the ranking round of the men's individual archery event, scoring 700 out of 720 points. He became the first archer to achieve this score under the new 72-arrow ranking round format. The record has since been broken by Brady Ellison, who once called Woojin "the greatest of all time" in an interview, according to World Archery. However, Woojin faced a shocking second-round defeat to Indonesia's Riau Ega Agatha in Rio. Despite this setback, he, along with Ku Bonchan and Lee Seungyun, secured the men's team gold, a feat he repeated in Tokyo with Oh Jin Hyek and Kim Je Deok. Woojin will compete in Paris for his third Olympic team gold and first individual medal.

« The biggest learning I'd take from 2012 is to not leave anything to chance »

ASHWINI PONNAPPA

Anjali Joshi

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On a rather cloudy Saturday afternoon at the Pullela Gopichand Badminton Academy, we waited in the reception area to interview Ashwini Ponnappa — India's veteran shuttler and a key player to watch at the marquee event of the Paris Olympics. It was a busy day at this iconic academy in Hyderabad, with players practising on the courts, admin staff working, and many people passing by the couch we were sitting on.

A woman in a piggy pink tee approached and greeted us in a modest and unassuming manner. One half of Crasto-Ponnappa, India's doubles prospect in badminton, Ashwini, sat down for a chat with *Sportstar* and talked about her early days, attaining glory, and the pressures of the Olympics.

Do you remember the first time you picked up a racquet?

Well, the first time I picked up a badminton racket was at home where I lived, playing outside with my friends. Those are my initial memories of playing the sport. Even though my dad was a hockey player,

my mom and dad thought that badminton might suit me. There was a court right next to where my dad worked, so it worked out for my parents because both of them worked, so one could drop me off and pick me up from practice. That's how badminton started.

At what age did you start playing, and when did you realise you could pursue badminton professionally?

I started training when I was eight and a half. I began competing when I was nine years old, but it was after I won my first national title in the sub-junior category in girls doubles that I felt badminton was something I could pursue. At that point, we were selected for the junior Indian team and as probables for the Commonwealth Games, so I thought, "Okay, badminton is something I can pursue."

Do you remember receiving your first medal?

I remember the first badminton award I got was at the RBI quarters where I lived when I was young. We had a community hall there that was

set up as a badminton court, where they held a family tournament for all the employees and their families. That's where I won my first badminton tournament, or badminton gold, you could say.

You started your doubles journey with Jwala Gutta, and you had a considerable age gap with her. Now you are partnered with Tanisha, who is 21. Do you think life has come full circle?

If you look at it like that, yes. When I started out, I was very young and inexperienced when I played with Jwala, but with Tanisha, it's a bit different. Even though she is very young, and we have a very huge age gap, she is also playing mixed doubles.

By the time I started partnering with her, she was already a part of the Indian team and had represented the country in two major tournaments. She was playing international mixed doubles, so she wasn't new to the senior international scene. Age-wise, she is young and has a long way to go; I think that's the only similarity between how we started our careers.



Fresh start: Ashwini Ponnappa had a successful partnership with Jwala Gutta before teaming up with Tanisha Crasto. NAGARA GOPAL

You decided over lunch to play together. Tell us a bit about that.

The run-up to lunch was important too. Of course, I had taken a break from doubles for a couple of months. Before I took the break, the coaches had suggested I play with Tanisha.

I had a couple of players in mind, but I really needed a break to think about whether I wanted to continue playing doubles and how I wanted my career to go.

The break helped because it gave me a lot of clarity. By the time we went for lunch, both Tanisha and I knew that the coaches were rooting for our partnership. The important thing was that both of us wanted to play together. That lunch cemented our decision to give this partnership a shot.

How is it playing with Tanisha? What are the things you tell her?

I enjoy her excitement. Even I am excited about going with Tanisha, and this is our first Olympics as a pair. The important thing I would tell her is to enjoy the experience. It's about having that balance of being in the zone during our matches and switching off [when not playing]. There will be a lot of pressure and focus on the event, so it's important to keep our heads on our shoulders, remember what our goal is, and learn to relax along the way, especially during the day when we are not having our matches.

Are you looking forward to playing a certain pair in Paris?

Not really. If the pair you want doesn't come, then what? It's better not to have expectations about whom we want to play. Whoever comes or whichever group we are in, we will be gunning to go and play well. So, no favourite pair as such.

How are you feeling physically and mentally?

I am quite happy with the fact that we have a couple of weeks before we head for the Olympics. It gives us a good training block with our coaches, Gopi sir and Arun Vishnu, and my strength coach, Deckline. These aspects are pretty important. Otherwise, you're playing so many tournaments that you don't get a long training period. It's nice to have it this time.

Mentally, I'm taking it one day at a time, focussing on improving every day, and giving my best on the court. I'm working on adding that tiny percentage to our game that can help us do well.

Take us through your day. What does it look like weeks before the Olympics?

I can't predict the future, but I can describe the last couple of weeks of our training. We've had 6 o'clock sessions where we're on the court



from 6 to about 7:30-8. We have a break in between and then start again at 10:30 and go until about 12. In the evening, I go to the gym from 3 to 4, or sometimes 4 to 5.

Some days, I also do skill work, so it could be 3 to 4 of gym and then skill work for an hour. Wednesday and Saturday afternoons are off, so we have rest days, and of course, Sunday is a full day off.

What are your thoughts on India's chances at the Olympics?

I think our chances are pretty good. We have many players who are in the world's top rankings in their respective sports. However, at an event like the Olympics, the pressure is very different. The player who deals with the pressure best has a strong advantage. I hope all our players, including us, can cope with the pressure and do well.

How do you deal with the pressure of social media?

Sometimes I look at social media and regret it. Sometimes it can put a lot of pressure on me and plant unnecessary thoughts in my head. We are humans at the end of the

day. We do have emotions and react to things people say online. So, at times, I don't look at the comments. I mean, it's scary even to post. Unlike in the past, people are much more judgmental these days.

Initially, social media was more about enjoying what we posted, but now everything is questioned, you know. If you post something good, you're not focused; if you post something bad, again, it's an issue. You don't know what to post.

I prefer staying away from it, but I understand there are well-wishers who sincerely want us to do well, and it's only for them that I make an effort to post every now and then.

How has the support from your friends and family been?

It's been great. One of the reasons I have continued to play is thanks to my family. They've been my biggest supporters — my husband, parents and brother.

My friends have also been big supporters and motivators over the past couple of years. They're the ones who keep me going when the going gets really tough. It's them who've always been in my corner,

Ready for the big stage: Paris 2024 will be the first Olympics for Ashwini and Tanisha as a doubles pair.

SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

irrespective of how I play or what I do.

You came really close at the 2012 Olympics. What are the lessons you will take from there?

The biggest lesson I'd take from 2012 is to not leave anything to chance. I remember that we won two of the four matches, but we still didn't qualify. In 2012, women's doubles was very controversial. If that controversy hadn't occurred, we would have reached the quarterfinal stage. It was quite unfortunate. Every single match and every single point is very important, and that's what I will take going forward.

Do you switch off from the game?

It's very important to switch off because otherwise, there is a lot of stress and pressure, which will definitely affect your game and body. It's important to come back, relax, go out, and explore the village. Seeing how things are and interacting with other athletes are things that have helped me in the past.

What are your thoughts on sponsorships?

I think, compared to a lot of other sports, badminton has sponsors who come forward. It's all about comparison. Badminton is fairly good, but the difference lies in who gets what. Some players get a lot, while some hardly get anything.

A lot of sponsors do see badminton as a good opportunity for visibility because it is quite popular in India and is growing. Many matches are being aired on TV. It's about who gets what and how the sponsorship is distributed.

An advice you'd like to give young girls playing badminton.

Work really hard and give it your best shot. There is no guarantee of making it, especially in sports, but you must give it your best shot and see how far you can go.

EYES ON THE PRIZE: NERVELESS DHIRAJ PRIMED FOR OLYMPIC CHALLENGE



Dhiraj knows he can't be overawed by the **grand stage**, whether it's the Games Village or the historic 17th-century venue Les Invalides, where the archers will aim for glory.

Y. B. Sarangi
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Donning identical India jerseys, and shooting with a flawless rhythm while engaging in long-distance endurance running during a training session at the Army Sports Institute in Pune, B. Dhiraj, Tarundeep Rai, and Pravin Jadhav exude a palpable determination. Their goal? To showcase their absolute best at the Paris 2024 Olympics.



The trio is aware that the hunger for an Olympic archery medal, a feat that has long eluded India, will only escalate the pressure on them. This pressure could be a double-edged sword, potentially detrimental to their performance.

Dhiraj, set to make his Olympic debut as the youngest and most accurate of the trio, understands this well. "It is just another tournament. Of course, there is a lot of hype

about the Olympics. It is my first Olympic Games. But inside me, it is just another tournament. Like in every tournament, I am giving my best. I will do the same work. Nothing special," Dhiraj says stoically during an interaction with *Sportstar*.

Despite his recent impressive results, Dhiraj possesses the maturity to prioritise team success. He realises that the team event, which features only 12 countries,

offers a more favourable path to a medal than the individual event, which includes a draw of 64 archers.

"From the beginning of the year, we have been planning how to improve our performance. We are on the same track; everything is going in the right direction.

"It's not about an individual. We are a team. We have been competing together for a long time. Whether it's in the Services or the



Off the mark: Dhiraj Bommadevara opened India's Paris Olympic quota account in archery by reaching the final of an Asian Olympic Qualifier Tournament in Bangkok last year.

K. V. S. GIRI

National team, we have been competing together since 2021.

"If I am competing individually, then the rest of the team supports me. If anyone else is competing, then the rest of the team supports him."

Dhiraj acknowledges the unpredictability of individual competition. "We don't know what will happen. I don't know what will happen the next day. I am 100 per

cent sure that I will give my best."

Dhiraj, who honed his skills at the Cherukuri Volga Academy in Vijayawada before joining ASI in 2017, has achieved commendable individual success. He secured bronze medals in World Cup stages in 2023 and 2024 and clinched an Olympic quota place last November. His solo quota place guaranteed India's presence in the archery event at the Paris Olympics.

"Our target was to win the team quota. We didn't succeed in that. Even after winning an individual quota, our target was to win at least one team quota. Every archer in India was trying to win it. We wanted to do it as soon as possible so that we can prepare for the Olympics.

"Step-by-step, we made a plan. We could not have made a proper plan until we won a quota. We knew that we had a good chance (to get a



Punching the Olympic ticket: Pravin Jadhav (in pic), teammate of Dhiraj Bommadevara, is one of the six archers to qualify for Paris 2024.

GETTYIMAGES

men's team berth through the world rankings) after the first World Cup (in Shanghai in April). We focused on a plan, what new situations we can come up with, what we can learn.

"Luckily, we performed better in the first World Cup. We are taking it very positively. Anything can happen in the game. Anything is possible in the game, and we are deriving

valuable lessons from our experiences, which is very beneficial."

Dhiraj draws encouragement from his performance in the World Cup Stage-3 in Antalya, where he defeated Olympic silver medallist Mauro Nespoli of Italy to win an individual bronze, and later clinched a mixed team bronze with Bhajan Kaur, just weeks before the Olympics.

"I tried to give my best in the last tournament. Of course, I have confidence in myself. I don't know what will happen (in the Olympics).

But I believe in my training, I believe in my preparation."

In competition, unexpected situations can arise, leading to wayward shots.

"It happens sometimes. The sport is unpredictable. Anything can happen. I missed shots in the Asian Games. I learned from that. There are situations that you don't expect. We are preparing ourselves for unexpected situations. We have the capacity to face them. We play matches on the podium (the elevated stage). We share things with each other. We support each other.



Cups we came to know that all the other teams are careful about competing against India. You can see that in their body language. They play with a lot of preparation. It feels good to see that, but sometimes it goes wrong as they shoot extremely well," he says.

The team, which collaborates with psychologist Gayatri Madkekar, understands the importance of maintaining a positive mindset. While Dhiraj struggles to articulate the impact of the psychologist's role, Rai, one of Dhiraj's idols, steps in like a true teammate.

"We get benefits from all the

« **DHIRAJ BELIEVES TRAINING IN THE FRENCH CAPITAL, WHERE THEY HAD A SUCCESSFUL CAMP BEFORE THE 2023 WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS, WILL HELP THEM ACCLIMATE FOR THE OLYMPICS STARTING JULY 24** **»**

support staff. We know that they work for our medals. If you think bad about someone, even God will feel bad about you. Psychologically, if you are in a team, you don't have to think bad about them. They don't value you as soon as you think bad about them. The negativity comes from within. You have to avoid that.

"You don't have to think it's the Olympics. The pressure will kill you. Most first-timers make this mistake. If you treat it like the Olympics, you lose your balance. You have to make the path bigger so that you don't have to keep balancing. Those who have maintained these two things will win (medals) in the Olympics," says Rai, reflecting on his years of experience.

The Indian archers also gave positive feedback on their sessions with renowned Korean coach Kim

Hyung Tak in Sonipat. "It was good. That's why I trained again and again (with him). We are in our best version, we just have to implement it (in the Olympics)," says Dhiraj.

The 22-year-old appreciates that his father, Shraavan Kumar (a technical official with the Archery Association of India), allows him to focus on his training. "I talk to him every day about my training. He has so much confidence in me that he doesn't disturb me. He keeps an eye on me, though. He calls our (India) coach Sonam (Bhutia) sir and asks about the matches.

"He knows everything (about my game), but he never tells me. He just tells me to play my game. He knows how hard I work. I don't have the pressure to win a medal."

As the countdown to Paris 2024 begins, Dhiraj, an Asian Games team silver medallist, believes their plan to train in the French capital — where they had a successful camp before the 2023 World Championships in Berlin — will help them acclimate before competing in the Olympics starting July 24.

"I know the place where we are going to train. I went there last time too. It is very close to where the tournament is taking place. Because of that, we will benefit a lot from the acclimatisation. It's (Paris) three-and-a-half hours behind us but we will adapt to that (as far as sleep cycles are concerned). We eat everything, so we will adapt to that as well. All the coaches have made the plans together."

Like his teammates, Dhiraj maintains his regular routine, including watching his favourite web series to unwind, without altering anything for this significant moment in his life.

He understands that he cannot afford to be overawed by the grand stage, whether it's the Games Village or the historic 17th-century venue Les Invalides, where the archers will aim for ultimate glory.

Dhiraj is determined to end India's barren run in Olympic archery, hoping to make history with his arrows and his distinctive tri-coloured bow.

That's how we form a team. All that comes from experience. Luckily, my fellow archers have participated in the Olympics. I learn a lot from them.

"Tarun bhैया says, 'You don't have to think about what went wrong (with Indian archers) in the last Olympics.' It's a new experience for me. The situation is completely different. We talk about how we feel while competing. I feel that everything is normal."

Jadhav, who participated in the Tokyo Olympics, offers a fresh perspective on the Indian team's standing. "From the last two World

COST CONCERNS AND DOUBTS ON LEGACY LOOM LARGE

Given the history of burgeoning costs and many Olympic sites being **left neglected**, the question arises: will Paris 2024 break this trend?

Pranay Rajiv

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Hosting an Olympic Games is widely regarded as a significant privilege, a right often fiercely contested among countries worldwide.

However, it also entails substantial responsibility, primarily of an economic nature.

The 2020 Tokyo Games, initially scheduled for that year but postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, reportedly incurred costs amounting to approximately 20 billion dollars. Experts estimate the average cost of hosting an Olympics to be around 12 billion dollars. According to an Oxford-based study, every Olympic Games since 1960 has exceeded its initial budget projections, highlighting that the

quadrennial event has one of “the highest overruns on record for any type of megaproject.”

Where is the money spent?

The majority of the expenses for hosting an Olympic Games typically go towards infrastructure. This includes constructing or upgrading sports facilities needed to accommodate the wide range of events that make up the Olympics.

The host country also needs to

focus on improving local transportation and providing accommodation for athletes, journalists, and spectators.

According to a report from the Wall Street Journal, China allocated over half of its \$45 billion budget for the Beijing 2008 Olympics to develop rail networks, roads, and airports.

Furthermore, the city must make substantial investments in urban beautification and public services.

After investing in infrastructure, there are operational costs that encompass everything from the arrival of athletes to the conclusion of the Games. A notable portion of these expenses is allocated to security, a priority that has gained greater significance since the 9/11 terrorist attack in the USA.

Where does the money come from?

The hosting nation bears most of



AFP

« The Parc des Champions (facing page) is a celebration site, which will be accessible for the public to see the Olympic medallists a day after their exploits »

the cost of hosting the Olympics by building the necessary infrastructure through capital investments. The nation can obtain funding from both private and public sources. The IOC organising committee budget covers a significant portion of the operational costs, including venue operations, workforce, technology, and games services. This budget is funded by domestic sponsorship, ticket sales, and licensing. Other operational costs, such as security, transportation, medical services, customs, and immigration, are covered by the host nation using the revenue generated from the initial investments. The estimated budget for the Paris Games is 10 billion dollars, with the IOC contributing 1.7 billion dollars.

Do countries make a profit out of the Olympics?

The University of Limoges published a report stating that the 2024 Olympics is expected to provide the Paris region with a net economic benefit of nearly 12.2 billion dollars.

Christophe Dubi, Paris Games Executive Director, stated, "As the first Olympic Games aligned with

Olympic Agenda 2020, Paris 2024 is proving that the Games can bring substantial economic benefits to their hosts while being socially and environmentally responsible. These are Games that truly adapt to the needs of their host and to the times we live in, creating an impactful legacy before the opening ceremony and long after the sporting competitions have ended."

The IOC has projected that hosting the Olympics creates job opportunities for local communities, boosts tourism, and improves the branding of cities.

Barcelona is often cited as a success story of how hosting the Olympic Games helps with tourism. The Spanish city jumped from 11th to sixth among the most popular European cities after the successful 1992 games.

However, this success has not been replicated in cities like London and Beijing, which recorded lower tourism footfall in the years after



Architectural marvel: China's National Stadium, also known as the Bird's Nest, cost a reported 3.5 billion yuan. AP

they hosted the Olympic Games.

One major issue faced by Olympic host cities is the underutilization of the cutting-edge sporting facilities built specifically for the games. The most prominent example is the 'Bird's Nest' stadium in Beijing, which cost China 460 million dollars and has been left largely untouched since the 2008 games, costing the Asian nation nearly 10 million dollars a year for maintenance, as revealed by The Atlantic. The 2004 Olympic Games in Greece pushed an already weak Greek economy to the brink, resulting in a long-drawn-out debt crisis.

