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INSIDE
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Sports Illustrated

JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2018 VOLUME 9 NO 3 ₹100

INDIA



YOUNG CHAMPS

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PEDAL POWER

The blue mountains of south India and tales of ecstasy

FATIGUE FACTOR

The fine balance in managing excessive workload in elite sport

TEST OF METTLE

India's tour of South Africa is trial by fire for Kohli and Company

NOW PLAYING

The scandal of Tonya Harding revisited in a gripping movie

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SCANDAL REVISITED

Almost 27 years ago Tonya Harding chucked it all away just when she had the world at her feet.

Photograph courtesy of Neon; Rodger Bosch/AFP/Getty Images (Kohli, du Plessis)



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CIRCULATION & VISIBILITY

National Head Rishi Kaul, rishi@emmindia.com
Assistant Manager Prakash Darge, prakash@emmindia.com

CORPORATE OPERATIONS

Publishing Director Simon Clays
Senior Publisher Vivek Pareek
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INTERNATIONAL SALES & ADVERTISING

FRANCE/LUXEMBOURG
Marion Badolle-Feick
T. +33 1 72 71 25 24
marion.badolle-feick@burda.com

ITALY

Mariolina Siclari
T. +39 02 91 32 34 66
mariolina.siclari@burda-vsg.it

GERMANY

Julia Mund
T. +49 89 92 50 31 97

Julia.Mund@burda.com
Michael Neuwirth
T. +49 89 9250 3629
michael.neuwirth@burda.com

AUSTRIA

Christina Bresler
T. +43 1 230 60 30 50
Christina.Bresler@burda.com

SWITZERLAND

Goran Vukota
T. +41 44 81 02 146

goran.vukota@burda.com

UK / IRELAND

Jeannine Soeldner
T. +44 20 3440 5832
jeannine.soeldner@burda.com

USA / CANADA / MEXICO

Salvatore Zammuto
T. +1 212 884 48 24
salvatore.zammuto@burda.com

BURDA INTERNATIONAL HOLDING GmbH

Legal Address: Hubert Burda Platz 1, 77652 Offenburg, Germany

Postal Address: Arabellastrasse 23, D-81925 Munich, Germany

Sports Illustrated USA

EDITORIAL

Editor, Time Inc. Sports Group Paul Fichtenbaum
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INBOX

FOR DECEMBER 2017



The piece on Gaurav Gill had a casual flow to it. It really captured the essence of what goes through the mind of an individual who is willing to drive at mind-numbing speeds on narrow, unpaved roads. While it's a shame that he has missed out on a drive in the WRC, what I want to know is who takes over once he decides it's time to turn the ignition off for good?

S. Narayan, Cuttack



The interview with Ashish Nehra was well put together, and it was good to know more about the person behind the stellar performances. The one fault I can find with the piece is that it didn't touch upon the issues that plague Indian cricket at the management level, as it would have been good to hear about that from someone who has been a part of the set-up for as long as Nehra.

Akhil Anand, Delhi



Although I am not a fan of kabaddi, I did enjoy reading the story *New Spices Of Kabaddi*. There is a simplicity to reading about these young boys who are taking up a sport that had barely even existed in their country a few years back. What is better to know is that they enjoy learning from Indian players, and perhaps it's only a matter of time before it becomes a truly global sport. Maybe then I'll follow it.

Naval Yadav, Lucknow



COVER

The story on Kidambi Srikanth was good and filled with anecdotes about the player. However, I feel the writer should have elaborated more on Srikanth's game and what makes him the force he has become.

S. Devender, Gurugram



PAGE 30

The roundup of India's 2017 in sports was well executed. It is not often that cueists are celebrated by the media, so it was great to see Pankaj Advani leading the "best sporting moments of 2017" list. Can't wait for 2018.

Daisy Mehdi, Assam

CONTACT
SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

LETTERS E-mail SI at siindia@emmindia.com or sportsillustrated@emmindia.com. Letters should include the writer's full name, address and phone number and may be edited for clarity and space. CUSTOMER SERVICE AND SUBSCRIPTIONS call 0124-3083590/616 or email circulation@emmindia.com. Download the digital copy on magzter.com, zinio.com



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COLOUR WORKS

The Adelaide Oval looked divine during sunset on day four of the second of five Tests of the Ashes series between Australia and England. Hosts Australia won the Test by a convincing 120 runs, taking a 2-0 lead in the series after winning the first Test by 10 wickets.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
CAMERON SPENCER/
GETTY IMAGES





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BIRD'S EYE

Max Parrot of Canada competes in the final of the FIS Snowboard World Cup 2018 Men's Big Air in Copper Mountain, Colorado. Parrot finished fifth overall, with Norwegian Mons Røisland coming out on top.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
SEAN M. HAFHEY/GETTY IMAGES



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PARADISE RUN

Lawrence Cherono of Kenya broke his own race record at the 2017 Honolulu Marathon. Cherono, who set a time of 2:09:39 in 2016, ran a 2:08:27 in Honolulu, Hawaii. This was the 11th year in a row that a Kenyan won the 26-mile course.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
TOM PENNINGTON/
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FOR THE RECORD
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SCORECARD

INDIA'S NEWEST GOLF STAR

[At 21, Shubhankar Sharma seems to have come of age and set a benchmark for Indian youngsters striving to reach the next level](#)

BY PRIYANKA SHARMA

■ A COUPLE OF months ago, during an interview, golfer Shiv Kapur commented that these are the golden days of Indian golf. When he said this, he also pointed out that the future of the sport in the country was in the right hands. One name that topped his list of India's next big golf stars was that of Shubhankar Sharma. Senior pros like Jeev Milkha Singh and Anirban Lahiri also voiced the same thoughts.

"India has a great pool of talent and the best thing about these kids is they are hungry and believe they can win at a young age. I really hold Shubhankar in high regard. He is someone who is very level-headed, hard-working and has the ability to be a world-beater," Kapur had said after lifting his first Asian Tour title in India, the Panasonic

Open, at the Delhi Golf Club in November.

Recently, over a span of two months (Oct. 8 to Dec. 10), Indian golfers have lifted four titles on the Asian and sanctioned Tour events—Ajeetesh Sandhu (Yeangder Players Championship), Gaganjeet Bhullar (Macau Open), Kapur (Panasonic Open India and Yeangder Heritage in April) and now Sharma. Veterans Jeev and Arjun Atwal were also in contention during the year, while S.S.P. Chawrasia retained the Indian Open title by a massive margin of seven strokes.

And as the Asian Tour approached a new season, Sharma scripted history at the Randpark Golf Course in South Africa, a competition which was not on his calendar until he took a last-minute decision to participate. Capping

off a dream week, the 21-year-old Chandigarh-based golfer won the Joburg Open by three strokes with a final round of three-under 69 and a total of 23-under 264. The achievement made him the youngest Indian and fifth overall to win on the European Tour after Jeev (four wins), Chawrasia (four), Atwal (three) and

in July 2018. The Joburg Open, co-sanctioned by the European Tour, Asian Tour and Sunshine Tour, was part of the Open Qualifying Series and thus offered berths to the top three finishers who were not already exempt. "It feels fantastic. I'm glad I made the decision to come here after thinking about not coming. I

The title win earned Sharma a ticket to the **British Open, to be held at Carnoustie, Scotland, in July 2018**

Lahiri (two). Lahiri had won the Maybank Malaysian Open at the age of 27.

Not only this, the title win earned Sharma a ticket to the British Open, which will be held at Carnoustie, Scotland,

don't think I will ever forget this week.

"The only thing I was telling myself was to stay aggressive. I never wanted to be defensive. Even when I was leading I never thought of





LOIC VENANCE/AFP/GETTY IMAGES (GABART); TIM BRADBURY/GETTY IMAGES (CELTIC); CAMERON SPENCER/GETTY IMAGES

defending my lead. I actually set a target of 25-under and I only shot a 23-under,” said an elated Sharma, who jumped to second place in the European Tour’s 2018 Race to Dubai. Despite an overnight delay, the Indian kept his focus and target intact as he birdied and parred on the back nine to finish a solid 23-under. Sharma was leading the field by four shots with 11 holes to go, when play was suspended due to rain. “Playing in The Open is everyone’s dream. Personally, it is my favourite major championship. I’ve watched it every year on television and to be playing in it next year is absolutely fantastic,” added the soft-spoken youngster, who is a member of the Chandigarh Golf Club and has five PGTI titles now.

Sharma, who has nine top-10 finishes on the Asian

RAISING THE BAR

Sharma’s patient approach helped him card an incredible 61, the lowest on the Asian Tour in 2017

Tour since 2014, missed out on his first win on the Asian Development Tour after losing in the playoff to compatriot and friend S. Chikkarangappa at the 2015 TAKE Solutions India Masters.

In Johannesburg, Sharma showed steely determination and maturity on a tough course that is mostly dominated by local pros. He was patient and selected his shots smartly to overcome the challenge posed by a field of 240. In fact, the 21-year-old shot a record 10-under 61 on day two of the event, days after he finished 69th at the European Tour Q-School in Spain to earn a conditional card. But

in a span of weeks, all has changed following his rounds of 69, 61, 65 and 69. Impressively, his last three rounds were bogey-free.

Inspired by South African golfing icon Ernie Els, Sharma had shown signs of a knack for golf as a kid—he became the youngest to win the All India Amateur Championship as a 16-year-old in 2013. A year later, he was the youngest Indian at 17 to win on the domestic PGTI Tour when he lifted the Cochin Masters title, until that record was broken by Chandigarh amateur Karandeep Kochhar last year. “He has a lot of talent and many more wins to come. It’s just the start for someone who is a good golfer with an excellent mind. I’m proud of him,” Jeev told *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED INDIA*. Meanwhile, Lahiri wrote on his Twitter handle: “He’s an amazing young kid! Another homegrown talent.”

