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46 What a homecoming! Saurashtra secured its maiden Ranji Trophy title in its backyard, a few kilometres away from the birthplace of the legendary Ranjitsinhji!



68 The physicality of the game made ATK difficult to watch under Antonio Habas' first stint in 2014-15. But the return of the Spaniard, along with that physicality, has won it its third ISL title.



72 "Football has only one language," says Bala Devi. Two months after joining Rangers, she opens up about her life in Scotland, seeing Steven Gerrard and the prospect of a promising future for India's under-17 girls.



76 The I-League title saw Mohun Bagan's season climaxing in a dramatic fashion as the team shook off some disappointments suffered earlier.



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“My dream has always been, and will continue to be, to compete at the highest level of sport... So in order to pursue my goals and dreams, I have decided to change events and compete in the 200m.

– STAR SOUTH AFRICAN ATHLETE CASTER SEMENYA, PROHIBITED FROM DEFENDING HER 800M OLYMPICS TITLE BECAUSE SHE REFUSES TO ADHERE TO TESTOSTERONE REGULATIONS SET BY WORLD ATHLETICS, SAID SHE HOPES TO COMPETE IN THE 200M AT THE 2020 TOKYO OLYMPIC GAMES.



“If it ended today and you know this day, this end of the season, these last 16 games, will be talked about for a very long time. And that’s something I’ll always remember, at least I scored my last basket and there’ll be a weird but cool memory.

– ATLANTA HAWKS STAR VINCE CARTER, WHO HAD EARLIER ACCEPTED THIS WOULD BE HIS FINAL NBA SEASON, RESIGNED HIMSELF TO THE FACT IT MIGHT ALREADY BE OVER WITH THE CORONAVIRUS THREAT LEADING THE LEAGUE TO SUSPEND ALL MATCHES INDEFINITELY.

AFGHANISTAN'S FIRST BUZKASHI LEAGUE GETS ROARING RECEPTION



The fear of terror attacks or coronavirus did little to deter thousands from packing a Kabul stadium on March 12 to watch horsemen play polo with a headless goat carcass in Afghanistan’s first buzkashi league. The standing-room-only crowd cheered, hooted and whistled as riders dressed in bright uniforms raced across the muddy field, each man trying to ensure that his team had custody of the 50kg carcass. Buzkashi, which means “dragging the goat” in Persian, involves grabbing the carcass, galloping across the field and dropping it into a “circle of justice,” drawn in chalk and located at either end of the ground. “I am here to support my team,” said government employee Shafiq Rahman, whose home province of Badakhshan in the north-east was facing off against central Bamiyan province — two of the 14 teams playing in the league. Haji Jawad Noori, a chapandaz — as buzkashi players are known — with the Kabul team, said the sport was “very difficult.” “You have to be very fast and flexible. The carcass is also very heavy,” the 28-year-old said.

NINE QATAR WORLD CUP WORKERS DIE IN 2019

Nine labourers on World Cup 2022 projects died in the past year, Qatari organisers said on March 11, stressing that none of the deaths were a result of accidents at tournament projects. All but one of the dead who suffered health issues had yet to undergo a new comprehensive medical screening intended to detect underlying risks, the supreme committee organising the tournament said. The checks, along with newly launched electronic medical records and mental health supervision for workers, were introduced following criticism by human rights groups of Qatar’s past labour practices. “With each death, regardless of what NGOs (non-governmental organisations) think, we’ve always taken a lot of attention and concern,” the committee’s executive director for worker welfare, Mahmoud Qutub, said. “The comprehensive medical screening, as a preventative measure, has probably been one of the most effective programmes we have launched.” In 2018, by contrast, one worker died as a result of a workplace accident after falling from a height at the Al-Janoub stadium. Ten non-work related deaths were reported in the same period.



AXELSEN, TAI TZU WIN ALL ENGLAND TITLES

Viktor Axelsen of Denmark claimed his maiden men's singles title at the All England Championships, while two-time former winner Tai Tzu Ying of Chinese Taipei regained the women's singles crown in Birmingham on March 15. The second-

seeded Axelsen, a former world champion, beat Chinese Taipei's top seed Chou Tien-chen 21-13 21-14 in a lop-sided final to add another feather to his hat. Axelsen, 26, became the first Dane to take the men's singles title since Peter Gade won it in 1999. Former world No. 1 Tai Tzu, playing in her fourth straight All England final, overcame top-seeded Chinese Chen Yu Fei 21-19, 21-15 to claim her third title at the prestigious tournament. The season's first Super 1000 World Tour tournament is the last event before the Badminton World Federation's suspension of all World Tour and sanctioned tournaments.



TIGER WOODS ELECTED TO WORLD GOLF HALL OF FAME

US superstar Tiger Woods, a 15-time major champion, will be inducted into the World Golf Hall of Fame as part of the class of 2021. The hall, located in St. Augustine, Florida, released a statement on March 11 saying Woods had been advised of his impending induction in the male competitor category in a phone call from PGA Tour commissioner Jay Monahan. "I am both honoured and humbled to be inducted into the World Golf Hall of Fame," Woods said in a statement. "This past year has been such an incredible journey and the support I've received from my family, friends and fans has been overwhelming. This achievement is the ultimate recognition to never give up and keep chasing." Woods, 44, was among 10 finalists named in March as candidates for 2021 enshrinement. His 93 worldwide victories include a record-tying 82 US PGA Tour titles. He won his 15th major title at the Masters last April, ending an 11-year major drought after career-threatening injuries. Woods is a three-time winner of the career Grand Slam and in 2000-01 completed the "Tiger Slam" when he became the first golfer since Bobby Jones to hold all four major championship titles at the same time.



EUROPEAN FOOTBALL GRINDS TO A HALT

The global coronavirus outbreak has brought football to a standstill. The biggest leagues have all been suspended, with little clarity on their resumption. With Italy reeling under the pandemic, Serie A was the first to announce changes. After a few closed-door games, the league fully shut down. Juventus' Daniele Rugani was the first well-known footballer to test positive for the virus. His teammate Cristiano Ronaldo, who travelled to Portugal to visit his mother, was in quarantine until tests came back negative. However, travel restrictions in and out of Italy have made it difficult for him to return to Turin. Soon, other leagues followed suit. La Liga was suspended for two weeks after Real Madrid went into a self-imposed quarantine following a positive coronavirus test by one of its basketball players. The German football league proposed the suspension of all football until April 2, while the French football season was also been suspended "until further notice." Paris Saint-Germain's Kylian Mbappe underwent testing for the virus after displaying a few symptoms consistent with the disease but the results came back negative. Despite putting on a brave face throughout, the English Premier League also shut down on the day Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta and Chelsea winger Callum Hudson-Odoi tested positive for COVID-19.

SNAPSHOT OF THE FORTNIGHT

Seeking parity: Before their SheBelieves Cup match against Japan on March 12, the US women's football team players warmed up with their jerseys turned inside out in protest against the United States Soccer Federation's recent filings in an equal pay lawsuit that said that the men's national team carries more responsibility and "requires a higher level of skill based on speed and strength" than what is demanded of the women. The US women's team has won the World Cup and the Olympic gold four times each. The men have never finished better than eighth at the World Cup since a third-place finish in 1930. GETTY IMAGES





FOR THE LOVE OF SPORT

Football, that's my poison

RAJENDRANATH ZUTSHI

I have always been a sportsperson, the sporty type as they say. I love to play cricket. But I am not a great watcher, though I do watch football. That's my poison. I had done a movie called *Goal* with John Abraham and Bipashu Basu back in the day. It was a football movie shot in London. During that time, I had visited the Manchester United stadium and I was blown away. I had never seen such a beautiful stadium. I was completely in awe. A stadium as pretty and as inviting as that! The lush green. Oh my god! That was one experience that I can never forget. I got hooked on to football completely then.



Many years ago, I would play cricket six days a week. It was great to start the day like that. It was awesome. I have had lots of cricket memories with the late Tom Alter. The lovely

Tom! He was our captain. He was a great sportsman and a lover of sport. His life completely played out like a sportsman.

In today's cricket, I can't give you a top shot point of view, but I like the IPL (Indian Premier League) as a concept as it has brought out talent like it's nobody's business. They have got cricketers from different parts of India under one roof. Sports, music and arts can do this. Sports always makes you a great human being.

Sitting in a stadium itself is a great feeling.

■ AS TOLD TO WRIDDHAAYAN
BHATTACHARYYA

Apocalypse... going viral!

The intricate web of integration of the global and local characteristics of sport – ‘glocal’ as it is called – lies shattered after the outbreak of COVID-19.



Pragmatic: The English Premier League has been suspended because of the coronavirus and Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp offered one perspective. “Football always seems the most important of the least important things,” the German said. “Today, football and football matches really aren’t important at all.” GETTY IMAGES

N. SUDARSHAN

These are not pretty times as COVID-19 (novel coronavirus) – a respiratory illness declared a pandemic – continues to wreak havoc around the world. Tales of streets being cleared, towns quarantined and entire countries in lockdown mode convey only half the story. The unfolding human catastrophe, of livelihoods being lost

and mounting deaths, may well be beyond anybody’s imagination.

Where does sport fit in this world of dystopia? Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp offered one perspective. “Football always seems the most important of the least important things,” the German said. “Today, football and football matches really aren’t



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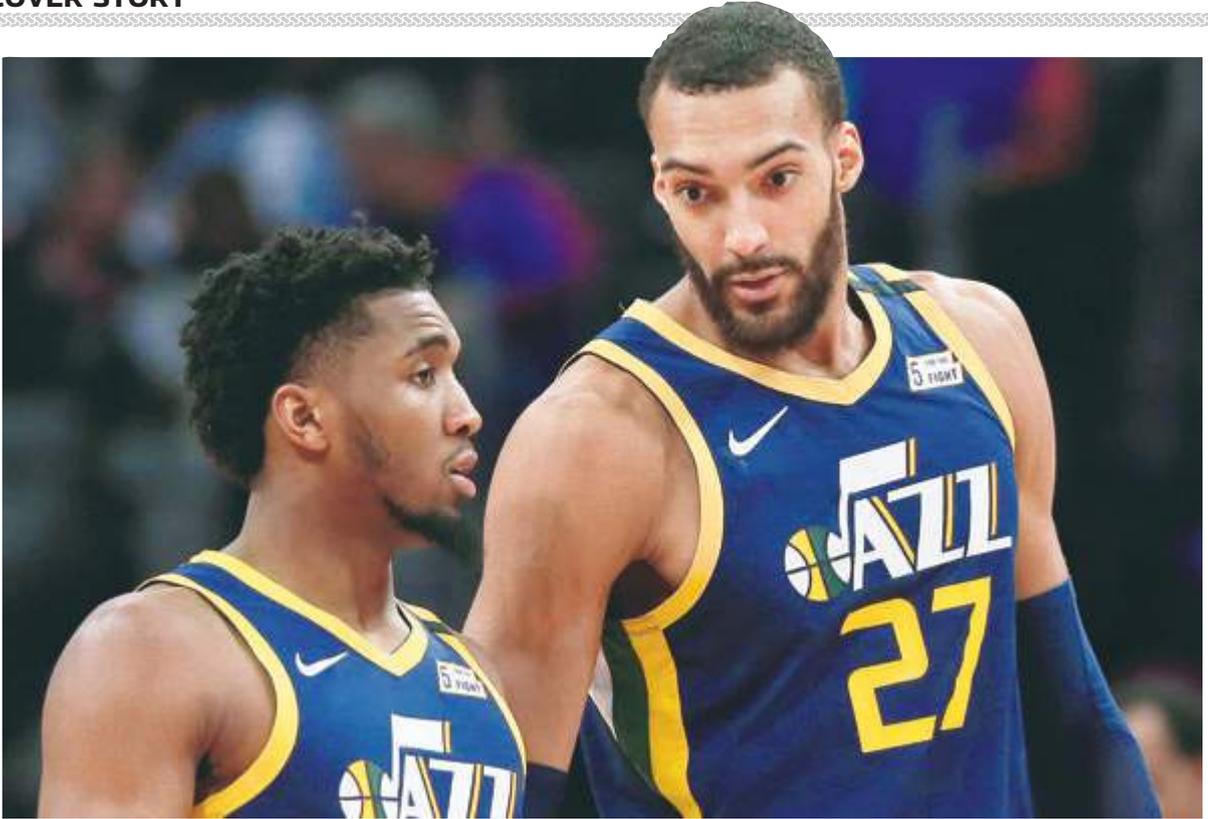
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The NBA story:

Utah Jazz center Rudy Gobert (27) and guard Donovan Mitchell tested positive for the coronavirus. Gobert's test result forced the NBA to suspend the season and the player has since donated half a million dollars for the battle against the virus. AP

important at all.”

As if on cue, from cricket's Indian Premier League (IPL) to football's Premier League to tennis's ATP and WTA Tours to basketball's NBA, every mega event that routinely sees thousands of footfalls has ground to a halt. Even the Olympic Games, that great vehicle of using sport as a means to build an active, fair and hopeful society, is now under threat with the Japanese capital Tokyo, the site of the 2020 edition, too close to the original epicentre of the viral disease.

European football's flagship events, the Champions League and Europa League have been stopped while the Formula 1 season opener in Melbourne has been cancelled. The Masters at Augusta, the first golf major championship of the year, which has been played every year since 1934 except during the war years (1943 to 1945), will not happen.

But modern-day sport is more than just an on-field activity. During testing times, it may not be a priority like Klopp said, but the very fact that it has grown out of its late Sunday afternoon amateur avatar into a multimillion dollar industrial complex makes it more than just a distraction. The intermingling with trade, business and politics accompanied by the free movement of capital and resources makes it a vital part

of the worldwide economic supply chain.

There is also a social and cultural dimension to sport. Apart from the game itself, sports-watching and match-going experiences inculcate a sense of shared consciousness in the deeply private and secluded world that people of today inhabit.

It is this intricate web of integration of the global and local characteristics of sport — 'glocal' as it is called — that lies shattered after the outbreak of COVID-19.

Barely a few days ago, though, no one had as much as an inkling about the chaos the world would descend into. Elbow-bumps and leg-shakes were still considered novel methods of beating the virus. But the sudden deepening of the crisis left no room for people to even meet face to face. 'Social Distancing' is now the way forward.

The Indian Wells tennis Masters set the ball rolling by cancelling the event in early March even as players, including the likes of Rafael Nadal, had started arriving. The lucrative tennis competition in the Californian desert is dubbed the 'Fifth Slam' and once it was put off, pretty much every tennis tournament in the subsequent weeks was expected to fold.

In England, it took the positive tests of Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta and Chelsea winger Callum Hudson-Odoi for the Premier

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Huge loss: Even the Indian Wells tennis event, referred to as the “Fifth Slam,” has been floored by the threat of the virus. The loss the Southern California area will incur following this cancellation will be to the tune of \$400 million. AFP

League to suspend action. As it stands, with nine games still left, table-topper Liverpool is ahead by a whopping 25 points.

There will be no argument if the authorities were to end the season immediately and pronounce Liverpool the champion, a well-deserved accolade for the club that is desperately seeking its first title in 30 years. But the grant of the Champions and Europa League places and promotion and relegation of teams across divisions are tricky matters that have no easy solutions.

In the cash-rich IPL, clouds of uncertainty first gathered when the Indian government, in a bid to contain the virus, suspended most visas for foreign nationals, including those of top international players. Not long after, advisories against mass gatherings and big-scale public events put paid to all hopes and pushed the BCCI to suspend the cricket extravaganza by two full weeks. The India-South Africa ODI series was halted midway while England’s tour of Sri Lanka was called off.

The economic impact will run into millions. According to Thomas Riley, host of *MarketScale’s* Diving into Data podcast, the loss the Southern California area will incur following the cancellation of the Indian Wells Masters will be to the tune of \$400 million. The Miami Open, the next Masters to be snuffed out, drew 388,734 fans last year. The loss for South Florida this year is pegged at \$390 million. Apart from gate receipts, this also includes the hits that auxiliary clusters of economic activity like hotels, restaurants, transportation and television and online broadcasting will take.

In India, *Star Sports* paid a whopping \$2.55 billion for the IPL telecast rights for a five-year period from 2018 to 2022. The cost per game (\$8.47 million) placed it third in the list behind the NFL in the United States and the Premier League in England. To call off the IPL will lead to a bloodbath, with tens of millions of dollars erased from each franchise’s share of the broadcast revenue.

Initially there was an attempt, in England in particular, to protect at least this part of the revenue by staging matches behind closed doors. While bigger clubs and franchises can absorb the loss of turnstile earnings, for lesser outfits that do not attract sufficient eyeballs on televisions and streaming websites, the loss of money from ticketing will be crippling. It may also lead to a situation where the broadcast companies themselves may be circumspect before investing such huge sums anticipating future disruptions.

On the other hand, if the Olympics doesn’t go ahead, it will be a seismic disaster for Japan. Riley pointed out that Japan’s spending on the Olympics is about \$12.6 billion of which \$5.6 billion is in private capital and the rest in taxes. A successful Olympics will enable Japan to earn back a significant amount of the latter; this, despite the recent experiences of Greece and Brazil, whose economies floundered after playing host to giant-sized sports competitions. The Asian powerhouse appears driven by the prevalent belief that large upgrades in infrastructure will have a positive impact on the well-being of its people in the long run.

Now imagine a closed door Olympics

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All eyes on Tokyo:

A man wearing a face mask walks past a Tokyo Olympics countdown clock on March 13, 2020, in the Japanese capital. Though something like four months remain before the mega event kicks off, there are calls for it to be put off because of the corona scare. Even United States President Donald Trump has suggested that the Olympics should be postponed to next year.

GETTY IMAGES

which will at once wipe out a billion dollars of gate receipts and much more in tourism potential.

In the event of a cancellation, a case can be made for say the newly built transportation systems to come good in the future, but Games-specific infrastructure will remain ghost entities. Even a stadium as iconic as the Bird's Nest, built for the 2008 Beijing Olympics, is now an 'expensive-to-maintain tourist attraction.'

What makes things even more difficult is the haphazard way in which COVID-19 has affected the world, with different areas hit at different times. The worst seems to be over for East Asia, especially China, while India, Europe and the Americas are bracing for the challenge. East Asia is an important market for all things sport and even after it is ready consume, it remains to be seen if the rest of the world would have recovered enough to keep pace.

Even if hypothetically the situation is conducive for Japan to host the Olympics, will the world's athletes be eager to participate? It's similar to 'Rolling Recession' in economics, a state where as one sector enters recovery, the slowdown will hit another part of the economy. There will also be question marks over the long-term effect

COVID-19 has on fan behaviour. A die-hard supporter will most certainly return to the stadium once the matches resume. Will a casual spectator, who might have otherwise travelled to the venue, risk being part of a large public gathering that soon?

For now, the governing bodies of different sports have presented an optimistic outlook. English football has been suspended only till April 3 and tennis till the last week of April. The IPL hopes to chug along from mid-April at least in a truncated form. But amidst devastation of such huge magnitude, it is safe to say that the world will not hurtle towards normalcy but only slowly mend. As sportswriter Jonathan Liew called it in *The Guardian*, "This is, in short, the most seismic disruption to the sporting calendar since the second world war, with the possibility that an obliterated spring is simply the prelude to an annihilated summer and a torched autumn."

And until such a time the hiatus stretches, fans and players can twiddle their thumbs and get by. But the task is cut out for those organisers looking for damage-limiting solutions, broadcasters staring at empty slots of programming and newspaper editors scrambling to find content to populate their columns with. ☞



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Managing the big one: There are suggestions of holding the Olympic Games without spectators. The scale might be reduced, too. GETTY IMAGES

Coronavirus threatens the Olympics

UTHRA GANESAN

The IOC and the rest of the world have about 125 days to ensure that the virus numbers fall to controllable levels so the Tokyo Games can be held.

There will be no Australian Grand Prix, or a race in Shanghai. There won't be any Players' Championship golf either. The NBA has been suspended indefinitely. Back home, the Indian Premier League (IPL) 2020 has been pushed back by a fortnight, with no clear date of resumption. And if things continue to remain the same with regard to the novel coronavirus, there just may not be any Tokyo Olympics in July-August.

The Japanese government and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) have been insistent, to the point of obduracy, that the Games will begin on July 24, as scheduled, and be organised according to plan. While the IOC has also said it will follow World Health Organization (WHO) directives and wait till May for any final decision, its public posturing of confidence is understandable.