Despite the IOC's support, hosting the Olympics is a financially risky business, as evidenced by both predictions and experiences.

Games	Olympic Stadium	Cost	Current use
Sydney, 2000	Stadium Australia	460 million USD	Multisport (cricket, football, rugby, motorsport etc.) concerts
Athens, 2004	Athens Olympic Stadium	Existing, renovated for 291 million USD	Football
Beijing, 2008	Bird's Nest	428 million USD	Concerts, football friendlies, motorsport
London, 2012	London Olympic Stadium	758 million USD	Football, athletics
Rio, 2016	Maracana Stadium	Existing, renovated for 350 million USD	Football
Tokyo, 2020	Japan National Stadium	1.4 billion USD	Football, athletics, concerts

PINNING HER CHANCES ON PATIENCE AND POWER

Despite being the underdog in a squad filled with **well-known athletes**, Reetika Hooda is confident of making her mark this Olympics.

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Girls and boys train separately at the Raipur Wrestling Academy near Sonapat, in Haryana. However, Reetika Hooda is one exception to this rule. On a typical training day, one can find her facing off against a series of younger male wrestlers in four-minute rounds. After each round, another fresher opponent comes forward, eager to test himself against the future Olympian.

Reetika is preparing to face some of the strongest female wrestlers in the world by actually practising against young men. The reason: there simply aren't enough female practise partners in India at her level.

After eight rounds of high-intensity wrestling, she is exhausted and reduced to crawling on all fours between rounds. Concerned, her coach Mandeep Singh crouches down to her eye level.

"You want to continue?" he asks her.

"Aho (yes)," comes the ragged reply. And she goes on.

She doesn't quit until, finally, Mandeep decides it's enough for the day.

It's her tenacity and willingness to push herself constantly, coupled with her recent form, that has many convinced that the 22-year-old from Rohtak could be Indian wrestling's surprise package at the 2024 Olympics.

In a squad of better-known and more accomplished

wrestlers, Reetika doesn't immediately stand out. The Indian team that's headed to Paris also includes three-time Olympic and two-time World medallist Vinesh Phogat, Anshu Malik (World silver medallist), and Antim Panghal (World bronze medallist and India's first-ever junior world champion).

Those who follow the sport aren't so quick to overlook Reetika, though. Last year, she became the first Indian woman to win a gold medal at the U-23 World Championships, beating USA's Kennedy Blades — who would later claim a spot in the USA Olympic team — in the final.

Reetika followed that up by coasting past far more experienced opponents, including a World silver medallist from Mongolia at the Asian Olympic qualifiers.

Just a month ago, she impressed in the UWW ranking series in Budapest, Hungary. Competing while suffering from a fever, she won three bouts and lost just one after conceding a final-minute takedown to eventually finish with a silver.





In Paris, she will carry the confidence of having already faced seven of the total 15 contenders in the women's 76kg category — of whom she's beaten six and lost by just one point to the other (2023 World bronze medallist Renteira, from Colombia).

The rest will only be ignoring her at their peril.

As for Reetika, she's simply counting down the days before her competition.

Being the first Indian to qualify in the heaviest weight class of women's freestyle wrestling, she wants more.

"At the Olympics, I know that there are bigger names than me, not just internationally but in the Indian team. There are three wrestlers who have already won a World medal. Anshu is going for her second Olympics. Vinesh is going to her third.

"I know why everyone will be focusing on them. But I don't mind that. I know that if I win a medal, the world will get to know who I am. I am just thinking I have to win a medal and the world will know there's

someone by the name of Reetika Hooda," she says.

While the rest of the country might indeed remember her name, her family has already come to the conclusion that it was perhaps in Reetika's destiny to be a wrestler. If not in her destiny, then at least the sport was in her blood.

Her father, Jagbir Hooda, says, "My great-grandfather was a man known as Balu *pehelwan*. I don't know how much of it is true, but he was supposed to be a giant among men. His neck was so thick that he would have to turn his entire body around when he wanted to speak to someone.

"There's a story of how when a bullock cart got stuck in deep mud, he

Peaking at the right time: Last year, Reetika Hooda became the first Indian woman to win a gold medal at the U-23 World Championships, beating USA's Kennedy Blades. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

took the yoke off the hump of the bullocks, put it on his own neck, and hoisted the cart out himself.

"His son — my grandfather — was a wrestler who was very famous in local *dangals*, but neither my father nor I wrestled ourselves," says Jagbir, a broad-shouldered six-foot-three former tankier in the Indian Army. "Neither my father nor I wrestled, but while that talent has skipped two generations, it's finally emerged once again in Reetika," he laughs.

It was Reetika's aunt who first

« Reetika will carry the confidence of having already beaten seven of the 15 contenders in the 76kg category »



Support system: Reetika with her coaches Mandeep Singh (left) and Kuldeep Sehrawat (right). **Right:** Reetika duels with male wrestlers at the *akharas* due to the lack of female practice partners in the country at her level. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

determined she was destined to become a wrestler, though it wasn't because of her skills on the mat. Reetika's mother Neelam says, "Because my husband was in the Army, it was very hard to keep Reetika with us when she was little. I would leave her at my parents' home in the village where she got a reputation for sneaking into neighbours' kitchens and taking away the pot in which they stored *ghee* (clarified butter).

"She'd bring the pot back home, and my sister would eventually catch her, while she was licking the pot clean. And she said, '*Yeh wali toh pehelwan hi banegi!*' (This one will become a wrestler only)."

There were other hints, of course. Although her brother Rohit is a year older than her, it was Reetika who would always end up winning whenever the two would fight. "It was all playful *dhakkam-dhakki* (pushing and shoving), but even then, Reetika would be the one who would be throwing him around.

"Very often I'd be called and be told that the two of them were fighting and instinctively I would be upset at Rohit for fighting with his younger sister, but then I'd find out that Reetika was the one who had started the fight and who had ended up winning," says Neelam.

For all that early spark, Reetika was a late starter to formal wrestling. She moved to Rohtak city from her grandparents' village in class five — following Jagbir's retirement from the Army — and didn't really play a lot of sports until she was in class nine.

"I was expected to study. I liked sports, but I only played a little during my school PT (physical training) class,"

Reetika says.

All that changed during her ninth grade when her school started a handball team in which she played as a goalkeeper. "I loved playing handball. A lot of girls were scared when the opponent threw the ball really hard at the goal but I never blinked. I was a very good goalkeeper, but I had to keep it a secret from my father because I didn't think he would have approved," she says.

It was a secret that was impossible to keep after her school competed and then won a state school championship held in Rohtak. The win came with the opportunity to travel out of state for the national championships.

Jagbir, though, put his foot down, but not for the reason Reetika thought. "It wasn't as if I was against her playing sports. When I saw that she was good enough to make it to a national tournament, I knew she was talented. But I didn't want her to take

part in a team event. Because of our family background and how she would fight and beat her brother, I thought wrestling might be a better fit for her," says Jagbir.

In Rohtak, that meant taking her to the wrestling *akhara* at Chhotu Ram Stadium run by Mandeep. Although he had only been coaching for four years at that point, Mandeep and the wrestling *akhara* at Chhotu Ram Stadium had a reputation for excellence. They had already produced a number of elite female wrestlers, most notably Olympic medalist Sakshi Malik.

Mandeep says he was impressed by her from the first class itself. "She was strong. I could make that out right away. She had very thick and strong legs, which are not common among girls.

"I then had her try out a wrestling *daav* (move) called a double leg takedown, and she picked it up right away. I felt this was someone who would be a quick learner and was also physically gifted," he says.

While Jagbir immediately enrolled her, he made it clear that she would have to show the initiative to pursue the sport wholeheartedly. "I made it clear that she couldn't expect her parents to push her to train. It had to be something she wanted to do," he says.

That was fine with her. "At that time I didn't know anything about wrestling. I never even thought I'd get to the Olympics one day. I was just thinking that I finally had the chance to play a sport. I was so happy just for that opportunity," she says.

Indeed, her mother never had to wake her up in order to wrestle. "Every day, she would wake up at 4:30 in the morning, make tea for me, and then wake me up so that I could accompany her to the *akhara*," says Neelam.

That natural talent, coupled with enthusiasm, showed rapid results. After about eight months of training, Reetika won a gold medal in the state school championships, beating girls who had been training for years.

Her own targets would only grow loftier. Within a year of her joining the *akhara*, Sakshi Malik would become



the first Indian woman wrestler to win a medal at the Olympics.

"When she got back to India, the whole stadium went out to receive her at the airport. I remember thinking just when would be the day that I would be able to accomplish something like that and see the whole stadium come to welcome me," Reetika says.

Things wouldn't always go just as she planned. "Her career has not always been smooth. There were years where everything went right for her, and there have also been years where it's been much harder for her," says Mandeep.

While Reetika had enjoyed plenty of success at the age-group level just two years after she took up the sport — she won her first national cadet title in 2017 — she had to wait many more years before she could actually make an impact at the senior level.

"I won my first senior gold medal at the Vishakapatnam Wrestling Nationals in 2022 after losing the previous three times. It was very disappointing to lose as long as I did."

Part of the reason was that Reetika hadn't grown into her weight category. Reetika actually competed for many years in the women's 72kg weight class before eventually moving up to the women's 76kg category since that was the weight class that featured in the Olympics.

Unlike most wrestlers, Reetika doesn't try to get any advantage by cutting weight — the process in which wrestlers starve and dehydrate themselves in order to compete in a weight category lighter than the one they normally walk around in — before a competition. "I tried it once, and I ended up having a headache that made it nearly impossible for me to wrestle," she says.



This means that Reetika, who stands five feet and six inches tall and competes in the heaviest weight category for female wrestlers, is routinely the smaller of her opponents.

"Usually my opponents will be 79kg before they cut weight to fit into the 76kg weight class. On the other hand, I'm actually only around 74kg on a normal day. I've actually gained two kilos to even weigh 74kg. Most of my opponents are bigger than me," she says.

"It just took her a year to learn to adjust," says Mandeep. "It's not that she was weaker than her opponents. She's actually really strong for her weight category, but she's just had to understand how to deal with the difference in experience. Once she learned how to win, it became routine for her," he says.

The turning point, both Reetika and Mandeep agree, came at the 2023 U-23 World Championships in Tirana, Albania. "I didn't go in thinking that I would actually win. I was just treating it as a competition that would give me international experience.

"Then one by one, I started beating all my opponents. Before the final, my coach told me I actually have the chance to make history. So I thought I might as well put in my effort to win it, and I ended up doing that," says Reetika.

In the tournament, Reetika beat America's top-rated wrestler Kennedy Blades, who would go on to claim the Olympic team spot, beating six-time world champion Adeline Gray at the USA team trials earlier this year.

A week later, she competed at the National Games in Goa, where she won a gold medal, beating former Asian champion Divya Kakran — an opponent she had lost to twice in previous matches — in a minute and a half in the first round of the final.

From then on, Reetika has been all but unstoppable in both national and international circuits. "What she lacks in size, she makes up for in speed and strength," says Kuldeep Sehrawat, chief coach at the training



centre in Sonapat, where Reetika trains with men, since the Chhotu Ram *akhara* only caters to women and none of them can currently match her.

What also serves her well, says Mandeep, is that she's hardly fazed regardless of the competition she's up against.

"She's not someone who gets nervous before a bout. Unlike many wrestlers, she doesn't even look at her draw before she steps on the mat. She knows she will never get a good draw, so she's made her peace with it. She's ready to take on anyone.

"That doesn't mean she doesn't prepare for her matches. Before every competition, she studies videos of her opponents and notes what they have won, but she doesn't let it put too much pressure on her," he says.

That's true ahead of the Paris Games as well. "After she qualified for

Pride of the family: Reetika poses with her medals. **Right:** Her father Jagbir and mother Neelam recognised her penchant for wrestling and gave her all the support she needed.

PICS: SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

the Olympics, she's never once said she feels the pressure of expectations. She just wants to give her best in the competition. When we train, she is always the last to leave the training hall. She won't leave until she's satisfied with her training," he says.

For Reetika, the Olympics are a competition just like any other. And while she's not a huge name in Indian sport right now, she's backing herself to change that in the days to come.

"Not many may be watching out for me, but I will make sure they remember my name after the Olympics," she says.



WHAT MADE THE CUT, WHAT DIDN'T



AP

Ahead of the Paris Olympics, some sports have been excluded, while **few new ones** have been added. Here's a quick recap.

Team Sportstar

The Paris 2024 Olympics, taking place from July 26 to August 11, will have 329 events in 32 sports. Some disciplines included in the Tokyo Games, which had 339 events in 33 sports, have been dropped.

Excluded sports

Karate

In 2009, Karate was considered for the 2016 Rio Olympics but lost out to golf and rugby. It finally made its debut at Tokyo 2020 with the Kata and Kumite events. Despite this, Karate won't be included in the Paris 2024 Olympics due to concerns about its entertainment

value and youth appeal. It also won't be part of the Los Angeles 2028 Games, as it faces stiff competition from other combat sports like boxing, judo, taekwondo, and wrestling.

Baseball

Baseball (**above**) first appeared at the 1900 Paris Olympics. Until 1988, it was only a demonstration or exhibition sport. It became an official Olympic sport at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics and continued until the 2008 Beijing Olympics. It returned for Tokyo 2020 at the host's request, as one of five temporary sports. Baseball is often excluded due to scheduling conflicts with the MLB, which makes player participation difficult. However, it

will be included in the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics to attract American audiences.

Softball

Softball, often seen as baseball's sister sport, won't be part of the Paris 2024 Olympics. It was included in the Olympics from 1996 to 2008 and returned for Tokyo 2020. According to the IOC's Olympic Charter, a sport must be practised by men in at least 75 countries on four continents and by women in at least 40 countries on three continents to qualify for inclusion. Softball's lack of global popularity also contributed to its exclusion from Paris 2024. However, both softball and baseball will be featured at the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics.

Included sports

Breaking

Inspired by its success at the 2018 Youth Olympic Games in Argentina, the IOC announced on December 7, 2020, that breaking (breakdancing) will be included in the Paris 2024 Olympics. This marks the first time a dance sport will feature in the Summer Olympics. The competition, set for August 9 and 10, will have 16 B-boys and 16 B-girls competing in one-on-one battles. Breakdancers will showcase their moves, adapting to DJ tracks to impress judges and compete for Olympic medals.

Kayak cross

At the Paris Olympics from August 3 to 5, a new event in canoe slalom, kayak cross, will debut. It replaces the men's and women's K-1 200-metre sprint races. In kayak cross, four athletes race together from a ramp above the water, navigating a course with up to six downstream gates and two upstream gates. This is the first head-to-head racing event in Olympic canoe slalom history, departing from individual time trials.

Change in formats

Artistic swimming: Artistic swimming has been an Olympic sport since the 1984 Los Angeles Games. Paris 2024 will be the first Olympics where male athletes can compete in the team event.

Boxing: With focus on gender equality, there will be seven weight classes for men and six for women. This reflects a reduction of one category for men (from eight) and an increase of one for women (from five), in line with the IOC's goals.

Sailing: Two new events, iQFoil and kiteboarding, have been added to the Olympic sailing lineup. The selection of boats has also been adjusted, now featuring two mixed-gender boats and four boats designated for each gender.

Shooting: In the shotgun discipline, the trap mixed team event will be replaced by the mixed team skeet event.

Sport Climbing: At the Paris Games, the athlete count will increase from 40 to 68, with the

THROW-DOWNS
Breakers compete in head-to-head battles, taking turns to respond and out-do each other, dancing to "breakbeat" chosen by DJ

CORE MOVES
Top rocks: Moves performed standing up
Down rocks: Performed on floor
Indian Step ▶ **CC** ◀

Freezes: Halt all motion and hold position
Power moves: Gravity-defying, acrobatic requiring strength, balance and flexibility

Chair ▶ **HeadSpin** ▶ **Air flare** – rotating while alternating balance on either arm

"TRIVIUM" SCORING
Designed to retain creativity while maintaining objectivity

Body: Physical moves performed
Technique 60% 40% Variety

Mind: Response to opponent's routine
Creativity 60% 40% Personality

Soul: Style and drama
Performativity 60% 40% Musicality

Philip Kim (CAN)
AKA Phil Wizard – WDSF World Breaking Champion 2022, silver medalist in 2023

Source: IOC Picture: Getty Images © GRAPHIC NEWS

competition split into two distinct events. Unlike Tokyo, where each gender had a single combined medal, Paris will feature separate bouldering and lead events alongside a speed event.

Track and Field: The marathon race walk mixed relay will replace the men's 50km race walk. Also, a repechage round has been added for sprint and mid-distance races from 200m to 1500m (including

100m and 110m hurdles). This gives athletes who don't qualify initially another opportunity to compete in repechage heats, aiming to reach the semifinals.

Volleyball: In the men's and women's volleyball tournaments, teams will be split into three pools of four, a shift from the previous format of two pools of six teams.

Weightlifting: The weight classes have been reduced from 14 to 10.

» OLYMPICS BUMPER
INTERVIEW P. R. SREEJESH





MAY THE FOURTH BE WITH YOU

P.R. Sreejesh **reflects** on the significance of the Tokyo 2020 hockey bronze medal and a rare fourth Olympic appearance this year.

Experience counts: With younger goalkeepers pushing him, keeping his place in the team is not easy for the 36-year-old. K. MURALIKUMAR

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In Bengaluru, a wall in the modest lobby of the Sports Authority of India (SAI) hostel, which houses the Indian hockey team, is adorned with a picture of a smiling P.R. Sreejesh, proudly wearing the 2020 Tokyo Olympics bronze medal that the country won after a patient wait of 41 years.

Sreejesh, who is nearing the rare milestone of playing in his fourth Olympics along with teammate Manpreet Singh, sits with *Sportstar* after a two-hour training session. Leslie Claudius, Udham Singh and Dhanraj Pillay, none of whom were goalkeepers, are the only other Indians to have achieved this feat.

"It's really exciting because very few have achieved this for India. You feel more responsible when you are participating in your fourth Olympics. The previous one was much better than all the other editions. So, this time it's about being more responsible," Sreejesh says. "For me, it's about giving my best performance and supporting my team. It's a privilege to compete at the 1924 Paris Olympics stadium, which will host hockey."

In his two-decade-long career, Sreejesh has experienced more downs than ups, which has made him truly appreciate the value of the Tokyo medal. Sreejesh acknowledges that the Olympics brings pressure, which is inevitable for a team that won the bronze medal last time.