A few years back, the emergence of Lahiri, Chawrasia, Bhullar and Kapur ended the debate of who’s next after the golfing trio of Jeev, Atwal and Jyoti Randhawa. Now, Sharma’s feat following some incredible results from young Aditi Ashok provide hope for India’s bright prospects in golf. With the change of attitude of the government and sponsors towards non-cricket sports in the country, largely thanks to Olympic medals won by Sushil Kumar, P.V. Sindhu and M.C. Mary Kom, India can expect a better show in golf too with talents like Sharma in the ranks. □

GO
FIGURE

×

42



Frenchman **Francois Gabart**, 34, broke the world record for the fastest solo navigation of the globe recently, completing the mammoth feat in 42 days, 16 hours, 40 minutes and 35 seconds.

69



Celtics’ 69 domestic games’ unbeaten run came to a grinding halt as coach Brendan Rodgers’ side were convincingly beaten 4–0 by Hearts. This was their first loss in domestic action since May 2016.

24

Stuart Broad claimed the record for most ducks by an English cricketer in Tests. Broad reached the mark as England were beaten by Australia in the third of the five-match Ashes series.





MAXIMISE YOUR FITNESS & RECOVERY

Here's how to incorporate the Principle of Periodisation into your programme design

BY SHAYAMAL VALLABHJEE

■ **WITH THE** six universally accepted scientific exercise-training principles—we've already discussed Adaptation, Progressive Overload, Specificity and Reversibility, also known as the De-Training Effect—we know that while rest is important for recovery from training, extended periods of rest can reduce an individual's level of physical fitness and return them to pre-training condition.

PRINCIPLE OF PERIODISATION

This principle tackles the process of dividing an annual training calendar into specific time blocks, where each block has a particular goal and provides your body with different types of stress. This allows you to create some hard training periods and some easier periods to facilitate recovery. A training programme should be considered as ongoing and should be broken down into long- and short-term blocks or periods of time, termed "cycles."

Breaking a programme down into cycles is helpful in prioritising your training goals and requirements. The cycles can also vary greatly in the amount of time that they span. Periodisation also helps you develop different physiological abilities during various phases of training. Periodisation is divided into three cycles...

MACRO CYCLE The macro cycle is the longest of the three cycles and includes all four stages of a training programme (for instance, endurance, intensity, competition and recovery). Macro cycles incorporate all 52 weeks of your annual plan and provide you with a bird's-eye view of your training regimen. The entire purpose is to facilitate long-range planning.

MESO CYCLE The meso cycle represents a specific block of training that is designed to accomplish a particular goal. Meso cycles generally follow a 21- or 28-day plan (three to four weeks in length). This work intensity is at its highest in a meso cycle, which makes recovery an integral component of this phase. Depending on your code of sport, you may have between 3-5 meso cycles in an annual macro plan.

MICRO CYCLE A micro cycle is the shortest training cycle, typically lasting a week, with the goal of facilitating a focused block of training. The work to rest ratio in a micro cycle is generally 1:1. In this phase, athletes focus on shifting specific physiological parameters such as lactate threshold and aerobic capacity through highly-specialised drills. There are between three to four micro cycles in a meso cycle.

Athletes looking to improve



their physical performance can easily become overwhelmed by the vast number of variables and the subsequent training methodologies that affect those parameters. Periodisation is a method of planning a structured approach to training that allows sports scientists and exercise physiologists to measure the relevant outcome of a training block against certain predetermined physiological markers.

In a nutshell, it is this planning that helps us determine if your training is working for

you. This is why it is so important. And there are many benefits of periodisation training, besides the fact that it exploits the body's powerful hormone response to the stress of new exercise stimulus. It also helps in avoiding mental and physical burnout and over-training by constantly varying the workout stimulus, and providing rest periods for recovery.

Plus, it allows you to create exceptional peaks in fitness for key competitions, and remain fitter all year long. More than anything, it helps protect the

CYCLE	VOLUME	INTENSITY	OVER-DISTANCE	ENDURANCE	TEMPO	LACTATE THRESHOLD	VO ₂ MAX
PREPARATORY	Moderate to High	Low	60%	30%	5%	5%	0%
PRE-COMPETITION	Moderate	Moderate to High	55%	25%	5-10%	10-15%	0-10%
TAPER	Low to Moderate	Moderate to High	55%	25%	5-10%	10-15%	2-5%
COMPETITION	Low to Moderate	High	55%	20%	5-10%	5-10%	0-5%
TRANSITION	Low	Low	85%	5-10%	0-5%	0%	0%

body from injury.

THE PRINCIPLE OF RECOVERY

Recovery is one of the most vital but neglected components of training. It is paramount to continued improvement and should be an integral component of all programme design. If the rate of recovery is appropriate, higher training volumes and intensities are possible without the detrimental effects of over-training.

That's why understanding the physiological concept of recovery is essential, as optimum recovery can be anything from a few hours post a single session to a few weeks at the end of competition. It is as individualised as designing a specific training programme for an athlete, as all bodies do not respond the same. Some of the factors that affect an individual's response to a recovery programme include the trained versus untrained status, psychological stressors, intensity of training, environmental conditions and the type of recovery used.

You would have heard of a few post-session recovery methods such as ice baths, massage, sleep pods, compression garments, electrical muscle stimulation, adequate nutrition, hypobaric sleeping chambers and many more. There is a vast amount of research going into understand-

ing the science of recovery, as it remains the most critical component to unlocking true athletic potential. A good place to start the recovery process? Ensure that you are adequately hydrated before and post a session. Hydration is linked very closely to an individual's rate of recovery. A two percent drop in body weight post a session can impair performance and the athlete's recovery.

THE PRINCIPLE OF INDIVIDUALITY

The final principle of scientific exercise-training is exactly that—individual and personal. Every athlete brings to their session their own individual set of strengths, weaknesses, muscular imbalances, level of flexibility, VO₂ score, joint issues, stresses, hydration levels, blood sugar levels, goals, needs, *et al.* This principle helps illustrate the point that there should *never* be a time when a programme is duplicated among athletes. We need to assess all the factors individually and tailor the training programme or cycles accordingly, so that we're sustaining optimum fitness levels.

Shayamal Vallabhjee is a sports scientist, EQ consultant and cricket expert. He is a Herbalife Consultant—Fitness and Education—and has trained elite athletes, filmstars and advises many teams and corporates.

+ QUERIES

I've been a pro athlete for a decade, and my fitness has only gotten better. Is there a professional forum I can become a part of?

—WILFRED D'SOUZA, Panaji

It really depends on what your sport or athletic event is. It's best that you register with your relevant sporting association, if you are looking for an accreditation or if you're looking to be in the loop for such activities. If you're looking for like-minded pros to train with, then search for the institutes where the local pros in your sport are training. These lists are readily available. In fact, there is a good chance that the institute will have a talent identification procedure or a pay-for-play model that can work well for you.

What supplements would you recommend for someone training to go pro?

—MALKEET BINDRA, Patiala

The first thing I recommend to all my athletes is to eat healthy, nutritious food and sleep well. These are the basic essentials and everything else will stack on top of this. Following this, recovery from training is paramount to me. If you want to consider some specifics, these are what I use with my athletes: BCAA + L glutamine for recovery, plant protein supplements, turmeric as a natural anti-inflammatory, a carefully-engineered hydration drink based on the analysis of my athlete's sweat, and magnesium + vitamin C combinations. Herbalife has some excellent products for all your nutritional needs, including Formula 1 nutritional shake mix as a healthy breakfast supplement, Personalized Protein Powder and even Herbalifeline, an omega-3-rich supplement for overall good health.

Have a nutrition, fitness or sports question for Shayamal? Write to us at SIAdvisor@emmindia.com.

 FOR THE RECORD

BWF'S 'CRAMMED' 2018 CALENDAR

The top shuttlers in the world have come down heavily on BWF for its revamped schedule, which will leave little time for rest

BY TEAM SI

■ **IT'S GOING** to be a busy 2018 season, in terms of the number of tournaments lined up during the year. And sportspersons will not only look to participate, but strive to excel. Fitness, then, will be a major concern.

In badminton in particular, shuttlers will have a jam-packed season and the Badminton World Federation's (BWF) revamped calendar for 2018 has already drawn flak, with current and former players expressing their displeasure with the scheduling which they feel will leave no room for recovery from injuries or time to train ahead of major events.

With the Commonwealth and Asian Games the two major tournaments besides a number of Super Series events, and the All England Championships and World Championships, the 2018 calendar already looked tight. The sport's governing body's mandatory rule—top 15 players in the singles and top 10 pairs in the doubles need to play a minimum of 12 tournaments or face a penalty—has made the going even more tough for shuttlers, especially Asian players.

Days after greats such as Prakash Padukone and Pullela Gopichand slammed the BWF's 'cramped' scheduling, top shuttlers like Saina Nehwal



and Carolina Marin have said the same, stating that the BWF decision has put them in a difficult situation.

"I would say that it's not right for the top players. It's too crammed. I am a player who cannot play back-to-back tournaments, I definitely need a lot of time before big events to give my best," said Nehwal.

"I think if we want to make badminton like tennis, then we should have four to five Grand Slam-like tournaments. If I would have been the president of BWF, then I would have made it five big tournaments, big money, big coverage. Then have tournaments such as the CWG, Asian Games and the Super Series Finals," added the former world No. 1.

Though Marin will have some time for recuperation in between tournaments with no CWG and Asiad for the Spaniard, the reigning Olympic champion echoed Nehwal's concerns. "It's going to be a crazy 2018," Marin told *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED INDIA*.

"With so many tournaments, it's going to be really tough to recover from matches. But we have to see how it turns out. Our focus is to play. After the PBL, we have three tournaments in a row and maybe some players may not play all of them," added the 24-year-old.

Meanwhile, H.S. Prannoy, who overcame a string of injuries to end the season with a career-high world No. 10,

said that an extended series of tournaments is taking a toll on the players. "I think the Super Series Finals can be scheduled a bit earlier in the year. If we have it one month earlier, we can change our training pattern. It shouldn't be like you come back from tournaments and you are again going at hundred percent."