Four years ago, the sporting world was in a flux leading up to the Rio Olympics as the Zika virus threatened the quadrennial Games. There were a few pullouts, mainly among golfers and a few tennis players, and general health concerns, but the Games themselves were never under any risk.

The shadows threatening the Tokyo Olympics are a lot more real. The novel coronavirus, or COVID-19, has already been declared a pandemic by the WHO, only the second time in recent history that the organisation has used the moniker, the previous one being the 2009 H1N1 influenza, or swine flu. But there is more behind the Tokyo scare.

The six-month leadup to any Olympics is usually the busiest time for sporting federations (organising the qualifying and test events) and athletes (trying to qualify or



fine-tune). This year, though, the entire schedule has been thrown into disarray.

Judo qualifying ends on May 25 but all events including the qualifiers are off till April 30. The African and Asian weightlifting championships have been postponed or cancelled, with the international body allowing lifters to register for out-of-zone events, provided those are held on time.

The shuttlers are in a worse situation. The badminton qualification period ends on April 26 and three events have already been cancelled. The India Open, scheduled to be held without spectators, is now uncertain after the Delhi government ordered the cancellation of all events.

The rowing qualifiers in Italy and Korea have been cancelled. Several qualifying events for sports including boxing and basketball have been shifted.

The absence of any clarity on qualifications means those yet to book a Tokyo ticket have been left hanging. Unfortunately, their respective national or international federations are equally helpless, hamstrung as they are by a combination of factors — the worldwide spread of the virus resulting in the absence of host cities, un-

certainty about the future course of the pandemic, and the participation of athletes in or from infected areas.

Of course, all this is assuming there will be an Olympic Games that the athletes are striving to participate in. Japan is going all out to ensure that it happens. It is a matter of pride for the Japanese, but there are more practical issues as well. With the world economy already plunging, cancellation of the approximately \$28 billion (including broadcast, sponsorship and infrastructure expenses) Tokyo Games might just end up crippling Japan to unforeseen levels. And that would just be one part of the eventual costs.

The hotel and tourism industry will be hit hard. Postponing the Games would lead to logistical issues. World sports work on fine margins in terms of hosting windows. Any change in the existing schedule would mean clashing with other major events through this year and a domino effect through the coming years.

There are suggestions of holding the Games without spectators. The scale might be reduced, too — the Olympic Flame welcome party has already been cut to less than

Precautionary measures: Juventus played Inter Milan before an empty Allianz Stadium on March 8. Italy as a nation is in complete lockdown, and all sporting events, all the way from the Serie A to community recreational sports, have been suspended. AP



Growing fears: The Olympic Flame welcome party has already been cut to less than half.

REUTERS

half. Contact sports like judo and wrestling remain high on the list of events that may get the axe in case organisers decide to curtail the programme. There nevertheless remains the threat of mass withdrawals in case of participation of athletes from affected areas.

The big hope for everyone seems to be the myth that the virus would be controlled once temperatures rise. Medical experts, though, have reiterated that there is no proof of heat affecting the spread of COVID-19.

Cutting off all social contact and self-quarantine seem, as of now, the only options. Which, being impossible in sports, has led to a dilemma: cancellation or postponement of events. Consider these: Inter Milan played its Europa League game at home in front of empty stands in late February, but the competition itself, along with the Champions League, has now been suspended, as is the English Premier League.

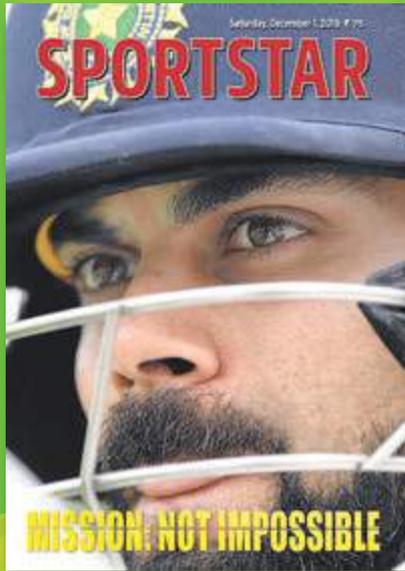
The Association of Tennis Professionals has suspended the men's tour for six weeks. The Professional Golfers' Association Tour has already cancelled five tournaments so far. Italy as a nation is in complete lockdown, and all sporting events, all the way from the Serie A to community recreational sports, have been suspended. Hockey Pro League matches in Europe have been postponed.

The biggest concern, of course, are the events and camps within Japan itself. The Professional Baseball League has been delayed; J-League football continues to remain suspended; Spring Honbasho, one of the top-six sumo tournaments, will be held behind closed doors for the first time since World War II. Olympic Test events in rugby and shooting have already been cancelled. Mongolia's archery team abandoned an Olympic training camp in Okazaki last month. Colombia's table tennis and gymnastics teams cancelled their respective camps in Kitakyushu.

Back in 2016, Zika spread through mosquitoes and was easier to control, compared to the human-spread COVID-19. Also, the Zika virus itself was well-known for a long time before its 2016 outbreak and medications and vaccines were adequately available. Not so for COVID-19.

Even though the actual fatality rate is quite low, it's the frightening speed of its spread. Given the long incubation period for the virus in a host, the fact that not everyone receiving the virus is actually getting sick or showing symptoms but remaining carriers nevertheless, and the absence of any verified medication make it a triple whammy for those trying to control it.

The IOC and rest of the world have about 125 days to ensure the numbers fall to controllable levels. ☞



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Immunity boosters: Incorporate pepper, ginger, garlic and turmeric in your diet. K. K. MUSTAFAH, M. SRINATH, M. A. SRIRAM & SHYLENDRA HOODE

Coronavirus outbreak: How to boost your immunity

To have a sound immune system, you need to have nutrition that is fuelling your muscles and your brain.

As you read this article, the Tokyo Olympics in summer 2020 is under a cloud of uncertainty. The novel coronavirus, or COVID-19, is the name on everyone's lips. If you have not heard of it, then you are not living on this planet. Key international tournaments have been cancelled; the Indian Premier League (IPL) is under a cloud. The government is shutting schools and asking for public gatherings to not take place. At our QUA Nutrition clinics, we are advising clients to check in on a nutrition counselling session via Skype or WhatsApp. As a sports nutritionist, it is my responsibility to see how an athlete can eat during this troublesome time. Let's break this down for easy understanding for anyone into a sporting career.

COVID-19 is a virus that causes a cold and progresses to pneumonia. People who have contracted the virus have a severe cough, fever and breathing difficulties. Antibiotics have not worked in the cases of this virus. Antiviral drugs are being administered, but for most people they do not work. A key thing to point out is that not everyone is contracting the disease and not everyone with the virus is dying.

It means that the immunity of individuals is key to battling this virus.

That's where I have the best advice to athletes. Let's boost and build your immune system so it is stronger. There is a problem, however, for athletes and that problem is training and competition.

When athletes train at high intensities, the immune

system can get compromised due to a lack of proper nutrition. Most athletes are not on a sports diet. A sports diet takes into careful consideration the total calories burnt, the amount of protein needed and a careful balance of the micronutrients like calcium, magnesium and vitamins. Many of these are highly depleted in training and if the diet does not compensate for that, then over days or weeks the body depletes its reserves. This is when the athlete's immune system gets defeated. To have a sound immune system, you need to have nutrition that is fuelling your muscles, your brain and in this case your immune system.

Right nutrition = tough immune system.

Over training + no sports nutrition = weakened immune system.

To boost the immune system, we need to do the following:

- Improve calories and not be calorie-deficit.
- Improve protein content and quality.
- Improve Vitamin D levels.
- Improve Vitamin C levels.
- Improve Vitamin B12 levels.
- Improve Vitamin E levels.
- Improve calcium and magnesium levels.
- Consume a high level of antioxidants or highly colourful fruits and vegetables.
- Incorporate pepper, ginger, garlic and turmeric in your diet as they are immunity boosters.



A quick step is to get a blood test done for your vitamin and mineral levels. Any deficiency should sound alarm bells. Check your C-reactive protein and erythrocyte sedimentation rate, which are inflammation markers. If your body is over-trained, then you are stressing your immune system.

Once you have got your data, start planning a diet that will help in boosting immunity. The below are a few things anybody can do in their daily regime in addition to a planned sports diet.

Haldi or turmeric can be added to your *dal*, *rasam* or even rice. I normally don't advise tea to athletes, but this viral flu season, I suggest have two-three cups of *masala* tea that has turmeric, ginger, cardamom, cinnamon and pepper added to it. Black is best. Limit your sugar. A *haldi* capsule or curcumin extract is advisable. I recommend Daily Defense from CureGarden or Himalaya's Haridra.

Add guava, *amla*, orange or kiwi to your daily diet. These days I drink a glass of freshly squeezed juice of five oranges. This is more Vitamin C than a capsule.

Add *tulsi* (basil) leaves to your tea. Every morning I eat four to five *tulsi* leaves from my potted plants. You can also use any capsule of it.

Add ginger and garlic to your curries. Two pods of garlic can be soaked overnight and had the next morning. Crush the garlic and leave it for two minutes. Let it oxidise. Then consume it. Allicin that is produced when garlic is crushed or chopped is a very powerful antioxidant and has antiviral properties. The only issue is your sweat begins to smell over three weeks. I'd rather have a smelly athlete than a sick athlete!

Eat purple grapes and purple cabbage. Nature has made these purple pigments to contain high anthocyanins that again have potent antiviral and immunity-boosting properties.

Ayurveda for centuries have given us some potent elixirs. Chyawanprash is my favourite. *Amla* or *kesar* are my choices to battle any cold. A tablespoon twice a day never hurts anyone.

Luteolin is found in celery, thyme, green peppers and chamomile tea. Luteolin inhibits, to a greater or

lesser extent, an enzyme known as TBK1's ability to activate a specific biochemical signal. If unimpeded, the signal would lead to the formation of gene products known to trigger inflammation. All athletes have inflammation due to training. The immune system and inflammation are finely tuned in terms of protecting the body against damage from exercise or trauma and damage from an invading virus.

I advise the following supplements. Please do consult your sports nutritionist or doctor or medical team for doping guidelines on consumption of the same.

- Calcirol 60,000IU or Vitamin D3 60,000IU. One Sachet per week for four weeks. Consult your doctor with your Vitamin D blood test for best dosages. It's always advisable to supplement with a doctor's advice.

- Health Aid – Vitamin C – one effervescent tablet a day or Limcee 500mg once a day.

- Zincolak – One capsule at bedtime or zinc gluconate 50mg at bedtime.

- MusclePharm's Glutamine 5gm in orange juice every day. If you already have a cold, take 10gm in juice three times a day. Do not cross 40gm per day. If you have medication or kidney or liver issues, please check with your doctor on consumption of this amino acid.

There is a lot more one can do to boost the immune system in addition to foods and supplements.

- Sleeping eight hours per day boosts your immune system.

- Getting natural sunlight boosts your immune system.

- Light exercise boosts your immune system.

- Practise good hygiene and good manners of wearing a mask when you have a cold.

- Do not shake people's hands. *Namaste* is the best way.

- Sanitise your hands regularly.

Keep a confident spirit. Research shows people with upbeat minds and heart rates are less prone to illness. ❧

■ THE AUTHOR IS CHIEF SPORTS NUTRITIONIST AT QUANUTRITION CLINICS. TO GET AN IMMUNITY-BOOSTING DIET OR A LIST OF SUPPLEMENTS UNDER A GUIDED PROGRAMME, EMAIL RYAN@QUANUTRITION.COM.



Is NADA failing dope testing?

The number of out-of-competition tests among top athletes increased in 2019 compared to 2018, but NADA's choice of periods for such testing defied logic in many cases.

K. P. MOHAN

Who should India's National Anti-Doping Agency (NADA) be testing the most during the course of a year? The obvious answer would be those in the Registered Testing Pool (RTP). According to the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) definition, the RTP is the pool of "highest priority" athletes who are subject to "focused in-competition and out-of-competition testing."

Keeping check: The Athletics Integrity Unit (AIU) of World Athletics did collect a substantial number of urine and blood samples from the Indians in 2018. Javelin thrower Neeraj Chopra was the lone Indian athlete in the AIU's Registered Testing Pool through 2019. *PTI*

The RTP is aimed at ensuring that anti-doping agencies have the chance to test top athletes unannounced at a designated place preferred by the athlete. A one-hour slot has to be provided to the testers for every day of the year by an athlete where he or she would be available for testing. Failure to be at the venue or to file the "whereabouts" may attract a sanction depending on the circumstances.

Doping is not about consuming steroids and other substances just before competition and hoping that testers would not catch you. It is more about a systematic consumption to ensure that one is not caught even if tested. If one is taking steroids, one will need a "safe period" of a month or two to be away from testers. It depends on the substance the athlete is taking, the mode of ingestion and the dosage.

"But wouldn't he be tested in the competition?" This is a question often heard in the context of doping suspicions concerning an athlete.

If the athlete is wise enough, he would not be caught even if he is tested. His doping cycles would have been designed to avoid detection.

This is where the RTP comes in. At least theoretically that is the idea. Catch the cheat when he or she is building for the competitions ahead, giving a safe period to avoid turning in a positive test. WADA wants agencies to carry out more out-of-competition tests than in-competition. But that often does not happen. Rules require an anti-doping authority to test its RTP athletes at least three times a year. That also, it seems, is a tough task, at least for NADA.

In 2018, NADA failed to test out of competition five of the six individual track-and-field gold medallists from India at the Asian Games before the meet. It also failed to test 10 of the 25 athletes in its RTP through the course of the year.

The record was better in 2019, but only marginally. This was not a multi-discipline

games year. For athletics, the big meeting was the World Championships in Doha in September-October. NADA had enlarged its RTP from 25 in 2018 to 44 athletes by around mid-2019 (the exact dates are not known since NADA does not indicate a date on the changes in its RTP on its website). According to figures made available by NADA, in athletics, it did not test at least eight of its RTP members up to November 11, 2019. Another 11 RTP athletes were subjected to just one out-of-competition test with a urine sample. Seven others were tested twice out of competition.

Only 10 RTP athletes were put through the stipulated three out-of-competition tests based on urine samples.

The 10 athletes in the Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS) — Neeraj Chopra, Tajinder Pal Singh Toor, Seema Punia, Arpinder Singh, Muhammed Anas, Hima Das, A. Dharun, Jinson Johnson, M. Sreesankar and Avinash Sable) — were subjected to a combined total of 15 out-of-competition tests in 2019 (up to November 11). Seema and Arpinder were not tested at all out of competition in this period.

One would have expected NADA to concentrate more on its RTP athletes in athletics for out-of-competition testing in 2019 following revelations about inadequacies the previous year. That did not happen.

The Test Distribution Plan (TDP) should have been so devised as to have a sensible mix of in-competition and out-of-competition testing. That would have meant spacing out three out-of-competition tests for RTP athletes in such a way that they would be well away from the in-competition period unless NADA was testing for erythropoietin (EPO) or growth hormone or similar substances.

Though the number of RTP-based out-of-competition tests among top athletes increased in 2019 compared to 2018, NADA's choice of periods for such testing defied logic in many cases. Those in the RTP who were tested out of competition from one-five days prior to a competition in 2019 included Arokia Rajiv and Muhammed Anas (400m), Jinson Johnson (800m and 1,500m), Hima Das and M. R. Poovamma (400m), Shivpal Singh and Annu Rani (javelin) and Tajinder Pal Singh Toor (shot put).

All these athletes were also tested "in-competition," making it all the more debatable.

Discipline-wise positive tests (Till December 12)

	Sports discipline	Positive
1	Aquatics	2
2	Archery	2
3	Athletics	20
4	Badminton	1
5	Basketball	1
6	Bodybuilding	60
7	Boxing	3
8	Football	1
9	Judo	7
10	Ju-jitsu	1
11	Kabaddi	1
12	Para-powerlifting	4
13	Powerlifting	14
14	Shooting	2
15	Tennis	1
16	Volleyball	1
17	Weightlifting	27
18	Wrestling	7
19	Wushu	2
	Total	157

If out-of-competition tests just before a competition happened to be the only ones under the "whereabouts" programme, then the purpose was all but defeated. Only "non-specified" substances that include steroids, metabolic modulators and certain stimulants are prohibited out-of-competition. Only "non-specified" substances are tested for out-of-competition samples. In-competition testing will be for the entire list of prohibited substances though not all samples are subjected to certain tests, EPO for example.

It is rare that an athlete would come into a competition with steroids within his or her system till a day or five days prior to a competition. Those who do test positive for steroids in "in-competition" testing might have possibly made a mistake in their intake of drugs so as to be caught while competing or else the laboratory is so advanced that it can detect the minutest quantities of metabolites over a longer period of time.

Since all substances are tested for in "in-competition" testing, it becomes almost meaningless to test out of competition, a day or a few days before, such athletes who are likely to be tested in-competition. The exception can come in the case of targeted testing for EPO and related substances since the window for detection of such substances is very limited, often a few days. Generally, endurance athletes in any sport are targeted for EPO.

With the National Dope-Testing Laboratory under suspension by WADA, there is an obvious resource crunch that NADA faces in getting tests done in foreign laboratories. This should not result in its attempts to test Olympics-bound athletes this season.



Off the radar: To get some idea about how lopsided testing had been in 2019 in certain cases in athletics, we have to look at the nine in-competition tests that the World University Games sprint champion Dutee Chand went through last season at home while noting that amazingly she did not undergo a single out-of-competition test by NADA! AP

In 2018, NADA managed to test some athletes training abroad, though all tests were bunched together closer to the Asian Games, making it almost a formality. Yet, in terms of deterrence, it was a good effort away from our shores even if these tests might have been done by other agencies on behalf of NADA. In 2019, though, there was to be no testing of track-and-field athletes abroad. Was there a cash crunch?

Contrary to what was being given out by the Athletics Federation of India (AFI), that WADA had come 11 times to test Indian athletes in Europe in 2018, it is now confirmed that WADA went only once. It collected six Indian samples in that single “mission” in 2018 on Indians training in Europe. In all, WADA did 39 out-of-competition tests in athletics around the world in 2018.

The Athletics Integrity Unit (AIU) of World Athletics (formerly the International Association of Athletics Federations) did collect a substantial number of urine and blood samples from the Indians in 2018 including those out-of-competition samples from Doha before the Asian Championships. The exact numbers of visits in Europe are, however, not available, though the AIU confirmed that 88 urine samples were collected from the Indians in out-of-competition testing outside India in 2018. There

were 25 Indian athletes initially in Spala, Poland. Javelin thrower Neeraj Chopra was the lone Indian athlete in the AIU’s RTP through 2019.

NADA’s in-competition and out-of-competition testing in athletics have rarely taken the logical route. It often misses the first couple of days of a national championships or else may collect 20 or 30 samples from 40-odd events. With the National Dope-Testing Laboratory under suspension by WADA, there is an obvious resource crunch that NADA faces in getting tests done in foreign laboratories. This should not result in its attempts to test Olympics-bound athletes this season.

To get some idea about how lopsided testing had been in 2019 in certain cases in athletics, we have to look at the nine in-competition tests that the World University Games sprint champion Dutee Chand went through last season at home while noting that amazingly she did not undergo a single out-of-competition test by NADA!

Someone like Gajanand Mistry who figures below 15 in the Indian list for the 400m in 2019 was tested three times out of competition, while some of the better-rated quarter-milers were not even tested twice.

Of course, it is NADA’s prerogative to choose athletes for testing as per RTP, performance, intelligence reports, et cetera.