"Every time we have participated, we have hoped for a medal, and we finally got it last time. This time, we believe that we are capable of achieving it once again. All 11 players on this team understand how difficult it was to succeed last time.

"The expectations are because of

Adapt with the times: His competitiveness and quest for excellence have helped Sreejesh evolve as a goalkeeper and stay relevant.

K. MURALIKUMAR



our performance. I don't think we should take expectations as pressure. We should consider it as support and use it as a 12th man."

Comparing the Tokyo and Paris journeys, Sreejesh offers an honest perspective.

"The Tokyo team was totally different because the COVID lockdown –gave us space and time to bond with and understand each other; that team was built in a different way. We were isolated on the whole campus. I would sit in my room and wave at everyone. That's how we used to communicate. We even conducted training sessions on *Zoom*. That helped us achieve a unique bond, different from the present team.

"But be it time, facilities or tactics — everything changes. Now, we have five or six new players in the team and a new coaching staff. Everything will be totally different from Tokyo. But I believe that at present, this is the best team to represent India in the Olympics."

For Sreejesh, Tokyo is now history. "We cannot dwell on it now. Every team is improving a lot, playing really well. The top six of them are very competitive and capable of beating each other on any given day. This is going to be tough for us. But I think we are capable."

Keeping his place in the team is challenging for the 36-year-old with younger goalkeepers vying for the position. The experienced custodian is a colleague, competitor, and mentor all rolled into one for 27-year-old Krishan Pathak and 28-year-old Suraj Karkera.

"You need to be physically and mentally fit to compete with them," he says.

But taking the youngsters along is crucial. "There shouldn't be a gap between me and them. I try to keep it open for everyone, talk to everyone, make fun of them, advise them, guide them, correct them, and go eat with them."

"If you feel like you are the senior guy and they should come to you, that is not the way a team works."

But Sreejesh wants Pathak and Karkera to earn their spots. "Suraj and Pathak have been with me since 2016. After the Junior World Cup, they joined us and have

been working alongside me. The Indian national hockey team has an open plate. If you are good, you are in. If not, there is no place for you. I always try to improve myself to earn my place and work hard alongside them.

"When the team is announced, I feel bad because these two guys are always travelling with me. When it comes to the Olympics, there is only one goalkeeper. It's a bit awkward. You should ask yourself, 'Why am I here?' Because I want to play in the Olympics. Otherwise, I could have ended my career three years ago."

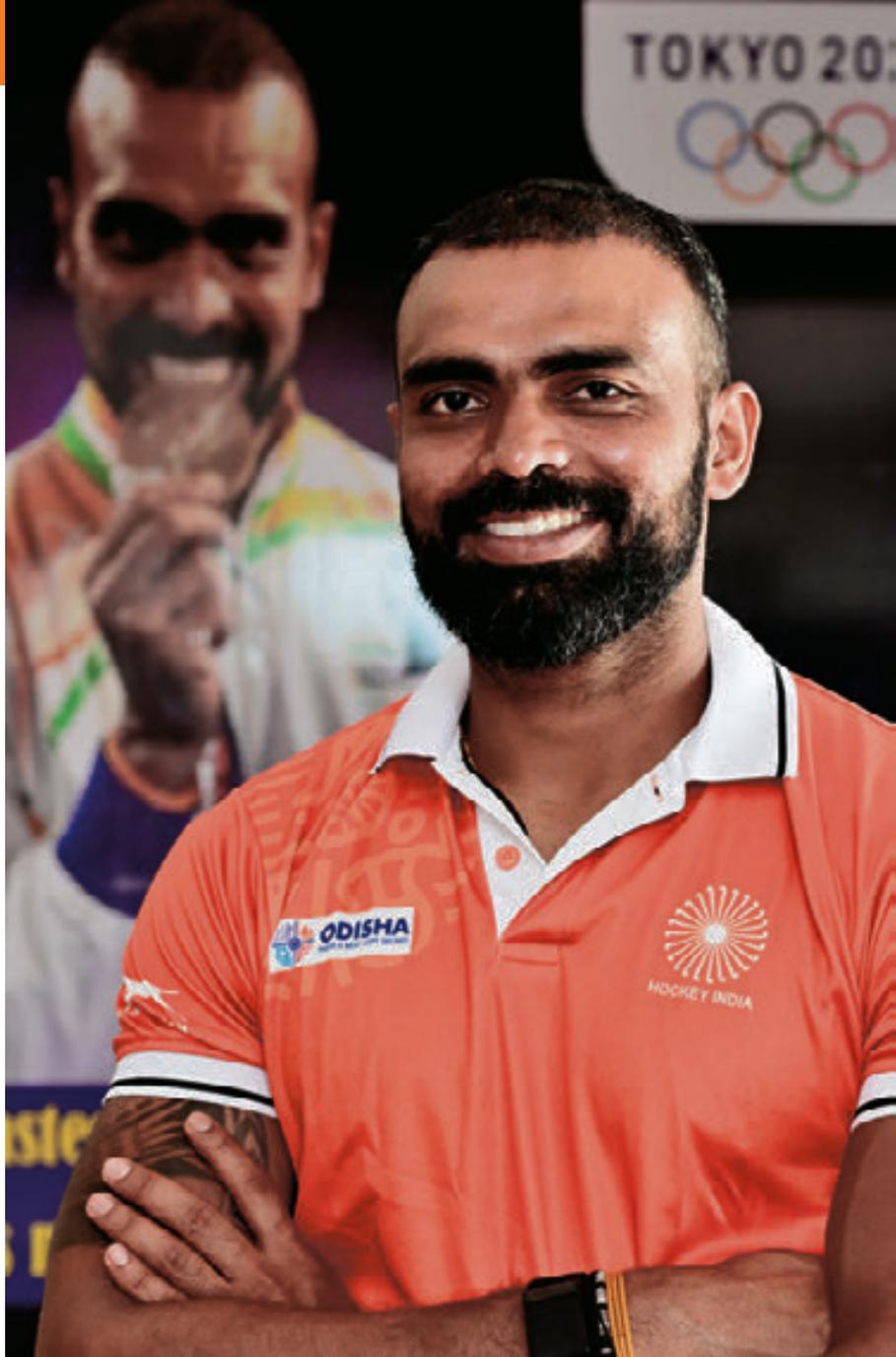
His competitive nature and pursuit of excellence have enabled Sreejesh to develop as a goalkeeper and remain significant over time. His position has also contributed to his longevity.

"There are times when we just copy what our previous goalkeepers or coaches taught us. We never learnt anything from other goalkeepers — from the Europeans or other international players. The techniques we learnt were wrong. After the 2012 Olympics, I changed my basics.

"That was the toughest period for me because every time I did something, the goalkeeping coach from South Africa, Dave Staniforth, would say, 'Sree, you can't keep your hands like that, or you can't keep them like this. You have to be like this, you have to be on your toes, you can't move around, you have to stay focused.' I never had that kind of training before. I had coaches who taught me, but it was not clear.

"From there, I tried to teach myself what was right for me. I tried to update myself. Every time I did something wrong, I corrected myself. When I became a senior on my team, I guided my juniors as well. It was like a give-and-take policy. You train them; you correct them. Automatically, you learn. That helps you to self-improve.

"The second thing is challenging yourself. After 2012, when Bharat Chetri left the team, I got the opportunity to be the number one goalkeeper, which can feel like a comfort zone. But I never allowed



myself to stay there. I always try to push myself by self-learning, self-correction, teaching the youngsters and guiding them.

"It's helped me improve every time. When I concede a goal, I watch the videos to better understand why and how I conceded it, and what I could have done to save it."

Sreejesh, who played a critical role in making some valuable saves in the Tokyo Games, spoke about former Dutch keeper Jaap Stockmann's assistance during the tournament.

Mentor mode: Sreejesh says he always tries to push himself by self-learning, self-correction, teaching the youngsters and guiding them.

K. MURALI KUMAR



"Jaap was like a shadow with me. Every time I texted him, he would text me back. He watched the matches but never tried to change my basics.

"He always tried to help me with my mentality — like how to approach the quarterfinals and semifinals, how calm I should be, and how to do things better.

"Goalkeeping is all about learning, relearning, and working hard. That's the only thing that keeps you at the top of your game. I believe that it always gets better after the age of 25–28. Once you play 100 matches, you get that rhythm.

"I always say goalkeepers are like wine. If you keep it over a period, it tastes better."

With the sport becoming faster

and strikers finding new ways to beat defences, Sreejesh makes himself better equipped to safeguard the goal.

"Firstly, you train with the best forwards. They always try to do a lot of variations, hitting as hard as they can. Secondly, you sharpen your defenders. Someone like Harmanpreet is always there to support me. With techniques changing and the game getting faster, these guys are getting sharper. And it's not 'me', it's 'us'. It's the defenders, starting from the forward line. For that, we need to do a lot of reflex workouts and short exercises, which can help us move faster. Then, definitely, I lift a lot of weights in the gym."

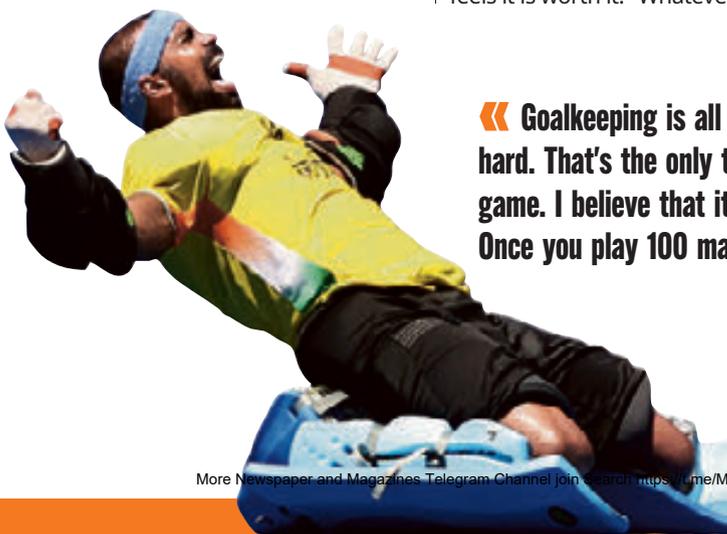
For all the toil done over the years, Sreejesh had to sacrifice a lot. But he feels it is worth it. "Whatever

One for the album: The Indian hockey players pose with their bronze medals at the Tokyo Olympics. India beat Germany 5-4 in the third place match to clinch a historic victory.

Below: An ecstatic Sreejesh celebrates the win. PICS: GETTY IMAGES

sacrifices I have made, I am so happy about them. Because my kids are really proud of who I am and what I am doing for my country. And they realise it."

Sreejesh, looking as sharp as ever, is one of the most recognisable faces. He created that iconic moment in Tokyo by sitting atop the goalpost after India defeated Germany, ensuring a historic podium finish. Now, he is again ready to give his best in Paris and help India finish in the medal brackets.



« Goalkeeping is all about learning, relearning, and working hard. That's the only thing that keeps you at the top of your game. I believe that it always gets better after the age of 25-28. Once you play 100 matches, you get that rhythm – Sreejesh »

Iconic and picturesque

Here's a look at some of the major venues of the Paris 2024 Olympics where the world's **best sportspersons** will battle it out for the coveted Olympic medal.

Team Sportstar

The 33rd edition of the Summer Olympics will take place from July 26 to August 11 in Paris and 16 other cities in France. This quadrennial event will be hosted in the French capital for the third time, following the years 1900 and 1924. Around 10,500 athletes are expected to participate in 329 events, which will be held across 35 venues in the country.

The upcoming edition in France will continue the

tradition of utilising popular buildings and arenas across the host country. Various iconic locations such as the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the Chateau de Versailles, and the Roucas-Blanc Marina in Marseille will serve as the settings for events during the 17 days of action.

ROLAND GARROS

Paris 2024 sport disciplines: Tennis, Boxing; Capacity: 34,000

The Stade Roland-Garros, situated in Paris' 16th arrondissement, is renowned for its rich history in tennis and will also host boxing events during the Games.

This iconic venue, which hosts the French Open Grand Slam tennis

tournament each year, spans 12 hectares and features 18 clay courts, including the main court, Philippe-Chatrier Court (**below**), equipped with a retractable roof for inclement weather. Additionally, boxing competitions will take place at the North Paris Arena, an exhibition centre with nine halls located in Seine-Saint-Denis.

GRAND PALAIS

Paris 2024 sport disciplines: Fencing, Taekwondo; Capacity: 8,000

The Grand Palais des Champs-Élysées, located in the heart of Paris, was constructed for the Paris Universal Exhibition in 1900. This



venue showcases exhibitions by artists from around the world and also served as the site for the World Fencing Championships in 2010. Additionally, the building was utilised during the final stage of the renowned Tour de France cycling event in 2017.

EIFFEL TOWER STADIUM

Paris 2024 sport disciplines: Beach Volleyball; Capacity: 12,860

The Champ de Mars public gardens, located next to the iconic Eiffel Tower, host numerous events and celebrations throughout the year. These lawns were previously used as marching grounds by the French military. A temporary outdoor

Skating central: The Place de la Concorde, which will host events in skateboarding, BMX freestyle, breaking and 3x3 basketball. GETTY

IMAGES

setup will be constructed in the gardens to host the beach volleyball event during the Summer Games.

CHAMP DE MARS ARENA

Paris 2024 sport disciplines: Judo, Wrestling; Capacity: 8,356

The Champ De Mars Arena is a 10,000 square meter temporary structure located opposite the Ecole Militaire on one side and the Eiffel Tower on the other. Currently known as the Grand Palais Ephemere, it serves as a temporary replacement for the Grand Palais, which is undergoing renovation ahead of the Games. The Arena will be the venue for the Judo and Wrestling events at the Olympics, after which it will be dismantled.

PARC DES PRINCES

Paris 2024 sport disciplines: Football; Capacity: 47,926

The Parc des Princes has been home to the Paris Saint-Germain

football club since 1974. It was built by renowned architect Roger Taillibert. The stadium has hosted the French national football and rugby teams and was used during the 1998 FIFA World Cup and the European Championships in 2016.

Other stadiums hosting football during Paris 2024 include Bordeaux Stadium in Bordeaux, Geoffroy-Guichard Stadium in Saint Etienne, La Beaujoire Stadium in Nantes, Lyon Stadium in Decines, Marseille Stadium in Marseille, and Nice Stadium in Nice.

PLACE DE LA CONCORDE

Paris 2024 sport disciplines: BMX Freestyle, Skateboarding, Breaking, 3X3 Basketball; Capacity: 30,000

Located in the Champs-Elysees area of Paris, the Place de la Concorde is one of the most well-known public squares in the city. It has been the site of victory celebrations after the First and



Second World Wars and most recently during the 1998 FIFA Men's World Cup. La Concorde has been temporarily reimagined as an open arena and will be hosting the urban sports of the Paris Games. Breaking, a new addition to this edition of the Olympics, will be held here for the first time. In addition, the Mountain Bike competition will be held at Elancourt Hill, while the Cycling Road competition will take place at Pont Alexandre III and Trocadero. Events for cycling will also be hosted at the Saint-Quentin-En-Yvelines Velodrome and BMX Stadium.

ESPLANADE DES INVALIDES

Paris 2024 sport disciplines: Archery; Capacity: 8,000

Les Invalides is a group of buildings located in the 7th arrondissement of Paris. It was built by Louis XIV in 1687 as a military hospital and retirement home for

war veterans. The Esplanade is the lawn area situated to the north of these buildings. The complex now includes military museums and the tomb of Napoleon Bonaparte. The Esplanade des Invalides will host the archery event during the Games and will also be the finishing line for the marathon. Other venues that will host the athletics events include Stade de France, Trocadéro, and Hôtel de Ville in Paris.

CHATEAU DE VERSAILLES

Paris 2024 sport disciplines: Equestrian, Modern Pentathlon; Capacity: 15,000 - 40,000

The Palace of Versailles served as the residence of King Louis XIV and other French royalty until the French Revolution. Following that, the site was transformed into a public museum and was recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1979.

There is a temporary outdoor arena outside the palace which will be used to host the dressage,

eventing cross country, and jumping competitions of Equestrian, as well as the Modern Pentathlon events, with the exception of the fencing ranking rounds.

TEAHUPO'O

Paris 2024 sport disciplines: Surfing; Capacity: 600

Teahupo'o is a settlement on the southwest coast of Tahiti, an island in the region of French Polynesia located in the Pacific Ocean. The area has hosted the Pro Tahiti World Championship event and the World Surf Championship Tour. The waves of Teahupo'o will host the surfing competitions, which will be held for only the second time in the Summer Games.

YVES-DU-MANOIR STADIUM

Paris 2024 sport disciplines: Hockey; Capacity: 15,000

The Stade Yves-du-Manoir will be



the only venue in the Paris 2024 roster that has hosted an Olympic event before. The stadium was utilised during the 1924 Olympics in the city, hosting events including athletics, horse riding, football, and rugby, among others. The venue also hosted the final of the 1938 FIFA World Cup, where Italy defeated Hungary to claim its second title.

Apart from these main locations, a few other centres will also host competitions during the Paris Games. The South Paris Centre, located in the 15th arrondissement, will host handball, table tennis, volleyball, and weightlifting competitions.

The Pierre-Mauroy Stadium in Villeneuve-d'Ascq, the home base for the Lille Olympique Sporting Club (LOSC Lille), will host the basketball and handball events.

The badminton competition will take place at the Porte de la Chapelle Arena, which has a capacity of 8,000 seats. The site will also host the Rhythmic Gymnastics event. Golf National, one of the most

prestigious golf venues in the continent, used for the Ryder Cup in 2018, will host the golf events at the Paris Games.

Among the aquatic events, Artistic Swimming will be held at the Aquatics Centre in Seine-Saint-Denis, while the Marathon Swimming event will take place at Pont Alexandre III. Paris La Defense Arena in Saint-Etienne will host the swimming and water polo events, while the Canoe and Rowing events will take place at the Vaires-sur-Marne Nautical Stadium. The Bercy Arena in Paris is another location where multiple disciplines like Artistic Gymnastics, Trampoline, and Basketball will take place.

All shooting events will be exclusively held at the Châteauroux Shooting Centre, while surfing events will be held at the Marseille Marina (**below**). The Le Bourget climbing venue in Seine-Saint-Denis is where sport climbing will take place and is only the second venue to be built from scratch after the Aquatics Centre in the same city.