Chief national coach Gopichand has his task cut out while deciding on his wards' schedules and keeping them fit for next year. On the other hand, it will be interesting to see how the players cope with the challenge not only from their opponents, but also the tight scheduling which is now another major worry. □

+ HOMING IN



SUSHIL KUMAR

The two-time Olympic medallist won his first international medal in three years as he clinched the 74kg gold at the Commonwealth Championships in Johannesburg. Sushil beat New Zealand's Akash Kullar via pinfall. Sakshi Malik also won gold in the women's 62kg.



SAIKHOM MIRABAI CHANU

Chanu won India's first weightlifting gold at the World Championships in over two decades, reigning supreme in Anaheim, U.S., with a record total lift of 194 kg (85 kg in snatch and 109 kg in clean and jerk) in the 48kg category. Olympic bronze medallist Karnam Malleswari had won the top prize in 1994 and 1995.



P.V. SINDHU

The World Championship silver medallist settled for a runner-up position at the Hong Kong Super Series, going down to world No. 1 Tai Tzu Ying 18-21, 18-21 in the final. Sindhu was bidding to become the third Indian shuttler after Prakash Padukone (1982) and Saina Nehwal (2010) to win the title.



HARMANPREET SINGH

The dragflicker was one of the star players in India's bronze medal show at the Hockey World League Final. India defeated a depleted but doughty German side 2-1 to retain the medal. While senior player S.V. Sunil opened the scoring for India, Harmanpreet's penalty corner in the 54th minute sealed the tie.



THEY SAID IT

Who said what in the world of sport to make us laugh and make us cry

"Perhaps only a holy book is more honest than him."
—Yuvraj Singh pays tribute to friend Ashish Nehra on his retirement from international cricket

"I buy five tickets so that no stranger annoys me when I watch a movie."
—India all-rounder Hardik Pandya

"If I am fit, nobody can touch me. Nobody can beat me easily. As long as I am training hard and my body is fit, I can beat anyone, bring it on."
—Five-time world champion M.C. Mary Kom beams with confidence after winning her fifth Asian Championships gold in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

"Well done @shubhankargolf!! So proud of you, young man! Champion on the @EuropeanTour. Let this be the first of many more in the future."
—Seasoned golfer Jeev Milkha Singh tweets on youngster Shubhankar Sharma's first European Tour win at the Joburg Open in Johannesburg, South Africa

"My mum and dad are unnerved because this is not the first time. They're angry and they don't want it to keep happening. And they're angry because nothing has been done about it."
—Liverpool's Rhian Brewster, on being racially abused during a UEFA Youth League match against Spartak Moscow

+ OUTSIDE EDGE By Satish Acharya





PLAY 'EM ALL

2017 was a great year for gaming with loads of variety in terms of genres, platforms, and themes. Here are our Top 10 Games of The Year

BY TEAM SI

1. RESIDENT EVIL 7: BIOHAZARD

Creepy. If *Resident Evil 7: Biohazard* had to be summed up in one word, that would be it. It is the good kind of creepy, though, the kind where you're watching a scary movie with your hands covering your face, but you dare not look away. So yeah, that kind of creepy, only, you're in control of the main protagonist and any mistake will lead to death. A great story is backed up by some brilliant voice-acting and beautiful (read dark and disturbing) visuals. Don't miss this if you're a fan of the horror genre, or games in general.

2. HORIZON: ZERO DAWN

Sony have shown once again that when it comes to console exclusives, there is no beating them. Not only does *Zero Dawn* look stunning on the PS4 and PS4 Pro, it has enough content, boosted by the release of the *Frozen Wilds* DLC, to keep you hooked long after you complete the main campaign. The fact that Aloy is a great protagonist in this post-apocalyptic world ensures that it never feels stale.

3. THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD

Nintendo knew they needed to come up with a great release title to get back in the console game with the Switch, and



1



2



4



10

they have done just that with *Breath of the Wild*. It packs a great adventure, with many calling it the best *Zelda* game ever, and the fact that it looks as good as it does on a portable console is testament to the hard work that went into making this great adventure. If only Nintendo had an official presence in India and didn't leave their fans relying on grey market imports.



7



3



6



5



8



9

4. FIFA 18

Another year, another *FIFA*. It's a footy game, and a bloody good one at that. If you had to pick one sports game this year, you would have made the right call if you picked this up.

5. ASSASSIN'S CREED ORIGINS

Ubisoft made sure they marked the 10th anniversary of the franchise with a bang, and *Origins* is arguably the best *AC* game ever, with hours of content and stunning visuals, all set in a mystic ancient Egypt.

6. UNCHARTED: THE LOST LEGACY

The story of the main protagonist of the *Uncharted* series, Nathan Drake, might have come to an end (so the publishers say), but this spin-off of the franchise has all the ingredients that made it one of the best franchises of all time.

7. F1 2017

It's probably the only place where it's possible to end Mercedes' domination, but *F1 2017* was also the best racing game of 2017. It's accessible, looks gorgeous, and who doesn't want to cross the finish line behind the wheel of a gleaming red Ferrari?

8. WOLFENSTEIN II: THE NEW COLOSSUS

What makes *Wolfenstein II* one of the best first-person shooters of the year is how well it plays, how good it looks while doing so and finally, the story it tells.

9. PERSONA 5

One would think nothing would top the stupendously good *Person 4*, but, alas, Atlus do love to outdo themselves, and have done so again. It's the same RPG formula where you lead the life of a high school student for a year, but what makes it addictive is the amount of depth the game possesses.

10. MARIO KART 8 DELUXE

Technically, this is a game from 2014, when it was first released on the Wii U. However, Nintendo polished it up, added a lot of content, and re-released it for the Switch, and it's as good as it was three years ago. Correction, it's a lot better. □



PERSPECTIVE

TOUCHING NEW HEIGHTS

The current NBA season has thrown up plenty of unexpected results, created new heroes and established a number of new records

BY ADITYA PANDEY

BOSTON CELTICS' DRAMATIC JOURNEY SO FAR

Gordon Hayward's gut-wrenching injury in the season opener against Cleveland Cavaliers seemed to have derailed their entire season, with his agent confirming he was "unlikely to play again this season." However, Celtics guard Kyrie Irving stepped up, turning on his inner 'Mamba Mentality,' and carried the Celtics to a 16-game win streak which included a dominating win against the current NBA champions, Golden State Warriors. Celtics lead the Eastern Conference.



16 Games' win streak by Celtics is the longest this season. It ties for the fourth longest in the franchise's history and 22nd longest in the NBA.

OKC IMPROVEMENT

Oklahoma City Thunder fans had immense expectations heading into the season. Instead, after 20 games, they were ninth in the Western Conference. Like last season, their struggles can be blamed on underperformance in key areas. OKC continue to be the least passing team in the league with just 2.8 passes per trip. Although Russell Westbrook and gang have a losing record at the moment, the Thunder have shown signs of their true potential. But they need to put in a lot of effort and learn to trust each other. It's time for Westbrook to give up his selfish gameplay and start sharing the ball more. Carmelo Anthony needs to bring out the 'Olympic Melo' hidden somewhere within him and reach his true potential, while Paul George needs to finish his plays. In the coming months, OKC would be looking for a run similar to the Cavs to get the right sense of playing as a unit.



LEBRON'S

"As a group we continue just to stick together throughout anything and everything."

KYRIE IRVING



AGE	25
NO. OF SEASONS	7
POINTS	24
REBOUNDS	3
ASSISTS	4.9

FIELD GOAL % 49.7



170

Ben Simmons became the only player in NBA history with at least 170 points, 100 rebounds and 80 assists in his team's first 10 games.



41

Utah Jazz's Donovan Mitchell set a rookie franchise record, scoring 41 points against New Orleans Pelicans.

MITCHELL: LEFF/GETTY IMAGES; (SIMMONS): GENE SWENEY JR./GETTY IMAGES; (MITCHELL): MADIE MEN/GETTY IMAGES

MVP SEASON

By the end of November, James shot 41.1% from beyond the three-point arc (career best), led the league in clutch time (fourth quarter or overtime) with less than five minutes remaining and neither team is leading by more than five points.

James, who will soon be 33, has already played more regular season games than Michael Jordan did. If he wins the MVP award this season, he will tie Jordan's five MVPs. Jordan won his fifth at the age of 35—the oldest to do so.

"I have no ceiling and I refuse to fall into the trap of complacency!"

JAMES HARDEN



GIANNIS ANTETOKOUNMPO



LEBRON JAMES



STREETER LECKA/GETTY IMAGES (HARDEN); TOM PENNINGTON/GETTY IMAGES (ANTETOKOUNMPO); STACY REVER/GETTY IMAGES (JAMES); MADRID MEYER/GETTY IMAGES; SHUTTERSTOCK.COM (COURT BACKGROUND); GRAPHICS BY VJAJENDRA

57 Cleveland Cavaliers' LeBron James has had the best single-game performance in the current NBA season so far with 57 points, 11 rebounds and 7 assists.

1,081 The number of games James played before his first ejection in the league. Against Miami Heat on Nov. 28.

46 The Atlanta Hawks set a franchise record for their biggest victory margin of 46 points when they beat Sacramento Kings 126-80 on Nov. 15 at the Philips Arena, Atlanta. The previous record was set way back on Feb. 12, 1965—a 44-point margin—when the St. Louis Hawks beat the Baltimore Bullets 144-100.

6' 7.23" The average height of the NBA player in 2017-18. It has been going up in recent years. Cleveland Cavaliers' Isaiah Thomas and Chicago Bulls' Kay Felder are the shortest at 5'9" and New York Knicks' Kristaps Porziņģis and Detroit Pistons' Boban Marjanovic are the tallest at 7'3".



2,000 Stephen Curry hit his 2,000th career three-pointer this season. He was the fastest to reach the mark, needing just 597 games, 225 less than previous record-holder Ray Allen.