Number of out-of-competition tests faced by Indian athletes in 2019 (Till November 11)

	Athlete	Discipline
Athletes in RTP not tested even once	Seema Punia Arpinder Singh Siddhanth Thingalaya Om Prakash Amolak Singh Tejaswin Shankar Dutee Chand Silambarasan M.	Discus throw Triple jump 110m hurdles Shot put Decathlon High jump Sprints Long jump
Athletes in RTP tested once	Muhammed Anas Hima Das Sreeshankar M. Arokia Rajiv R. Suren Purnima Hembram Praveen Chitravel Sanjivani Jadhav M. R. Poovamma Shivpal Singh Shipra Sarkar	400m 200m, 400m Long jump 400m Decathlon Heptathlon Triple jump Distance events 400m Javelin throw Middle-distance events
Athletes in RTP tested twice	Sheena N. V. Annu Rani M. Salahuddin Ajay Kumar Saroj A. Dharun Manjit Singh Tajinder Pal Singh Toor	Triple jump Javelin throw Triple jump Middle-distance events 400m, 400m hurdles Middle-distance events Shot put
Athletes in RTP tested thrice	Neeraj Chopra Jithin Paul Amoj Jacob Jinson Johnson Devender Singh Kang V. Neena Chinta Yadav L. Suriya Parul Choudhary Navjot Kaur Dhillon	Javelin throw 400m 400m Middle-distance events Javelin throw Long jump 3,000m steeplechase Distance events Distance events Discus throw, shot put
Athletes in RTP tested four times or more	Lili Das (6 times) P. U. Chitra (5) M. P. Jabir (5) Shankar Lal Swami (4) M. Afsal (4) Gagandeep Singh (4)	Middle-distance events Middle-distance events 400m hurdles 3,000m steeplechase Middle-distance events Discus throw

Among the other prominent athletes tested out of competition were Jisna Mathew and Saritaben Gayakwad (400m) twice each; V. K. Vismaya (400m) once; K. S. Jeevan and Noah Nirmal Tom (400m) once each; Jithu Baby and Alex Antony (400m) thrice each; and Vipin Kasana (javelin) once (*see table*).

Seema Punia, a multiple international medal winner in the discus throw who is a TOPS beneficiary and RTP athlete, has undergone just one test in two years! Keeping her in the RTP and at the same time being unable to do any test at all since she is

probably abroad most of the time is illogical.

NADA has to shed its testing philosophy. Target-testing should not mean testing an athlete out of competition a day before his event at a national meet. "We have done enough tests in athletics" should also not mean NADA can skip the next National Championships, which may be the final selection trial for a major global meet. More tests at the university level and the Khelo India and Schools Games would go a long way in curbing the doping menace among young athletes. ☞



A good guide: I have, over time, learned a lot by just watching and listening to Lakshmipathy Balaji when he was our coach. K. R. DEEPAK

Meeting Bala gave me goosebumps

ABHISHEK TANWAR

It was a very proud moment for me as I was just getting into the Tamil Nadu team.

I first met Bala *anna* (Lakshmipathy Balaji) in Hyderabad during the Vijay Hazare Trophy in 2015 when I joined Tamil Nadu as a replacement. Firstly, then, it was a very proud moment for me as I was just getting into the team. The very second thought which occurred to me was, “Wow, I will get to meet and interact with my favourite player Lakshmipathy Balaji.” As I was asked to join the side in Hyderabad, they handed me some of his clothes too because at that time he was our coach-cum-player.

I rushed to the team hotel as soon as I landed, the excitement was too much to hold. The first thing I did on reaching the destination was to go to his room and give him his clothes. I was so nervous that I could literally hear my heart beat. Well, moments later, there he was standing in

front of me, sporting the ever-charming smile as he welcomed me. He wished me good luck ahead of the upcoming fixture. I also realised that he had been following me closely since he started praising me for my accuracy while bowling and the fearless attitude I carried. He also asked me to work on my speed a little bit. It was a dream come true for me. From seeing him on TV, absolutely decimating the Pakistan batting line-up in 2004, and winning us the match, to seeing him in person gave me goosebumps.



I have, over time, learned a lot by just watching and listening to him when he was our coach. It is just amazing how quickly he reads the batsman’s mind and accordingly switches his technique.

■ AS TOLD TO SANTADEEP DEY



Things to remember about Maria Sharapova

Sharapova will dearly miss the sport she loves, but tennis will miss this transcendent champion who combined celebrity and brand with major titles, more effectively than any woman before.

Star value: Maria Sharapova achieved more success, fame, and fortune than she could have imagined when she arrived in America.

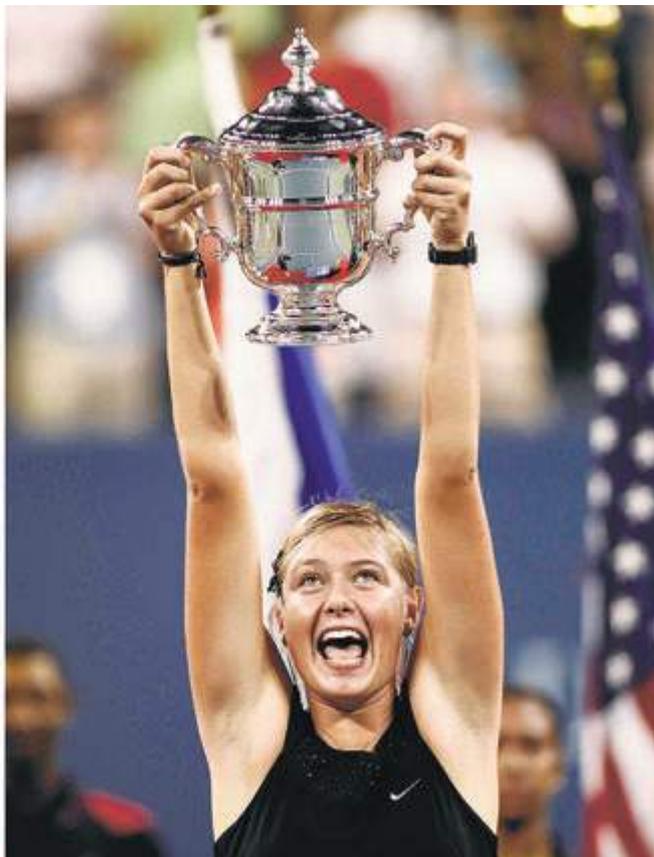
AFP

“How do you leave behind the only life you’ve ever known?” wrote Maria Sharapova in a poignant essay announcing her retirement on *VanityFair.com* and *Vogue.com*. “How do you walk away from the courts you’ve trained on since you were a little girl, the game that you love — one which brought you untold tears and unspeakable joys — a sport where you found a

family, along with fans who rallied behind you for more than 28 years?”

Sharapova will dearly miss the sport she loves, and tennis will miss this transcendent champion who combined celebrity and brand with major titles, more effectively than any woman before.

Born in remote Siberia, Sharapova was discovered at age six by all-time great Mar-



This combination of file pictures shows Sharapova holding trophies after winning (from left) the 2004 Wimbledon, the 2006 US Open, the 2008 Australian Open, the 2012 and the 2014 French Opens. AFP

tina Navratilova at a Moscow tennis clinic. Navratilova told Maria’s parents that her manifest talent could best develop where hers did nearly 30 years earlier: in America, the proverbial “land of opportunity.”

Sharapova’s tennis odyssey started a year later when her father, Yuri, with just \$700 in his pocket, took his ambitious daughter to the tennis hotbed of south Florida. Neither spoke English, but both believed hard work would pay off. Twenty-five years later, the statuesque blonde achieved more success, fame, and fortune than she could have imagined when she arrived in America. Here’s what I’ll remember most about Maria Sharapova.

American dream — Chasing her dream was tough from the start. Sharapova was bullied at Nick Bollettieri’s Tennis Academy, which Andre Agassi once described as having a “Lord of the Flies” environment. Her mother, Yelena, couldn’t join Maria and Yuri for two years due to visa problems. But the young Sharapova persevered through adversity as she would throughout her roller coaster career.

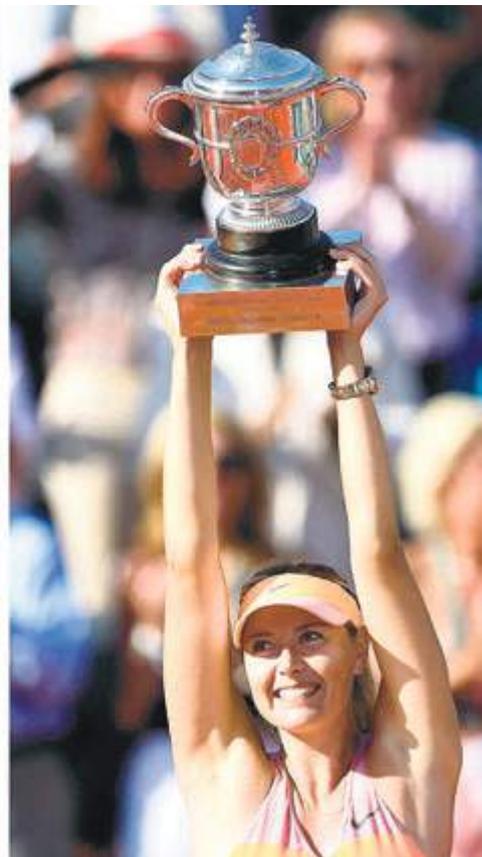
“I was very lonely. Also missed my mom a lot,” she recalled. “To be able to see me,

my father always had to work hard so he could get back home early before I fell asleep. I always received insults and more [harsh] treatment than others, though I did it to pursue all my dreams with enthusiasm. Because of that, I learned how to take care of myself. I also never thought about quitting because I knew what I wanted.”

It would take unrelenting pain from injuries and a series of bad losses that plunged her ranking to an abysmal No. 373 this February to force her to finally quit. “I look at photos of myself and of the motion where I’m just about to hit the ball, and I’m in the air or just as I’m making contact, and I can’t even look at it because it makes me cringe,” Sharapova told *The New York Times*. “I have so much pain.”

Despite the pain, Sharapova would gain five Grand Slam titles and five more major finals, plus a silver medal at the 2012 Olympics. The resilient Russian also reached a career-high No. 1 in August 2005, earned a top 5 year-end ranking nine times, and won the WTA Finals among her 36 titles.

Teen queen — During the 2004 Wimbledon, 17-year-old Maria took her



English, maths and sociology exams, but in the dramatic final, she passed her toughest test. She shocked two-time and defending champion Serena Williams 6-1, 6-4 to become the first Russian to win Wimbledon and its second-youngest champion (after 16-year-old Martina Hingis) in the Open Era.

The slender Sharapova, seeded 13th, displayed the poise of a veteran as she fearlessly outthit the muscular, heavily favoured Williams in one of this century's biggest upsets. "Nerves of steel or the innocence of youth" was how Boris Becker, himself a 17-year-old prodigy when he won the 1985 Wimbledon, explained Sharapova's tour de force.

A star was born that historic day on Centre Court. Navratilova called it, "the best thing that could have happened" to women's tennis.

Consummate professional — Not a natural athlete by her own admission, Sharapova left no stone unturned to improve her speed, agility, strength, flexibility and stamina. Yutaka Nakamura, her personal strength and conditioning coach from 2011-18, described her as the epitome of

"perfectionism and precision. She's a true professional. She's all business on the court."

Off the court, the elegant Sharapova turned into a sweaty gym rat. "To prepare for every two-hour practice, we started with a warm-up, stretching and pre-hab, which is injury prevention," Nakamura told me. "After her surgeries, Maria had to spend an extra hour doing injury prevention on top of strength and conditioning and practice. We did mobility exercises and dynamic stretching and running and specific exercises for her shoulders. After practice and lunch, Maria did another 60- to 90-minute session of fitness work."

Sharapova's commitment to training never wavered. "Maria never got discouraged," said Nakamura. "When you see her on TV, she never shows any weakness. And behind the scenes with us, she always followed our guidance. She was always very driven."

On Sharapova's retirement, Nakamura said, "She gave everything she had. She had no regrets. She wanted to say good-bye on her terms."

International celebrity — From 2005

“On being branded the new Anna Kournikova, after the sexy Russian blonde who never won a singles title, the 16-year-old Sharapova fired back, “I’m not the next Kournikova – I want to win matches!”



Silver lining: Sharapova's lone Olympic medal was a silver at the 2012 Games in London. Serena Williams took gold, while Victoria Azarenka came third.

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to 2012, *Forbes* magazine ranked Sharapova in its Celebrity 100, a list of the most popular and influential figures in entertainment and sports. Despite downplaying her beauty, she was a glamour girl in the mould of Anna Kournikova, another shapely, blonde Russian. Sharapova appeared in the *Sports Illustrated* Swimsuit Edition and was named the most-searched for athlete by *Yahoo* in 2005 and 2008.

Discussing the tailored jacket she wore on court during a 2012 French Open victory, Sharapova confided, "Glamour and diva. Hmm. Yeah, that's me."

In the rare times she courted controversy, those headlines only made her more popular worldwide — except her 2016 admission of using a banned drug. Sharapova boasted a strong, loyal following on social media, and in 2014, she became the first tennis player to pass 15 million fans on Facebook.

Although Sharapova seldom mingled with fellow players, she hobnobbed with the rich and famous, attending designer Vera Wang's show at the New York Fashion Week a few days before her retirement announcement and soon after that, the Vanity Fair Oscars after-party with boyfriend-businessman Alexander Gilkes.

Savvy businesswoman — "There are a couple of sides of me," she told *The Associated Press* before the 2006 US Open, which she won. "There's the Maria that's a tennis player. There's the Maria that is a normal girl. And there's the Maria who's a businesswoman. And that's where the 'Maria Sharapova brand' comes into play."

Serena Williams, her bete noire on the court — winning their last 18 matches! — didn't compare to Sharapova in the competition for endorsements for most of their careers. The gorgeous Russian ranked as the world's highest-earning female athlete for 11 consecutive years, according to *Forbes* magazine. Besides signing lucrative sponsorship deals with Nike, Tag Heuer, Canon, Motorola, Land Rover, PepsiCo, Sony, Porsche, and Evian, Sharapova has investments in the UFC and skincare label Supergoop! and owns her own candy brand called Sugarpova.

When critics noted the potential harmful effects of high sugar levels in Sugarpova products, the entrepreneur recently told *CNBC*, "I understand the criticism of my product. However, I am an athlete who knows what is healthy and what is not healthy for my body. Health is one of my biggest priorities as a professional athlete.



On the other hand, everyone likes sweets, including me.”

Sharapova’s \$315 million career income from endorsements far exceeded her \$38.7 million career prize money.

Diehard competitor — “It was always great battles when we played together,” two-time Wimbledon champion Petra Kvitova said after learning of Sharapova’s retirement. “I do always have respect for her. She’s been an amazing competitor, she never gives up.”

Kvitova echoed the sentiments of Tour players and fans around the world. No matter the score or how well or poorly she played or how much she suffered from injuries, she battled relentlessly. Her manner-

isms revealed her intensity. She clenched her fist as she waited to return serve and she pumped her fist after she won a big point. To keep her focus between points, she walked away from the baseline with her back to the net, a slowdown ritual that irritated some opponents.

I most remember a ferociously determined Sharapova sprinting faster than ever to out-hit and outlast the superbly fit, speedy Simona Halep 6-4, 6-7, 6-4 in the terrific 2014 French Open final. The champion called it “the toughest Grand Slam final I’ve ever played.”

Former two-time US Open champion Tracy Austin called Sharapova “one of the greatest competitors in the history of ten-

Confession: In the rare times she courted controversy, those headlines only made her more popular worldwide — except her 2016 admission of using a banned drug. AFP



Respect: “It was always great battles when we played together,” two-time Wimbledon champion Petra Kvitova said after learning of Sharapova’s retirement. AP

nis.” All-time great Chris Evert said, “What I admire about Maria Sharapova is that she plays every point like it’s match point and every tournament like it’s Wimbledon.”

In my book, Sharapova ranks with Monica Seles, Steffi Graf, Serena Williams, Billie Jean King and Maureen Connolly as the greatest female competitors.

Stentorian shrieks — When Sharapova whacked the ball, she emitted screams, squeals and shrieks. A mischievous London tabloid once recorded her screams at an ear-bashing 100 decibels on its infamous

grunt-o-meter — far louder than Serena Williams’ second-place primal yells of 88.

“I’ve been doing it since I was four and it’s automatic,” insisted Sharapova then. “I can’t help it and I can’t stop doing it.”

She never stopped screaming, despite complaints from opponents and fans, some of whom turned off the TV audio during her matches.

Fashion statements — A fashionista second to none, Sharapova displayed an dazzling array of costumes. My favourite was the eye-catching, black Nike dress she

Kind words: “It was always great battles when we played together,” two-time Wimbledon champion Petra Kvitová (**Facing page**) said after learning of Sharapova’s retirement. “I do always have respect for her. She’s been an amazing competitor, she never gives up.”^{AP}

wore at the 2006 US Open. If you look great, you feel great, and you often play great, so perhaps it was no surprise that Maria won the title, defeating superstar Justine Henin in the final.

Another head-turner was the “atomic red” dress adorned with Swarovski crystals she donned at the 2007 US Open. Sharapova’s most creative outfit was the white tuxedo-and-shorts combo that stole the show at the 2008 Wimbledon.

“I have six pinnacle outfits a year, with four of them showcased at the Grand Slams,” Sharapova told *The Times* (UK). “Under the floodlights, the Centre Court becomes my own catwalk.”

Like Venus Williams, she created her own fashion line. No wonder Sharapova called herself “Baby Fashionista.”

Undying passion — Much like Roger Federer, Jimmy Connors, Pancho Gonzalez, King, Navratilova and other champions who competed on the pro tour into their 30s, Sharapova loved the game with the same unadulterated passion she had as a four-year-old child in Russia. Despite chronic right shoulder problems that required multiple surgeries and recurring left forearm tendon pain, she soldiered on, mounting a determined comeback after each setback.

In 2015, Sharapova explained why she never lost her passion for tennis. “Selfishly, it’s just a really powerful feeling as a woman to feel that you’re good and you can be better at what you do,” she said. “I wake up in the morning and although I have many other passions and interests, and you’re like ‘Do I really have to wake up for this?’ when the alarm goes, when I’m out there, hitting the tennis ball has always been a motivation. No matter how good or bad things go on around me in my life, I love that feeling of getting better.”

Sharapova’s passion for improving was matched by her passion for competition. In her first interview after retiring, she revealed what she’d miss most. “Competing — there’s nothing like it,” Sharapova told former pro Daniela Hantuchová at World Team Tennis’ Celebrity All-Star Weekend.

“No matter what I’ll choose to do in my future, that moment of victory and match points and losing and then having to figure it out for the next match is one of the best parts of this game.”

Clay conquests — No one could have predicted the hard-hitting, but defensively challenged Sharapova would win more Grand Slam titles on clay than any other surface. Certainly not the broad-shouldered, 6’2” Russian. On playing on clay, “I feel like a cow on ice,” she famously quipped in 2007.

Yet five years later, Sharapova overwhelmed Sara Errani in the French Open final to complete a rare career Grand Slam. The triumph also made her the only woman to win a Grand Slam singles title after undergoing surgery to her serving shoulder.

“I always believed I could be a better player, whether it was on clay, whether it was on grass, whether it was on cement, anything,” Sharapova said afterwards. “This is what I’ve always wanted to achieve. No matter how tough it was, no matter how many people didn’t believe in me, didn’t think that I could get to this point, I didn’t care and I didn’t listen. I always listened to my own voice, and it always told me that for some reason I’m meant to be better. I’m meant to succeed again.”

Proving it was no fluke, Sharapova won a second Roland Garros for her fifth major title in 2014, edging clay-court standout Simona Halep. That superb performance ranks with her 2004 Wimbledon triumph over Serena as her two most memorable matches.

Zinger quotes — Known for her keen intelligence and direct replies, Sharapova has delivered verbal volleys as devastating as her match play.

On being branded the new Anna Kournikova, after the sexy Russian blonde who never won a singles title, the 16-year-old Sharapova fired back, “I’m not the next Kournikova — I want to win matches!”

At the 2012 Australian Open, eventual finalist Sharapova was informed by the media that Agnieszka Radwanska, who had lost in the quarterfinals, criticised her for the shrieks Radwanska described as “annoying” and “just too loud.” Not amused, Sharapova countered, “Isn’t she back in Poland already?”

At the 2013 ESPY Awards, she skewered model Marissa Miller’s virtually see-through frock: That’s interesting... I would

“Despite chronic right shoulder problems that required multiple surgeries and recurring left forearm tendon pain, Maria Sharapova soldiered on, mounting a determined comeback after each setback.”



Brand image: The statuesque blonde also owns her own candy brand called Sugarpova.

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maybe...cover some parts of it?"