AFP

Sport-wise breakdown

3x3 Basketball - La Concorde (Paris)

Artistic Swimming - Aquatics Centre (Saint-Denis)

Artistic Gymnastics - Bercy Arena (Paris)

Athletics - Hotel de Ville (Paris IV), Invalides (Paris), Stade de France (Saint-Denis), Trocadero (Paris)

Archery - Invalides (Paris)

Badminton - Porte De La Chapelle Arena (Paris)

Basketball - Bercy Arena (Paris), Pierre Mauroy Stadium (Villeneuve-d'Ascq)

Beach Volleyball - Eiffel Tower Stadium (Paris)

Boxing - North Paris Arena (Paris), Stade Roland Garros (Paris)

Breaking - La Concorde (Paris)

Canoe Slalom - Vaires-sur-Marne Nautical Stadium (Vaires-sur-Marne)

Canoe Sprint - Vaires-sur-Marne Nautical Stadium (Vaires-sur-Marne)

Cycling Mountain Bike - Elancourt Hill (Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines)

Cycling Road - Invalides (Paris), Pont Alexandre III (Paris), Trocadero (Paris)

Cycling BMX Freestyle - La Concorde (Paris), Saint-Quentin-En-Yvelines BMX Stadium (Montigny-le-Bretonneux)

Cycling Track - Saint-Quentin-En-Yvelines Velodrome (Montigny-le-Bretonneux)

Equestrian - Chateau de Versailles (Versailles)

Fencing - Grand Palais (Paris)

Football - Bordeaux Stadium (Bordeaux), Geoffroy-Guichard Stadium (Saint Etienne), La Beaujoire Stadium (Nantes), Lyon Stadium (Decines), Marseille Stadium (Marseille), Nice Stadium (Nice), Parc de Princes (Paris)

Golf - Golf National (Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines)

Handball - Pierre Mauroy Stadium (Villeneuve-d'Ascq), South Paris Arena (Paris)

Hockey - Yves-du-Manoir Stadium (Colombes)

Judo - Champ de Mars Arena (Paris)

Marathon Swimming - Pont Alexandre III (Paris)

Modern Pentathlon - Chateau de Versailles (Versailles), North Paris Arena (Paris)

Rhythmic Gymnastics - Porte De La Chapelle Arena (Paris)

Rowing - Vaires-sur-Marne Nautical Stadium (Vaires-sur-Marne)

Rugby Sevens - Stade de France (Saint-Denis)

Sailing - Marseille Marina (Marseille)

Skateboarding - La Concorde (Paris)

Shooting - Chateauroux Shooting Centre (Chateauroux)

Sport Climbing - Le Bourget Sport Climbing Venue (Le Bourget)

Surfing - Teahupo'o, Tahiti (French Polynesia)

Swimming - Paris La Defense Arena (Nanterre)

Table Tennis - South Paris Arena (Paris)

Taekwondo - Grand Palais (Paris)

Tennis - Stade Roland Garros (Paris)

Trampoline - Bercy Arena (Paris)

Triathlon - Pont Alexandre III (Paris)

Volleyball - South Paris Arena (Paris)

Water Polo - Paris La Defense Arena (Nanterre)

Weightlifting - South Paris Arena (Paris)

Wrestling - Champ de Mars Arena (Paris)



WHEN I SKIPPED AN OPENING CEREMONY TO WATCH A MOVIE

The essence of the Olympics lies in the Athletes Village, and over the years, I have created some **enduring memories** there.

Abhinav Bindra

The Olympic Games Village is a unique place where athletes from around 200 countries come together to compete fiercely yet live in a friendly, warm atmosphere, creating wonderful memories for everyone.

I experienced this during my Olympic debut at the Sydney Games in 2000. It's not just about life in the Olympic Village; the essence of the Olympics is in the Athletes Village. You see stars like Michael Phelps, Roger Federer, and Novak Djokovic, and everyone is equal. That is the spirit of sports you encounter in the Village.

I have a favourite Olympic story from the Sydney Games. Anwer Sultan (an Indian shooter) and I were having dinner when we saw Venus and Serena Williams. Anwer wanted a picture with them, but I was too shy to ask. They agreed, but we didn't have smartphones back then, and Anwer's camera was in our room. We asked them to wait for five minutes while we fetched it.

When we returned, the Williams sisters were still there, waiting. But the story doesn't end here.

We realised the camera didn't have a film roll. We excused

ourselves again and ran to get one from the photo shop in the Village. It took another 10 or 15 minutes, but the Williams sisters were still there, waiting and happy to pose with us. That's the spirit of sports at the Olympic Village.

It is some experience to sit in the huge dining hall and watch athletes of different sports, different countries, sizes, and shapes moving around.

Life in the Olympic Village with over 10,000 athletes eagerly trying to get ready and be at their best is an exhilarating experience. It is a wonderful feeling to be there together, trying to reach the highest levels of human excellence and human endeavour.

I remember Karnam Malleswari winning the weightlifting medal (bronze) in Sydney. Later in the evening, everyone congratulated her when she returned to the Village. It was similar scenes when (Rajyavardhan Singh) Rathore won the (silver) medal in shooting in Athens 2004. Everyone was making greeting cards and writing their messages for him.

When I won in Beijing (2008) and returned to the Village, I was so hungry. I had no energy left. I was

ready to collapse. I remember rushing to the dining area and having a McDonald's meal. I also got many congratulatory cards, and it was a special feeling.

If you remember, in the Games newspaper that comes out every morning, I was put on the front page the next day. It was a little prize in itself.

In London (2012), I remember me and (Indian shooter) Manavjit Singh Sandhu missing the opening ceremony. There was a mall next to the Olympic Village. We went there to watch a movie—just the two of us in the hall. They did run the show for us!

Rio 2016 was a fantastic experience. My coach, Heinz Reinkemeier, and my physio, Digpal Ranawat, were there. Despite the challenges, we enjoyed great bonding and camaraderie.

Life in the Olympic Village is a high-energy existence. There is a sensory overload. You can get drained in that atmosphere. There are high-energy individuals. The gym is full. Every area is full of people. At times, it is important to find a quiet place and be with yourself.

It's good that shooters will stay in a satellite village near their venue, far



from Paris, instead of the Games Village.

Heading into Beijing, I was very focused. I had followed the process and wasn't thinking about the outcome. I aimed to concentrate on executing my skills and living in the moment. With 60 shots in qualification and 10 in the final, I wanted to shoot 70 perfect shots, one at a time, doing my best with each.

I was satisfied and proud of my preparation, feeling that I had done everything possible.

Winning the gold was a significant moment for me and the country. It lifted a long-standing burden. For too long, we had been taunted that a country of a billion people had no gold. It was a breakthrough for Indian sports.

It gave belief to athletes and helped change the mindset of people on the whole. More than the athletes, people started to believe that we could win Olympic gold.

Everyone's aim went higher.

As a country, we have changed. Society has changed. Young India has much more belief that we can be the best in the world.

At the elite level, there is no dearth of support. There is too much support, which is wonderful. There are significant challenges, but there is significant progress as well.

Step by step, we have to focus on getting to the next level.

At some point, we may also hit stagnation. From 10 medals in the Olympics, which we are poised to cross in Paris, how do we reach 30 or 40 medals? How do we evolve to that level to match our overall progress as a nation?

That thought should take precedence after Paris. It is great that we are doing well at this stage, be it in the Olympics or winning the (T20) Cricket World Cup. We need to look at sports to build a healthier country, ensuring that young children get to play sports for a

better society. Playing sports for the joy of playing, not just for excellence at the highest level, helps you learn values from sports and develop character. We have to ensure greater participation in sports.

Once we do that and have a very large number of people playing, it will automatically have an impact on the number of elite athletes. I can see that happening in shooting already. There is so much depth of talent. That has to happen in many different sports. That shift must happen if we are looking to bid for the 2036 Olympics.

Despite all the progress, we have a limited number of athletes at the elite level. No amount of enhanced budget can help us win more unless we have a bigger pool of talent in multiple sports.

Hosting the Olympics should serve as a larger catalyst for change for a more healthy, vibrant, and sporting India.

As told to Kamesh Srinivasan

HAVING BREAKFAST WITH SERENA AND BEING STARSTRUCK BY USAIN BOLT

It was unfortunate that I missed out on a medal finish, but I must say **I was fortunate** to have stayed in the Village at that time.

Joydeep Karmakar

The Athletes' Village at the Olympics has an overwhelming effect on one, especially when you see it for the first time. I remember being among the first Indian athletes to reach the Village with Abhinav Bindra. I was awestruck. But at the same time, as an athlete, you know you are there to perform. I tried to cut the excitement down. But truth be told, you can't (*laughs*). That's the reality because it's so vast. I think that is the only place on Earth where thousands of athletes from different countries, ethnicities, races, religions, and cultures come together.

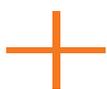
When I see a (Novak) Djokovic, for the first time, sitting on a small rock among friends and gossiping just like others, it feels nice. And then Serena Williams sitting right across my table where I'm having my breakfast—that is something! Yes, I'm an Olympian; I was taking part in the Games as well. But these were heroes we looked up to, and those were moments where you got

starstruck. I don't remember interacting with many athletes. But at the opening ceremony, I saw this huge guy breeze past me, dancing to the tunes being blasted at the stadium. And then it didn't take me long to realise it was Usain Bolt. And that was one time when I went stiff because I have been a great follower of the man!

The dining area was so huge that it could fit in two football fields. It was amazing. There's fun, frolic, and, of course, lots of food from different parts of the world. Some of which you would have perhaps never seen. But to my surprise, the biggest and

clear favourite counter was that of McDonald's. The best athletes in the world would stand in what was the longest of the queues. I never had a clue why, because, as athletes, we were always asked to follow a strict regime of nutrition and diet!

I must say I was a little fascinated by the African cuisine. Maybe because I hadn't been exposed to African food before that. The menu looked very different and tasted different as well. I wouldn't say I'm very fond of African food, but yeah, it was very new, and I had to experiment. There was, of course, a bit of window shopping, where we



The dining area was so huge that it could fit in two football fields. It was amazing. There's fun, frolic, and, of course, lots of food from different parts of the world.



PTI

would look at the menu from every corner of the world and take turns being fascinated.

When I browse through folders on my laptop, I think I can find only 20 photos of mine. I am not very sure why I didn't have more pictures. I was fond of photography back then as well. That was when I bought my first SLR (Single-Lens Reflex) camera and got it delivered to the Games Village. It was purchased from a store in Kolkata and brought in by Mr. B. G. Mallick (former vice-president of the

Bengal Olympic Association), an official who was travelling to London. It was handed over to me at the Village gate. Maybe I didn't use it much because I was too busy training and couldn't find the time.

It was unfortunate that I missed out on a medal finish, but I must say I was fortunate to have stayed in the Village at that time. Everyone around me didn't make me feel like I had finished fourth in the 50m rifle prone event. After the news spread, Indian athletes and officials from various

sports asked me how I was doing. However, later that day, the reality sunk in when Saina Nehwal won the bronze medal (the first Indian woman to win an Olympic medal in badminton). While everyone was rightfully celebrating, I realised what I had missed.

I also missed out on exchanging lapel pins from other countries (a common practice among the sports fraternity at multi-discipline events) as well. Now I regret not doing it.

As told to Santadeep Dey



AP

BEING IN THE OLYMPICS GAMES VILLAGE WAS A DREAM COME TRUE

I saw sprint **great Usain Bolt** at the Village but couldn't click a picture with him as I didn't have a mobile on me.

Dipa Karmakar

During my journey to the 2016 Rio Olympics and beyond, I had an unforgettable experience. The support I received from the then Sports Authority of India (SAI) Director General Injeti Srinivas during the pre-Olympics phase was tremendous. Since there was only basic equipment in Agartala then, I was allowed to train in Delhi, and new equipment was purchased specifically for me. Even today, gymnasts are using that same equipment for training. After qualifying for the Olympics, I gave my all during training under the guidance of my coach, Bishweshwar Nandi sir.

Once I reached the Games Village, it was like a dream for me. Initially, we could not find where the Indian contingent was staying. After finding them, I first met our hockey team players.

I cannot describe how the atmosphere was in the Village. It was an entirely different experience. But I kept my focus on training. My first target was to qualify for the vault final, and it was a big moment to achieve that. It was not easy as I was

the first Indian to make it to that stage. There was none from whose experience I could benefit.

There was a seven-day gap between the qualification and final, and I looked around a bit during that time. There was a McDonald's inside the Games Village and I noticed a familiar face there. He was none other than sprint superstar Usain Bolt. He was so tall! I could not take a photo with him, as I did not have a mobile phone at that time. But I was just so happy to see him there.

In the final, I did my best and was pleased with the points I received to finish fourth.

My goal was to exceed 15 points, and I achieved that with a score of 15.066. However, I felt disappointed when I found out that I narrowly missed out on a medal. When I returned to the Games Village, many people, including our chef-de-mission, Rakesh Gupta, praised my performance. They said it was hard luck that I missed out on a medal and compared my performance to that of legends like P.T. Usha and Milkha Singh. It was a proud feeling.

While returning, I initially thought that we would need to find a taxi from the airport since no one would be coming to receive us. However, my coach, Nandi sir, said, "You have no idea what's happening in India." I was overwhelmed by the grand welcome and felicitation I received at the Vivekananda Maidan in the presence of then Tripura Chief Minister Manik Sarkar and Sports Minister Sahid Chowdhury. I had never seen such celebrations in Agartala, except for Independence Day or Republic Day.

I received awards and honours, but nothing was as significant as the recognition that Tripura and gymnastics gained after my performance in Rio. It inspired confidence in young people, who started practising gymnastics. Numerous gymnastic centres, both public and private, opened across the country.

The gymnastic centre in Agartala became operational with the latest equipment and a foam pit. Now, many kids train there. For us, the teacher-student combination, all of this was a great achievement.

As told to Y.B. Sarangi



R. RAVINDRAN



SCAN TO
WATCH

MEETING ONE OF MY IDOLS, SANIA MIRZA, WAS A HIGHLIGHT

The dining hall at the Games Village was said to be the **best place to see top players** from different countries come together.

Bhavani Devi

As the first Indian fencer to qualify for the Tokyo Olympics, I was incredibly excited. However, our preparations were far from ideal due to the impact of COVID-19 on our training.

Although I was happy to be with my family in Chennai, I was not satisfied with the quality and intensity of my practice sessions. The year leading up to the Tokyo Olympics was challenging, and I was nervous about making the cut. But after I qualified, everything changed, and I was filled with energy.

I travelled to the Tokyo Olympics from Italy with my coach. Upon reaching the airport, there was a long queue of athletes waiting, filling out forms, and following COVID-19 protocols. It felt like I was already in the Olympic Village! Finally, after many COVID-19 tests, I arrived there. I stayed in the same block as the Indian women's hockey team, and it

was a great experience to see Novak Djokovic at the Village. It's unusual to see top tennis players in the Village. Every day at the dining hall, there was a crowd of people waiting to get the autograph of the former World No. 1 from Serbia. The dining hall was said to be the best place to see top players from different countries come together.

There was a lot of talk about fencing, which made me happy. However, I didn't meet any top fencers as they were all busy preparing for their events.

I've always admired Indian athletes from other sports. I was lucky to meet one of my idols, Sania Mirza, and I told her, "You are one of my biggest inspirations." Due to COVID-19 protocols, we were asked to leave immediately after our event. It was great to see Indian athletes from different disciplines. Since I had arrived early to prepare, I attended the opening ceremony.

Unfortunately, I couldn't watch the closing ceremony as we had to leave the venue due to COVID-19 protocols.

There was a lack of enthusiasm from the residents of Tokyo for the Olympics, likely due to the impact of COVID-19. The streets were empty, and there were few spectators at the venues. The Village had a large recovery hall for athletes, with support staff available for those in need. I was grateful to have my mother visit me, thanks to the support of the Sports Ministry.

Winning my first match against Tunisia's Nadia Ben Azizi and becoming the first Indian fencer to achieve this at the Olympics was a great feeling. Overall, it was a fun and valuable learning experience. I'm now training in Orléans, near Paris, and although I didn't qualify for the Paris Olympics, I'm determined to move forward.