TWEET TALK

'ROHILICIOUS' IMPACT

Rohit Sharma's stellar performances in the series against Sri Lanka saw a heap of praise come his way

BY TEAM SI

■ **EVEN AS FANS** on social media were yet to get over #Virushka, the hashtag used for Indian cricket captain Virat Kohli's wedding to Bollywood star Anushka Sharma, Rohit Sharma's destructive innings in the second ODI between India and Sri Lanka sent Twitterati into a frenzy. The Indian became the only player to score three double tons after putting on 208 off 153 balls, with his second ton coming off just 36 balls in Mohali. His previous 200+ knocks came in 2013 (209 against Australia in Bengaluru) and 2014 (264

against Sri Lanka in Kolkata). As if the feat wasn't enough, the India opener, who was the stand-in skipper for the series, went on to score his second T20 hundred in just 35 balls, equalling David Miller's record (against Bangladesh in October 2017) of scoring the fastest hundred in T20 cricket. Astounded by the 30-year-old's innings in Indore that was laced by as many as 10 sixes, current and former players took to Twitter to congratulate the 'Hitman' for his incredible innings that broke several records. "Every time you think you have



seen it all, you see something incredible. Today, Rohit Sharma has shown us that. I admit I am gasping," cricket commentator Harsha Bhogle added. "What an innings Hitman, quite unreal. Many congratulations on the 3rd ODI double. 3 alone out of a total 7 ODI double hundred's. Take a bow @ImRo45," wrote @VVSLaxman281. A few parody accounts in fact went on to honour the batsman and posted some hilarious tweets. "Government of India should start printing 200 rupee notes as a tribute to Rohit Sharma. #INDvSL #RohitSharma" wrote @VirenderSehwag, a Virender Sehwag fan account. There was also mention of Rohit's sixes—his 65 was the highest in a calendar year. He hit 46 sixes in 21 ODIs, 16 in nine T20s and had three in Tests. □

+ INSTAGRAM

ALL ACTION AND ALL PLAY

Ronaldo wins yet another trophy, Mbappe rides shotgun and P.V. Sindhu clicks a snap



High Five
Real Madrid's Cristiano Ronaldo wins the Best Player of the Year award for a fifth time, at the Global Soccer Awards
@cristiano



Riding Shotgun
PSG forwards Neymar (left) and Kylian Mbappé look like the perfect golf buddies during a winter training camp in Doha
@k.mbappe29



Glitz And Glamour
Star shuttler P.V. Sindhu (centre) and doubles players Chris and Gaby Adcocks at the BWF Gala Dinner
@pvsindhu1


Vaishnavi Yadav | Allahabad | Basketball

The 16-year-old is one of the emerging stars in Indian women's basketball. She was the top performer at the FIBA U-16 Asia Championship, where India got promoted to Division A after securing the Division B title, defeating Malaysia 64-48, and Yadav was an integral part of this with points at crucial junctures.


Aryan Makhija | Mumbai | Swimming

Makhija became the new sensation in Indian swimming as he won the boys' 1500m freestyle event at the Seagulls Winter Short Course Championship in Durban. His timing of 15 minutes and 21.99 seconds beat the previous Indian national record held by Sanu Debnath set at the World Short Course Championships in 2014.


Mahaveer Raghunathan | Chennai | Racing

The 19-year-old racer became the first Indian to win the European racing championship when he emerged the winner in the last two races of the Boss GP Championship [Formula Class] in Imola. In a strong field of 20 racers from across the world, the Chennai-born youngster amassed 263 points in seven rounds to annex the title.



RISING STAR OF BADMINTON

■ GADDE RUTHVIKA

Shivani has established herself as one of the rising stars on the Indian badminton circuit. Following a long list of injuries that had hampered her season, the 20-year-old from Vijayawada won the Tata Open India International Challenge singles title, defeating compatriot Riya Mukherjee 21-12, 23-21 in Mumbai.

One of the protégés of the famed Pullela Gopichand Academy, Shivani recorded her biggest career win when she shocked P.V. Sindhu for the South Asian Games singles gold last year. She was also part of the Indian women's bronze medal winning team at the 2016 Thomas and Uber Cup in Kunshan, China. □

FACES IN THE CROWD

Edited by Priyanka Sharma


Selena Selvakumar | Chennai | Table Tennis

Selvakumar won three titles at the 2017 Junior and Cadet Table Tennis Open in Egypt—the junior girls' singles, doubles and team. She beat Marwa Alhodaby 4-3 in the singles final. She then paired with Nigeria's Esther Oribamise to beat the Egypt-Greek duo of Farida Badawy and Malamatenia Papadimitriou 3-2 for the doubles gold.


Kunal Mathur | New Delhi | Karate

This prodigy put on an exemplary performance at the World Karate Championship 2017 in Kilkenny, Ireland, where he claimed the silver medal in the children's kata event in Under-30kg and up to 10 years category. Mathur, who stepped into the karate world when he was just five, has won several medals in national tournaments.


Manav Thakkar | Rajkot | Table Tennis

The 17-year-old notched up another high in his fledgling career when he became the first Indian paddler to climb to the top of the ITTF World Junior Circuit rankings despite finishing runner-up at the 2017 Serbian Junior and Cadet Open. Thakkar and four others also qualified for February 2018's ITTF World Junior Circuit Finals in Luxembourg.

Nominate a Name Now ▼

To submit a candidate for Faces In The Crowd, e-mail us at siindia@emmindia.com or sportsillustrated@emmindia.com.





CRICKET

TRIAL BY

FIRE

There is no doubt that the current Indian cricket team, No. 1 in the Test rankings, is the best bunch of players in a long time. However, their credentials will be tested in South Africa where they have traditionally struggled to perform

By Vimal Kumar

Photograph by Anesh Debiky/AFP/Getty Images

AGNIPARIKSHA," THAT IS how India's forthcoming Test series against South Africa is being billed by broadcasters Sony TV. Invariably, TV channels often deal in hyperbole but for once it seems that broadcasters have chosen the appropriate word—which translates to "trial by fire"—for a high-voltage contest beginning in the first week of 2018. You can call it the Final Frontier or the Ultimate Challenge or whatever you wish to, but the fact is that it has been a long time since a clash was one of the most anticipated Test series in the eyes of the Indian cricket fan.

"Yes, like everyone else I am also excited as a lot of people are talking about it. It's a hyped series. I like challenges in life, they keep me going. I want to make a difference for the team. I am sure we are going to play well," asserts India all-rounder Hardik Pandya.

This is a contest between the top two Test nations, India currently at No. 1 (124 rating points) and South Africa at No. 2 (111 rating points) in the International Cricket Council's official team rankings. Four batsmen each from both sides feature in the top-20 batsmen of the world in the ICC rankings. This gives you the sense that these are two evenly balanced sides. However, it's the bowling combination that is going to be crucial, and, as has been the case in the past, South Africa hold the aces in this department. A majority (five) of the top-20 bowlers in the ICC rankings are South Africans while three Indians feature in this list. However, in an ironic twist, two of them (Ravichandran Ashwin and Ravindra Jadeja) are not even guaranteed a place in the playing XI because of the likely playing conditions which are going to favour the hosts. Over the years, South Africa have prepared tracks which favour pacers—knowing full well that India didn't have a quality pace attack. Luckily, perception as well as reality seem to have changed with the evolution of India's new varied pace battery. "Of course, it's a huge plus for us as we have so many options. The captain, the coach and the team are very confident now that they don't have to worry about injuries as we have plenty of options available," says India vice-captain Ajinkya Rahane. "I don't think a lot about these things. I just keep backing my bowlers. I have played in a number of teams but the atmosphere is the best in this team," added Pandya when asked if this is India's most varied bowling attack.

If South Africa boasts a fearsome quartet of Dale Steyn, Vernon Philander,



It took India four tours to win their first Test and they have **NEVER MANAGED** to win two Test matches in a series yet.

Kagiso Rabada and Morné Morkel, India can match fire with fire with Mohammed Shami, Bhuvneshwar Kumar, Jasprit Bumrah, Ishant Sharma and Umesh Yadav. South Africa no longer have a Jacques Kallis in the team, but India can expect Pandya to give them much-needed balance—something they have always lacked in away matches.

India may have lost the last Test series in South Africa 0–1 (a two-match series) but it certainly wasn't a one-sided affair. The result could have easily been 1–1. In fact, India came agonisingly close to winning a series in 2010–11 (a 1–1 draw) and prior to that they had even taken a 1–0 lead in a three-match series in 2006–07, only to concede the rubber by a margin of 1–2. It's pretty evident that over the past decade, and on the last three trips in particular, India's lack of bowling depth cost them dearly; especially in the absence of a

quality third seamer and the fourth bowler who could keep the momentum going after initial damage was done. On paper, at least, it seems India have covered all the bases and the onus is more on the batsmen to make sure they make enough runs in the first innings and set up victories. And that is where India has been found wanting, historically.

IT'S NOT MUMBAI, where the ball doesn't get higher than the stumps. It's going to be hard to play here," Steyn had



challenged the Indian batsmen after bowling one of the most hostile One Day International (ODI) spells in the first ODI of the last tour. As someone who has troubled the best Indian batsmen in their own backyard, Steyn does know a thing or two about Indian batting's vulnerabilities on South African pitches.

It took India four tours to win their first Test in South Africa and they have never managed to win two Test matches in a series yet. Unsurprisingly, this is the one country where Indian batsmen have not been able to dominate a bowling attack for very long. Many of them have done exceptionally well in Australia (Sachin Tendulkar and V.V.S. Laxman) or England (Sourav Ganguly and Rahul Dravid), but none averaged over 50 in South Africa. Cheteshwar Pujara (70), Rahane (69.66) and Virat Kohli (68) all managed to achieve what none of the great Indian batsmen had—an average of 50-plus in South Africa in 2013.

FLAT OUT

With five quality fast bowlers in the side, the Indian squad has the firepower to match the South Africans in the pace department.