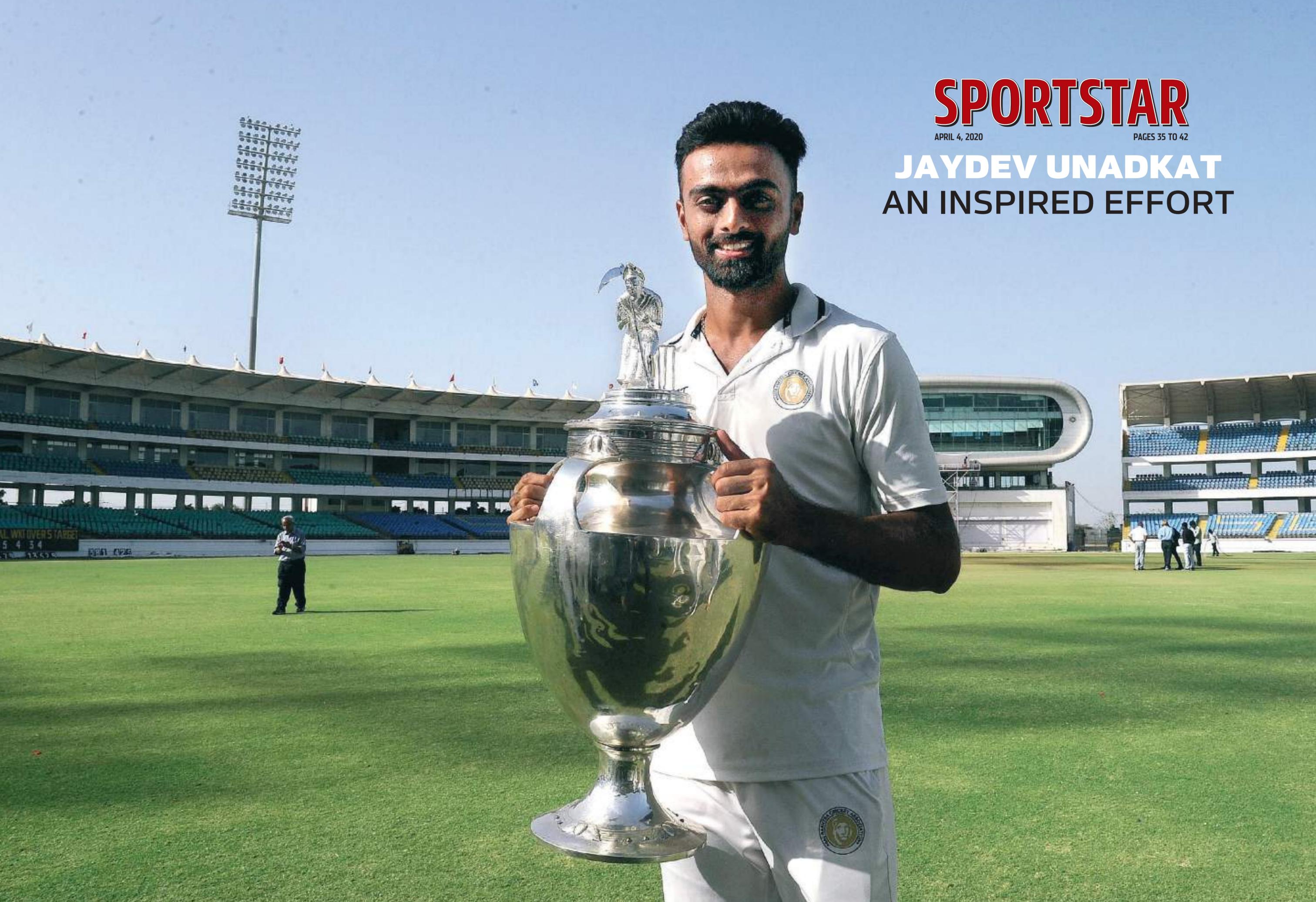
When Caroline Wozniacki criticised the 2017 US Open decision to schedule all of Sharapova's matches on Arthur Ashe Stadium in her first Grand Slam appearance after serving a 15-month drug ban, Sharapova responded, "I'm a pretty big competitor. If you put me out in the parking lot of Queens in New York City, I'm happy to play there. That's not what matters to me. All that matters to me is I'm in the fourth round. I'm not sure where she is." (Wozniacki had lost in the second round.)

After Gilles Simon suggested at the 2012 Wimbledon that women did not deserve equal pay at Grand Slams events, Sharapova retorted, "I'm sure there are a few more people that watch my matches than his."

Not-so-fond farewell — Just as she was a lone wolf at Bollettieri's tennis academy — "Maria never practised with her fellow students — never!" Nick wrote in his autobiography — she had very few friends on the pro tour. Sharapova once described the locker

room as "my least favourite place." In her memoir, *Unstoppable: My Life So Far*, Sharapova wrote: "The record book? Posterity? F.... that. Did you hear what that girl said about me at the press conference? That's what gets me going. Make them eat their words." The feeling was mutual. When Halep was asked if she had talked to Sharapova after the Russian revealed her positive drug test, the Romanian replied, "Why would I talk to Maria now? I never talked to her before." Dominika Cibulkova once said of Sharapova. "She's a totally unlikable person — arrogant, conceited and cold. When I sit beside her in the locker room, she won't even say hello." So it wasn't surprising that very few of her fellow pros, aside from Petra Kvitova, Novak Djokovic, Rafael Nadal, and former boyfriend Grigor Dimitrov, paid tribute to her after she announced her retirement. There would be no farewell tour for the aloof champion.

Sharapova was respected by all, but loved by few. ☞



SPORTSTAR

APRIL 4, 2020

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JAYDEV UNADKAT AN INSPIRED EFFORT



A get-together of greats: Cricket icons Brian Lara and Sachin Tendulkar go back a long way. They met recently in Mumbai as captains of the West Indies and India Legends teams respectively ahead of a Road Safety World Series cricket match. AP

Zest needed to promote Test!

SHAYAN ACHARYA

It's been 13 long years since Brian Lara quit international cricket. But the West Indies icon still keeps a tab on world cricket and names K. L. Rahul as his favourite batsman.

"Rahul is just class. He is a great entertainer and a great person to watch," Lara said. In Mumbai as the captain of the West Indies Legends for the UnAcademy World Series (which has subsequently been called off owing to the coronavirus threat), Lara made it clear that efforts need to be taken to revive Test cricket, as that's the ultimate format of the game. Not a big fan of day-night Tests or the four-day affair, Lara believes that Test cricket should be marketed well, in a bid to attract more spectators.

In a chat with *Sportstar*, Lara spoke on a range of issues...

As you walked in to bat for the West Indies Legends, it brought back so many memories. For you, how was the feeling to get out there and face the Sachin Tendulkar-led India Legends?

I didn't know what to expect. First of all, the crowd was just unbelievable. The amount of people that turned up... It was a full house! It didn't look like it had a spare seat, which is great.

How was it to see Tendulkar back in action again?

People are hungry for cricket, they are hungry to see legends, like (Virender) Se-

My only concern really would be to see if we can get Test cricket to shine again.



One from the classical old school: Lara values Test cricket very highly and has authored many remarkable feats in it. REUTERS

hwag and Sachin (Tendulkar), when they come out to play. So I think it was awesome. The competition was even more than I expected. The way how we set out batting... I am pretty proud of (Daren) Ganga and Shiv (Shivnarine Chanderpaul) trying to pull something off earlier. We sort of faltered at the end, but the Indians — Sachin and Sehwag — batted us out of the game. It was a special day, seeing Sachin back on the field and seeing the crowd reaction. I think it's a great tournament which is for a cause. Road safety is such a huge thing in India, and not just in India but around the world. To be leading the charge on an improvement in that area, is great. People not only came to see the cricket icons from the past, but they also came in support of the venture, which is great.

You have also been following world cricket pretty closely. What are your thoughts on the overall performances of the batsmen — be it Virat Kohli or Babar Azam...

I follow the West Indies as you know. They did pretty well in Sri Lanka in the T20 version of the game. Around the world, there are so many amazing batsmen to look

at. There are Steve Smith, Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma. My favourite is K. L. Rahul. Cricket is healthy, the commercial side seems to be pretty good, which is important. My only concern is maybe Test cricket. You'd like to see it find a way to shine again. When I was a kid, it was the form of the game that everybody wanted to watch. We had thousands of people outside the Queen's Park Oval in Trinidad. When I was a kid, we would be waiting to get inside to watch a Test at six o'clock in the morning. That's not the case today. Obviously, the game has evolved and it's a lot more attractive — the shorter version of the game. But my only concern really would be to see if we can get Test cricket to shine again.

What should be done to make Test cricket more attractive?

You look at England. It has done nothing to change, but a Lord's Test match, or for that matter, every single Test match in England (is still packed). It's traditional stuff for families to go and watch Test cricket. I was speaking to a guy one day and you know, he was with his son. He said, this is the same thing that his dad did 30 years ago. I think they have created that love and respect for

the game in England and also in Australia in terms of a Boxing Day Test, or even any Ashes series, that's played there.

First of all, that has to come back. You can try to test the game how many ways you want, it's still a five-day game. They want to change it to four days, it's still going to be a four-day game. It's still gonna be long. I think you've got to get the people interested, you got to get the kids interested and understanding that vision of the game. Why would I at 50, still love Test cricket? No disrespect to the T20s or the 50-over-game, but a good Test hundred or a great Test spell from any bowler is something to marvel about.

So, you have to get back to the youngsters and make sure that they understand and appreciate that form of the game for them to continue liking it and wanting to see it.

So, would you say that in every bilateral series, there should at least be a couple of Tests if not more?

A couple of Test matches isn't going to increase the love for the game. It's simple. Growing up, we wanted to be Test cricketers, and a kid growing up now, wants to be a T20 cricketer. Why? Because T20 is marketed in such a way for kids to want to be T20 cricketers. They don't want to be anything else. So, the marketing of the sport to children from very early ages is important. And if we are not doing that, it doesn't matter how many Test series you have. Test cricket in the Caribbean has lost its spunk many, many years ago. Nobody is actually going to watch it and even in a place like India, you would know the difference between India playing a Test match and India playing a T20 game. So, it's going to be hard work, but I just hope that they can stick around.

You spoke about K. L. Rahul. What is special in him that attracts you?

He's just class. I mean, when you are watching a player, you want to see him play, you want to see great technique, a good aggressive spirit as well. He is a great entertainer, he's a great person to watch. It is as simple as that. He's no better batsman than Virat Kohli. Virat is the best batsman in the world, but it's just the preference of who I like to see bat. No disrespect to anybody else.

Rahul was not part of India's Test squad against New Zealand. Do you think that he should be given more opportunities in the longer format of the game?



I am not involved in Indian cricket. I just know that with his technique and the way I see him bat, he should not have a problem being in any team. So I don't know if it's the lack of scores or whatever the case may be... that might be his problem, which he has to work out. I don't think anybody should be given too much of a chance because they look good. He's got the ability to play all forms of the game and to secure his place. He should be one of the first names after Virat Kohli in any Indian team. And (for that to happen), he's in charge of that, not the selectors, not any favours or anything. He's in charge of his own destiny. ☞

He likes Rahul: Lara is all appreciation for the approach of K. L. Rahul. "He is a great entertainer, he's a great person to watch," says the West Indian great.

K. MURALI KUMAR

What a homecoming!

Saurashtra secured its maiden Ranji Trophy title in its backyard, a few kilometres away from the birthplace of the legendary Ranjitsinhji!



WRIDDHAAYAN BHATTACHARYYA

The Khandheri stadium in Rajkot is straight out of the wild west. With barren lands on either side separated by a national highway and a railway track behind, the Bengal cricketers had a Clint Eastwood-like determination, but it was Saurashtra which pulled the trigger at the opportune moment.

On day five, Saurashtra captain Jaydev Unadkat caught Bengal by the neck to secure a victory on the first-innings lead of 44 runs. He trapped Anustup Majumdar in front of the stumps and ran Akash Deep out — a freak dismissal with the batsman carelessly stranded outside the crease — to bring his side back into the game. From 354/6, the visiting team added just 27 runs to be dismissed for 381 in reply to 425. Saurashtra batted till tea as a formality.

The trophy returned to the Kathiawar region and the land of Ranjitsinhji, after whom the tournament is named, after 73 years. Before Saurashtra came into the domestic cricketing map in 1950, Nawanagar and Western India from the domain had a taste of the title in 1936-37 and 1943-44. Surprisingly, Bengal was the runner-up on

Celebration time:

The triumphant Saurashtra team. The first innings lead clinched the final for the squad.

VIJAY SONEJI

both occasions.

Appearing in its fourth final in eight years, Saurashtra had to do it this time. Earlier, it had lost twice to Mumbai and once to Vidarbha.

Cut to 2007, when Ravindra Jadeja had gone to play a T20 match wearing Saurashtra's jersey. Somebody asked him, 'Yeh Kahan Ki Team Hai? Kahan Se Khelto Ho?' Debu Mitra, coach for 10 years, reveals.

"A few years later, when we were playing Mumbai in the Ranji final, they got Sachin Tendulkar for the game. He hadn't played too many games that season but he returned to play against us," recalls Mitra.

That was the start of Saurashtra's rise.

It is a coincidence the team that beat Bengal this time has been made by a former Bengal cricketer!

After the veteran moved on, former player Sitanshu Kotak wore many hats — that of coach, analyst and also, the media manager. The press would love him back too. Former India fast bowler Karsan Ghavri was appointed coach for season 2019-20. He was more of a mentor with assistant coach Niraj Odedra being the taskmaster on the field.



Ghavri announced that he wouldn't be continuing from the coming season due to health concerns as Ranji also means an erratic travel schedule across India; slightly difficult for a 69-year-old, who suffered a heart-attack four years ago. He ended on a high.

The final, however, was not a great advertisement for red-ball cricket with only three-and-a-quarter innings on display. Bengal batsman Majumdar once again was on course to win the game for Bengal but Unadkat bowled with belief. After every wicket, he would look up to thank the almighty. He finished as top wicket-taker of the season with 67 scalps. "Before every ball, I told myself that I need to bowl that one magic ball," he says.

Ranji matches do not pull enough people to the stands. It was mostly the players' and officials' families along with some school-children. On day three, the kids had arrived with vuvuzela-type horns. Their roar would start with Unadkat's run up and fade once the ball hit the bat. The players would clap in return. They have been doing this for three years. All of them would clap in a synchronised pattern. It can be intimidating for the opponent batsmen.

Elsewhere, Hemali Desai, the woman scorer of BCCI-SCA, was at work.

On-field umpire C. Shamshuddin got injured in the middle of the match when a ball accidentally hit his groin. Reserve umpire Yeshwant Barde flew in that evening.

Right there, all the time: Saurashtra captain Jaydev Unadkat screams in joy. He led from the front, his left-arm pace fetching him 67 wickets in the Ranji season.

VIJAY SONEJI

We sat in an open media box, right beside the president's box and the selectors' enclosure. New chief selector Sunil Joshi was in attendance with Sarandeep Singh. Jatin Paranjpe joined two days later. Bengal bowling coach Ranadeb Bose was in fact hoping Mukesh Kumar, the pacer who got the wicket of Cheteshwar Pujara, would catch Joshi's eye.

Bengal coach Arun Lal had criticised the strip. And it did not go down well with the Saurashtra Cricket Association officials. "Very poor wicket. The board has to look into things like this. The ball is not coming up, it is not getting off properly. It is dusting on the first day. This is very poor," he was visibly put off.

Lal Ji, as he is fondly called, is a cancer survivor and his story is an inspiration to Bengal cricketers. But his comment on the pitch, on day one itself, was not received well. The SCA issued a statement stating that 'the wicket may not have had extra bounce which the Bengal bowlers were looking for, but that doesn't make the wicket poor.'

Cheteshwar Pujara's father, Arvind, was a happy man in the end. He stood quietly beside his daughter-in-law when the Saurashtra players lifted the trophy.

"For the entire team and the region, this is special and it also means a lot for my father, who has played in the Ranji Trophy for Saurashtra in the past. And he was present today. For generations to follow, it will give them belief," says Pujara.

“The youngsters will get inspiration out of this and the entire cricketing structure will improve. We have started a process and it will continue. It is about performing consistently season after season,” says Pujara, adding that Ranji performances should count. “Jaydev has bowled exceptionally well throughout the season. If someone takes 67 wickets in a season, I don’t think there is anyone who can perform better in the Ranji Trophy. There has to be a lot of importance given to Ranji performances for getting picked in the Indian team.”

There was a sense of gloom in the Bengal dressing room but they fought hard with a strong performance from comeback man Wriddhiman Saha. He batted for 247 minutes with Sudip Chatterjee to drop anchor. His innings stopped at 64.

Unadkat carried the trophy to the press conference room and kept it beside him while answering the media. “I wanted to be bowl-fit. To be fit and bowling with the same intensity on the final day as I would on the first day.

I wanted to prove I am not just someone who is looked up to when the IPL auction numbers come up,” he made it clear. ❧



This and that

The debatable limited DRS: Certain dismissals did not go either team’s way and the lack of a ball tracker and a snickometer was felt. Bengal stumper-batsman Saha survived close calls and threatened to take the match away from Saurashtra.

Bat theft: On day three evening, some kids entered the Saurashtra dressing room and stole three bats that belonged to Dharmendrasinh Jadeja. The police intervened and tracked them down by scanning the CCTV footage in the evening.

Pujara’s prolonged absence: Cheteshwar Pujara batted down the order to contain an ailment and did not field for the remainder of the game. On day four, he started having back spasms.

Coronavirus: The pandemic hogged all the limelight. It was the constant chatter among people and on the last day, no fan was allowed inside the ground.

Inspirational: The Man of the Final, Arpit Vasavada, celebrates his century. Applauding him is the batting ace Cheteshwar Pujara. “For the entire team and the region, this is special,” said Pujara after the trophy had been won. VIJAY SONEJI

Some telling numbers

- 2.81:** Jaydev Unadkat’s economy rate
- 5/92:** Dharmendrasinh Jadeja’s best figures
- 4:** Number of new Ranji champions in the last decade... Rajasthan, Gujarat, Vidarbha and Saurashtra
- 2.42:** Combined run-rate of both the teams in the first innings (final)
- 186:** Sheldon Jackson’s highest score
- 763:** Runs scored by Arpit Vasavada

The quarterfinals dilemma!

In a league-cum-knockout tournament, if the quarterfinalists are to be spotted logically, the top eight teams should enter the knockout stage. But logic and Indian cricket are seldom on the same page.

AMOL KARHADKAR

Cheteshwar Pujara and Jaydev Unadkat finally laid their hands on the silverware. Arun Lal's inspirational guidance took Bengal to the final for the first time in 13 years. Wasim Jaffer ended a glorious career after surpassing the 12,000-run mark in the history of the tournament. Abhinav Mukund marked his 100th Ranji game with a century against Railways. He then scored a double hundred versus Baroda to go past 10,000 first class runs. And Parthiv Patel, the veteran with a sheepish smile, became only the fifth member in the 300-dismissal club for wicket-keepers in the Ranji Trophy.

Towards the end of an intriguing 86th edition of the Ranji Trophy, Goa too reached a milestone...that of qualifying for the Ranji Trophy knockouts for the first time. The team had made its Ranji debut in 1985-86. Howsoever significant it may seem, the achievement was primarily for the record books.

After all, Goa qualified for the quarterfinals as the table-topper in the Plate Group — widely referred to as Group D — which is actually a group of novices in the Ranji Trophy. In fact, had it not been for Goa's miserable outing in the 2018-19 edition — when it finished at the bottom of Group C and was relegated to Plate — the team would not have been, even remotely, in contention for a quarter-finals spot.

The gulf between Goa — the table-topper in Plate — and an elite team was evident during its quarter-final versus Gujarat, the table-topper from the Cross Pool of Groups A and B. Not even for one session in the five-day game did Goa look like even competing against a formidable Gujarat. Had it not been for Gujarat's inexplicable decision to bat in its second essay instead of enforcing the follow-on despite taking a 400-plus lead in the first innings, the mismatch would have been over on Day Three instead of the eventual finish on the fourth evening.

The match was a repeat of last year's



A splendid career: Wasim Jaffer announced his retirement from all forms of cricket. The veteran opener has amassed more than 12,000 runs in the Ranji Trophy. PTI



Embellishing the landmarks: Tamil Nadu opener Abhinav Mukund celebrated his 100th Ranji Trophy game with a hundred against the Railways. He then went past 10,000 first-class runs in the course of his double century against Baroda. **K. PICHUMANI**

quarterfinal between eventual champion Vidarbha and Uttarakhand when despite being dragged into the last day, Uttarakhand — the Plate group topper — was never in the game as such.