As told to K. Keerthivasan

Did you know

Paris 2024 Olympic medals

The Paris Olympic medals contain ironwork from the Eiffel Tower, the first time any host city has incorporated pieces of a national monument

FRONT

Hexagon: Original metal recovered from structure during renovation, reflecting shape of France

Claws: Shaped like tower's rivets, attach hexagon using technique similar to affixing gemstones in jewellery

Radiating lines: Designed to reflect light – nod to Paris's nickname as *City of Light*

RIBBON

Inspired by latticework of tower, blue ribbon for Olympics and red for Paralympics – red shade inspired by original paintwork on tower

BACK

Greek goddess of victory, *Nike*, with Acropolis on left and Eiffel Tower on right

PARALYMPICS

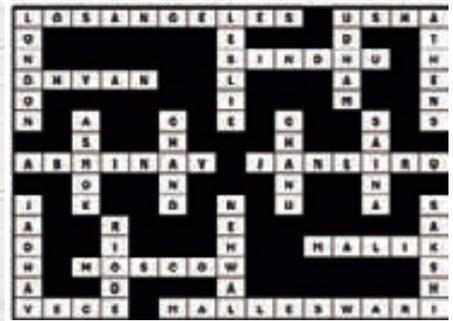
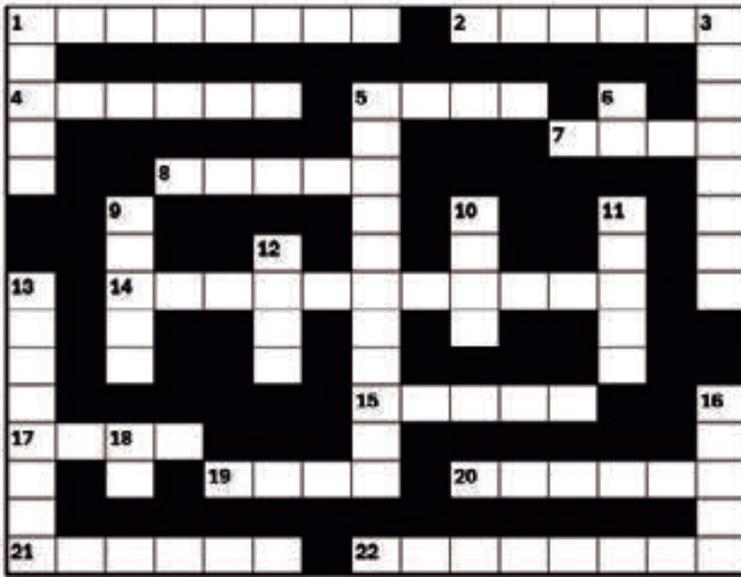
View of tower from beneath. Stamped with Paris 2024 in braille, in homage to *Louis Braille*, French inventor of writing system for visually impaired

Medal specifications

Diameter:	85mm
Thickness:	9.2mm
Weight Gold:	529g
Silver:	525g
Bronze:	455g

Designed by jewellery firm **Chaumet** and produced by France's mint – **Monnaie de Paris**





**SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S
CROSSWORD**

Olympics Bumper Special

ACROSS

1 Who holds the record, winning 18 medals which is the most by a male or female gymnast in Olympics history? (8)

2 Who is regarded as “the greatest Olympic swordsman ever” with a tally of seven gold medals in Sabre at six different Olympics? (6)

4 Who won both singles and doubles gold medals in tennis at the 2012 London Games? (6)

5 Which athlete won the most medals at the last Olympics held in Tokyo? (4)

14 Who is first male tennis player to achieve the Golden Slam? (5,6)

15 & 8 Who was called as the “Flying Finn” with nine gold and three silver medals in Olympics history? (5,5)

17 In which city were the first-ever Paralympic games held, which also marked the first time ever that such events coincided? (4)

19 & 11 Down Who won seven gold medals in swimming at the 1972 Munich Games, which was an Olympic record for most golds at a single Olympics that stood

for the next 36 years? (4,5)

20 Who was the first athlete to win a gold medal in the same individual event in four consecutive Olympics? (6)

21 Identify this family from where three athletes (brother, his wife & his sister) have won 12 medals in Olympics history? (6)

22 Who, in the 1980 Moscow Games, became the first to win eight medals, the most in a single edition, which has since been equalled twice by Michael Phelps? (8)

DOWN

1 & 16 Who did the “double-double” by winning the 5,000 and 10,000 metres gold medals, at the 1972 Munich and 1976 Montreal Olympics? (5,5)

3 Who is the most successful male rower in Olympic Games history by winning a gold medal in five consecutive games? (8)

5 Who created an Olympic first by winning the gold medal in 5,000 and 10,000 metres and also the marathon at the 1952 Helsinki Games? (4,7)

6 & 7 Across Who is this

gymnast, who won six medals at the 1984 Los Angeles Games, which, incidentally, was the first Olympics in which his country was taking part (it has now become a sporting powerhouse)? (2,4)

9 Identify this family that holds the record of winning the most medals in Olympic history for a father and son duo? (5)

10 Who, at the 1988 Seoul Games, not only became the first ever to achieve a Golden Slam in tennis but also to achieve it in the same year? (4)

12 Who is the only male athlete to win diving gold medals in successive Olympics — in Los Angeles 1984 and in Seoul 1988? (4)

13 Who became only the second man in Olympics history to win both 1,500 and 5,000 metres gold medals at the same Olympics? (8)

18 Identify this archer whose wife, too, won gold medals at the 2004 Athens and 2008 Beijing Games? (2)

»» WORLD CHAMPIONS BACK HOME



Breakfast with champions: India Prime Minister Narendra Modi hosted the Indian team for breakfast in Delhi. The team arrived from Bridgetown, Barbados, after a 16-hour non-stop charter flight, the AIC24WC (Air India Champions 24 World Cup). They stayed in the West Indies longer than expected due to Hurricane Beryl closing airports. [AFP](#)



Kings of the world: The Indian team's victory bus surfs through a sea of jubilant fans on its way to the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai after the 2024 T20 World Cup win in Barbados. India captain Rohit Sharma knew this feeling as he was part of the bus parade in 2007, when India had won the inaugural T20 World Cup. [EMMANUAL YOGINI](#)



Unbridled joy: Impromptu chants of "Bhaaaaaarat Mata ki...Jai" and "Mumbaicha Raja, Rohit Sharma" reverberated around the palm-fringed curve of Marine Drive, the Queen's Necklace, as a sea of blue took over the Marine Drive. [EMMANUAL YOGINI](#)



Cynosure of all eyes:

Indian players got a heroes' welcome in Mumbai after the T20 World Cup win ended a wait of 17 years for a second World T20 title. AFP



Break a leg: The players went on a victory lap around the ground, their voices joining the roaring crowd in triumphant song. Skipper Rohit Sharma and the final's MVP, Virat Kohli, led the charge, bursting into impromptu dance moves that electrified the celebration. AFP



Welcoming SportStars:

Throng of jubilant fans lined Marine Drive, clutching *Sportstar* posters commemorating India's triumphant T20 World Cup victory. The parade route was a sea of blue, as thousands eagerly joined India's victorious homecoming.

THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

India Women's Chennai heroics

525/4 } India Women's score (after 98 overs) on the first day of the Chennai Test against South Africa Women on 28 June 2024. This is now the highest made by any side (men or women) in Test cricket history. The previous highest was the 509/9 made by the Sri Lankan men's side on the second day of the Colombo Test match against Bangladesh on 22 July 2002.

500 or more runs made by a Test side in a single day's play

Runs/Wkts	Day	For	Opp	Venue	Date	Result
525/4	1	Ind-W	SA-W	Chennai	28 Jun 2024	Won
509/9	2	SL-M	Ban-M	Colombo	22 Jul 2002	Won
506/4	1	Eng-M	Pak-M	Rawalpindi	1 Dec 2022	Won
503/2	2	Eng-M	SA-M	Lord's	30 Jun 1924	Won

400 or more runs made by a Test side in a single day in Women's cricket

Runs/Wkts	Day	For	Opp	Venue	Date	Result
525/4	1	Ind-W	SA-W	Chennai	28 Jun 2024	Won
431/4	1	Eng-W	NZ-W	C'church	16 Feb 1935	Won
410/7	1	Ind-W	Eng-W	N Mumbai	14 Dec 2023	Won

603/6 } India Women's total (after 115.1 overs) in the Chennai Test against South Africa Women on 29 June 2024. This is now the highest made by any side in Women's Test cricket history, surpassing Australia Women's 575/9d also against South Africa in Perth this February. This achievement marks the fifth time a 500-plus total has been achieved in Women's Test cricket, with India becoming the fourth team to accomplish this feat after England, Australia, and New Zealand.

500-plus totals by a Test side in Women's cricket

Total	For	Against	Venue	Month, Year	Result
603/6d	Ind-W	SA-W	Chennai	Jun 2024	Won
575/9d	Aus-W	SA-W	Perth	Feb 2024	Won
569/6d	Aus-W	Eng-W	Guildford	Aug 1998	Drawn
525/10	Aus-W	Ind-W	Ahmedabad	Feb 1984	Drawn
517/8d	NZ-W	Eng-W	Scarborough	Jun 1996	Drawn
503/5d	Eng-W	NZ-W	Christchurch	Feb 1935	Won

5.23 } India Women's run-rate during their record total of 603/6d against South Africa in Chennai. This is now the highest-ever achieved in Women's Tests by any side while making totals of 250 or more.

Highest run-rates achieved in a Test innings of 250 or more in Women's cricket

R/R	For	Total	in Overs	Against	Venue	Month, Year	Result
5.23	Ind-W	603/6d	in 115.1	SA-W	Chennai	June 2024	Won
4.58	Aus-W	575/9d	in 125.2	SA-W	Perth	Feb 2024	Won
4.13	Aus-W	427/4d	in 103.2	Eng-W	Worcester	Aug 1998	Drawn
4.09	Ind-W	428/10	in 104.3	Eng-W	N Mumbai	Dec 2023	Won
4.04	SL-W	275/8d	in 68.0	Pak-W	Colombo	Apr 1998	Won

292 } Indian women's opening pair Shafali Verma (205) and Smriti Mandhana's stand against South Africa in Chennai. This is now the highest-ever partnership for the first wicket in Women's Test cricket history, bettering the previous record of 241 runs between a Pakistani pair in March 2004. This stand is now the second-highest for any wicket in Women's Test cricket history.

Highest partnerships for any wicket in Women's Test cricket

Runs	Wkt	Player1	Player2	For	Agst	Venue	Month, Year	Result
309	3	Lindsay Reeler (110*)	Denise Annetts (193)	Aus-W	Eng-W	Wetherby	Aug 1987	Drawn
292	1	Shafali Verma (205)	Smriti Mandhana (149)	Ind-W	SA-W	Chennai	Jun 2024	Won
275	2	Thirush Kamini (192)	Poonam Raut (130)	Ind-W	SA-W	Mysore	Nov 2014	Won
253	4	Karen Rolton (209*)	Louise Broadfoot (71)	Aus-W	Eng-W	Leeds	Jul 2001	Won
241	1	Kiran Baluch (242)	Sajjida Shah (98)	Pak-W	WI-W	Karachi	Mar 2004	Drawn

143 } India Women's fifth wicket stand against South Africa in Chennai. This is now the highest-ever partnership for this wicket in Women's Test cricket history, bettering the previous record of 138 runs stand between a South African pair.

Highest 5th wicket partnerships in Women's Test cricket

Runs	Player1	Player2	For	Against	Venue	Month, Year	Result
143	Harmanpreet Kaur (69)	Richa Ghosh (86)	Ind-W	SA-W	Chennai	June 2024	Won
138	Johmari Logtenberg (74)	Charlize van der Westhuizen (83)	SA-W	Eng-W	Shenley	Aug 2003	Drawn
136	Lisa Sthalekar (120*)	Alex Blackwell (58)	Aus-W	Eng-W	Sydney	Feb 2003	Drawn
135	Betty Wilson (127)	Valma Batty (63)	Aus-W	Eng-W	Adelaide	Mar 1958	Drawn

Note: Before this Test match, the 138-run stand was South Africa's highest for any wicket in Tests. In Chennai, in the second innings, Laura Wolvaardt and Sune Luus surpassed it with a stand of 190 runs for the second wicket.

3 } Number of bowlers in Women's Test cricket to claim an eight-wicket haul in an innings. Sneha Rana (8/77) recorded the third-best bowling figures in Women's Test cricket in Chennai against South Africa in June 2024. This elite group consists of two Indians and one Australian. Rana's figures are by far the best by any bowler against South Africa. The previous best was the 5/21 by Darcie Brown for Aus-W in Perth in February this year.

Best bowling figures in Women's Test Cricket

Bowling	Bowler	For	Against	Venue	Month, Year	Result
8/53	Neetu David	Ind-W	Eng-W	Jamshedpur	Nov 1995	Lost
8/66	Ashleigh Gardner	Aus-W	Eng-W	Nottingham	Jun 2023	Won
8/77	Sneha Rana	Ind-W	SA-W	Chennai	Jun 2024	Won

Note: Ten other bowlers have claimed a seven-wicket haul in Women's Test cricket.

1279 } The combined match run-aggregate in the Chennai Test. This is now the second-highest in Women's Tests. The total of 1371 in the Women's Ashes Test in Nottingham in 2023 remains the highest.

Women's Test matches with highest run-aggregates

Runs	Wkts	Team1	Team2	Venue	Month, Year	Result
1371	40	Aus-W (720/20)	Eng-W (641/20)	Nottingham	June 2023	Aus-W won
1279	26	Ind-W (640/6)	SAF-W (639/20)	Chennai	June 2024	Ind-W won
1143	17	Eng-W (574/11)	Aus-W (569/6)	Guildford	Aug 1998	Drawn

Note: India's aggregate of 640/6 and South Africa's 639/20 are now occupying the fourth and fifth position after Aus (720/20, see above table and 650/15 in Taunton in 2019) and England (641/20, see above) among sides with most run-aggregates in Women's Test cricket.

639 } South Africa Women's match-aggregate (266+273) in the Chennai Test is now the second highest in a losing cause in Women's Test cricket. Incidentally, South Africa became the first team to lose a Test despite scoring 250 or more runs in both innings of a Women's Test match.

Highest match-aggregates by sides in a losing cause in Women's Test cricket

Agg	For	(Totals)	Opp	Venue	Month, Year	Lost
641/20	Eng-W	(463+178)	Aus-W	Nottingham	June 2023	by 89 runs
639/20	SA-W	(266+373)	Ind-W	Chennai	Jun 2024	by 10 wickets
480/20	Aus-W	(219+261)	Ind-W	Mumbai WS	Dec 2023	by 8 wickets

2 } Number of sides to win three consecutive Test matches in Women's cricket. Australia Women (on three occasions) and India Women (twice) hold a unique place in Women's Test cricket history. The Indian women had previously won their last three Tests against England and Australia in December 2023, and their recent victory over South Africa in Chennai puts them in a unique position. If they win one more Test against their next opponent, they will become the first to win four consecutive matches.

Women's Test sides with three consecutive Test victories

Winning side	Opponent1	Opponent2	Opponent3
Australia-W	Eng-W in Gosford, Jan 1985	Eng-W in Bendigo, Jan 1985	Eng-W at Worcester, Aug 1987
Australia-W	Ind-W in Adelaide, Feb 1991	Ind-W in Melbourne, Feb 1991	Eng-W in N Sydney, Feb 1992
Australia-W	Eng-W in Shenley, Jun 2001	Eng-W in Leeds, Jul 2001	Eng-W in Brisbane, Feb 2003
India-W	Eng-W in Taunton, 29 Aug 2006	Eng-W in Wormsley, Aug 2014	SA-W in Mysore, Nov 2014
India-W	Eng-W in New Mumbai, Dec 2023	Aus-W in Mumbai WS, Dec 2023	SA-W in Chennai, July 2024

All records are correct and updated until 13 July 2024



ON THE WRITE LINE

Sunil Gavaskar



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A SUNDAY BLOCKBUSTER, AND A SPANISH DOUBLE-WHAMMY

Carlos Alcaraz, the 21-year-old Spaniard, won the All-England Men's Singles title at Wimbledon, while a 2-1 win over England in the final made Spain the European champion for an **unprecedented** fourth time.

It was a Spanish Sunday, all right, as first Carlos Alcaraz, the 21-year-old Spaniard, won the All England Men's Singles title at Wimbledon, defeating Novak Djokovic in straight sets, and then a few hours later, the Spanish football team ended the dream of the England football team of winning their first title since 1966.

While Alcaraz made Djokovic, the winner of 24 major titles, look like a rank amateur, the Euro Cup football final was a closer affair, where Spain pulled away in the last 10 minutes to register a 2-1 win. Spain were by far the best team in the tournament, having won all their matches, and the way they bounced back after England scored the equaliser was incredible.

Let me confess that I have very little idea about football, so kindly excuse the next few lines. **Having seen a bit of football on TV in the 1970s and '80s, some of it in black and white and a lot in colour TV, the feeling that is overpowering is that the modern game is no longer the beautiful game it was back then.** This feeling was reinforced while watching a colour version of the 1966 World Cup final that was won by England against West Germany (as Germany was called then) in front of their adoring crowd in Wembley. Throughout that game, there was no instance of shirt pulling by the opposition player, none of the trying to elbow the opponent's eye into his brain while jumping up for the header, none of the trying to

tackle the player from behind with arms around the neck and shoulders, which is more suited for wrestling than football, and above all, no acting as if one has been injured grievously and won't be able to play the rest of the season and not just the current match.

If ever Oscar awards are given for acting in the sporting arena, the football players will win it hands down every single time. The way the player is writhing in pain one moment and the manner in which he magically recovers barely a minute later has to be a modern miracle if it were not acting of the highest order.

Yes, the game is more physical now, and that's because it has been allowed to be so by lax referees, who are more concerned about keeping the game moving. Those who follow the game more avidly than me can be better judges of whether the game is better being so physical as it is now or whether the physicality has gone a tad over the top. The thing about sports is that once a mistake is overlooked or ignored, more people do it because they have already seen somebody get away with it.

In cricket, the modern practice of bowlers, especially the quick ones, getting a refreshing drink on the boundary line where they go to field after completing their over is an example of the authorities turning a blind eye to the practice. Why have the drinks interval then if bowlers are going to get themselves hydrated after going flat out for six deliveries? Mind you,



Sparkling win: Spain pulled away in the last 10 minutes to register a 2-1 win against England in the Euro final. GETTYIMAGES

the batter doesn't get the chance to have a drink after an over where they may have taken eight runs or so, which are all run. **Cricket is also a game where stamina and endurance matter no matter what the format is, so frankly, it should go back to the days when drinks were taken only after every hour of play and before that only with the permission of the opposition captain and umpires.** Once the umpires looked the other way and allowed one bowler to do that, it became a trend, making a mockery of the drinks interval. The third umpire and match referee should also ensure that the reserve player does not step onto the field to offer a drink to his teammate but stays outside the boundary line.

Coming back to tennis, Alcaraz's annihilation of Djokovic may hasten the Serbian into retirement after this season is over. Djokovic somehow does not get the same love and affection from the crowd as Roger Federer and

Rafael Nadal did, but with four more majors than Federer and two more than Nadal, he is, for all practical purposes, the greatest player of this generation.

Hopefully, he will call time on his career before he starts getting beaten by players nowhere close to him. It was sad to see Federer lose in the earlier rounds of his last year or so, and that's why it's hoped Djokovic goes out on a high in a final even though he may not have won it. The retirement call is never easy, particularly for a sportsperson.

More than the body, it's the mind that tells you when it's time to go, and that happens when one is not enjoying doing what one is doing and when work becomes a chore.

In a sportsperson's case, it is when he or she is not enjoying being out there battling an opponent. That's when the R-word needs to be taken and completed.



Djokovic somehow does not get the same love and affection from the crowd as Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal did, but with four more majors than Federer and two more than Nadal, he is, for all practical purposes, the greatest player of this generation.



GETTY IMAGES

James Anderson calls it a day

1 The 41-year-old fast bowler played 188 Tests and took 704 wickets.

England fast bowler James Anderson ended his 21-year international career after playing his last Test match against the West Indies at Lord's.

The 41-year-old fast bowler played 188 Tests and took 704 wickets in the format. He finished just four short of the late Shane Warne of Australia, making him the

highest-ever wicket-taker among fast bowlers. In his final match, England won by an innings and 114 runs, with Anderson taking four wickets.



2

India won the World Championship of Legends trophy by defeating Pakistan by five wickets in the final. Pakistan set a target of 157, with Shoib Malik scoring 41 off 36. Anureet Singh was India's top wicket-taker with three wickets. Ambati Rayudu led the chase with a half-century, while Gurkeerat Singh and Yusuf Pathan contributed 34 and 30 runs respectively.



3

K. MURALI KUMAR

Delhi Capitals (DC) has parted ways with Ricky Ponting after seven years. Ponting, a two-time World Cup-winning Australian captain, became head coach in 2018 when the team was called Delhi Daredevils. He led DC to its first final in 2021, but the team struggled afterward, finishing fifth in 2022, ninth in 2023, and sixth in 2024.