“Not only South Africa, this team has

toured Australia, England and New Zealand together and we are a confident bunch. We have a very positive frame of mind as we are aware about the conditions and expectations. Personally, I don't think there is added pressure. On the contrary, I relish the challenges of

batting in difficult conditions where the team needs you most,” says Rahane. Admittedly, the 2013 series consisted of just two Tests, a very small sample, which is why this series will give some indication if the success on that tour by this new triumvirate was a fluke. Remember what happened to Dravid on his multiple tours to South Africa? Despite his exceptional away record, Dravid had just one great series in 1996-97, which was, incidentally, his first tour of South Africa. After that, he managed just one half-century in his next 16 innings. A batting average of below 30 (29.71) in South Africa didn't do justice to his overall average of 52.31. So why do Indian batsmen struggle most in South Africa?

“It's a combination of factors. More than the well-directed short-pitched stuff, what has worked mostly is the follow-up deliveries. Seam movement and swing have caused more problems than just flat-out pace,” explains Lance

Klusener, a former South African pacer.

There seems to be a disturbing pattern of batting average dropping significantly in South Africa among India's modern batting greats. If Mohammad Azharuddin scored at an average of 23.33 in contrast to his overall average of 45.03, Virender Sehwag didn't do much better at 25.46, as opposed to 49.34. Ganguly (36.14 in comparison to 42.17) and Laxman (40.42 compared to 45.97) didn't drop alarmingly but neither managed to score a Test hundred in South Africa. Their combined total of 34 innings in South Africa yielded just eight 50s.

"Pitches in South Africa have a balloon bounce. Apart from that, they always have fantastic players at backward point like Jonty Rhodes, Herschelle Gibbs and A.B. de Villiers. When pace bowlers are bowling just short of length, the only option for you is to play with soft hands and take a single. And, if the single doesn't come (because of superb fielders), it becomes easier for pacers to put pressure on a batsman," W.V. Raman, part of the team when India toured



NO COVER

Indian batsmen have always found it difficult to handle the bouncy pitches in South Africa and that is reflected in their averages.

South Africa for the first time in 1992, had told this writer a few years ago. Tendulkar too got runs at an average of 46.44 in South Africa while his career average is 53.78. And, his record improved drastically in the 2010 series owing to his two centuries on that trip. A robust campaign in South Africa doesn't earn the same plaudits as prospering in Australia or England does, but it is distinctly evident that batting in South Africa is the ultimate challenge. "In Australia, the challenge is extra bounce but the ball doesn't move that much. In England, it swings a lot and moves around but doesn't have the same speed or bounce off the pitch. In South Africa, it's a combination of both which makes batting extremely challenging. Batsmen suddenly have to cover the high bounce along with seam and swing. In a layman's words, it's a combo challenge of Australia and England," reasons former India opener Aakash Chopra.

Former India coach Madan Lal says tours of South Africa have been the hardest for the Indian team in the past two decades. "You can say that the challenge of playing fast bowling in South Africa is almost similar to what we used to face in the West Indies. But we used to have longer tours and lots of practice

Number

17 Number of sixes hit in 15 Tests by Virender Sehwag—a record in Tests involving the two countries.

39.39% Success percentage recorded by South Africa in 33 Tests overall as compared to 30.30 by India.



10/153 Career-best bowling figures (5/60 + 5/93) produced by Venkatesh Prasad in the 1996-97 Durban Test. He remains the only Indian pacer to bag 10 wickets in a Test match vs. South Africa in South Africa.

340 Runs added by Hashim Amla and Jacques Kallis for the third wicket at Nagpur in February 2010—South Africa's highest partnership for any wicket vs. India in Tests.

ers Game

12/98 Bowling figures achieved by R. Ashwin in the Nagpur Test in November 2015—the best by any bowler in India–South Africa Tests.

31 Number of wickets captured by Ashwin at an average of 11.12 in the four-Test series in India in 2015-16—his career-best performance in a Test series.

3 Number of South African players to receive two Man of the Match awards each vs. India in Tests—Brian McMillan, Jacques Kallis and Hashim Amla.

319 A superb knock off 304 balls played by **Virender Sehwag** vs. South Africa at Chepauk, Chennai, in March 2008. With his 278-ball triple century, he set a world record for the quickest triple hundred in Tests. His tally of 257 runs on the third day (52 not out to 309 not out) is a record for most runs by a batsman in a single day's play against South Africa in Tests.



8/64 A career-best bowling performance produced by Lance Klusener in the second innings of the 1996-97 Kolkata Test is the best in the Tests involving India and South Africa. He remains the only bowler to bag eight wickets in the fourth innings of a Test match against India.

2 Number of wins registered by India in 17 Tests played vs. South Africa in South Africa.

15 Number of Tests captained by Graeme Smith, winning six, losing five and drawing the remaining four—winning percentage 40.00. His tally as captain is the highest in India–South Africa Tests.

60 Number of dismissals (58 catches + 2 stumpings) in 14 Tests effected by Mark Boucher—a record by a wicketkeeper in India–South Africa Tests.

6 Number of Indian players getting the Man of the Match award while playing Tests vs. South Africa in South Africa—one each by Pravin Amre, Rahul Dravid, Virat Kohli, V.V.S. Laxman, and S. Sreesanth and Javagal Srinath.

9 Dave Richardson (Port Elizabeth in December 1992) and Mark Boucher (Durban in December 2010) with nine dismissals each, jointly hold a wicketkeeping record for South Africa in a Test match involving the two countries.

4 Number of Tests won by South Africa by an innings' margin vs. India.



63 Wickets captured by **Dale Steyn** at 21.41 runs apiece in 13 Tests—the most by a South African bowler vs. India in Tests.
—Rajesh Kumar

PACERS

	Tests	Wkts	Ave	5WI	10WM	SR	ER	Best
South Africa	17	254	24.94	10	2	56.0	2.67	7/84
India	17	166	36.20	7	1	67.6	3.21	6/76

SPINNERS

South Africa	17	30	48.06	0	0	94.4	3.05	4/74
India	17	81	37.96	3	0	89.0	2.55	7/120

matches in between. Even the matches against regional teams of Barbados and Jamaica used to have many quality pacers. Even if we lost those practice matches, it used to give us enough practice in getting acclimatised,” says Lal.

Unfortunately, India are making the same mistake for the umpteenth time by not playing a practice game (a solitary two-day match was scrapped from the original schedule of this tour as India decided that net sessions are more rigorous and better than a game which doesn't even have first-class status). The Board of Control for Cricket in India's (BCCI) casual approach while finalising the tour schedule has given a headache to the team even before a ball is bowled in the Test series. Former India captain Bishan Singh Bedi wonders what is the point of playing against a sub-standard Sri Lankan side ahead of an important series. “I just fail to understand why we keep playing Sri Lanka time and again. This is not the right way to prepare for one of the toughest assignments,” Bedi warned.

Captain Kohli and coach Ravi Shastri have publicly expressed their displeasure at the oversight by the BCCI in the planning. However, it can also be argued that the captain and coach raised the alarm belatedly. That India were going to South Africa in late December 2017 was known well in advance. In fact, the S.A. tour was supposed to be a four-match series with a Boxing Day Test from Dec. 26, 2017, in Durban, but the love for money (by the BCCI) took precedence over planning. On the last trip in 2013, a solitary practice game was washed out while in 2010-11 India didn't have any first-class games before the Test series. Sadly, history keeps repeating itself and India never learn from mistakes. In the 2013 series, captain M.S. Dhoni had conceded that there was no point in blaming scheduling, but luckily there was an ODI and T20 series before the Test series so it did help in acclimatisation.

Perhaps Shastri could have taken a leaf out of former India coach Gary Kirsten's book. In 2010-11, team India was in a similar situation with a seemingly meaningless ODI series being played against New Zealand. However, Kirsten decided to depart with many Test players for a 10-day camp, leaving the coaching responsibility to his assistant, Eric Simons. As a result, it wasn't a coincidence that India managed to share the honours for the first time and, in fact, came close to winning the series.

Some experts believe that even if playing Sri Lanka was a must (due to obligations towards broadcasters), the series could have been planned in a better way. “Ideally, I would have liked T20 and ODI series before the Test series. At least players would be in Test match mode. What is happening now is that very few players are getting a first-class match due to the Ranji trophy semi-finals,” says Chopra.

Perhaps, it is also about how much India cares and values its Test series win. For the Ashes series, England reached Australia 26 days prior to the first Test. Even though they badly lost the series, they can take solace in the fact that it wasn't due to lack of planning.

South Africa also has an immediate wound to heal. They are unlikely to forget in a hurry what kind of turners they got when they toured India in 2015. Yet, neutral observers are also confident of India's chances this time around.

“I think this is a very strong Indian team but across the world there are not too many teams going and winning away. South Africa is a very challenging place to play but I think the way Kohli leads the team, with belief, this team will go a long way,” said former Australian captain Adam Gilchrist, who was in India recently.

In spite of a great record of winning nine Test series in a row (only the third team in history after England and Australia), Kohli and his men must have

TAKING GUARD

Kohli and Pujara are likely to be the mainstay of the Indian batting, but other top-order batsmen have to quickly get into the groove.



been disappointed with the way the Delhi Test against Sri Lanka ended. A sequence of 16 Tests on home soil, spread across two seasons, had 11 wins, but poor fielding and good batting tracks like Rajkot (against England) and Ranchi (versus Australia) have highlighted the old vulnerability of not being able to finish off games when opponents have shown some resistance.

India have lost five of the six Test series played between the two nations in South Africa. Out of 17 Tests played in South Africa, India have won only two, lost eight and seven have ended in draws. Yet, very few are holding their past record against them when judging the chances of this team. “No reason why they can't be a world force but they can be only judged by the results. It's hard to predict the outcome, but definitely the potential is there (to win),” said Gilchrist.

While former India captain Dravid feels the Kohli-led team has a “great chance” of winning a maiden Test series in South Africa, former coach Anil Kumble is also confident that the team has what it takes to create history in South Africa. Even Morkel said that India have batsmen who score on hard,



Captain Kohli publicly expressed **DISPLEASURE** at the oversight by the BCCI in the planning.

bouncy pitches and have a good seam attack that has pace and swing.

WITH SIX SCORES of 200+ in the last 18 months, Kohli has been in great form and if he can manage one more double ton in South Africa, it will be the first of its kind, as no Indian has scored a double hundred on South African soil. However, the team feels it's just not about Kohli scoring big hundreds.