Let's not take away anything from Goa and Uttarakhand, which performed to the best of its abilities in the lowest rung. But the fact that a team from the group of novices is allowed to feature in the knockouts makes nothing but a mockery of the most prestigious tournament. And the fact that the spot awarded to the Plate topper is at the cost of one top team from the top two tiers in Ranji Trophy further takes the sheen away from the tournament.

In fact, in a league-cum-knockout tournament, if the quarter-finalists are to be spotted logically, the top eight teams should enter the knockout stage. But logic and Indian cricket are seldom on the same page. Two of the four quarterfinals each season for a decade preceding last year were nothing but formalities, for the last two seasons, three quarterfinals featured teams that are not really among the best and the most consistent in Ranji Trophy.

This has resulted in a majority of the quarter-finals of the Ranji Trophy being reduced to a farce. Thus, it is not fair at all for a team from the bottom-most tier of the Ranji Trophy to be catapulted into the

quarterfinals.

Rohan Gavaskar, the former Bengal and India player, is stunned by the initiative of letting the Group D topper feature in the quarter-finals. "Even in the past, you have had multiple groups and the bringing of Group C teams into the quarter-finals. That doesn't necessarily mean it's the top eight teams from the country because you may have had one group relatively easier than the others. You definitely cannot have a team from Group D, which is basically the weakest group, in the quarter-finals," says Gavaskar, who has been closely following the domestic season for the last decade as a TV commentator.

"Their reward should be just a promotion to Group C and then next year if they do well, they have a chance. The objective of creating Group D is to primarily spread the game in the north-eastern and other regions. They can't qualify for the quarterfinals by playing in such a weak group, like Goa was completely outclassed and Goa is one of the stronger teams because they are in Ranji Trophy for about 30 years now! Look at Uttarakhand, they got promoted last year and have been relegated back to Group D this time around. They are clearly not up to the standard right now."

Fans and connoisseurs alike would



ideally want to see the top eight teams featuring in the quarterfinals. But in the Indian cricket set-up, when tournament formats go hand in hand with the BCCI vote politics, the Supreme Court-appointed Committee of Administrators (CoA) went a step ahead by letting Group D teams have a crack at winning the Ranji Trophy.

Nowhere did the apex court-directed administrative reforms specify that Plate Group teams have to be in the knockouts, but the CoA legal team interpreted the rulebook as presenting even the Group D teams with an equal and fair opportunity of winning the Ranji Trophy! This has led to the quarterfinals being virtually turned into a farce since last season.

“That’s a matter of perspective. We had to bring them in because we were asked to prepare a structure and we had to organise it from the cricket operations’ side,” says Saba Karim, BCCI’s General Manager — Cricket Operations.

“Now that a new set-up has come in, they will see what sort of amendments are required and we will act accordingly. Even some years ago when there was Elite or Plate, there were some dissenting voices from the teams. That’s one reason why we have a captains’ conclave after a season. Now that the season is over, we will again have a captains’ conclave and take feedback from them. Then we will see what we can do about it.”

Ever since the BCCI moved from the zonal league-cum-knockout format to the two-tier system, there have been several changes in the format of the tournament. In fact, when Sunil Gavaskar, as the chief of BCCI’s technical committee, proposed the introduction of the Elite and Plate groups instead of the zonal leagues to avoid the monotony of facing the same opponents and an increase in the minimum number of matches for all the teams, he had recommended 10 teams (the top two from each of the five groups) in Elite and the remaining 17 in Plate.

Such was the BCCI vote politics that the Working Committee — erstwhile body responsible for BCCI’s day to day functioning — felt two was too less a number from each zone to be in the top tier and eventually expanded Elite to 15 teams, with the top three coming from each zone. The purpose of introducing the two-tier system was somewhat diluted, but still it was way better than the mundane zonal league.

After playing the semi-finals and finals for the first six seasons since switching to the two-tier format in 2002-03, the BCCI vote politics cropped up again and in a somewhat bizarre move, decided to include Group C teams in the knockouts after introducing three groups of nine teams each.

It effectively meant that the teams that featured in the knockouts were No. 1 to 6,

Triple century: Gujarat captain Parthiv Patel became only the fifth wicketkeeper to effect 300 dismissals in the Ranji Trophy. The feat came against Goa. VIJAY SONEJI

19 and 20. Since 2018-19, it has become even weirder, with the teams that make it to the quarterfinals being effectively ranked No. 1 to 5, 19, 20 and 29. The supporters of the weird system point out that Rajasthan won the Ranji Trophy in 2010-11 despite qualifying for the knockouts, but exceptions don't always prove the rule.

In the 26 quarterfinals since 2008-09 featuring teams from Groups C and D, only four times have those from the lower rungs overcome those from the top two tiers. While Rajasthan went on to be crowned champion in 2010-11, Services lost in the semis in 2012-13, while Maharashtra (2013-14) and Saurashtra (2015-16) made it to the final.

But the fact that almost 85 per cent of the quarter-finals have gone in favour of the favourites does raise serious question marks over the prevalent system. No won-

der Manoj Tiwary, the Bengal veteran, urges the decision-makers to have a relook at the knockouts format.

"I think the groups need to be looked at once again. Out of the top 18, only five go through. And just imagine, a team like Goa — with all due respect — or those who are coming from Groups C and D, some of them get relegated, then play against weaker opponents and are now straight into the quarterfinals, it's unfair on the teams from the top two groups," Tiwary says.

So what is the way out? This writer spoke with almost a dozen current and former experienced cricketers and a majority of them felt if teams from Groups C and D had to feature in the knock-outs, the most viable way is for the BCCI to reintroduce the pre-quarterfinals like in the 1980s and 1990s. But that would mean adding

Evolution of Ranji format since 2002-03

The Ranji Trophy did away with the zonal league-cum-knockout format in 2002-03. The BCCI switched to a two-tier league system in order to avoid the monotony of the same opponents being repeated in the zonal league and with an eye to increase the number of matches offered to teams in a season.

Here's how it has evolved since then.

2002-03 to 2007-08

Elite Group: 15 teams divided in two groups (top two in each group advanced to the semi-finals; last in each group was relegated to Plate for the following season)

Plate Group: 12 teams divided in two groups (top two in each group qualified for play-offs; winners of both play-offs were promoted to Elite for the following season)

2008-09 to 2011-12

Elite Group: 15 teams divided in two groups (top three in each group advanced to the quarter-finals; last in each group was relegated to Plate for the following season)

Plate Group: 12 teams divided in two groups (top two in each group qualified for play-offs; winners of both play-offs progressed to quarter-finals and promoted to Elite for the following season)

2012-13 to 2015-16

- ☛ Three groups of nine teams each

- ☛ Top three teams from Group A and B and top two from Group C qualified for quarter-finals

- ☛ Top two teams from Group C promoted to Group A and B and bottom-placed teams in Group A and B relegated to Group C for the following season

2016-17

- ☛ Two groups of nine teams each and one group of 10 teams

- ☛ Top three teams from Group A and B and top two from Group C qualified for quarterfinals

2017-18

- ☛ Four groups of seven teams each, based on weighted average of previous season

- ☛ Top two teams from each group qualified for quarterfinals

2018-19

- ☛ Three groups of nine teams each and one group of 10 teams

- ☛ Five teams from the Cross Pool of Group A and B; Top two from Group C and the top team from Plate Group progressed to quarter-finals

- ☛ Last two from the Cross Pool and bottom-placed from Group C relegated to Group C and D, respectively, for the following season; Qualifiers to knock-outs promoted to the next tier the following season

2019-20

- ☛ Two groups of nine teams each and two groups of 10 teams each

- ☛ Five teams from the Cross Pool of Group A and B; Top two from Group C and the top team from Plate Group progressed to quarter-finals

- ☛ Last two from the Cross Pool and bottom-placed from Group C relegated to Group C and D, respectively, for the following season; Qualifiers to knock-outs from Group C and Plate Group promoted to the next tier the following season.

another week to an already cramped Ranji schedule.

Karim, himself a regular in the pre-quarterfinals era, isn't sure whether that is feasible. "There are a number of constraints under which we work. The biggest is the window. If you have to conduct so many tournaments within a limited window, a particular tournament cannot stretch for too long because so many other tournaments and matches need to be played," he says. "There are various parameters through which we have to look at domestic cricket. However, in the end, domestic cricket is meant to improve Indian cricket."

While all the experts agreed with Gavaskar Jr. that the teams from Group D should not even be considered for quarterfinals at least for five years more, some of them felt "A4 vs C1" and "B4 vs

C2" makes sense as two PQFs, with the top three teams from each of the top two pools qualifying directly for the quarterfinals.

Rohan, however, feels the older pre-2018-19 formula of sticking to the quarterfinals makes sense considering the constraints with the scheduling dilemma. "I think the old format of 3 & 3 (from A and B) and 2 from Group C was a sane format. I feel that's the ideal way to go about it. Even in the past, we have seen teams coming from Group C being competitive in the knockouts," he says.

With a Test captain at the helm of affairs of BCCI, one expects him to pay heed to the concerns of the domestic cricket fraternity. It would be interesting to see if Sourav Ganguly can spare some time from his Board games and ensure that the quarterfinal farce is rectified next season onward. ☞

Not a happy hunting ground for minnows

Ever since Group C teams were given a shot at the Ranji Trophy title, in the 12 seasons including the ongoing one, only four teams from the lower rung have progressed beyond the quarter-finals. Rajasthan won the title in 2010-11, Maharashtra and Saurashtra made the final in 2013-14 and 2015-16, respectively, and Services reached the semis in 2012-13.

2008-09

From Plate to QF: Himachal Pradesh and Bengal

In QF: Mumbai bt HP by 9 wickets

In QF: Tamil Nadu bt Bengal by 8 wickets

2009-10

From Plate to QF: Assam and Haryana

In QF: Mumbai bt Haryana on first innings lead

In QF: Uttar Pradesh bt Assam on first innings lead

2010-11

From Plate to QF: Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh

In QF: Karnataka bt Haryana by 5 wickets

In QF: Rajasthan bt Mumbai on first innings lead

In SF: Rajasthan bt Tamil Nadu on first innings lead

In Final: Rajasthan bt Baroda on first innings lead

2011-12

From Plate to QF: Maharashtra and Hyderabad

In QF: Rajasthan bt Hyderabad on first innings lead

In QF: Tamil Nadu bt Maharashtra on first innings lead

2012-13

From Group C to QF: Services and Jharkhand

In QF: Punjab bt Jharkhand on first innings lead

In QF: Services bt Uttar Pradesh by 5 wickets

In SF: Mumbai bt Services on first innings lead

2013-14

From Group C to QF: Maharashtra and Jammu &

Kashmir

In QF: Punjab bt Jammu & Kashmir by 100 runs

In QF: Maharashtra bt Mumbai by 8 wickets

In SF: Maharashtra bt Bengal by 10 wickets

In Final: Karnataka bt Maharashtra by 7 wickets

2014-15

From Group C to QF: Assam and Andhra

In QF: Karnataka bt Assam on first innings lead

In QF: Maharashtra bt Andhra by 75 runs

2015-16

From Group C to QF: Saurashtra and Jharkhand

In QF: Mumbai bt Jharkhand by 395 runs

In QF: Saurashtra bt Vidarbha by an innings and 85 runs

In SF: Saurashtra bt Assam by 10 wickets

In Final: Mumbai bt Saurashtra by an innings and 21 runs

2016-17

From Group C to QF: Hyderabad and Haryana

In QF: Jharkhand bt Haryana by 5 wickets

In QF: Mumbai bt Hyderabad by 30 runs

2018-19

From Group C to QF: Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh

From Plate to QF: Uttarakhand

In QF: Saurashtra bt Uttar Pradesh by 6 wickets

In QF: Karnataka by Rajasthan by 6 wickets

In QF: Vidarbha bt Uttarakhand by an innings and 115 runs

2019-20

From Group C to QF: Odisha and Jammu & Kashmir

From Plate to QF: Goa

In QF: Bengal bt Odisha on first innings lead

In QF: Karnataka bt Jammu & Kashmir by 167 runs

In QF: Gujarat bt Goa by 464 runs



Busy bee: Jonty Rhodes is an explorer. He likes to wander around the countries that he visits. M. KARUNAKARAN

Striking the right balance

SHAYAN ACHARYA

It's not just about batting and bowling, you do have to contribute in the field as well.

Jonty Rhodes, the former South Africa cricketer, led his nation's Legends team in the UnAcademy Road Safety World Series before the event was called off owing to the coronavirus threat. He will also be joining the Indian Premier League (IPL) franchise Kings XI Punjab as its fielding coach as and when the tournament kicks off.

Rhodes is looking forward to working with Kings XI's head coach Anil Kumble. Having played in the same era, Rhodes admires Kumble's coaching style. "I did not approach Kings XI Punjab. But I took the

offer because of Anil Kumble and he was in charge. I quite happily said yes," Rhodes said.

In a chat with *Sportstar*, the 50-year-old spoke about Kings XI Punjab, his experiences of touring Pakistan for the Pakistan Super League and how fielding has changed over the years...

The last few weeks have been quite busy for you as you travelled to Pakistan for the Pakistan Super League (PSL). How was the experience? How

did it feel to witness cricket returning to that part of the world?

It was massive, obviously from Pakistan's point of view to not play the PSL in your country (so far). I have seen what the IPL has done and how it has lifted young talents in India. So for Pakistan not to have that opportunity — as all its cricket was in Dubai — over the last 10 years, it was difficult to make the game grow in that essence.

So to have the PSL there now, it will certainly benefit Pakistan cricket. They've always got young fast bowlers coming through and that's one thing you observe as a commentator. Every team has got these emerging players, who bowl fast and swing the ball. And it was interesting to see two or three emerging batsmen, which they haven't done in the past. They kind of relied quite heavily on the players who've been there for a while.

I rode a bike like I do in India. I got out and I rode around the mountains and got out as much as possible. So I'm certainly somebody who doesn't like to be stuck in a hotel. And no matter what country I'm touring, I'm making sure I'm getting out as much as possible.

Many teams are still apprehensive about touring Pakistan due to security concerns. You were there for some good two weeks...

I think obviously every team...and the ICC (International Cricket Council), you get the clearance and g-ahead from the ICC. And, I think from my perspective, security was top-notch. It was the main focus, but I went out riding. I didn't tell anybody. I just organised the bike ride — I have some mates there. I didn't have any security. But you know, I rode for two hours on the road and came back with 15 other bikers. I think they were more intimidating guys — 15 guys on Harleys (*laughs*)! I really did not think about it (security concerns). I am in pretty close contact with various security guys who have worked with the South African team. I just asked them to give me a heads up if they heard anything regarding security concerns. They didn't, so from that perspective, I was good to go...

This season, you are back in the IPL (it has been suspended till April 15 because of the coronavirus) as the fielding coach of Kings XI Punjab. The franchise has named Anil Kumble the head coach and



Back in partnership: Rhodes and Anil Kumble were with the coaching staff of Mumbai Indians six years ago. They have joined hands again at Kings XI Punjab. Rhodes has great respect for Kumble's coaching abilities. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

K. L. Rahul the captain. What are your thoughts for the season?

I did not approach Kings XI Punjab, I got a call. Because it was Anil Kumble and he was in charge, I quite happily said yes. I really like the way he works. He is a thinking man's cricketer. He is someone who has played top-level cricket, but with a real



Admiration:

Rhodes admires Chris Gayle and Lokesh Rahul, the Kings XI Punjab openers. Rahul is also the captain now. K. R. DEEPAK

brain around, away from cricket, too. And I think you need that. If you're going to be head coach or mentoring a team, you got to be more than just a cricketer. I've worked for a bank in South Africa after I retired — at Standard Bank as a sponsor, business banker. There are so many stakeholders in the game and if you're just focusing on cricket, you kind of get a little bit lost in it. So I think Kumble's awareness around the game is incredible.

And I've been loving watching K. L. Rahul. He has been playing some superb limited overs cricket. His stats in white ball cricket have been really good because he plays good cricket shots. He maximises the power play, not because he stands and bashes it, but he cuts the ball straight and is devastating. He's been consistent because he has just played good cricket.

You are returning to coaching an IPL team after a long time. What are you personally looking forward to? In franchise cricket, even coaches have a challenging job...

Yeah, I think it's just a different environment. Working with someone like Chris Gayle is going to be something exciting. He is such a larger-than-life character, not just

as a cricket player, but as a human being, too. He's an incredible man. So, I am looking forward to working with him. I've worked in teams against him, where he's been frustrating as the opposition guy who's been smashing us around. I think coming back into the IPL, I've been really focusing on grassroots and development cricket. So hoping by the time my time is up with Kings XI, I can be adding more than just to the IPL franchise. I want to make sure that we're making the game grow in the area too, so that you get young local players and future stars of Kings XI.

You don't want to go to the auction every year, and wonder where these guys are coming from. As much as possible, you want to be making the game grow in the region. So if I can leave after two-three years, I want to make sure that I've left the game in a better position than I found it. I think that's what I'm excited about. So, I'm sure winning trophies is important, but making the game grow in that area is something I've been doing for the last two years as much as possible.

You applied for the India fielding coach job. And now, you are back in the IPL as a fielding coach. Are you planning to take



up any international assignments in the future?

The difficulty with international assignments is that it's a real commitment from the time point of view. In IPL, I'm going to be here, away from home, for just two months of the year. That's a proper commitment. But if you add four or five more months to the year on top of that, then it really is difficult. My wife and I have four young children at home, who are growing fast. Our daughter India is now five and son Nathan Jon is a toddler. The two older boys are 13 and 10. So before you know it, your son is finishing high school and if I don't spend enough time at home, I'm gonna miss them. I'm missing a lot already. For my wife, it's a big sacrifice. She works really hard at home, with the four kids, with not much help at all. They are of different age groups; they play different sports. Both our parents live a long way away, so she doesn't have a family as such to call on.

So I don't think I'll be looking for an international or a national team to work for after the IPL. I love the fact that I can go and coach in Nepal and all over here — in Salem, Pune — and not be stuck in one place for eight months of the year.

Over the years, the art of fielding has changed immensely in international cricket. What are your thoughts? Is there anyone in particular who has caught your eye?

Fielding now has evolved so much that there is high expectation. I mean, at one stage I was thought like the father of fielding. Now, I feel like a grandfather of fielding, because there's been a lot of young players who've come through. And a lot of the players now — with the focus on fielding — they specialise in patrolling the boundary. That was an element of the game that I never had to work on.

There was no Powerplay when I was playing. So, a lot of the work was saving a single, saving the twos. From that perspective, when the IPL started, for the first three years, if you had 10 catches in the tournament, seven or eight would be by international players. Now, of 10 catches, seven will be by local players. That's amazing. We've seen that change, that transition, because players understand it is an important element of not just limited overs cricket, but it is a third arm of the game. It's not just about batting and bowling, you do have to contribute in the field as well. ❧

Catching them young: Rhodes enjoys working with youngsters and empowering them for greater deeds. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

India's dismal SENA record continues

6 The number of Test series victories for New Zealand at home against India. This was India's 10th tour of New Zealand overall, the first being in February-March 1968, when the visiting side won the four-match series 3-1 to register its first ever overseas series win against any opponent. Since then, India has managed to win just one more series in New Zealand, in March-April 2009 when it won at Hamilton by 10 wickets while the two other Tests were drawn. This also means that after winning three Test matches in the 1968 series, India has managed to win just two more Tests in New Zealand in its last 21 matches spanning 51 years! For the record, India's Test performance in SENA countries (South Africa, England, New Zealand, Australia) has been quite dismal, as shown in the tables (right).