4

REUTERS

England Women dominated New Zealand Women in a three-match ODI series, winning all three games easily. In the first match, England secured a nine-wicket victory with a 137-run opening partnership between Maia Bouchier and Tammy Beaumont. Bouchier's maiden international century and Sophie Ecclestone's five-wicket haul led to an eight-wicket win in the second match. In the final game, Lauren Bell (**right**) took five wickets, and Nat Sciver-Brunt's unbeaten 76 helped England to a five-wicket win, completing the series sweep.



5

AFP

Gautam Gambhir has been appointed as the head coach of the Indian men's cricket team, succeeding Rahul Dravid. The former India opener, who played a key role in the 2011 ODI World Cup victory, has signed a three-year contract. He was chosen over W.V. Raman and will start his tenure in July, continuing until December 31, 2027, the year of the next ODI World Cup.

» T20I PHOTOLINE
INDIA vs ZIMBABWE



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IMAGES



1st

Ecstatic: Zimbabwe captain Sikandar Raza removed Indian skipper Shubman Gill, the team's top-scorer in the first T20I, and took two more wickets later while defending a modest total of 115. AFP



2nd

Stunned: In its first match since winning the T20 World Cup, albeit with a second-string team, India was handed a shock defeat, getting bowled out for 102. AP



3rd

Rise up: Abhishek Sharma, playing only his second T20I game, smacked a 46-ball century as India posted 234/2 in the second game. Zimbabwe was never in the chase and lost the game by 100 runs. AFP



4th

Leading from the front: Shubman Gill anchored his way to a 49-ball 66 and was helped by Ruturaj Gaikwad's quickfire 28-ball 49 as India posted a competitive 182/4 batting first in the third match. AFP



5th

Lone battle: Dion Myers remained unbeaten on 65 off 49 balls which included seven fours and a six but lack of support from other batters meant Zimbabwe lost the third game by 23 runs. AFP

YASHASVI JAISWAL (93) AND SHUBMAN GILL (58) SHOWED NO MERCY AS INDIA CHASED DOWN 153 INSIDE 16 OVERS WITH 10 WICKETS IN HAND IN THE FOURTH MATCH

6th



AFP



7th

Mainstay: Sanju Samson lifted India after it was reduced to 40/3 in the PowerPlay, forming a 65-run partnership with Riyan Parag and taking the team to 167/6. India then defended the total, bowling Zimbabwe out for 125 and winning by 42 runs in the final game. ^{AP}



8th

Future is now: Led by Shubman Gill, India defeated Zimbabwe 4-1 in the five-match series, during which five players — Abhishek Sharma, Riyan Parag, Dhruv Jurel, Sai Sudharsan, and Tushar Deshpande — made their T20I debuts. ^{AP}

» WOMEN'S T20 INDIA vs SOUTH AFRICA



INDIA TICKS MOST OF THE BOXES AS T20 WORLD CUP LOOMS

With the Women's **T20 World Cup** just under three months away, India's recent outing against South Africa at home was revelatory in more ways than one.



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With the Women's T20 World Cup in Bangladesh just under three months away, teams are stepping up their preparation.

India's recent outing against South Africa at home was revelatory in more ways than one. The persistent Achilles heel — fielding — haunted it once more in the three-match T20I leg against the Proteas, a disciplined bunch on the field.

In the first T20I (South Africa

eventually won by 12 runs), in-form batters Laura Wolvaardt and Marizanne Kapp were allowed reprieves. Tazmin Brits, who struggled to time the ball in the first half of her innings, was allowed to claw her way to a career-best 81, eventually falling off the last ball of the innings.

Harmanpreet Kaur was honest in her assessment. "We weren't good enough. We dropped chances that gave away at least 20 runs," she pointed out. Fielding and fitness were the main pillars of head coach Amol Muzumdar's philosophy upon assuming leadership of the team. He walked the talk when the second T20I

saw wholesale changes with Renuka Thakur, Asha Sobhana, a concussed Richa Ghosh, and an injured D. Hemalatha making way for Arundhati Reddy, Shreyanka Patil, Uma Chetry and Sajeevan Sajana.

The Indians gave a better account of themselves in the second fixture, barring one unfortunate blip from Jemimah Rodrigues at deep cover in the final over. That dropped chance not only gave Annerie Dercksen a lifeline but also triggered a hat-trick of boundaries to plump up the South African total.

Harmanpreet experimented with her resources, with five different



Sharing the spoils: India beat South Africa by 10 wickets in the third women's T20I to end the three-match series 1-1. R. RAGU

bowlers featuring in the PowerPlay. The pace bowling duo of Pooja Vastrakar and Arundhati Reddy shared the new-ball duties. Sajana, Shreyanka, and Radha Yadav were all given an over in the PowerPlay to try and stem the flow of runs, but in vain. The Proteas raced to 66/1 at the end of six overs. **The Indian bowlers made an impact in the middle overs, implementing the lessons from the first game to drag the length back and exploit the variable bounce.** The spinners, led by street-smart Deepti Sharma, opted for a stump-to-stump line and beat the batters with flight. However, India faltered at the death, conceding 31 runs in the last two overs, permitting a floundering total to reach 177. The host didn't get to chase, with persistent rain washing out the fixture.

Valuable asset: Smriti Mandhana's classical stroke-making coupled with consistency bodes well for India. R. RAGU

India's best game with the ball was the final one, with a chance to tie the series proving to be the perfect dangling carrot. It was the third game on the trot on the same strip, with the surface slowly warming up to the bowlers. Harmanpreet stacked

her bowling cards quite similarly to the previous game in the PowerPlay. This time, there was better discipline with line and length and much tighter fielding. It was a night that belonged to Pooja, whose career-best 4/13 headlined the





Standing out: Deepti Sharma's (left) skill and guile with the ball and Jemimah Rodrigues's form with the bat were among the highlights of India's T20I performance. R. RAGU

annihilation of the Protean batting line-up, which eventually folded for just 84.

Smriti Mandhana and Shafali Verma took their time to chase it down, the former bringing up her fifty (her fifth 50+ score in six innings in the tour) and the series-levelling 10-wicket win with a maximum over deep backward square leg.

Smriti's classical stroke-making has always come with the asterisk of inconsistency. Her confidence and fluency with the bat bode well for the Women in Blue ahead of the Asia Cup in Sri Lanka and the World Cup in Bangladesh. Shafali struggled in the ODIs, but the Test double ton helped iron out her nerves, with the nonchalance making its way to the T20Is, where she fearlessly kept the scoring rate up. Harmanpreet and Jemimah being among the runs, stepping up the scoring with their diverse playing styles, will also encourage the outfit with slow, spin-friendly surfaces awaiting them.

There is a caveat, though. South Africa's bowling card lacked the bite that players like Kapp lent. The all-rounder bowled just two overs, that too in the final T20I, posing

plenty of questions, particularly to Smriti with her seam position and ability to capitalise on swing. The southpaw, and frankly, the Indian lineup in its entirety, was rarely challenged with the ball during this series, with India making the most of a transitioning side's instability in its bowling arsenal.

This is a concern ahead of the showpiece events that await. Sri Lanka has a formidable pace and spin bank, particularly when deployed at home. Bangladesh's tracks, as one saw during India's tour there earlier in the summer, are low and slow, forcing even the best of batting teams to sweat and earn their runs. Against more confident and potent bowling attacks, India might not get away as easily and will want to guard against complacency ahead of the fixtures coming up.

Arundhati's ability to quickly identify her faultlines and recover makes her a valuable addition to the pace pool, giving her an edge over Renuka, who can sometimes rely too much on conditions.

Arundhati's superior fielding credentials only strengthen her case. In the spin quiver, India has a



India Asia Cup fixtures:

vs Pakistan, July 19

vs UAE, July 21

vs Nepal, July 23

problem of plenty. Alongside mainstay Deepti, Radha's miserly economy rate and ability to break partnerships put her high in the pecking order. Asha and Shreyanka will find themselves tussling for a spot in the team, and it might come down to match-ups to see who makes the cut. Sajana, who offers a potent spin option alongside athleticism on the field and firepower with the bat, got a look in as an injury replacement and may find it harder to break in if India persists with Hemalatha.

India's opponents in the Asia Cup appear weaker and lack the momentum that regular game time has given the Women in Blue. India is likely to reach the final, where anything can happen. This tournament will be a good opportunity to see if their form can lead to victories, especially since it's their last chance to prepare for the T20I showpiece.



Sweet sixteen for the world champion



FORMORE
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Argentina's road to a historic 16th Copa America title was a thrilling ride of emotions and drama, with **Martinez delivering the knockout punch** to Colombia in the final.

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The defending champion defended. Lionel Messi cried and laughed. James Rodriguez won hearts. The 2024 Copa America was a roller-coaster of emotions.

In the end, Argentina (La Albiceleste) stood tall and etched its

name in the record books.

It would be wrong to say that Argentina entered the Copa America final as the absolute favourite. Colombia, aka Los Cafeteros, impressed with its brand of attacking football throughout the tournament, and began the summit clash in the same manner, choking the Albiceleste with relentless pressing.

Messi & Co. **(above)** was in choppy waters and it took careful and compact defending to



Keeping it cool: Golden Boot winner Lautaro Martinez kept his calm to slot the ball into the far corner for a 112th-minute winner. REUTERS

keep Colombia at bay. With plenty of penetrations into the final third, head coach Nestor Lorenzo's men looked favourites to grab the opening goal.

However, Argentina held on, despite not playing its best football. This has been the story of its journey in this tournament this year — not being able to score more than two goals in any match but still churning out favourable results by sheer grit.

With the scores level after the regulation 90 minutes, the final went into extra time. Until the 111th minute, the nets did not rattle. And then, an immaculate touch from Giovanni Lo Celso sent Lautaro Martinez clear on goal.

The Inter Milan forward, in red-hot form, kept his calm to enter the box and slot the ball into the far corner for the winner. It took his tally to five

goals in this tournament, earning him the Golden Boot award.

The final also had its share of emotional moments. Captain Messi was in tears after being substituted due to an ankle injury.

Angel di Maria left the pitch in the national colours for the last time, after being subbed off in the 117th minute. Deservedly, both received a wonderful reception from fans inside the Hard Rock Stadium.

The story ended on a happy note as Messi's tears turned into smiles after Argentina's 1-0 win, guiding them to a record 16th Copa America title.

Legends bid adieu

It was the perfect ending for Angel Di Maria, who leaves with two Copa America titles and a World Cup.

He has undoubtedly been the team's most clutch player, scoring in the finals of the 2021 Copa America, 2022 World Cup, and La Finalissima. With 145 caps, he has scored 31 goals for his country.

"I dreamt that I would win it [Copa America 2024] and retire like this," said the 36-year-old.

Luis Suarez also bid goodbye to international football, though it was not a fairytale ending as Uruguay crashed out after a semifinal loss against Colombia.

However, he played his part in helping La Celeste grab third place after scoring a late equaliser against Canada, where Uruguay eventually won on penalties.

'El Pistolero,' as Suarez is fondly known, leaves as Uruguay's highest-ever goalscorer with 69 goals in 142 appearances.

Security concerns

There were two glaring security concerns during this tournament.

Colombia's semifinal clash against Uruguay ended on a bitter note. After James Rodriguez (right) and his men guided Los Cafeteros to a 1-0 win, post-match incidents raised questions about CONMEBOL's ability to provide proper security.



Clutch icon: With 145 caps, Angel Di Maria has scored 31 goals for his country, and leaves with two Copa America titles and a World Cup. AFP

After the clash, Darwin Nunez, Ronald Araujo, and some other Uruguayan players were seen entering the stands and clashing with Colombian fans.

It was later revealed that they did this to protect their family members, who were harassed by Colombian fans.

CONMEBOL opened an investigation, but Uruguay coach Marcelo Bielsa defended his players' actions, stating they did what needed to be done.

The second glaring security

concern occurred before the final at the Hard Rock Stadium, where fans without tickets rushed the gates in a bid to enter the stadium.

This incident was similar to what happened before England's Euro 2020 final against Italy, where English fans without tickets broke through the gates to get inside the stadium. The USA is scheduled to be one of the hosts for the 2026 World Cup, and these incidents during this Copa America have raised a lot of questions ahead of the quadrennial event.



Before the final at the Hard Rock Stadium, fans without tickets rushed the gates in a bid to enter the stadium, raising questions about USA's hosting credentials.



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» EURO 2024

La Rojaroll back the glory years

Top of the world: Spain's captain Alvaro Morata lifted the 'Henri Delaunay Trophy', after beating England 2-1 in the final. GETTY IMAGES

A **new chapter was written** in the history books of European football as Spain became the continental champion for a record fourth time.

Joan Mathew Jacob
joan.mathew@thehindu.co.in

As the clock ticked closer to ninety minutes at the Olympiastadion Berlin during the Euro 2024 final, England fancied its chances of pulling a final rabbit out of the hat to spoil Spain's party.

However, with four minutes to go, Marc Cucurella outpaced Kyle Walker on the left flank to fire a low cross into the six-yard area, where Mikel Oyarzabal had the simplest poke at the ball to put it past Jordan Pickford, prolonging the Three Lions' 58-year trophy drought.

At full-time, with the scoreline reading 2-1, a new chapter was written in the history books of European football. Spain was the continental champion for a record fourth time, this being its third

title in the last five editions.

Captain Alvaro Morata lifted the 'Henri Delaunay Trophy', with stalwarts of yesteryear like Andres Iniesta, Xavi Hernandez and David Villa looking on from the stands, witnessing a revamped, pacy side that still resonated with the Spanish possession fervour that once dominated world football.

Spain was easily the best team out of the 24 to reach the final, after having completely overhauled its 'tiki-taka' identity to display a vertical and dynamic style of play.



After just 20 months at the helm, Luis de la Fuente hand-picked talents from his under-19 and under-21 sides that achieved European success, to reignite a new period of Spanish dominance, with 15 out of the 26 players that travelled to Germany having played under him in the initial years of their careers. The redesigned side ended up scoring a remarkable 15 goals in seven games.

Flawless from the start

Spain conquered the 'group of death' with flawless performances that sent early warnings to other nations that *La Roja* were title

contenders yet again.

With dominating showings against a Croatia side that enjoyed success in recent tournaments, defending champion Italy, and a resilient Albania, Spain wrapped up the phase as the sole nation to secure all possible nine points.

In the knockouts, debutant Georgia provided an early scare, only for Spain to fire four goals in reply. Host Germany, however, proved to be a tougher task in the quarterfinal.

After a 1-1 draw in regulation time, Spain required the services of an unlikely goalscorer in Mikel Merino, who went airborne in the

Future bright: Rising stars, Lamine Yamal (**left**) and Nico Williams (**right**) with Spain's head coach, Luis de la Fuente. AFP

119th minute to precisely head a Dani Olmo cross past German keeper Manuel Neuer.

Only Kylian Mbappe and France stood in between Spain and a fifth European Championship final. Despite conceding an early goal, Spain was inspired to a win by a wonder strike from Lamine Yamal, followed by Olmo landing the knockout punch. Just three days short of turning 17, he broke Pele's record to become the youngest player to score in a major tournament.

Younger stars shine brighter

Nico Williams and Yamal have certainly been Spain's brightest takeaways from the tournament, with the youngsters amassing a combined nine goals and assists.

The two combined within just 69 seconds into the second half against



A revamped Spain squad scored a record-breaking 15 goals in seven games, becoming the first nation since the tournament's inception to win all its matches.



England to get the scoreboard moving, with Williams netting his second goal of the tournament.

The quick-footed wingers have filled gaps left unattended after the 'golden age' of Spanish football, with their exuberant and direct play. Williams was the Player of the Match in the final while Yamal deservedly walked away with the Young Player of the Tournament award.

Midfield is where some of Spain's legends have played in the recent past, and its trio in the middle for Euro 2024 lived up to the expectations.

Paris Saint-Germain's Fabian Ruiz was a close contender for Player of the Tournament, driving runs into the final third and even having a crack at the goal himself.

He had the third most shots on target in his squad and ended a delightful campaign with two goals

Big-match player: Rodri was the Player of the Tournament, after producing a stellar performance in this year's edition. GETTY IMAGES

and two assists.

Pedri's unfortunate injury in the opening minutes of the quarterfinal against Germany paved the way for Olmo to cement himself as a ball-carrying threat in this electrifying team. Against Germany, Olmo scored and assisted after his introduction from the bench and finished the tournament as joint-top scorer (3).

Possibly his best moment of the tournament came in the 90th minute of the final when he stood firm on his own goal line to clear away a Marc Guehi header from point-blank range.

However, both Ruiz and Olmo were outshined by Rodri, who has been one of the best players in the

world in recent years. He shifted from the centre-back responsibilities he was entrusted with by former manager Luis Enrique and eased into his ball-winning role at the heart of the pitch. Despite coming off after the first half in the final, injuring himself after blocking a Declan Rice shot, Rodri managed to get his hands on the Player of the Tournament award.

No way but up

Inventor Thomas Alva Edison once said, "Good fortune often happens when opportunity meets with preparation," which is an accurate way to justify De La Fuente's success with this bunch of players. This trophy has been in the making since he took over the Under-19 Spain squad in 2013.

Bringing a whole new identity to a major tournament, whilst still

On target: Mikel Oyarzabal (in red) had the simplest poke at the ball to put it past Jordan Pickford (right). AP
Below: Cole Palmer was the sole scorer for England. AFP



maintaining the status as one of the heavyweights of European football, is no easy feat but a patient one. Instead of picking most players from usual suspects like Barcelona and Real Madrid, De La Fuente chose to stick with those he trusted.

He, therefore, forged an attacking group that responded positively to adversity instead of passing the ball around in their own half.

Spain is no longer the side that's entirely reliant on its intricate passing manoeuvres. Instead, it has become an open-minded team ready to ambush opponents at any given opportunity while still upholding the

values of their predecessors.

With a youthful yet technically able group of players, Spain can look forward to yet another period of dominance, with many more nights possibly ending with the players and fans singing "*Campeones, Campeones, Ole, Ole, Ole.*"



CHANGE OF GUARD

Carlos Alcaraz decisively overwhelmed a resilient Novak Djokovic and **solidified his legacy** as one of the sport's future greats.

Paul Fein

The ageless legend against the young superstar. The controversial Serb against the diplomatic Spaniard. The epitome of technical perfection against the most dynamic athlete in tennis history.

How fitting that on the 150th anniversary of modern tennis — which began on grass in Victorian England — the sport's undisputed GOAT faced a worthy successor. As Novak Djokovic said during the fortnight, "History is on the line."