"You know, everyone in this team has a distinct style. We feel every player is number one in his position. The No. 3 is best in that position, No. 4 is best and so on till 11 and that is the reason why this team has become No. 1 in Test cricket," asserts Rahane.

The Test vice-captain may have gone through a horrendous run recently against the pedestrian attack of Sri Lanka, but his pedigree away from home is undisputed. Rahane has scored six of his nine centuries outside India, and averages nearly 20 runs more per innings—53.44 to 33.63. The only thing missing from his formidable Test CV is a Test hundred in South Africa, which he narrowly missed out on in the last trip (he made a superb 96 at Kingsmead). "Self-belief is very important as it helps you in winning half the battle. Skill levels of both teams are almost the same but people expect us to win...it is because we have dominated in all formats of the game. I think and have always believed that if we start well, momentum is going to stay with us," says Rahane.

India can also look to take advantage of the fact that two of South Africa's biggest match-winners are short of Test-match fitness. While Steyn last played a Test for South Africa in November 2016 (since then he has been out of international cricket due to an injury), de Villiers, similarly, has also not played Test cricket since January 2016. Perhaps good form, and a bit of luck, will lead to a bit of history. □



SPORTS FATIGUE

FOR OUTSIDERS, the lives of successful sportspersons appear enviable. The fans, often dazzled by the glamorous lifestyles and high living, elevate them to the status of demigods. Any youngster playing a sport dreams of emulating his favourite icons.

But, as the saying goes, all that glitters is not gold. From the outside, the life of the Virat Kohlis and Hardik Pandyas seems perfect, but get a little closer and all is not as it seems. For these men—as successful as they are despite their relatively young age—spend their days either training or playing in trying conditions. Then there is constant travel to deal with. Living out of a suitcase is more a norm than an exception for professional sportspersons. Though in modern sports there are teams of specialist support staff to take care of the needs of a professional sportsperson, the wear and tear that comes from constant playing ultimately takes its toll on the mind and body.

Just before the home Test series against Sri Lanka, Pandya, still only 24, requested the Indian cricket



“I’M LUCKY THAT I GOT THIS REST. ACTUALLY, REST MEANS I’M GOING TO TRAIN IN THE GYM AND IMPROVE MY FITNESS.”

board to drop him for the first two matches. Expectedly, he invited criticism. After all, why would a young player who made his debut just a year earlier need rest?

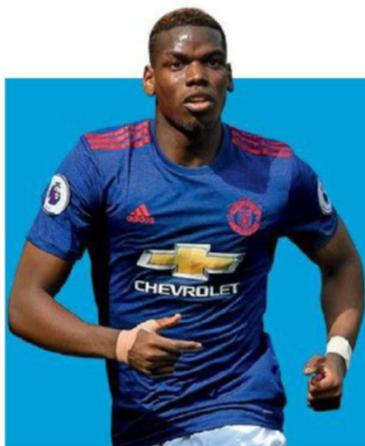
The fact is that, rather than ridiculing Pandya’s decision to pull out, the Indian cricket fraternity should be thankful to him for putting the spotlight on an issue that everyone is aware of but chooses to brush under the carpet of the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI)—Indian cricketers are playing too much cricket, and it’s beginning to take a toll on them.

A look at some broad numbers reveals the workload

that Pandya has borne for a year. Before the start of the South Africa series the young all-rounder bowled 449 overs in all formats, including in the past two seasons of the Indian Premier League (IPL) since his T20 debut at Adelaide against Australia in January 2016. Pandya requesting a rest was not the big news. However, his honesty about his body, and professionalism, kicked off a debate about excessive cricket being played owing to the ‘non-compromise revenue model’ of the Indian cricket board.

Add to that the personal sponsorship deals that don’t allow them the luxury of sitting on the sidelines to recover from fatigue, because there are plenty of young aspiring cricketers waiting to take their spots and prove themselves. “To be honest, I asked for it because my body was not alright,” Pandya told CNN-News 18. “I want to play cricket when I’m totally fit

GARETH COLLEVEY/GETTY IMAGES; ASHLEY STU FOSTER/GETTY IMAGES



Paul Pogba

Manchester United’s record signing and the heart of their midfield, Pogba suffered a hamstring injury on Sept. 12, 2017. The Frenchman was substituted after 18 minutes in a Champions League tie against FC Basel. Many questioned coach José Mourinho’s (right) decision to include him in the lineup as the player had begun to show signs of fatigue three days earlier in a 2-2 draw with Stoke City. It is important to note that Pogba made 51 appearances (49 starts) for United during the 2016-17 season, the highest at the club. Pogba returned to action on Nov. 18, and during his absence United’s form and results suffered. The team drew against Liverpool, lacking creativity, but more important, lost to Chelsea and Huddersfield.



TIPPING POINT

Professional leagues like the EPL put a very heavy workload on the players with very little time for recovery, which is a cause of frequent breakdowns.

train in the gym and improve my fitness and come back properly fit,” he explained. “I’m pretty excited about the South Africa series. I wanted that break to get super fit for the series and then I can bounce back quickly.”

Pandya’s decision could be a good case study for the BCCI as there are many star cricketers who have been playing continuously in all formats of the game and they need to be protected from physical and mental fatigue for the sake of their futures.

“Injuries related to overuse of the body are most common in sports because for a normal body you need a good balance between your cardio and stretching,” Dr Deepak Chaudhary, director, Sports Injury Centre,

and I’m giving my 100 percent...and I was not able to give that because of a few niggles here and there, which is bound to happen because of the amount of cricket that I have played over this one year.”

“I’m lucky that I got this rest.

Actually, rest means I’m going to

Safdarjung Hospital, New Delhi, told **SPORTS ILLUSTRATED INDIA**. “If you overuse the body, your muscles need to recover before you take to the field again. And time is needed for recovery. A muscle which has not recovered depletes in terms of protein, in terms of glycogen and it is likely to get injured.”

“We have some T20 specialists and we have ODI and Test specialists,” adds Ramji Srinivasan, the former fitness trainer of the Indian cricket team. “Only a few players are playing in all formats of the game and those players need to be taken care of very specifically. That is very important. The recovery process is crucial and both mind and body have to recover well in time. For that, rest is needed.”

Kohli’s stats over the past two years (upto December 2017) make for interesting reading. Since January 2016, he has faced 7,157 deliveries, or 1,193 overs, in which he scored 5,871 runs in 99 matches across all formats.

SHALUN BOTTORNI/GETTY IMAGES (ABOVE); GARETH COPLEY/GETTY IMAGES



EPL’S Winter Schedule

The Premier League is the biggest league in the world but in its quest to remain so it has put the well-being of players lower on the list of priorities. While the rest of Europe’s top leagues enjoy a winter break, the EPL goes on, with some clubs playing as many as four games in less than 10 days. Add to it England’s torrid winter, travel, and other domestic cup commitments. Managers sweat each time a player pulls up short or reaches for his hamstring. More often than not, this means a long list of injuries resulting from fatigue during the new year and the latter half of the season around March. No matter how much care is taken, the lack of rest eventually catches up with players.

Add to that his fielding responsibilities for hundreds of overs in demanding conditions. No other international cricketer carries the burden of such massive numbers. To this add the thousands of miles he has travelled, both in India and internationally. Kohli's fans call him the 'Run Machine,' but his workload over the past two years suggests that 'Robot' would be a better nickname.

Kohli, captain of the Indian team, admitted he too needed a rest ahead of the Test series against Sri Lanka. "Definitely, I do need a rest. Why not? When I think it is time my body needs to be rested, I'll ask for it. I am not a robot...you can slice my skin and check, I bleed," he said. It's clear that this is an issue that needs to be addressed by the board. "The constant increase in sporting activities, especially in football and cricket, across the globe and the intense training has caused a proportionate increase in sports fatigue and injuries," says Prof. Raju Vaishya, Sr. Orthopaedic Consultant at Apollo Hospital, Sarita Vihar, New Delhi. "These injuries, if they aren't diagnosed and treated in time, can spoil the career of a professional player."

REDUCING WORKLOAD?

In December, the BCCI decided that the number of match days would be reduced from 390 to 306 over the next five-year cycle from 2019 to 2023. Though this will not include the 2021 ICC Champions Trophy and the 2023 World Cup. It also announced that in the proposed Future Tours Programme (FTP) for the next four years, the number of home matches has increased from 51 to 81. But it's unlikely that players will get any relief because 60 matches will be played during the 50 days of the IPL. The BCCI has also decided to play more T20 matches over 2019–2023. As the IPL offers lucrative fees over a small period, players don't want to give it a miss, but the most popular cricket league in the world is taking a toll on them. The situation is such that sooner or later the board and the players will be forced to address the issue.

"The most important requirement for the IPL is to get the body clock adjusted to perform after 8 pm. Matches in the IPL require a high level of alertness and explosive power. However, because these matches are played at night, all factors need to be adjusted, i.e. sleep patterns, travel schedules, calorie intake and mental training," says Shayamal Vallabhjee, a sports scientist and cricket fitness expert.

During Srinivasan's stint as fitness trainer from 2009 to mid-2013, the Indian team won the World Cup and Champions Trophy and became the No. 1 Test side. However, he feels T20 cricket is the killer. "In T20 or the IPL, the issue is extensive travel. That is a killer. You finish a match at 1 am, then you rush

"NO ONE LIKES TO TAKE A BREAK"

Former India opening batsman and member of the 2011 World Cup-winning team Gautam Gambhir talks about managing fatigue

SI: How does overuse of the body and excessive workload affect the overall performance of a cricketer or any athlete?

Gautam Gambhir: Well, professional sport requires A-level concentration and commitment. A slight slip can push you back by a season. Excessive fatigue or stress on the body can make already vulnerable body parts weaker, and in some cases can cause career-damaging injuries. I can promise you that no cricket player around me can ever claim to be absolutely injury-free and we have learnt to live with the fact that you have to ignore injuries and instead keep working on gaining strength in your over-used muscles and body parts. Another aspect is that if you are not resting then in a team sport you are compromising someone else's performance as well. For example, if I am not 100 percent I won't be able to make that extra effort to stop the ball or take a tumbling catch. So, effectively, my lack of fitness can cause some serious loss to someone else—in my case my bowling teammate or the batsman with whom I am batting.