India's Test series results in New Zealand

Season	Matches	India won	New Zealand won	Draws	Series won by
1967-68	4	3	1	0	India
1975-76	3	1	1	1	Drawn
1980-81	3	0	1	2	New Zealand
1989-90	3	0	1	2	New Zealand
1993-94	1	0	0	0	Drawn
1998-99	2	0	1	1	New Zealand
2002-03	2	0	2	0	New Zealand
2008-09	3	1	0	2	India
2013-14	2	0	1	1	New Zealand
2019-20	2	0	2	0	New Zealand

India's Test results in SENA countries

Country	Matches	India won	Opposition won	Draws	Win percentage	First played in
South Africa	20	3	10	7	15.00	1992-93
England	62	7	34	21	11.29	1932
New Zealand	25	5	10	10	20.00	1967-68
Australia	48	7	29	12	14.58	1947-48
Total	155	22	83	50	14.19	1932
In India	272	106	52	114#	38.97	1933-34
Elsewhere##	115	29	32	54	25.22	1952-53

includes a tied Test; ## in West Indies, Zimbabwe, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh

85 The number of grounds where India has played Test matches. The recent Hagley Oval match at Christchurch became India's latest playing venue since its first ever Test appearance at Lord's in London way back in June 1932. The Hagley Oval now is the 58th ground to host the Indians in away Tests. For the record, Lord's, with 18, has hosted the most Tests of any away ground for India, while London as a city has hosted India on most occasions – 31 Tests (18 at Lord's and 13 at the Oval). The Hagley Oval, meanwhile, becomes the seventh ground in New Zealand to host a Test match against India, while Christchurch is the only city in New Zealand to have the distinction of hosting a Test against India at two different grounds.

New Zealand grounds to host Tests against India

Ground	Matches	India won	New Zealand won	Draws	Win percentage
Basin Reserve, Wellington	8	1	5	2	12.50
Eden Park, Auckland	5	2	1	2	40.00
Jade Stadium, Christchurch	4	0	2	2	0.00
Seddon Park, Hamilton	4	1	1	2	25.00
McLean Park, Napier	2	0	0	2	0.00
Carisbrook, Dunedin	1	1	0	0	100.00
Hagley Oval, Christchurch	1	0	1	0	0.00
Total	25	5	10	10	20.00

Note: India's five-wicket victory at Carisbrook on February 20, 1968, was its first ever Test win on foreign soil.

2 The number of Indians who have managed to score a 50 in New Zealand under the age of 21 years. At 20 years, 112 days, Prithvi Shaw's 54 on the opening day of the second Test match at Christchurch made him the second youngest Indian batsman to register a Test fifty on New Zealand soil, after Sachin Tendulkar who was 16 years, 293 days when he made his 88 at Napier in February 1990. Incidentally, Tendulkar still remains the youngest ever batsman to register a Test 50 on New Zealand soil.

Youngest Indians to make a Test 50 in New Zealand

Age	Batsman	Score	Venue	Month/year
16 years, 293 days	Sachin Tendulkar	88	Napier	February 1990
20 years, 112 days	Prithvi Shaw	54	Christchurch (Hagley Oval)	February 2020
21 years, 338 days	Atul Wasan	53	Auckland	February 1990
23 years, 81 days	Brijesh Patel	81	Wellington	February 1976
24 years, 189 days	Sandeep Patil	64	Wellington	February 1981

6 The number of openers below the age of 21 years who have managed to score a Test 50 in New Zealand. Prithvi Shaw's 54 at Christchurch makes him the fourth youngest to do so.

Youngest openers to make a Test 50 in New Zealand

Age	Batsman	Score	Country	Venue	Month/year
18 years, 290 days	Tamim Iqbal	53	Bangladesh	Dunedin (University Oval)	January 2008
18 years, 294 days	Imran Farhat	63	Pakistan	Auckland	March 2001
20 years, 67 days	Junaid Siddique	74	Bangladesh	Dunedin (University Oval)	January 2008
20 years, 112 days	Prithvi Shaw	54	India	Christchurch (Hagley Oval)	February 2020
20 years, 268 days	Abdul Kadir	58	Pakistan	Auckland	February 1965
20 years, 353 days	Sami Aslam	91	Pakistan	Hamilton	November 2016

4

The number of Indian openers under the age of 21 years to register a 50 in an away Test match.

Prithvi Shaw at Christchurch became the latest to do so.

Youngest Indian openers to make a 50 in an away Test match

Age	Batsman	Score	Opponent	Venue	Month/year
19 years, 36 days	Parthiv Patel	69	Pakistan	Rawalpindi	April 2004
20 years, 44 days	Ravi Shastri	66	England	The Oval	July 1982
20 years, 108 days	Madhav Apte	64	West Indies	Port of Spain	January 1953
20 years, 112 days	Prithvi Shaw	54	New Zealand	Christchurch (Hagley Oval)	February 2020
21 years, 183 days	Abhinav Mukund	62	Wellington	Roseau	July 2011

9.50

Virat Kohli's batting average during the recent Test series in New Zealand. It was

the second worst series batting performance of his Test career. It was also one of the worst performances by an Indian batsman-captain in a Test series.

Kohli's lowest Test averages in a series of two or more Tests

Average	Opponent	In	Season	Matches	Innings	Runs	Highest score
9.20	Australia	India	2016-17	3	5	46	15
9.50	New Zealand	New Zealand	2019-20	2	4	38	19
13.40	England	England	2014	5	10	134	39
15.20	West Indies	West Indies	2011	3	5	76	30

Fewest runs in a Test series by a top-order batsman-captain for India (minimum four innings)

Runs	Captain	Opponent	In	Season	Matches	Innings	Average	Highest score
26	Nari Contractor	West Indies	West Indies	1961-62	2	4	6.50	10
29	Sourav Ganguly	New Zealand	New Zealand	2002-03	2	4	7.25	17
33	Maharajkumar of Vizianagram	England	England	1936	3	6	8.25	19*
38	Virat Kohli	New Zealand	New Zealand	2019-20	2	4	9.50	19
42	Mohammad Azharuddin	England	England	1996	3	5	8.40	16

Queries Corner

South African debutant Kyle Verreynne claimed three catches as a fielder in the One-Day International against Australia at Paarl. Has any other debutant held more?

— Salil Joshi, Mumbai.

In fact, three catches by a debutant fieldsman is the maximum in ODI cricket. Verreynne became the seventh such fieldsman to do so in an ODI match on debut. The others are Bishan Singh Bedi, Martin Crowe, L. Sivaramakrishnan, Jacob Martin, Pragyan Ojha and George Bailey. For the record, Scotland's Matthew Cross, claimed six catches on his ODI debut against Canada at the Hagley Oval in Christchurch in January 2014, which is the most by a debutant wicketkeeper.

How often has Bengal finished as runner-up in the Ranji Trophy? Is it true that it has a very poor record in Ranji finals?

— Aavek Mukhopadhyay, Kolkata.

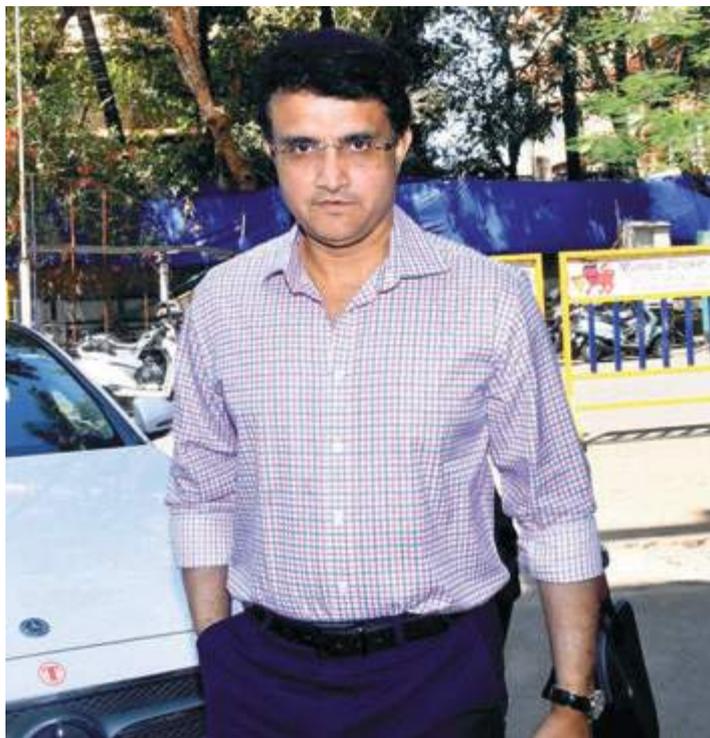
The recent loss (on the first innings lead) to Saurashtra was Bengal's 12th from 14 finals. It has managed to win the title only in 1938-39 and 1989-90. Its 12 runner-up finishes is the most by any Ranji Trophy side. Tamil Nadu has been runner-up on 10 occasions (thrice as Madras and seven as Tamil Nadu). This means Bengal has now lost 86 percent of the finals it has played, ahead of Tamil Nadu on 83 percent.

All figures are updated as of March 14, 2020.



A feather in BCCI's cap!

Whether the IPL will be played at all depends on how quickly the spread of COVID-19 is controlled.



Pragmatic: BCCI President Sourav Ganguly arrives for a meeting with the IPL franchisees, regarding the future of the 2020 event in the wake of the disruption caused by the coronavirus, in Mumbai on March 14. The sane approach adopted by both parties has come in for a lot of praise. VIVEK BENDRE

The decision by the BCCI to suspend the IPL till April 15 is a laudable one. The health and safety of a nation are more important than sport and it's wonderful that the usually much-maligned BCCI has put that before anything else.

The BCCI often gets pilloried for putting revenues ahead of everything else, but with this bold, courageous and correct decision, hopefully, it will have put a stop to this accusation. That will, of course, be too much to ask for in a country that invariably loves pulling one another down. What will no doubt help BCCI to get rid of this tag of being money-minded is if it encourages charity even more, be it through the IPL or any other events under its control.

Yes, there may be a tax angle to that too, but like the Australian and English Boards have an annual Day for a charity at a Test

match, something similar would definitely help the Indian Board to improve its image.

The Australian and English boards have a pink day for one Test every summer for fundraising and more crucially creating awareness of cancer with their Jane McGrath and Ruth Strauss days. The BCCI could zero in on a charity that it feels deserves assistance and earmark one or maybe more days in the domestic international calendar where all proceeds of the day will go to the charity.

Whether the IPL will be played at all depends on how quickly the spread of COVID-19 is controlled. Till April 15 overseas players won't get a visa so it may take a bit longer for the tournament to take off. Foreign players bring a different flavour to the tournament and add to the excitement, so it's important to have them.

Having said that, for a so-called top BCCI official to comment that "the BCCI has to ensure the quality of the game is not poor. We did not want a Mushtaq Ali tournament," is an incredibly insensitive statement if indeed it is true. Firstly, it's insulting to the great man after whom the tournament is named and secondly begs the question that if it's such a "poor" tournament, then why have it at all? Also, can light be shed on why the quality of the tournament is poor? Surely it's not simply because there are no international players in it, but also because there are no Indian internationals in it! That is a scheduling issue that the BCCI has to look at.

This year's domestic schedule has to be amongst the most thoughtless ones in recent memory. The Ranji Trophy was marginalised not only by the international season where India players couldn't play for their state teams, but also by the scheduling of an India A tour to New Zealand bang in the middle of the Ranji season which deprived some states of the cream of their talent!

There was also the ICC under-19 World Cup which of course is not scheduled by the BCCI, but again some of the promising



youngsters who could have played for their states were away in South Africa. Once again there was the mistaken notion of thinking that Indian cricket is the senior Indian cricket team when in fact Indian cricket is club cricket, school cricket, first class cricket, 'A' list cricket, junior cricket and these should never be diluted.

That said, Saurashtra deserves heartiest congratulations for winning the Ranji Trophy for the first time. It was a sustained effort over the last decade or so by the team, culminating in this triumph. There were some heartbreaks along the way as the team finished runner-up three times before winning in its fourth appearance in the final.

Mohandas Menon, 'the Sachin Tendulkar' of statisticians, has come up with some fabulous nuggets. Nawanagar (HQ Jamnagar) played Ranji Trophy from 1936/37 to 1947/48 and won the title on debut in 1936/37 when it beat Bengal in the final!

Western India States Agency (HQ Rajkot) appeared in Ranji Trophy from 1934/35 to 1945/46 and won the title in 1943/44 when it beat Bengal in the final. Kathiawar appeared in Ranji Trophy from 1946/47 to 1949/50. These three sides merged to become Saurashtra in 1950/51 and when Saurashtra became Ranji champion for the first time recently, it beat Bengal!

Also, when Saurashtra won its first national title in the 50 overs Vijay Hazare Trophy event in 2007/08, guess which team it beat in the final? Yup, it was Bengal again!

In the last few years, there have been new champions in the Ranji Trophy with Vidarbha winning it back to back and now Saurashtra. This is a great sign for Indian cricket as talent is now coming to the fore from all corners of the country and not just the metros.

Well done, Saurashtra and let's hope it's the first of many more titles to come. ❧

A moment to cherish: Saurashtra skipper Jayadev Unadkat and star batsman Cheteshwar Pujara proudly display the Ranji Trophy which Saurashtra won for the first time.

VIJAY SONEJI



Fifth title: Australia, having learnt its lessons from the loss to India in the opening match of the tournament, tore apart the bowling to score 184 and bundled India out for 99 in a one-sided final. GETTY IMAGES

A watershed moment for women's cricket

The bowlers accounted for 250 wickets. A staggering 76 sixes were hit during the tournament. Who said the women's game was boring?

86,174.

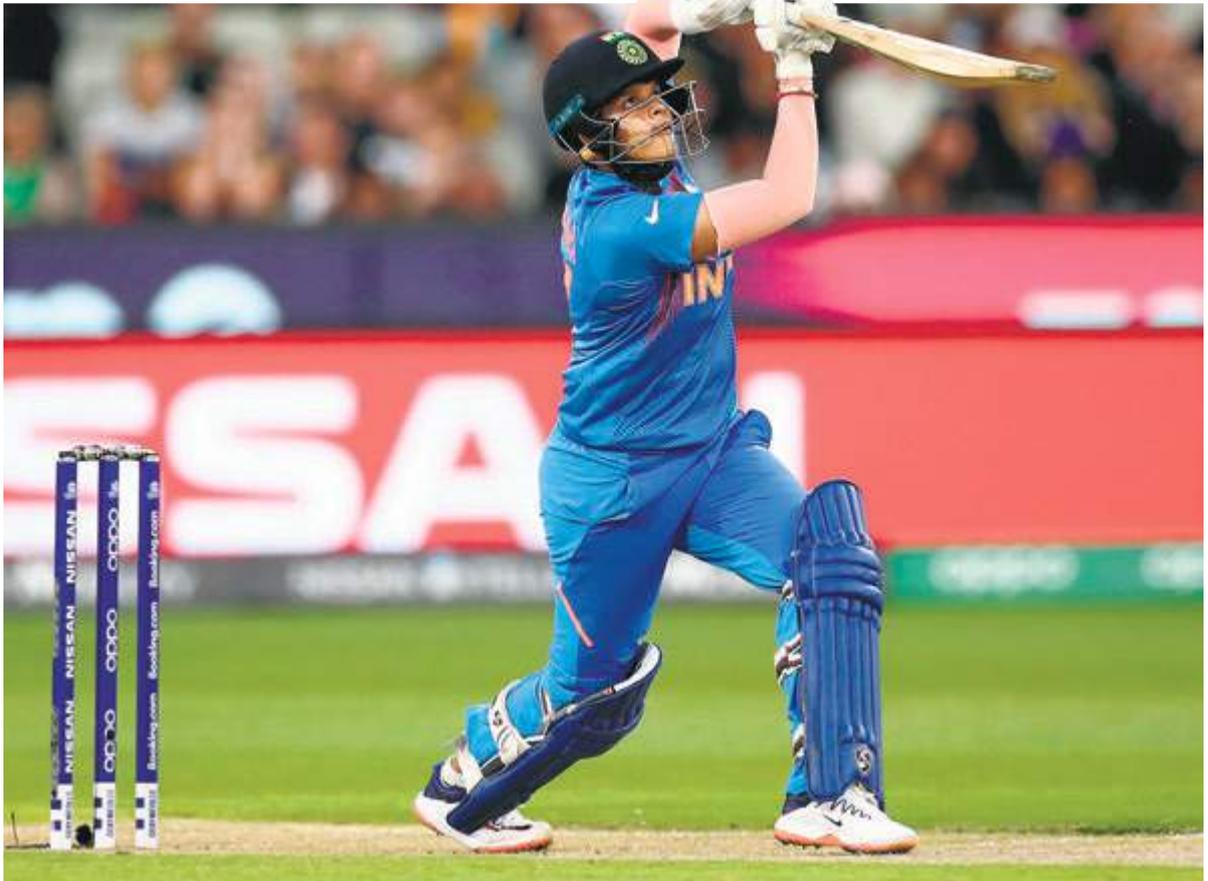
That number pretty much sums up the growth of women's cricket in the world. On March 8, international women's day, 86,174 cricket fans gathered at the Melbourne Cricket Ground to witness the ICC Women's T20 World Cup final between India and Australia.

The previous highest viewership for the women's T20 World Cup came in 2009 when 12,717 watched England beat New Zealand at Lord's. There was a 213 percent increase in the viewing minutes in India just for the group stage! In Australia, the host country, it was an 1,600 percent increase. Rightly marketed, publicised and promoted, the tournament drew crowds in hordes. The

highly competitive and close games also coincided with the Indian men's team's terrible showing in neighbouring New Zealand.

That a 16-year-old Shafali Verma, who was taking her early steps in international cricket, could become a household name in just two weeks showed the reach of the tournament. Permitting Mitchell Starc to leave the South Africa ODI series midway for him to cheer his wife Alyssa Healy in the final was a master stroke from Cricket Australia in its attempt to promote women's cricket. It went a step further by adding a further \$600,000 to the prize money earned by world champion Australia to ensure it matched the men's prize.

To see Twitter and other social media



platforms flooded with stories of young boys idolising women cricketers, the batting craftsmanship displayed by the players dissected and analysed, the sheer quality of play witnessed and the innumerable thrillers offered during the fortnight made it a memorable tournament.

The only blip, a major one at that, was the lack of a reserve day for the semifinals. India, by remaining unbeaten in the group stage with four wins in as many matches, progressed to the final after the knockout match against England was washed out. The second semifinal between Australia and South Africa was also affected by rain, with the host team nudging ahead as per Duckworth-Lewis method.

England captain Heather Knight was rightly miffed. “You’d hope now there is going to be a rule change...and moving forward, no other team will have to experience going out of a World Cup purely because of rain,” she said.

The ICC, just like it reversed the absurd boundary rule after the damage was done — England being the beneficiary against New Zealand in the World Cup Final in 2019 —

has now decided to have a reserve day for the upcoming World Cup knockout games.

India’s tournament to lose

India pipped Australia by 17 runs in the first encounter thanks to the spin effort of Poonam Yadav after being in a seemingly losing position. India continued in the same vein with the bowlers defending small targets in an extraordinary fashion. Smriti Mandhana, Harmanpreet Kaur and Jemimah Rodrigues performed below expectations even as Shafali compensated for their lacklustre show with her explosive batting. She ruffled up scores of 29, 39, 46 and 47 to give the bowling unit just enough to work their magic.

India’s overdependence on Shafali and the bowlers proved to be its downfall as Australia, having learnt its lessons from the loss in the opening match, tore apart the bowling to score 184 and bundle out India for 99 in a one-sided final.

Playing after a break of seven days, India seemed to have lost the momentum and caved in meekly to give Australia its fifth World crown. Shafali could score only two.

Young gun: That a 16-year-old Shafali Verma, who was taking her early steps in international cricket, could become a household name in just two weeks showed the reach of the tournament.

GETTY IMAGES



Record crowd: On March 8, international women's day, 86,174 cricket fans gathered at the Melbourne Cricket Ground for the final. REUTERS

Her exploits, however, helped her briefly hold the World No. 1 spot in ICC T20 batting rankings. She is only the second Indian after Mithali Raj to achieve the feat.

Alyssa Healy, cheered on by Mitchell Starc, scored a quickfire 75 to help Australia set up an intimidating target for India and earn the player of the match award in the final. The script couldn't have been better for the host.

Overall

The fact that Thailand qualified for the World Cup was a big boost in the ICC's plan for expanding cricket to different regions of the world. Thailand may not have won any match, but the players' endearing mannerisms earned them admirers. After losing the first three matches, Thailand looked set to end the tournament on a high after scoring a strong 150 for 3 against Pakistan, but rain proved to be a dampener to its plans. Even then, the Thai players led by Sornnarin Tip-poch sported their biggest smiles and treated the fans to some fun-filled dance moves while waiting for the rain to abate.

India decided to make the retirement of Shashikala Siriwardene of Sri Lanka special

by gifting her a jersey signed by the players with personal messages jotted down. It showed the camaraderie between the Indian and Sri Lankan players from the days when women's cricket was watched only by a handful.