With 24 Grand Slam titles, Djokovic yearned to break his tie with Margaret Court as the all-time leader.

This year, advanced age, injuries, and even a rare lack of motivation left Djokovic out of sorts and seemingly over the hill. Stunningly, he hadn't won a tournament or even reached a final in 2024. On June 5, he underwent surgery to repair a torn meniscus suffered at the French Open and wasn't sure he'd enter Wimbledon until four days before the start of the revered tournament he'd captured seven times.

No match for Spanish armada: With 24 Grand Slams, Djokovic yearned to break his tie with Margaret Court as the all-time leader. But it was not to be. AFP

"I didn't come here to play a few rounds and prove to myself and others that I can actually compete in one or two matches," Djokovic declared. "I really want to go for the title."

That he did, thanks in part to an easy draw and a quarterfinal walkover from the injured, No. 9 seed Alex de Minaur. But The Djoker steadily regained his elite form and outclassed No. 15 Holger Rune 6-3, 6-4, 6-2 in the fourth round.

Then he polished off No. 25 Lorenzo Musetti 6-4, 7-6, 6-4 to make his 10th Wimbledon and record 37th Grand Slam final, in what Nick Kyrgios called "an incredible performance." Former No. 1 Jim



Exclusive club: Alcaraz is just the sixth man in the Open Era to capture the 'Channel Double' — Roland Garros and Wimbledon — in the same year. REUTERS

Courier said, "It's miraculous he's here in the final."

When some in the Centre Court crowd booed him for celebrating the semifinal victory by mimicking playing the violin — a loving gesture to his adorable six-year-old daughter Tara — Djokovic took the high road and recalled his less serene, life-changing youth.

"Wimbledon has always been a childhood dream for me — to play it, to win it. I've told the story many times, but I think it's worth repeating. I was a seven-year-old boy in Serbia watching the bombs fly over my head and dreaming of being on the most important court in the world, which is here — Centre Court

at Wimbledon — while constructing a Wimbledon trophy out of any material I had in the room... watching myself in the mirror and telling myself I'd be a Wimbledon champion one day."

His dream did come true, far longer and more glorious than he could ever have imagined.

But was it over? Now that he had achieved sports immortality, was he a mere mortal on the tennis court?

Djokovic revealed he

underestimated Alcaraz a year ago. That would not be the case on Championship Sunday. Alcaraz, who became the first teenager to rank No. 1 in 2022, had gone 3-0 in major finals and became the youngest man (21) to capture major titles on all three surfaces. Although this tournament was just his fifth on grass, his unique combination of awesome power and delicate touch, his blazing foot speed, vast array of shots, improvisational skills, and



After his surgery to repair a torn meniscus, Djokovic wasn't sure he'd enter Wimbledon until four days before the start of the tournament.



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shrewd tactics made him a natural on this tricky surface.

Further, he was better than ever in several areas. With a streamlined serving stance and motion, Alcaraz increased his first serve speed average from 118 mph to 123 going into this final.

The Spaniard's mental control became a key to his 6-7, 6-3, 6-4, 6-4 semifinal victory over No. 5 Daniil Medvedev, who had beaten No. 1 seed Sinner (left) in the quarterfinal: "Yesterday I was calmer than last year. For example, I tried not to think about the match or just for a few moments watching some videos. But apart from that, I try not to think about it."

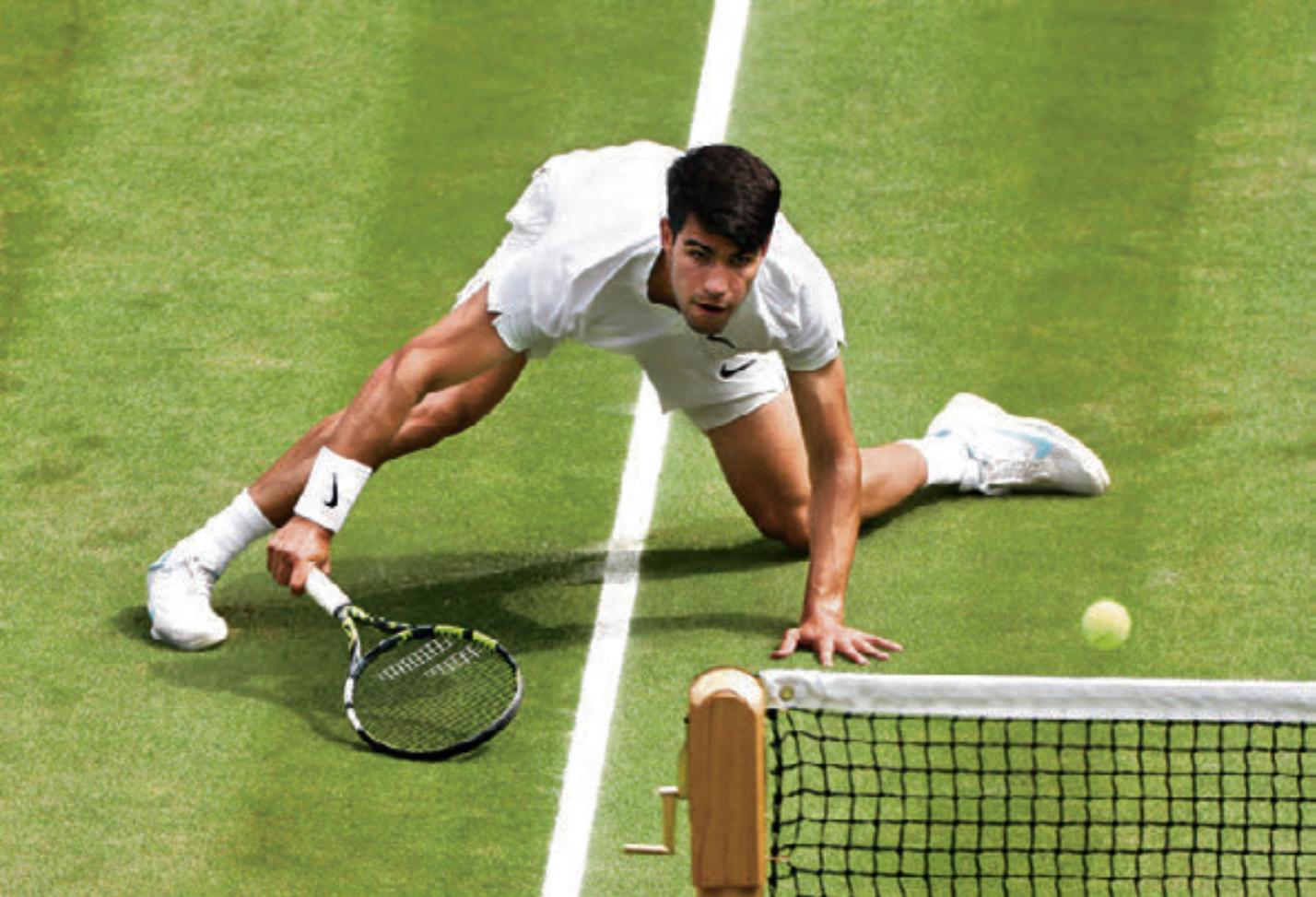
Although Alcaraz overwhelmed Djokovic for most of the lopsided 6-2, 6-2, 7-6 (4) final, three compelling games stood out. The marathon opening game lasted 13 minutes as Djokovic fought off four break points before missing a forehand on the fifth. Alcaraz, more confident and relaxed than a year ago when he

Ace mentality: "I didn't come here to play a few rounds and prove to myself and others that I can actually compete in one or two matches," Djokovic declared. "I really want to go for the title." AFP

nervously dropped the first set, 6-1, tested — even tormented — Djokovic with almost every shot in his diverse arsenal. The Serb eventually failed the test. Renowned for turning defence into offence ever since winning his first Slam at the 2008 Australian Open, Djokovic often found himself arriving late and swinging late at Alcaraz's explosive shots that sounded more like firecrackers.

Early in the third set, some spectators chanted "Let's go Nole" (his nickname) to try to get him into the match. **Though the majority rooted for the popular Alcaraz, Djokovic was now the underdog, and they wanted the competitive match they had expected.**

With Alcaraz serving at 2-3,



Djokovic somehow matched the power and speed of his younger rival, earning two break points that Alcaraz squelched. Order was finally restored when the Spaniard held serve with a 121-mph ace. “Djokovic played a great game, but he still didn’t win it,” said *ESPN’s* John McEnroe, a three-time Wimbledon champion in the 1980s.

The ninth game of the match turned into a Federeresque highlight reel for Alcaraz, who modelled his game after the Swiss maestro. Two rocket forehands put Djokovic in a love-30 hole. On the next “Did you see that!” point, Alcaraz leapt laterally to intercept a backhand volley before it landed, converting what normally would have been a passing shot attempt into a spectacular swinging forehand crosscourt volley winner. Two points later, Alcaraz sprinted to unleash a backhand passing shot winner for the service break. “It’s a shot-making smorgasbord,” raved Patrick.

Responding to the cheering fans

No nerves this time: Alcaraz, more confident and relaxed than a year ago, tested — even tormented — Djokovic with almost every shot in his diverse arsenal. GETTY IMAGES

during the changeover, Djokovic smiled. But with Alcaraz serving for the title, it was no laughing matter for the Serb. Alcaraz reeled off the next three points, giving him triple championship points.

Shockingly, Alcaraz the Closer morphed into Carlos the Choker. He lost five straight points! The

lowlights: a double fault, a wild swinging volley error, and two forehand errors.

Before the final, Alcaraz had said, “I’m not new anymore... I’ve been in this position before.” Indeed, a year ago he memorably pounded 18 winners (to Djokovic’s 3) in the final set.

Experience breeds confidence and poise, and Alcaraz held serve at love to force a tiebreaker. Djokovic had won 25 of his last 28 tiebreakers at majors, but the irresistible force that is Alcaraz could not be stopped in this critical tiebreaker. With the



Renowned for turning defence into offence, Djokovic often found himself arriving late and swinging late for Carlos’ explosive shots.

Midas touch, he conjured an incredible half-volley winner to go ahead 4-3 and then massaged a disguised drop shot winner for 6-4. The relaxed Spaniard smiled. On championship point, Djokovic, one of the best serve returners in history, hit a backhand return into the net.

Always gracious in defeat, Djokovic embraced Alcaraz at the net. King Carlos raised his arms and blew kisses to the Centre Court spectators before hustling to his player's box to rejoice with his family, friends, and team.

"The mental strength [Alcaraz showed] after he blew the 40-love lead is one of the reasons we love this guy," said John. "Many players would have folded, freaked out, but he kept his composure."

"The changing of the guard becomes official today." — *ESPN* analyst Patrick had correctly predicted before the Wimbledon final.

Alcaraz became just the sixth man in the Open Era to capture the 'Channel Double' — Roland Garros and Wimbledon — in the same year. The others were tennis legends Rod Laver, Bjorn Borg, Rafael Nadal, Roger Federer, and Djokovic.

Krejcikova Czech-Mates Paolini in Suspenseful Wimbledon Final

No one predicted two longshots would make the women's Wimbledon final — not even themselves.

Jasmine Paolini, the Cinderella story at 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 with a big heart after outlasting Donna Vekic in a 2-6, 6-4, 7-6 semifinal thriller.**

Barbora Krejcikova, disrespected at 100-1 despite being the 2021 Roland Garros champion, had an unimpressive 13-11 career record on grass and an abysmal 7-9 match record going into Wimbledon, attributable to illness, a back injury, and rust. Yet the low-key Czech reignited her singles career — she



amassed seven doubles and three mixed doubles Slam titles — at the world's most prestigious tennis tournament.

Known for her savvy tactics, 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 vanquish 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."

Perhaps we should have expected the unexpected. In the post-Serena Williams era, parity on the WTA Tour has prevailed most often at

Wimbledon, where Krejcikova became the eighth lady to lift the trophy since Serena captured her eighth crown in 2016. Further, shockers have now become the norm. Rybakina, at 80-1 odds, won in 2022 and Marketa Vondrousova, at 100-1, triumphed a year ago.

In this improbable final, Paolini benefited from the 'recency factor'. **Her breakthrough year featured reaching the Australian Open fourth round and winning her first 1000 title at Dubai on hard courts before making her maiden Grand Slam final at Paris on clay.** Paolini sustained that momentum at Wimbledon where her bold shot-making and exuberance made her a crowd favourite. *IBM Match Insights*



BARBORA KREJCIKOVA BECAME THE FOURTH WOMAN FROM THE CZECH REPUBLIC TO WIN WIMBLEDON IN THE OPEN ERA

weighed both factors heavily, installing her as a 69 per cent favourite against Krejčíková.

Krejčíková, who ranked a career-high No. 2 in 2022, carried a chip on her proud shoulder. Following her victory over Madison Keys in the 2023 Miami Open third round, Krejčíková told WTA Insider, "When I read something on social media, it's about Iga, Aryna, and Elena — I'm not really there. What else should I do? How should I prove it again? This week, again I'm here and I'm going to prove it again so that I get into this Top 3. I want to be mentioned as well. I want to be recognised as well because I think I deserve it. I've had a lot of success on the tour, and I just don't get the

credit."

What Krejčíková lacked in charisma and acclaim, the 28-year-old Czech more than made up for in 'crunch time' brilliance, capturing 11 of her previous 12 major finals (all but one in doubles). That reservoir of confidence and experience would prove the difference in this fluctuating final.

"Who plays more fearlessly from the centre of the court is key," said *ESPN* analyst Brad Gilbert, who predicted Krejčíková would "win 6-4 in the third set." *ESPN* analyst Pam Shriver, a coach on Vekić's team, said, "The net play today could be the most important factor here."

As it turned out, Gilbert was right, particularly in the deciding set when

Krejčíková attacked 33 per cent of the time compared to only 17 per cent for Paolini. At the net for the entire match, the Italian had a slight edge, winning 12 of 16 points, compared to 11 of 16 for the Czech. But those net forays were too infrequent to turn the tide.

The 5'10" Krejčíková is a boxer-puncher who changes pace and spins to disrupt the rhythm of opponents, much like her compatriot Vondroušová did in her 2023 final upset over Ons Jabeur. But using her superior size and power — especially on the serve — against the 5'4" Paolini became the winning strategy. It also kept the highly partisan crowd mostly out of the match.

Krejčíková belted a crosscourt forehand winner on break point to set the tone in the opening game. The Czech secured her second service break for a 4-1 lead. When her forehand winner smacked the baseline to build it to 5-1, *ESPN's* Chris Evert, who won her first Wimbledon 50 years ago, said, "She's overpowering Paolini as Swiatek did in the French final. She's in the zone."

Strangely, in the second set, Krejčíková changed her winning game — a cardinal tactical sin. Playing defensively, she let Paolini back in the match. "Her forehand cross courts and serves were working in the first set, and then she stopped hitting with conviction," pointed out *ESPN* analyst Mary Joe Fernandez.

Two timid Krejčíková backhand slice errors gave Paolini the break for a 2-0 lead. Energised, the Italian staved off a break point and held serve for 3-0, while the confused Czech gestured to her player's box in frustration. In the eighth game, Krejčíková totally lost the plot with a drop shot and weak forehand errors to lose her serve and the set, 6-2.

Paolini is a late bloomer at 28, much like compatriots Francesca Schiavone, the 2010 Roland Garros champion, and Flavia Pennetta, the 2015 US Open titlist. Her feisty demeanour, big semi-Western forehand, and undersized stature most resemble 5'3" Dominika Cibulka, the 2014 Australian Open



AFP

Exclusive club: Alcaraz is just the sixth man in the Open Era to capture the ‘Channel Double’ — Roland Garros and Wimbledon — in the same year. REUTERS

pressure-packed, 14-point game with two tough serves that overpowered Paolini’s vulnerable backhand. Asked by ESPN’s Fernandez to describe her mentality in the winner-take-all third set, Krejčíková answered, “Two words. Be brave.” Her 14 winners and four aces attest to that.

She still wasn’t clear, though, why her resurgence happened at Wimbledon, her least successful major until now. “I have no idea why this tournament. I had a really tough draw from the very first match. I was just going match by match. I was just feeling better and getting better.”

Even though No. 1 seed Iga Swiatek (**below**), No. 5 Jessica Pegula, No. 6 Vondrousova (**right, below**), and No. 10 Jabeur suffered early-round upsets in her half of the draw, Krejčíková still faced formidable foes. She edged Veronika Kudermetova, a hard-hitting Russian, 7-6, 6-7, 7-5 in the opening round, the always-dangerous No. 11 Danielle Collins 7-5, 6-3 in the fourth round, the go-for-broke No. 13 Jelena Ostapenko 6-4, 7-6 in the quarters, and Rybakina — whom many pundits picked to win the tournament — in the semis.

Paolini benefited from a much easier road to the final, her sternest test coming against No. 12 Madison Keys in the fourth round. Keys served for the match at 5-2 and again at 5-4 but was limping after a physio taped her left thigh. At 5-5, 15-all, and crying from the pain, she had to retire with a pulled hamstring muscle. The empathetic Paolini told the crowd, “Right now I’m so sorry for her. I’m happy [I won] but sad for her.” When interviewer Annabel Croft told the popular Paolini, “You’ve become a bit of a crowd favourite,” the Italian remained modest. “Yeah, I hope so,” as spectators cheered.

Krejčíková, who had won just seven matches all year before Wimbledon, equalled that total during the fortnight. To accomplish that, she played an Open Era record

runner-up. The shortest major champion in the Open Era was 5’3” Nancy Richey at the 1968 French Open. Since then, world-class tennis players have steadily increased in height, averaging around 5’9”, and have become more athletic.

In the deciding set, Krejčíková repeatedly exploited Paolini’s lack of height and reach with slice serves wide in the deuce court, kick serves in the ad court, and high-bouncing forehands. “She [Paolini] should have moved in on her serve returns to cut off the slice serve and kick bounce,” said ESPN analyst Rennae Stubbs.

The Czech easily held serve and earned a critical serve break for 4-3 when Paolini double-faulted.

Krejčíková had reversed the momentum by playing aggressively. But could she keep her composure and conviction?

Serving for the championship at 5-4, Krejčíková fended off two break points — with a backhand volley winner and an inside-out forehand winner. Then she closed out the



A LATE BLOOMER AT 28, PAOLINI HAS A FEISTY DEMEANOR AND A BIG SEMI-WESTERN FOREHAND

175 games.