SI: Do cricketers (national or international) usually talk about fatigue or taking a break during the season?

GG: No one likes to take a break unless he or she is forced to. Yes, we talk about fatigue and injuries all the time as that is a common factor among all cricketers. We also exchange notes if the injuries are common.

SI: Have you ever felt that fatigue is affecting your game? If so, how did you handle it?

GG: Yes, it has affected but then I have pushed myself to get that extra ounce of energy out. I remember, in the 2011 World Cup final I was mentally and physically drained when I reached my half-century against Sri Lanka. After that I started to smartly pace my innings and thanks to the generous umpires, I could regularly hydrate myself, otherwise the humidity in Mumbai was extremely high that April 2011 night. So, one has to be smart about handling fatigue as one can never be 100 percent fatigue- or injury-free.

MOST COMMON SYNDROMES

Athletes can suffer from one or a combination of fatigue factors, which can hamper performance in the short term or lead to injuries in the long term



NEURAL FATIGUE

Although the local muscular system can recover quickly, fatigue of the central nervous system can take much longer. This means that performance while training is largely inhibited by neural rather than muscular factors most of the time.



LOCAL MUSCULAR FATIGUE

Caused by insufficient energy to power high-intensity workouts and increasing levels of muscular discomfort.



NEUROENDOCRINE FATIGUE

It is very rare, but consistently overstressing the body's reserves can eventually lead to negative effects on hormone status. This causes cortisol to rise, testosterone to drop, and sets up a situation where you become progressively less able to recover properly.



ENVIRONMENTAL FATIGUE

Lack of sleep, stress, the pressure of performance and jetlag are some factors that can trigger this. While all these factors will have an impact on the nervous system, they are distinct from those that training imposes.

SOURCE: BREAKINGMUSCLE.COM

SPORTS FATIGUE

back to your hotel room,” says Srinivasan. “The next morning you take a flight to another city to play another match and that is more tiring than the match itself. And this process keeps repeating for almost two months.”

The consensus among experts is obvious—fatigue can weaken various muscle groups, including the hamstring, and that could be a cause for injury to athletes. In the 10th season of the IPL, around 17 players, including big names such as Kohli, K.L. Rahul, A.B. de Villiers, Martin Guptill, Murali Vijay, Ravindra Jadeja, Dwayne Bravo, Quinton de Kock, J.P. Duminy, Darren Bravo and Umesh Yadav, either sat out some games or missed the entire league as a result of injuries. Interestingly, some of them did play a few matches before being forced to sit out.

“It is seen that sports-related injuries are often hidden by players and are not disclosed to their coaches or administrators due to fear it will keep them out of action or out of the team for some time,” says Dr Vaishya. “Hence, these injuries keep lingering, leading to permanent damage to joints and bones.” But is T20 cricket the culprit?

Srinivasan, now with the Tamil Nadu Cricket Association, has a different view. “Physiologically, I think ODIs or Tests are more tiring than T20. One can say the intensity is very high, but bowlers have to bowl only four overs,” he says. “Whereas in Tests and ODIs, the process is very long and tiring both mentally and physically. It’s more challenging for players to play a Test or an ODI compared to a T20 game.”

Srinivasan’s argument isn’t without reason, as this is not the first time the fatigue factor is being talked about. Over two decades ago, well before T20 cricket became the cash machine that it is today, Richie Richardson, the former West Indies batsman, who preferred to play without a helmet, called time on his career, citing fatigue as the cause.



CALLING IT A DAY

In recent times, Swann of England took early retirement because he could not cope with the demands of modern cricket.

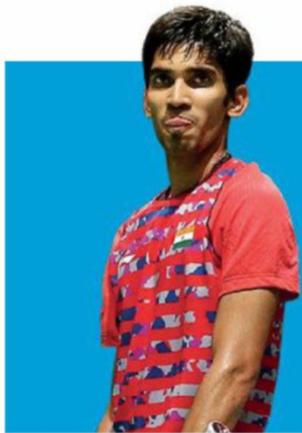


“I resigned and retired because I was suffering from chronic fatigue syndrome, I was burnt out and it was a struggle to continue playing cricket,” Richardson told the BBC in 2007. “Every day was stressful, everybody wanted a piece of you and I had no time for myself. I was training harder and trying hard on the field, but I couldn’t do what I wanted to do. I felt like I was selling myself and my fans short. They wanted me to continue, but if I had I would have got ill so it was time to move on.”

Another, more recent, example is that of Graeme Swann. During the 2013–14 Ashes, the England spinner abruptly announced his retirement. He may have been 34, but poor form was not the culprit. “England have been very good to me as they have rested me when they could. But my body doesn’t like playing the long forms of cricket,” Swann told the media following his decision. “My arm doesn’t cope very well with bowling 30 or 40 overs in the first innings and then repeating it in the second innings a day later anymore.

“I could feel my performances tapering off in the backend of games

STU FORSTEN/GETTY IMAGES (ABOVE); WARREN LITTLE/GETTY IMAGES FOR FALCON



Kidambi Srikanth

India’s top male shuttler is also someone who had to take time away from the court as his body couldn’t cope with a rigorous 2017 during which he won a record four Super Series titles in a single year. Srikanth pulled out of the Hong Kong Open and China Open in November due to a muscle strain. The then world No. 2 took a week’s rest after aggravating a leg injury during the Senior National Badminton Championships in Nagpur, but it was also fatigue due to the hectic season that got the better of him. “I am pulling out of the China Open. It is a muscle strain and the doctor advised me to take rest for one week. It happened in the Nationals, because I kept playing without a break,” he said after pulling out.



heat and humidity of South Asia.

“Due to external temperatures during the summer months the body is prone to overheating. Many factors are affected—hydration levels, body temperature and the duration and intensity of exercise. In hot weather, recovery from intense sessions may take up to 24 to 48 hours longer,” says Vallabhjee. Unlike Cricket Australia (CA), the BCCI doesn’t have a weather policy to counter tough conditions during the season. CA has drafted its own ‘Extreme Heat Guidelines’ which read: “Where possible, matches should be scheduled to start earlier/later to avoid the hottest parts of the day, session times should be altered to avoid play during the hottest parts of the day, reduce length of sessions to allow for additional drink breaks, increase length of lunch/tea breaks.” It’s clear that the BCCI’s financial model is completely revenue-driven and it is not going to compromise on that. So what measures can

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“I THINK ODIs OR TESTS ARE MORE TIRING THAN T20. ONE CAN SAY THE INTENSITY IS VERY HIGH, BUT BOWLERS HAVE TO BOWL ONLY FOUR OVERS.”

and I wasn’t happy with that. Every game I’d think, ‘Great, it’s back again,’ but with more overs and fatigue the elbow would start to let me down. I’m not willing to just hang on and get by, being a bit-part player.”

IN GOOD SPIRIT?

While the BCCI’s decision to increase the number of matches at home and reduce the number of playing days is a welcome one, it’s not something that was done with the benefit of players in mind alone. Playing more cricket in India has many financial benefits as more home matches will ensure increased revenue for the board. The months from October to December constitute the home season for the Indian team. Whereas the period from January to March is considered a secondary season overseas. But playing at home or in countries such as Sri Lanka or Bangladesh from May to September is a nightmare due to the

be taken to protect the players in the current scenario?

“Workload on the team management is going to be tough now. You have to be on the money and you have to be on the ball. How do you manage players’ workload?” Srinivasan argues.

“I feel there has to be a rotational policy for resting the players for T20, ODIs and Test matches like the Australian team had in the ’90s and early 2000s. You have to decide what is important—money or assets (players) which bring in money. You have to adopt a rotation policy.”

Perhaps it’s time all parties involved realise that while players will love to play the game day in, day out, to do that they need a few good nights of sleep. □

MINAS PANAGIOTAKIS/GETTY IMAGES (FEDERER)



Roger Federer

Perhaps the best example of a sportsperson understanding his body and managing fatigue levels is Federer. The Swiss maestro was judged to be past his prime by most as he had not won a Grand Slam title since his 2012 win at Wimbledon when he was around 30. In 2013, he didn’t manage to reach a major final, was runner-up in one in 2014, and lost two finals in 2015. Almost 36 at the start of 2017, Federer returned after an extended break in 2016 and won the Australian Open, beating long-time nemesis Rafael Nadal. Federer then gave the French Open a miss to manage fatigue, before conquering Wimbledon again for the eighth time.

WOMEN'S
BOXING

GIRLS WITH IRON FISTS

A decade since M.C. Mary Kom put India on the world boxing map, the nation seems to have found its new boxing stars. These girls from remote corners of the country are not only winning bouts, but also hearts

By **Priyanka Sharma**

Photographs courtesy of BFI

DONNING THE MANTLE

The crowd that watched Ankushita's triumph will probably remember it as the day they witnessed the rise of India's next Mary Kom.





THE FINAL VERDICT read 4–1. But even before the bout, Ranjita Boro knew what the outcome of the last fight of the 2017 AIBA Women’s Youth Boxing Championships in Guwahati would be. The mother had faith in her 17-year-old daughter, Ankushita. Much like Ranjita, the confidence could be felt in the small crowd that included father Rakesh Kumar, who travelled around 200 km from their ancestral village of Meghai Jaroni in Sonitpur district of Assam to watch the fight. For them, it was a big moment, an emotional one.

“Thank you, coach, I won because of your guidance. It wasn’t an easy bout, I tried really hard. I was surprised to see the crowd’s support... my family and friends have also travelled from so far to support me. It is because of my parents’ sacrifices and blessings that I have reached here,” Ankushita said, with teary eyes and quivering voice, before walking away with the award for the best boxer of the tournament.