Bangladesh frightened India in the group stage, and Pakistan put up a spirit performance to defeat the West Indies in signs of growing talent in the subcontinent. The West Indies and New Zealand departed in the group stage, suggesting quality competitions among the top teams in the world.

In terms of individual performers, Beth Mooney top-scored in the batting department with 259 runs. Her opening partner Healy was equally impressive as the two found their place in the ICC Team of the Tournament. In all, five Australian players were named in the Best XI. That's how dominant the champion has been. Only Poonam Yadav could find a place in the XI from India. Shafali was named the 12th player.

The bowlers accounted for 250 wickets. A staggering 76 sixes were hit during the tournament. Who said the women's game was boring? ☞

■ ANJANA SENTHIL



Scan the QR code to listen to what impact the T20 World Cup had on women's cricket on our special show Not Just A Man's World.

Same square mechanism

By C.G.S.Narayanan

After the traditional post-key play, the principles of changed play became popular in the middle of the last century especially in the realm of two-movers which was later extended to three and longer-movers. Now that all the popular three-move themes of yesteryears with familiar jargons were well worked out and originality is hard to come by, composers have shifted their attention to yet another area which is gaining ground-changed functions of moves and same square mechanism. The first example below by Ukranian expert features 'same square mechanism' on c5 with interference of white bishop shut off of black line and battery play.

Mikhail Marandiyuk

5th Prize, Rudenko MT, 2017



Mate in three moves

Key 1.d3! [2.a4+ Qxa4 3.Nc4 A, Nd5 B, Nd7 C#]

1...Rec5 2.Nc4+ A Ka4 3.N:c5#

1...Rcc5 2.Nd5+ B Ka4 3.N:c5#

1...c5 2.Nd7+ C Ka4 3.Qc6#

The third move battery threats reappear as second move continuations after the black defences on the same square c5.

The second example is a masterpiece by the World's best three-move

composer for many years. The same square mechanism is doubled i.e both for white and black.

Key 1.Nb2! (2.Qd8+ Kxc5 3.Na4)

1...Kxc5 2.Rc4+ Kd5 3.Be4

1...Nxc5 2.c4+ bxc3 e.p 3.Nb4

1...Bxc5 2.Bc4+ Kxe4 .Qxf4;

1...b6xc5 2.Nc4 any 3.Nb6

Four moves by black on same square c5 and four moves by White on the same square c4. Self-blocks on c5 and a switchback in the last variation.

Alexandr Feoktistov

I prize, FIDE Olympic Tourney 2018



Mate in three moves

The problem for solving is by yet another Russian master which features model mates.

Igor Agapov

1st Prize, A.Grin-110 MT, 2018



Mate in three moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article 'Sacrifice variants': **Key 1.Qb3!** waiting. 1...Kg6 2.Qg8+ Kf6 3.Bh4; 1...axb3 2.Kf5 b2 3.g4

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

Best in the business: India captain Virat Kohli last year said Wriddhiman Saha was the best pure wicketkeeper in the world. PTI



The stump-mic chatter

WRIDDHAAYAN BHATTACHARYYA

India Test specialist stumper Saha came back from New Zealand and played his first Ranji Trophy final for Bengal in Rajkot.

Sitting in one corner of the dressing room balcony at the Saurashtra Cricket Association Stadium, Wriddhiman Saha looked relaxed after the Ranji Trophy final; satisfied after playing an official red ball match after three months. Bengal lost but not without a fight. The golden highlight in the hair above his forehead, usually hidden by the helmet and cap, looked prominent as he greeted Sitanshu Kotak, the former Saurashtra batsman. “Kotak bhai, Arpit Vasavada bilkul aap jaisa khelta hai,” he tells Kotak.

The superman stumper had injured his right ring finger during the pink ball Test against Bangladesh in November. The Test series in New Zealand would have marked his comeback but he warmed the bench with Rishabh Pant galloping around with the wicketkeeping gloves.

In a chat with *Sportstar*, Saha reflected on his maiden Ranji final, future as the India ‘keeper and limited DRS in domestic cricket.

How do you sum up the Ranji final? Bengal fought hard...

Firstly, it was a pleasure to play the Ranji final. I never thought would play one. Manoj [Tiwary] has played. When I didn’t play the Tests in New Zealand, I was practising with the red ball to keep myself prepared for the final if Bengal qualified; others were practising with the white ball for ODI series [against South Africa] and the IPL. I got a good team environment once I joined. The wicket wasn’t as expected for the final but you can’t give excuses. You have to deliver come what may. We lost the toss which was vital. We were a little behind in everything. Even with runs, partnership. The food was right in front but somebody snatched it.

You batted for 247 minutes with Sudip Chatterjee scoring 64...

The guys who scored here took time as the wicket was not easy. Everybody took time. There was no pace and bounce, so playing shots wasn’t easy.

What’s your take on the limited DRS? You survived close calls...

We have earlier played ‘umpire call=final



call' which could have gone for or against. Now that there is DRS, we can gauge that the umpire may make a mistake. His 'yes' can be our 'no' and vice versa. When the umpire is saying 'yes', we are probably not believing it. DRS is to challenge umpires but if there is full DRS, it will be much better. It will help either sides.

How would you assess Bengal's season and Abhimanyu Easwaran's captaincy? How was it to play under a young captain?

After the match, we had a discussion on the season, where we went wrong and where we did well. Whatever I have seen, I thought we were a bit more consistent compared to previous years. I think if the opening partnerships were better, that would have been good. We should check our shot selection and play according to the situation. Abhimanyu is a good batsman and he is just going through a bad time, which can happen. He is captaining for the first time. It is not that his decision is the final one as he is consulting everyone. We are three or four in the group with whom he discusses. He asks all of us before taking decisions. I want him to contribute more as a batsman.

At 35, how tough is it to pull off those dives?

I obviously don't do things that I did at 22. The body will not allow me to do that. I choose quality over quantity. You don't need to catch 200 a day at the nets.

The whole world thought you would play in New Zealand but you didn't.

How tough was it to sit out?

Normally, every player gets to know the squad before the match when the batting order is decided. I got to know after going there. It is not tough because you are still part of the team. You have to go by the team management's decision based on the conditions but yes, inside, you feel that hopefully you will play since you played the last Test series.

Has there been any specific communication from the team management that you would keep in India and Rishabh in overseas?

I haven't been informed anything personally yet. But I keep the team in front and individual choices later. If team decides Rishabh will play, I will be fine with it as I want the team to win. ❧

Eyes on the ball:

Wriddhiman Saha scored a patient 184-ball 64 during the Ranji Trophy final against Saurashtra.

VIJAY SONEJI



Back at the top: The ATK players celebrate after winning a record third ISL title. PPTI

The Habas revolution

The physicality of the game made ATK difficult to watch under Antonio Habas' first stint in 2014-15. But the return of the Spaniard, along with that physicality, has won it a third ISL title.

AASHIN PRASAD

After tasting success under Spaniards Antonio Habas and Jose Molina in 2014 and 2016, ATK's board decided to go the British way for a couple of seasons. Four different coaches associated with English Premier League clubs came and went, but the Indian Super League (ISL) club could manage only ninth- and sixth-place finishes in the 2017-18 and 2018-19 seasons, respectively.

That was followed by a massive overhaul of both players and staff. Eighteen players came in during the off season, while 16 were offloaded. ATK turned once again to Habas — who had been without a coaching gig since his stint at FC Pune in 2016 — to

rekindle the magic.

Habas' football hadn't won many admirers in his first stint in India. His style in his first year at ATK, of setting up his team to primarily stop the opposition from scoring, was not particularly enjoyable. But the club won the title with just five outright wins in 17 matches.

Another facet that made ATK difficult to watch then was the physicality of its game. In 2014 and 2015, the team attempted 378 tackles (the most) and 479 tackles (third most), respectively, and committed 250 fouls (the most) and 208 fouls (third most). Under Molina in 2016, the tackles and fouls were even higher.



In the two seasons that followed, ATK's figures on those two criteria dropped under English managers in the revamped 10-team league.

But, with Habas returning for the just-concluded campaign, the physicality soared — ATK ranked second in both tackles (693) and fouls (294).

Habas, who has worked as assistant to Rafael Benítez, a shrewd tactician, at Valencia, fused his cautious approach with the quality at his disposal to bring out a rapid counter-attacking style. ATK's defence starts from the front line, and among the off-season arrivals were the Wellington Phoenix strike duo of Roy Krishna and David Williams from Australia's A-League. The duo has been key to ATK's revival this season with their pace, work rate, power and goals, which translated into 32 direct goal contributions. Krishna and Williams are also among the top five offenders in both fouls and tackles.

In 2014, Habas allegedly punched FC Goa's Robert Pires at half-time and was banned for four games, which was later reduced to two. This time around, it was his team that was throwing punches — only, they were on the pitch.

ATK scored 33 goals in the league stage and conceded just 16 goals — the second best on both fronts. The philosophy was not to give the opposition space, win the ball back

and blitz teams on the counterattack. And when required, Habas had his team play the waiting game to break down the opposition, as it did in the comeback semifinal win over Bengaluru FC after being 0-2 down. The team also pulled out the stop-start approach in defending leads to grind out wins.

Habas revealed that he had tried eight or nine different formations in the pre-season before settling on 3-5-2 for 2019-20. Krishna and Williams operated in a similar system at Wellington, and Habas seemed to have made notes on how to get the best out of them. Winger Michael Soosairaj, who became the most expensive signing in the off-season, was deployed as a wing-back through the whole of last season.

"After the pre-season, we kept 3-5-2 because we had two very important players in attack like Williams and Roy and we had to use this system. More importantly, during the pre-season, we had to learn what the fundamental principles were. We had to impart the concept and the ideas to the core 14-15 players and after that I could settle into one system and one formation," said Habas.

Among the core players were Javier Hernandez and Edu Garcia, who played as ball carriers in the central midfield. Wing-backs Soosairaj and Prabir Das in particular had a stellar season with defensive contributions and crossing. Central defenders

Man in charge: The ATK players toss coach Antonio Habas in the air after the Spaniard, who returned to the club for this season, had led them to the title.

PRASHANT NAKWE



Scan the QR code for our complete ISL coverage on The Full Time Show.



Top goal-scorer:
Chennaiyin FC's
Nerijus Valskis won
the Golden Boot.

PRASHANT NAKWE

Pritam Kotal and Sumit Rathi, just 18, were constant at the back despite injuries to players around them. Goalkeeper Arindam Bhattacharya, who copped a fair share of criticism despite his nine clean sheets, pulled off crucial saves in the final against Chennaiyin FC.

In between all this, there was also the merger with Mohun Bagan, which won the I-League in the same week as ATK's triumph. ATK got a glimpse of what 131 years of football heritage it was going to be part of when Bagan fans willed the Red and Whites on in the semifinal win over Bengaluru. The Salt Lake Stadium saw more than 55,000 people on that night — the highest attendance since the inaugural season.

More than the ISL title, Habas coveted the league winner's shield, which would have taken the club into the AFC Champi-

ons League group stages next season, and ATK had remained on course until the last two matches. The Spaniard pointed out that season-ending injuries to key central defenders Carl McHugh and Agustín Íñiguez cost the team dear. Habas' achievements this season are more than commendable considering the injuries he had to contend with, and during the league stages, Habas was able to put out the same starting XI only twice.

With the final being played behind closed doors at the Fatorda Stadium in Margao, Habas wanted his players to "create the atmosphere with their performances."

ATK's opponent in the final, Chennaiyin FC, was riding high on confidence, knowing that its front four could penetrate any defence. When Rafael Crivellaro's shot was cleared off the line in the first minute and



Nerijus Valskis's shot thundered off the bar in the third, it seemed like it would be Chennaiyin's night. But ATK thwarted the opposition's efforts, while not squandering its own to make it a 3-1 win on the night.

At the end of the game, Chennaiyin's coach Owen Coyle, still seemingly coming to terms with the result, repeatedly said: "Don't tell me they were the better team on the night." He later conceded that if "you don't take your chances, then you will be punished."

The Scotsman had taken over a squad that had seemed to be heading for another bottom-of-the-table finish and had turned it into a goal-hungry machine. Chennaiyin had run down ATK 3-1 in the league stage on its way to a playoffs run with an eight-match unbeaten streak. The defeat had derailed

ATK's chances of finishing top of the league and qualifying for the AFC Champions League. The men from Chennai then stunned table-topper FC Goa in the first leg of the semifinal before prevailing 6-5 on aggregate.

As the curtains come down on the 2019-20 ISL season, the ATK-Mohun Bagan combine will begin plotting for a historic season. Habas has been picked as coach ahead of his compatriot Kibu Vicuña, who led Bagan to the I-League title with four games to spare.

After the ISL win, Habas had expressed his desire to help the club maintain its position as the best in the country. And he will have a rich pool of talent to assemble his squad from.

The rest of the teams in Indian football, beware. ❧

Leading the change: Owen Coyle had taken over a Chennaiyin FC squad that had seemed to be heading for another bottom-of-the-table finish and turned it into a goal-hungry machine.

ISL/SPORTZPICS

Football has only one language

Two months after joining Rangers WFC, Bala Devi opens up about her life in Scotland, seeing Steven Gerrard and the promising future of India's under-17 girls.

KIRAN TOM SAJAN

“Do you have Indian spices?” she asked the cashier of a Scottish grocery store in broken English.

“*Kaunsa spice chahiye aapko?* (Which spice would you like?)”

The storekeeper, who guessed that the

customer is an Indian, asked back in Hindi.

“*Haldi,*” she said as her face lit up instantly.

Besides her family and friends at the other end of the phone, this was the first time she had listened to someone speaking



Hindi since arriving in Glasgow two months back in January.

The storekeeper, a Punjabi-origin woman, did not know that her customer was Nangom Bala Devi, India's most prolific goal-scorer and current No. 10 of Rangers Women's Football Club.

As she handed over the turmeric powder to Bala, they talked more in Hindi. She was excited to find a store that sells Indian spices.

"I love cooking and was struggling to find the ingredients," Bala said.

"Usually I eat from the cafeteria at our training ground. But now it's international break and we don't have training. That's why I thought I will cook something," she added.

Bala stays with four of her teammates in a large house near their training ground. Although it has only been two months, Glasgow has a special place in her heart.

"I absolutely love this city. The people here support me a lot. And I am amused to see their discipline. They are family-first people, but at the same time they give 110 percent in their work," Bala said.

"And most of them give a lot of importance to fitness. Every morning I go running in a park near my house, and I can see lots of people jogging there. Most of them, even the elderly, are fitter than me. I hope Indians also follow this one day and give more importance to our health," she added.

Bala, who has scored 52 goals in 58 appearances for India, had a lot of inhibitions when she arrived at Rangers.

The language barrier was the worst. Born and brought up in a small village in Manipur, the 31-year-old spoke only Manipuri and Hindi.

"Forget English, even my Hindi is terrible," she chuckled.

But her coaches and teammates at Rangers have been doing their best to make her feel at home since arriving in Glasgow in January.

"I realised soon that I don't have to be scared. People here are really friendly. They help each other a lot. And football has only one language everywhere. I pass when they say 'pass,' and I turn when they say 'turn,'"

Bala said.

However, there has been a huge change in the way she trains since joining the Scottish club. Unlike the Indian system, the clubs in Europe follow short but high-intensity training regimes.

"In India, we train for 90 minutes or two hours, but it won't be intense. But here we do 45-minute sessions that are extremely exhausting. It's a huge learning experience," she said.

With the added responsibility of wearing the No. 10 shirt, Bala is on a mission to score a lot of goals for Rangers.

She has started two games — one each in the League and the domestic Cup — and came off the bench in another Cup tie. She has already made her mark by assisting a goal in the first game she started.

Still adapting to the system, she hopes she can help

Rangers win trophies.

"I was so excited when I got the No. 10 shirt here. It motivates me a lot. But it also puts a lot of pressure as I have to justify their belief in me. Now I am working hard to step up my game and play at the highest level."

But with the coronavirus outbreak affecting the sporting world, Scotland suspended all leagues until further notice. All domestic professional and grassroots football under the jurisdiction of the Scottish FA is suspended, which includes the Scottish Women's League, and Rangers has also told its players there will be no training at the club until further notice. The players are expected to keep themselves fit until the season restarts. Bala Devi plans to continue her workout and personal training during the off time.

"We trained together for two days after the international break. We were told today [on March 13] that the league has been postponed," she said.

A childhood fan of Liverpool, Bala has more reasons to be happy at Rangers. The women's team attended one of the games of the Rangers men's team, where she saw their manager Steven Gerrard, the Liverpool legend and one of her idols.

"I haven't gotten to talk to him yet. But I am hoping he will come and give us a talk

Wise words: "What we need to do is organise more games for our (India) women's team," says Bala Devi. "...We need to play more games against bigger teams and get more exposure."

INTERVIEW BALA DEVI

Going pro: Bala Devi has started two games – one each in the league and the domestic cup – and came off the bench in another cup tie for Rangers. She has already made her mark by assisting a goal in the first game she started. (Below) The Manipuri star proudly displays the No. 10 jersey she wears.

RANGERS WFC



soon. I am so inspired by just watching him stand by the line and give instructions,” she said. Although her life at Rangers has only started, Bala believes her transfer is only the start of a very bright future for India women’s team. “All eyes will be on them when India hosts the under-17 women’s World Cup this year,” Bala said.

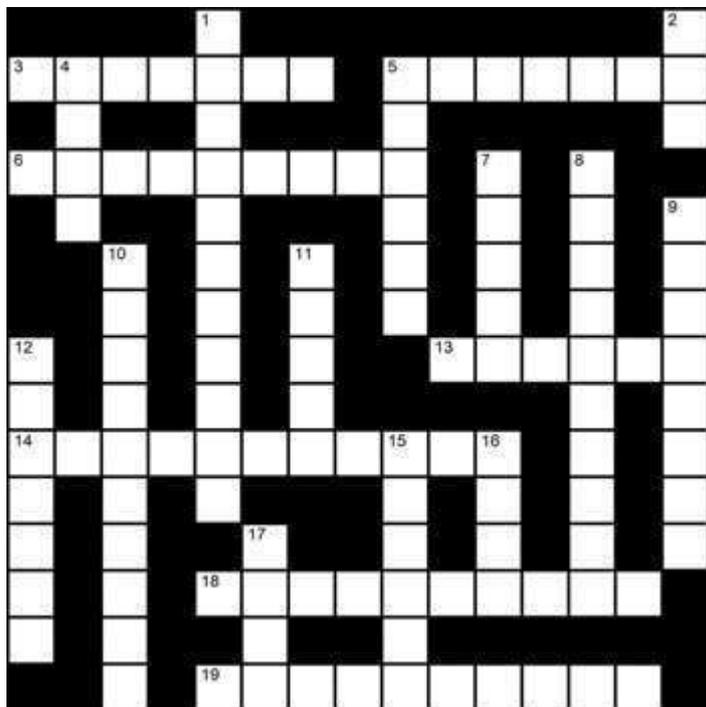
“There was a huge exposure for the tournament when the under-17 men’s World Cup was held in India in 2017. Now there is an opportunity for women’s football as well.

A lot of doors will open if our girls perform well at the tournament.”

Placed 57th in the world, the Indian senior women are comparatively better than their male counterparts in the FIFA rankings.

“We need organise more games for our women’s team. We have already secured draws against Vietnam and Uzbekistan. We need to play more games against bigger teams and get more exposure. Our future will be bright,” Bala added. ☞





SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

ACROSS

- 3 The Captain Roop Singh Stadium stands here. (7)
- 5 He popularised the Flop! (7)
- 6 Second India to win the All England Open Badminton Championships. (4,5)
- 13 Jinks is this cricketer's nickname. (6)
- 14 Forward in the Indian women's hockey team, from Mizoram. (11)
- 18 Bhupendra Nath Bose established this on August 15, 1889. (5,5)
- 19 Holds below the waist are not ok in this style. (5-5)

DOWN

- 1 The only NBA player to play 22

- 2 An extra. (3)
- 4 England bowler Mark Andrew... (4)
- 5 The current name of something that was launched in 1963 to celebrate the International Tennis Federation's 50th anniversary. (3,3)
- 7 First name of India's winter sports poster boy. (5)
- 8 Jaydev Unadkat is its captain and Shitanshu Kotak its coach. (10)
- 9 Current women's world champion in chess. (2,6)
- 10 Ronaldo de Assis Moreira, commonly known as... (10)
- 11 She recently created a new world indoor record in triple jump: Yulimar... (5)

- 12 The team Carlos Sainz and

- Lando Norris drive for. (7)
- 15 Spanish racing driver Fernando ... Diaz. (6)
- 16 The basketball team Wolves is from here. (4)
- 17 The number of bases in a ball field. (4)

The beautiful garden blooms!