Her exciting 6-2, 2-6, 6-4 triumph over the tenacious Paolini made Krejčíková the fourth woman from the Czech Republic to capture Wimbledon in the Open Era. **She followed the late Jana Novotná, her friend and mentor, in 1998, Petra Kvitová in 2011 and 2014, and Vondroušová last year.**

During the trophy ceremony, the smiling Paolini saw the bright side of her bittersweet loss. "It's a dream come true to play on this stage. You played such beautiful tennis. Congrats to you and your team."

Krejčíková told the Centre Court spectators, "It's unbelievable what just happened. It's the best day of my tennis career and my life."

As she did when she won her first major at the 2021 French Open, she recounted the inspiring story of how Novotná — who tragically died at 49 of ovarian cancer in 2017 — became her coach and confidante during her last three years.

"Coming to Jana, knocking on her

Surprise package no more: Jasmine Paolini, the Cinderella story at the French Open but dismissed here with 50-1 odds, had never won a main draw match on Wimbledon grass. AFP

door, giving her the letter... everything that happened during that moment just changed my life," Krejčíková said. "It definitely changed my tennis life. During the period when I finished juniors, I didn't know what I should do. I didn't know if I should play pro or go the way of education. **Jana was the one who told me I had the potential and that I should definitely turn pro and try to make it. Before she passed away, she told me to go and win a Slam.**"

Jana's teenage protégé has achieved that twice. And as Krejčíková poignantly said after her semifinal win, "I have so many beautiful memories and when I step on the court here, I'm just fighting for every single ball because I'm sure that's what she would want me to do. I miss her so much."





HAMILTON REIGNITES SILVERSTONE LOVE AFFAIR



Local boy Lewis Hamilton's dramatic victory at the British Grand Prix showed why **his legendary partnership** with Mercedes has been so successful.

Dipak Ragav
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The Lewis Hamilton-Mercedes pairing is Formula One's most successful driver-team partnership. In terms of wins and titles, it has surpassed the famed Michael Schumacher-Ferrari juggernaut (five titles and 72 wins). Hamilton has won six of his seven world titles driving a Mercedes and a staggering 82 races before the start of the 2024 season.

The Briton should have had one more world title in 2021 if the final race in Abu Dhabi had been conducted according to the rules and

REUTERS



regulations properly.

So, it came as a shock when Hamilton announced in early February that he would leave Mercedes at the end of the year to join Ferrari in 2025.

Over the last two years, Mercedes slipped behind Red Bull when it got its car concept wrong for new regulations that came into force in 2022. Since then, this successful combo has seen meagre returns. In 2022 and 2023, Hamilton failed to win a race, the only time it has happened since his debut in 2007.

So, ahead of the current season, all eyes were on whether this pair could add to its win tally before ending a hugely successful relationship that began in 2013.

At the start of 2024, it did not look like it would happen. The car wasn't competitive enough to fight for podiums even, and Hamilton himself appeared to be slower than teammate George Russell, especially

Long wait: Lewis Hamilton's last win came at the Saudi Arabian GP in 2021.

GETTYIMAGES

in qualifying.

But slowly, Mercedes has found the right developmental path over the last few races. The performance upgrades the team bolted onto the car resulted in Russell's opportunistic victory in Austria after Max Verstappen and Lando Norris clashed while battling for the lead.

It was almost like the stars were starting to align for the Silver Arrows and Hamilton in the run-up to the British Grand Prix a week later.

On a weekend where the weather played a dramatic role, with intermittent rain followed by bright sunshine, Hamilton seized the opportunity to deliver one of the most memorable wins of his career, sending the British fans into a frenzy. The 39-year-old qualified second behind his teammate and was running in that position in the race's opening stint but showed his class once the rain hit the track. As the drivers tip-toed around the iconic Silverstone circuit, searching for grip, Hamilton breezed past Russell, adapting to the variable conditions and grip levels better than his teammate.

Though McLaren drivers Norris and Oscar Piastri passed Hamilton in the first part of the race, the team's strategic blunders around the pit stops allowed Hamilton back into the lead. Once he got ahead after the final stop, switching to dry tyres, he

showed remarkable ability to nurse his less durable soft compound tyres and stay ahead of a fast-charging Verstappen to take a record ninth British GP win — the most by a driver at a single circuit. It was almost poetic that he ended his two-year drought — his previous win came in Saudi Arabia in 2021 — in style on home soil.

Whatever happens from here on in the rest of the season, the 83rd victory has ensured that Hamilton will leave Mercedes on the right note, something the most successful pairing in the sport deserved.

Moto GP

The reigning champion, Francesco Bagnaia, continued his dream run, extending his winning streak to four races. The Italian was the class of the field in the Dutch GP at Assen and followed it up with another commanding performance at the German GP in Sachsenring.

At Assen, Bagnaia won both the Sprint and the main race, dominating the weekend. In Germany, he took third in the Sprint before securing the top step of the podium on Sunday. These wins allowed the factory Ducati rider to regain the championship lead from his main rival, Jorge Martin. The Italian two-time champion now has 222 points and a 10-point advantage over Martin.

Surging ahead: Francesco Bagnaia leading the pack at the German Grand Prix. AFP



Duels galore

By C.G.S.Narayanan

In chess problem jargon there are like sounding terms such as 'dual' and 'duel' with totally different conceptual meaning. Dual is a weakness in an orthodox direct mate problem where more than one mate follow a single black defence. Later on in modern compositions 'dual separation' has become an integral part of many themes and considered an embellishment. Duel is fairly simple term meaning one-to-one move between two pieces of opposite colour. The two-movers in this article present duels between white king, which discovers mate after defence, and each type of black piece. To start with we have a duel between the kings

M.R.Vuckcevic (after A.C.White)
First Hon.Memtion, Problem 1970



Mate in two moves

There are two set mates in the diagram 1...Ke4 2.Kd6 and 1...Kxf6 2.Kd5, Key 1.Ne3+
1...Ke4 2.Kc5; 1...Kxf6 2.Kd7
1...Ke6 2.Kc7; 1...Kd4 2.Ra4
There are five king mates inclusive of two changed mates.

The second is a duel between White king and black queen. **Key 1.Bd5** has many threats (2.Kc4, Kxc5 and Nd3)

1...Qxh8 2.Kc4; 1...Qxa1 2.Kxc5 and 1...Qa4+, Qa5+, Qa6+ Qxc6+ 2.KxQ
The record is six mates by king achieved here. 1...Rb7 2.Nd3 is not thematic

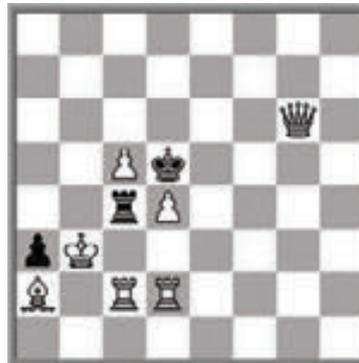
C.J.Morse
The Tablet 1965



Mate in two moves

The maximum duel mates between WK and BR is six but only five are shown here in an elegant setting. The problems presented here are taken from C.J.Morse's humorous effort 'Chess problems: Tasks and records'. In the problem given below for solving notice the duel between king and black rook.

N.A.Macleod
The Problemist 1980



Mate in two moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article 'Dual avoidance': **Key 1.Rg6!** (2.Rd8) 1...bNxd4 2.Ne3; 1...eNxd4 2.Bc4; 1...Kxd4 2.Rd6.; 1...cxd4 2.Qg5

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



Double delight for Abhay Singh



India won two titles in the Asian doubles squash championships, which concluded in Johor, Malaysia, recently, with Abhay Singh (left) recording a 'double'.

Asian Games medallist Abhay won the men's doubles crown along with Velavan Senthilkumar, the top-seeded pair, cruising past Malaysian second seeds Ong Sai Hung and Syafiq Kamal 11-4, 11-5.

Later, Abhay and the experienced Joshna Chinappa, the third-seed pair, put it past the second-seeded Hong Kong duo Tong Tsz Wing and Ming Hong Tang 11-8, 10-11, 11-5 in the mixed doubles final.

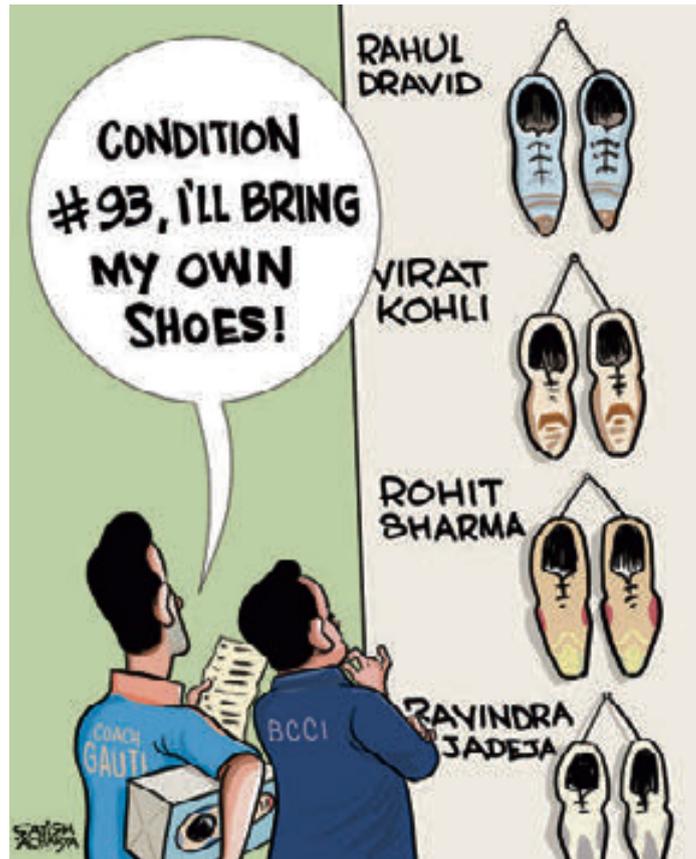
"I'm very happy with the way Abhay and I performed this week. We were confident and got better as we advanced in the tournament," Senthilkumar said. "It was timely of the SRFI and HCL to revive the National doubles championships after a long gap as it allowed us to gain momentum."

Joshna said, "It means so much to me to play for India again, especially since I was out of action for the last five months following a knee surgery. Playing doubles was a great opportunity to return to India action first before I get back on the PSA Tour."

TEAM SPORTSTAR

» INDIAN PLAYGROUND

SPORTOON



1 Parvej and Sonam won the men's and women's gold in the seven-kilometre race organised as Bharat in Paris Run at the Nehru Stadium in New Delhi. The meet also had competition in eSports. While the runners had a total prize purse of Rs. 1,50,000, the eSports champions shared a prize purse of Rs. 1,14,000. Team Hail India, comprising Prakul Singh Fertyal, Ketan Singh, Dev Kumar, and Abhijeet Das, emerged as the champion in the BGMI (Battle Grounds Mobile India) section. Piyush Kumar Mishra from Patna won the EChess title. Vanshaj Sharma from Mumbai won the title in the EA Sports FC 24 category.

KAMESH SRINIVASAN

2 Vizag Warriors emerged champion in the Andhra Premier League T-20 cricket championship, defeating Uttarandhra Lions by 87 runs in the final at Dr. YSR-ACA-VDCA Stadium. Batting first, Vizag Warriors scored 189 for five in 20 overs, with openers B. Munish Ram (37, 27b, 6x4) and Ashwin Hebbar (91 n.o., 56b, 8x4, 4x6) being the main scorers. In reply, the Uttarandhra Lions folded for 102 in 16.3 overs. For the winner, K. Sudharsan (two for 21), J. Ram (two for 23), and P.M. Gangadhar (three for 17) bowled well. The winner collected a cash prize of Rs. 25 lakhs and the runner-up Rs. 15 lakhs.

TEAM SPORTSTAR



FITNESSWISE

Ramji Srinivasan



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Beware of the impostors

In the domain of fitness coaching, it is important to distinguish **genuine experts** from pretenders, who often rely on jargon, superficial knowledge, and self-promotion.

Despite there being an abundance of 'experts' in the coaching profession, it remains to be understood why there is a significant lack of genuine expertise in the Strength and Conditioning (S&C) domain.

In the current scenario, one must be mindful and intelligent enough to separate the wheat from the chaff. Not everyone who claims to be an expert truly is one. It's important to take the time and effort to differentiate genuine experts from those who merely pretend to be.

Often, people and even professional athletes are fooled by imitators. Imitators associate their own professional proficiency with words like scientist/expert/coach, etc., to make people believe they are the go-to people for advice and game-changers in their respective fields.

Additionally, the mushrooming of fake qualifications and intern processes is creating an unhealthy trend in the professional world. This overload can be beyond comprehension and difficult to control in the future.

Here are a few ways in which one can identify true professionals against imitators:

1. Profundity of knowledge

Imitators often struggle to answer deep questions, be it technical or tactical, or even simple processes. Their understanding is surface-level, lacking the detailed knowledge possessed by real experts, who can instead dive deep into details, explain first principles, and address non-standard cases with ease.

2. Adaptability of vocabulary

Imitators stick to jargon and can't adapt their

language to make complex ideas sound clearer and simpler. This is a common way to avoid exposing their ignorance and inefficiency. They impress people with technical jargon to make them believe they are the true experts.

Experts can simplify and clarify concepts, adjusting their language to fit their listeners' understanding and cater to the athlete's needs.

3. Responses to questions

Imitators may get agitated when asked for clarification, as maintaining the appearance of expertise is their primary concern. This is true for many fake experts. Name-dropping is often a way out of a corner for them as they can be very dodgy when confronted with genuine doubts.

Experts, on the other hand, welcome questions and are eager to share their knowledge, appreciating genuine curiosity. They are always in the process of learning through any means to expand their knowledge pool.

4. Acknowledgement of failure

Imitators often avoid admitting mistakes to protect their image and may point fingers at other



professionals or instances rather than improving their standards. Passing the buck to others in times of failure is their standard procedure.

Whereas, experts recognise that failure is part of the learning process and openly discuss their past errors, ensuring they never repeat the mistakes.

5. Knowing their limits

Imitators do not recognise the boundaries of their knowledge and often have a know-it-all attitude. They possess a self-inflated image of themselves as multi-field experts and wrongly interfere in domains where they are neither qualified nor aware, which can be a huge irritant for qualified professionals.

Experts are aware of what they do and don't know and are clear when they are approaching the limits of their expertise.

6. Marketers vs. experts

Marketers are skilled at communicating ideas clearly and memorably but are not necessarily experts.

When seeking expertise, it's

important to look beyond popular communication methods to find those experts with true depth of knowledge.

In today's oversaturated internet and social media coaching world, it's more important than ever to be astute about where we get our information. With so many self-promulgated authorities on various subjects, extricating true expertise from imitation is imperative for effective coaching and athlete development.

Keep in mind, true expertise is not just about always knowing the right answers but understanding the depth and breadth of the subject with an open mind to keep learning.

Quality assistance: England batter Joe Root (left) warms up with England's strength and conditioning coach, Phil Scott. GETTY IMAGES



In today's oversaturated internet and social media coaching world, it's more important than ever to be astute about where we get our information.

A *kutti* cricket story

No one has captured Chennai cricket from the inside like **Ravichandran Ashwin** has.

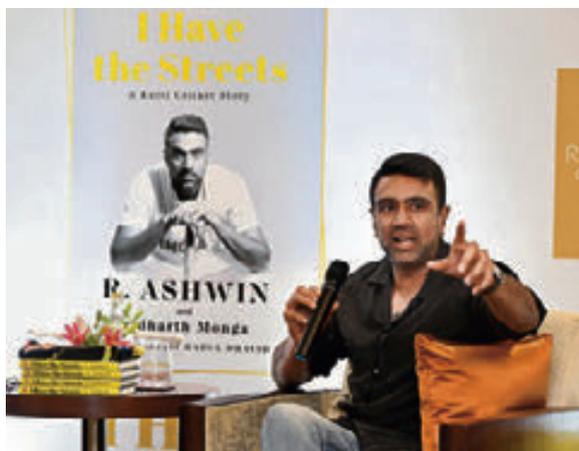
Suresh Menon

David Frith has a delightful description of the unorthodox Australian spinner Jack Iverson's bowling action: "He flicked the ball as would a man disposing of a burnt-out cigarette." Iverson held the ball between a bent middle finger and thumb and made it turn from the off. He had worked on it with a table tennis ball.

In Chennai decades later, Ravichandran Ashwin learnt to bowl a similar delivery with a tennis ball and made it go the other way. He called it the *sodakku* ball "because of the click sound the thumb and the middle finger make," he writes in a delightful memoir, *I Have the Streets*. Ashwin notices that some Sri Lankans including orthodox left-armer Rangana Herath bowl that delivery. Later it is christened the carrom ball.

It is unusual for an international bowler to continue experimenting with deliveries well into his career — but Ashwin continues to do so. One possible reason might be, as he says with great self-awareness in another context, "When it comes to cricket, I am basically made of questions."

It all began on the streets of Chennai, and a team named RUCA (Ramakrishnapuram Underarm Cricket Association). It says something of the kind of person Ashwin is that he has short bio data of his team-mates in RUCA. It includes a player who calls himself Peter Siddle, but is known as Peter Schedule because "we have to clear our schedules whenever he bowls." He once sent down a



His other side: The book, "I Have the Streets: A Kutti Cricket Story", chronicles R. Ashwin's transition from gully cricket and his quest to constantly evolve. M. VEDHAN

28-ball over.

No one has captured Chennai cricket from the inside like Ashwin has (with help from cricket writer Sidharth Monga). The passion, the madness, the humour, friendships, self-belief, that combination of insularity and world-weariness that is unique.

I lived in Chennai in the 1980s, reporting and playing, and I recognise this charming mixture. Nicknames came easily.

There was a bowler named 'Tyte' because he ran in like the fast bowler Frank Tyson but bowled like the spinner

Gupte. If *sodakku* is common usage now, then it was '*arakozhi*', to describe a stroke neither forward nor back and a literal translation of half-cock which describes it.

"Whenever I lose something in life," writes Ashwin, "when I see no other light, I turn to this cricket in our street with some of my best friends. Everything changes, but not the joy I experience when I play here."

There's more in the book, of course. The medical issues, the falling in love, the relationship with fellow players and the many arguments that are natural companions of a self-assured man. Told after being given his first IPL contract that he would now be rubbing shoulders with the likes of Dhoni, Muttiah Muralitharan and Matthew Hayden, Ashwin thinks to himself, "I am not here to rub shoulders. I am here to show that I belong here."

On the other hand, he quickly discovers, "One place I don't belong is at the IPL after-match parties." A lovely blend of the confident and the diffident. Another mixture reflecting Chennai cricket.



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