The I-League title saw Mohun Bagan's season climaxing in a dramatic fashion as the team shook off some disappointments suffered earlier.



AMITABHA DAS SHARMA

Ecstasy: Jubilant Mohun Bagan players after clinching the I-League title.

RAJEEV BHATT

The tactical acumen of Spanish coach Kibu Vicuna, the right selection of foreign and Indian recruits who kept performing consistently and a management persisting with the side even during times of poor form, are a few of the reasons that ensured the moment of glory for Mohun Bagan. The I-League title saw Mohun Bagan's season climaxing in a dramatic fashion as the team shook off some disappointments suffered earlier. The team failed to win the Calcutta Football League and the Durand Cup and even started the I-League with a draw and a loss in the first two outings.

The turnaround came with a 4-0 win against TRAU FC in the third round and this sparked a fantastic journey for Mohun Bagan as the team created a new I-league record of remaining unbeaten in 14 matches at a stretch. It had an incredible 12 wins while drawing only two matches in this phase to make it an unparalleled run of success.

When asked to analyse how Mohun Bagan managed to make its triumph so absolute in the end, Debasish Dutta, a senior official of the club, said one of the main reasons was choosing Kalyani Stadium as the venue. "Kalyani has a fantastic ground



and the stadium has a smaller capacity compared to the Salt Lake Stadium. This ensured that we had packed galleries motivating the side in every match. The giant Salt Lake Stadium appeared empty even if we had 20,000 supporters coming in,” Dutta said. “I must also congratulate the club executive who continued to put faith in the coach and team even after it failed to pick up a title earlier in the season.”

Ask Kibu Vicuna and he says, “The team has been performing at a good level from the beginning of the season. I have always been saying that this team needs time to reach its peak. We had a completely new team and one had to be patient for it to bring the results. It is good that the club management put faith in us and gave us the time to come up with the title in the end.

“As a team we always wanted to win every tournament and as you see we finished second in both the Calcutta Football League and the Durand Cup. It goes to show that the team always had the potential and it was only a matter of time before we began

to express ourselves in the right way,” Vicuna said. “Football is about emotions and it is the dream of every footballer to make the fans happy by winning titles. It is good that we could produce that kind of football to make this happen.”

When asked to define the point where he thought the title was a possibility, Vicuna said, “If you talk about any turning point it should be our win against Aizawl FC because the title became a reality then. So long the talk was about ‘the team could do it,’ now the talk was that ‘the team has done it.’”

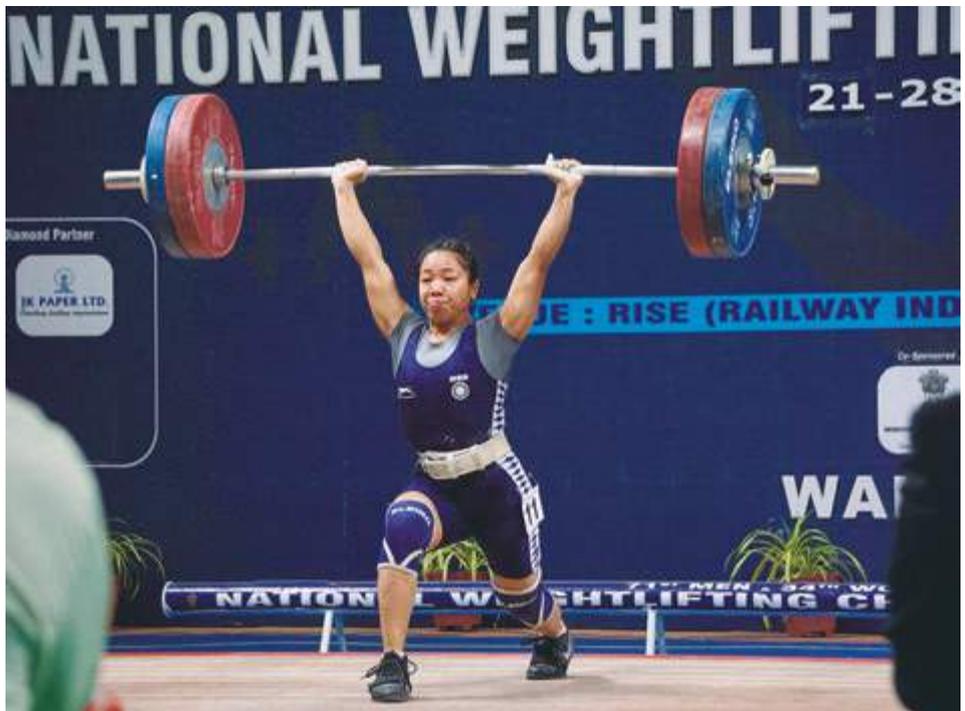
As Mohun Bagan heads to the ISL next season after its merger with ATK scheduled in June 2020 (the merged entity will be called ATK-Mohun Bagan), both Vicuna and the players stare at an uncertain future. Dutta said Mohun Bagan will have some engagement for Vicuna and the players. But with ATK enjoying a lion’s share of members in the board that will manage the team next season, such assurances hardly have any bearing on the future. ❧

Coach and pupil: Mohun Bagan coach Kibu Vicuna with Papa Babacar Diawara, who netted the lone goal against Aizawl FC. RAJEEV BHATT

Double century:

S. Mirabai Chanu is one of the few women in the 49kg weight class to have crossed a total of 200kg.

C. V. SUBRAHMANYAM



STRETCHING EVERY SINEW

Y. B. SARANGI

India hopes to field two to three weightlifters at the Tokyo Games. Former world champion S. Mirabai Chanu is the country's most prominent face and is considered a medal prospect.

Weightlifting has been a part of the Olympic programme since the start of the modern Games. In 1896 in Athens and 1904 in St. Louis, different techniques were used and all the lifters competed in the same event irrespective of their body weight.

At Antwerp 1920, the lifters were categorised according to their body weight. Two segments, the snatch and the clean and jerk, were introduced at the 1976 Montreal Games. But women's events featured at the Olympics only from Sydney 2000.

At the 2016 Rio Games, men competed in eight weight classes and women in seven. The International Weightlifting Federation (IWF) has brought in gender equality for the Tokyo Games with seven weight classes for each gender.

Dominant teams

China and the erstwhile USSR have dominated weightlifting at the Olympics. Chinese weightlifters have won four consecutive gold medals in the men's 69kg category from 2004 to 2016. China's women have won 14 out of the 35 gold medals since 2000.

Also, athletes from other Asian countries and Europe have been doing well in the sport. At the Rio Games, 22-year-old Georgian Lasha Talakhadze registered a record total of 473kg (snatch 215kg, clean and jerk 258kg) to win the +105kg title.

Among the women, Spain's Lidia Valentín Pérez won silver in Beijing (2008), gold in London (2012) and bronze in Rio (2016) and will be a top contender in Tokyo in the 75kg class.

The format

Competitions will be held in the 61kg, 67kg, 73kg, 81kg, 96kg, 109kg and +109kg classes for men and 49kg, 55kg, 59kg, 64kg, 76kg, 87kg and +87kg classes for women.

In snatch, the bar is lifted from the floor to above the head in one movement, while in clean and jerk, the bar is first brought up to the chest before being jerked over the head. A lifter gets three chances apiece in each. The best performance in the two segments is considered for the total. An athlete needs to register at least one 'good lift' in each segment to be eligible for ranking.

Athletes are ranked as per the

aggregates.

How to qualify

The IWF has laid out a revamped and elaborate qualifying system following reservations expressed by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) over the large-scale incidence of doping in the sport.

Accordingly, an athlete has to compete in at least one ranking event — such as gold level (world and continental championships), silver level (IWF events, including multidiscipline games and championships) and bronze level (other international competitions) — in each of the three periods starting from November 1, 2018, to April 30, 2020; six overall; and at least one gold level and one other gold or silver level event. Points will be awarded for these performances and the best results in each of the three periods will be considered to ascertain rankings.

A country can qualify one athlete in a weight class and overall four per gender.

The IWF has also stipulated quota places for countries according to their track record in doping violations.

Several Olympic qualifying events, including the Asian championships scheduled in Tashkent from April 16 to 25, have been suspended due to the global coronavirus outbreak.

India watch

India won its first weightlifting medal at the 2000 Sydney Games, with Karnam Malleswari taking bronze in the 69kg class.

The country hopes to field two to three weightlifters at the Tokyo Games. Former world champion S. Mirabai Chanu, one of the few women in the 49kg weight class to have crossed a total of 200kg, is India's most prominent face and is considered a medal prospect.

Besides, Youth Olympics gold medallist Jeremy Lalrinnunga (men's 67kg) and national champion Rakhi Halder (women's 64kg) are among the frontrunners for Olympic quota places. **S**

Indian hope: Youth Olympics gold medallist Jeremy Lalrinnunga is among the frontrunners for Olympic quota places. GETTY IMAGES





Manpreet, Rani bag Hockey India Player of Year awards

India captains Manpreet Singh and Rani Rampal capped an eventful 2019 as Hockey India Player of the Year (men’s and women’s respectively), while Harbinder Singh was honoured for his lifetime contribution to the game at the third Annual Hockey India Awards. While the players of the year received a cash prize of ₹25 lakh each, a certificate and a trophy, Harbinder Singh was handed a cheque for ₹30 lakh. The Upcoming Players of the Year — Vivek Sagar Prasad and Lalremsiami — got ₹10 lakh each while individual award winners got ₹5 lakh each.

The federation also felicitated and rewarded winners of various international awards through the year and those who crossed milestones — ₹1 lakh for those completing 200 international caps and ₹50,000 for 100. The total prize money distributed was to the tune of ₹1.64 crore.

“I would like to congratulate Hockey India for their continued efforts of raising the bar to the highest of standards. Hockey has always been a very important part of India’s sporting history and I am really proud of the Indian teams who have consistently been performing for the country,” FIH and IOA president Narinder Batra said.

■ TEAM SPORTSTAR



Limpele resigns as Indian badminton’s doubles coach

Flandy Limpele has resigned as the doubles coach for the Indian badminton team. He flew back home owing to family reasons.

“I had spoken to Gopichand that I want to resign but I decided to stay back due to the All England and European tournaments but it turns out the players cancelled their trip for All England,” Limpele said.

“I feel the doubles department is not as favourite as singles. It is unfortunate that it has less love than singles but having said that it is just one of the reasons. The main reason for my departure is personal. I wish all the best to the Indian team, they have good coaches.”

Last December, Limpele had criticised the Indian players, saying their poor attitude and lack of teamwork is affecting the growth of the doubles game.

Chirag and Satwik, who won the Thailand Open Super 500 and reached the finals of French Open Super 750 to eventually reach the world No. 10 under Limpele, described the coach’s exit as a big setback ahead of the Tokyo Games.

“We came to know of it. He messaged us informing that he is leaving. It is a big setback for us,” Chirag said.

Limpele is India’s fourth foreign coach to have resigned without completing the tenure.

■ TEAM SPORTSTAR



Pankaj Advani wins 34th national title

Ace Indian cueist Pankaj Advani clinched the National 6-Red Snooker Championship with a convincing 7-3 win over Maharashtra’s Ishpreet Singh in Ahmedabad. It was the 34th national title for Advani.

After trailing 1-3 in the summit clash, the 23-time world champion proved why he is the best in the business. He dazzled the Gujarat crowd with sublime potting and supreme safety play.

After losing the opening frame, Advani bounced back to draw parity. Then two frames on the trot that had Advani’s name on them were snatched by the young Ishpreet as he went 3-1 up against his accomplished opponent.

It was Advani’s experience that changed the course of the match. He dictated the proceedings from the fifth frame onwards. Ishpreet often found himself on the backfoot as Advani took the attack to his opponent.

“I’m particularly glad to win my 34th National title at the age of 34. Also very pleased to win the National title in the short format of snooker. Its unpredictability keeps one on their toes and to come out on top is a great feeling,” Advani said.

On the adjoining table in the women’s edition, Ameer Kamani overcame Vidya Pillai 4-2 to win the title.

■ AGENCIES



Long-distance runner Kiranjeet fails dope test

Long-distance runner Kiranjeet Kaur, who won the Tata Steel Kolkata 25K among the Indians, has tested positive for a banned substance and has been provisionally suspended by World Athletics. The 31-year-old Kaur had clocked 1:38:56 to finish 11th overall and first among Indians in the Kolkata 25K in December.

“Presence of Prohibited Substances (SARM S22) (Article 2.1) — Notice of Allegation Issued,” the Athletics Integrity Unit said.

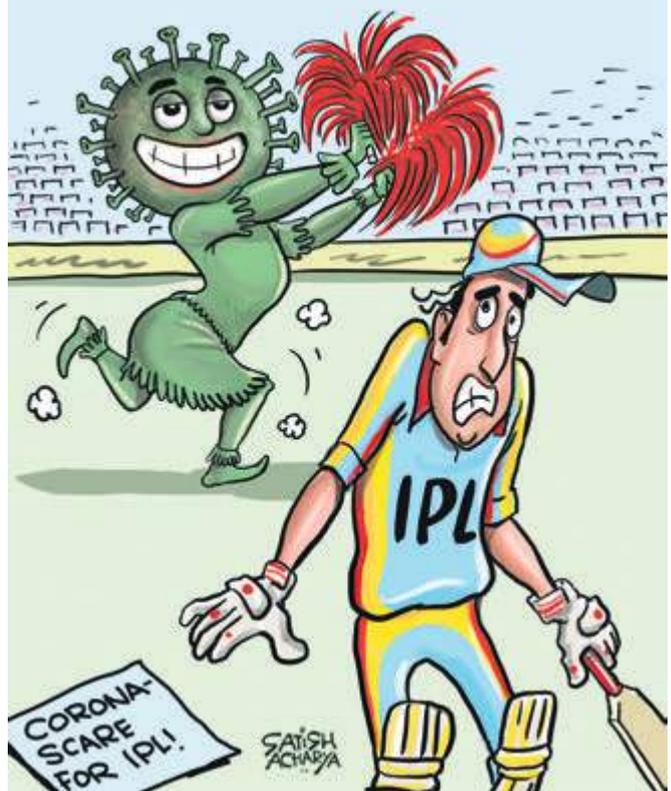
She had won a bronze in 10,000m at the Federation Cup National Championships in March last year in Patiala. Representing Haryana, she originally finished fourth with a time of 35:49.96 but it was upgraded to bronze after Sanjivani Jadhav was stripped of her gold due to a doping offence.

Kaur had also taken part in the 5000m race in Patiala and finished fifth. She had also won a silver in 5000m in the National Inter-State Championships in Guwahati in 2018.

SARMs or Selective Androgen Receptor Modulators are anabolic agents. SARM 22 or its trademark name Enobosarm or Ostarine is one of the most popular SARMs and it affects both muscle and bone. Ostarine is not meant for human use or consumption and its sale is prohibited.

■ AGENCIES

SPORTOON



Fun-filled: Players take part in the first-ever Khelo India Winter Games at the ski resort of Gulmarg, some 52km north of Srinagar. Nearly 830 sportspersons from 20 states participated in 30 events at the venue located at an altitude of 8,694 feet. NISSAR AHMAD

Safety first, sport later

Nothing about the coronavirus is clear and fully understood. It is the fear of the unknown that has led to panic in some areas.

SURESH MENON

At the turn of the century, the British scientist Martin Rees wrote *Our Final Century*, a book where he said, “I think the odds are no better than 50-50 that our civilization on Earth will survive to the end of the present century.”

He bet that “by the year 2020 an instance of bioerror or bioterror will have killed a million people.” He clarified later: “By “bioerror”, I mean something which has the same effect as a terror attack, but rises from inadvertence rather than evil intent.”

I bring this up only to lend some perspective to current debates. Sport in the time of coronavirus might seem a particularly misguided concept. But sport is more than sport and shades into that field of human activity called “business.” If it weren’t for the huge sums involved and the losses expected (the ATP’s Indian Wells tennis tournament lost over \$60 million on cancellation), there would be only a moral issue.

Sometimes the moral issue is easier to handle than the commercial one. Other things remaining equal, we say human life is precious, and cancel sport. But other things are seldom equal. There can be no international sport without travel, without thousands of spectators, without contact, without disruption. Hence the dilemma. Organisers turn risk analysts and many are forced to cancel (or postpone, which sounds better) events.

And one cancellation often leads to another, as organisers take strength from another’s decisions. At

the time of writing, the ATP Tour is on a six-week break, the NBA has been suspended for the season, all sport in Italy has been called off till April 3, and many internationals in rugby, table tennis, soccer, cycling and more have been put off.

The biggest of them all, the Olympic Games, is scheduled to be held in Tokyo from July 24 to August 9. Will a vaccine be found by then? Will the virus itself ease off as summer sets in? Is it too early to decide? The uncertainty — for athletes, officials, spectators with tickets — can be debilitating.

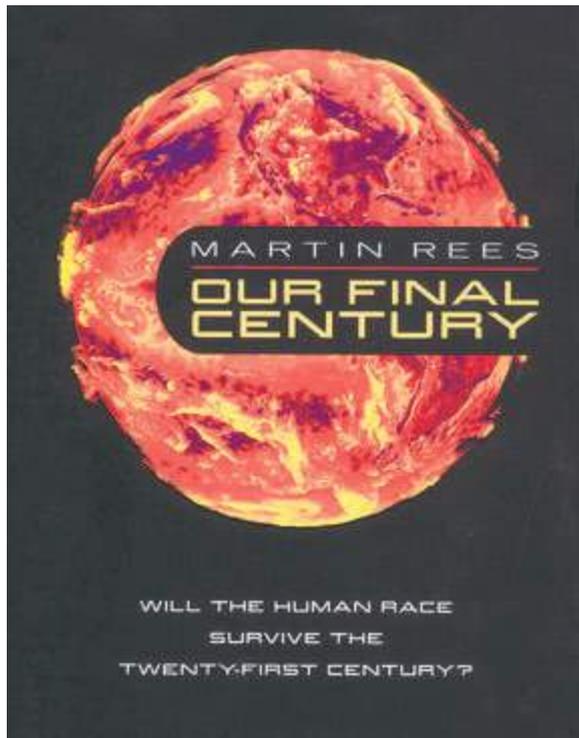
In India, South Africa arrived just before the visa ban came into effect. This was taking a chance since it is not only the players but spectators too who come under threat. Already Juventus soccer star Daniele Rugani and Utah Jazz player Rudy Gobert have been attacked by the coronavirus. So has a spectator at the Women’s World T20 final in Melbourne, and calls have been made to people who watched the game from the same stand at the MCG.

Nothing about the coronavirus is clear and fully understood. It is the fear of the unknown that

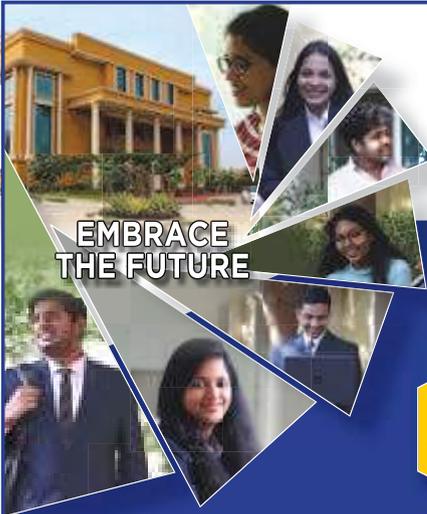
has led to panic in some areas. But sometimes a little panic is a good thing if it keeps people safe. False bravado based on nothing more than hope can be dangerous, even fatal.

Professor Rees signed a copy of his book thus: “To Suresh with best wishes — and in the hope that I am too pessimistic.”

I hope I am being too pessimistic here. ☞



Prophetic: In his book *Our Final Century* that was published at the turn of the century, the British scientist Martin Rees bet that “by the year 2020 an instance of bioerror or bioterror will have killed a million people.”



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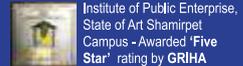
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