For the hosts, the Ankushita Boro vs. Ekaterina Dynn timer result in the 64kg category capped off the best show ever by India at the youth worlds. Already the darling of the locals, Ankushita became the toast of the nation after winning the last gold up for grabs—which made it five golds in five finals for India, besides the two bronze medals won by Neha Yadav (+81kg) and Anupama (81kg). Nitu (48kg), Jyoti Gulia (51kg), Sakshi Choudhury (54kg) and Shashi Chopra (57kg) had already emerged winners in their respective finals. India had one bronze medal from the previous edition of the event and had not won a gold since 2011.

The gold rush for India started with Nitu’s thrashing of Kazakhstan’s Zhazira Urakbayeva 5–0, before Gulia, Choudhury and Chopra followed it up with three back-to-back golds. There was a long wait after that bout, with five welter and heavyweight finals crammed in between. The crowd saved its energy for the last bout of the day and as Ankushita entered the ring, the noise at the Karmabir Nabin Chandra Bordoloi Indoor Stadium reached a crescendo.

Up against one of the toughest boxers in the competition, Ankushita had to produce her best. After all, the Russian had tamed all with her power, speed and guile. The Assam girl, who had been laid low by chicken pox just before the tournament, however, was on a roll as she unleashed a combination of punches, allowing no room for Dynn timer to make a comeback. With her silky-smooth footwork and lightning punches, Ankushita peppered Dynn timer’s body and face. No prizes for guessing the judges’ decision.

While qualifying for next year’s Youth Olympics in Ar-

gentina was a dream harboured by all these girls, only Gulia (the only one born after 1999) made the cut. While financial assistance followed for all of them, it meant much more to Ankushita, who comes from a family of farmers. Boxing Federation of India (BFI) president Ajay Singh announced a cash prize of ₹2 lakh for each of the winners, while Ankushita received around ₹20 lakh from various agencies of the state, including its government.

“Not many people in our village know about the sport or have done boxing. She started boxing in 2012, when one of her cousins, Brajen, took her for trials at the Sports Authority of India (SAI) Centre in Golaghat. In order to spend less money on travel, she stayed at the hostel. In fact, due to our poor condition, we are staying at Ankushita’s maternal grandparents’ home,” says Rakesh, who is a teacher on probation at the Borbil M.E. School.

“She is the eldest of our three daughters. As a kid, she was fond of dancing and won several local competitions. We always thought she might become a professional dancer, but I am happier that she is winning medals for the country. Now, her sister wants to follow in

STANDING TALL
The lanky Chopra (in blue) and Nitu (below, left) were rewarded for their quick footwork throughout the competition.

Feather (57kg):
Shashi Chopra (Ind) bt Do Hong Ngoc (Vie) 4–1

Light Fly (45–48kg):
Nitu (Ind) bt Zhazira Urakbayeva (Kaz) 5–0





EXPECT A MEDAL AT TOKYO 2020

AS M.C. MARY KOM won an unprecedented fifth Asian Boxing Championships gold medal in Vietnam, those that hope to one day follow in her footsteps were making a name for themselves at home. The girls' brilliant run at the Youth Women's World Championships in Guwahati impressed several in the fraternity, including India's elite men's and women's high-performance director, Santiago Nieva. The Argentine-origin Swede was all praise for the new breed of boxers and believes they possess all the qualities to succeed at the senior level as well. Nieva, who coached the Swedish national youth and elite teams for eight years, spoke to SI on the current state of affairs, the future prospects and Mary Kom. Excerpts:

SI: Your thoughts on the new crop of boxers and the future of Indian boxing.

SANTIAGO NIEVA: With these kind of results where five boxers are in the final with some brilliant performances, it is a tremendous boost for Indian boxing. I believe we can look forward to a bright future. These girls are well-schooled which is very important for international success. I am impressed by how they can throw very good

combinations and follow up in high rhythm at youth level bouts. This is very promising, because results are not produced overnight. This is not a magic trick. We need to have a good system and infrastructure not only at the national level, but at all levels; states and provinces, and work collectively. The Boxing Federation of India (BFI) is doing a good job, the government is investing, I am sure we will have a lot of good boxers in the near future.

SI: Which areas do you think our boxers need to improve upon?

SN: It's a bit of everything. We need to focus on the technical-tactical development of boxers. That can be done through video analysis which is not used much in India. That is a great tool we have introduced, along with strength training where we are using more modern methods rather than old school approaches. The next step would be nutrition. For a high-performance sport, the nutrition of boxers in India is not the best. We need to educate coaches and boxers in this area, which can make a difference and help them become stronger for competitions. Indian boxing is highly influenced by the European style, and I am trying to add some American style into it.

I want our boxers to go for body punches, they are a little too focussed on head-hunting. They need to work on close range and body punches, to add variation in their technical arsenal.



SI: Your thoughts on Mary Kom, who is still going strong.

SN: She is very open-minded and a brilliant boxer with huge experience. She is giving great performances with yet another medal. But I would still like to come out with some inputs on her positioning when she's in defensive and offensive situations.

SI: What do you think of the Indian male boxers?

SN: India is generally stronger in lighter weight categories. In 49kg, we have two to three boxers who wouldn't surprise me if one of them becomes an Olympic medalist in Tokyo. I am expecting a gold medal in one of the lighter weight categories at the Commonwealth Games.

—Priyanka Sharma



her footsteps. In fact, many girls in the village have shown an interest in taking up boxing; Ankushita is becoming an inspiration in the locality now,” added Ranjita, clad in a traditional Bodo dress, a red *dokhona*, for the finals. “With this money, we can now build a house of our own.”

Ankushita, who admitted that the 2015 national championship gold was the turning point in her career, is a protégé of coach Tridib Bora at the Assam Boxing Academy in Guwahati. “I want to fulfil my parents’ dream and compete at the Tokyo Olympics. I will try harder for that,” said the lanky boxer. However, the Olympics won’t feature her weight category and she may have to go a notch higher, 69kg, to qualify for the 2020 Games.

THE KIND OF impact the young champion has had on her state and home fans is remarkable. Olympian Shiva Thapa is the only boxer from Assam who had garnered such accolades from the crowd here. But who has been the inspiration for the promising star?

“My idol is Mary Kom,” said Ankushita, striking one of her favourite poses. This is a common answer from

Locals at the Sarusajai Stadium have already feted Ankushita with the title of ‘Next Mary Kom,’ owing to her ferocious attitude and the Northeast connection.

all these girls when asked about their inspiration. For the past decade, if not more, Indian women’s boxing has been all about Mary Kom, and the 34-year-old from Manipur has been shouldering the expectations of over a billion people.

But with Mary Kom in the last phase of her career, one question has been asked often—who’s next? The answer may lie in the achievements of the girls who hail from some of India’s most remote areas. “These kinds of results show India has a bright future. The boxers here have the heart and stamina, they just need to work on their technique,” says Santiago



MAKING HEADWAY

Despite a fantastic show by the Indian girls, only Gulia (left) is eligible for the 2018 Youth Olympics to be held in Argentina.

Fly(51kg):
Jyoti Gulia
bt Ekaterina
Molchanova
(Rus) 5-0

**Light Welter
(64kg):**
Ankushita
Boro (Ind)
bt Ekaterina
Dynnik (Rus) 4-1

**Bantam
(54kg):** Sakshi
Choudhary (Ind)
bt Ivy-Jane
Smith
(Eng) 3-2

Nieva, the high-performance director for both men's and women's boxing.

Interestingly, the common link between these young girls and Mary Kom is that all of them come from far-flung areas and from humble backgrounds and are armed with a massive drive to excel. Their belligerence, power and speed have been so impressive that even 'Magnificent' Mary Kom said: "These girls are very talented and smart. Some of the lighter weight categories have the potential to become the next Mary Kom, but they will have to work really hard."

BFI chief Singh added: "All these girls have incredible stories to tell. They have struggled and fought hard. In some cases, they have run away from their homes to pursue their passion. The entire country is proud of them. They are probably future Olympic medallists."

In fact, locals at the Sarusajai Stadium have already feted Ankushita with the title of 'Next Mary Kom,' owing to her ferocious attitude and the Northeast connection. Assam Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal, who announced a cash prize of ₹10 lakh for the Bodo girl for making the state proud, called her "the future Mary Kom."

"Ankushita has established Assam on the world boxing map. Our main objective is to create a playing environment across the state, in the villages, tea gardens and the Barak and Brahmaputra valleys and produce more champions like Ankushita. After participating in tournaments like this, the athletes who come from remote areas can go back to their villages and tell everyone about their experience. That way we can engage more youngsters in sports," Sonowal told SPORTS ILLUSTRATED INDIA.

While Ankushita sparked a passion for boxing among youngsters in the Northeast, other medallists—from small towns in Haryana—have emerged from a patriarchal society to take sports forward, much like Rio Olympic medallist Sakshi Malik and the Phogat sisters did in wrestling.

"I had to lie to my parents to be able to train as they



were against boxing. I used to say I'm going to work on a school project at my friend's place who stayed next to the Shaheed Batun Singh Stadium in Roorkee. It was only after my state championship selection that they discovered my secret," said Gulia, who won a gold and silver medal each in invitational meets in Serbia and Turkey this year.

However, what instilled the passion for boxing in Gulia was the fame that came to a neighbourhood friend after winning a gold medal at a district level competition. Though her parents' resistance towards the sport stopped her initially, it wasn't long before she made her way. "The drive was very strong. I thought I could also win and bring some laurels for my parents and the country," the Rohtak-born boxer says, who is known for her aggressive style.

For Chopra, who hails from Hisar, Saina Nehwal's gold medal win at the 2010 Commonwealth Games paved her way into sports. She began going to a nearby stadium and started playing badminton. "It was only after I saw Mary Kom *dididi* winning the bronze medal at the London Games that I felt so strongly about boxing. I realised then that girls can also participate and win in a combat sport like boxing," said Chopra, reminiscing about her childhood activities, and about being a naughty kid fighting with boys in her locality. Chopra has a gold and silver medal each in international meets, and feels that this year has been "life-changing" for her.

Hailing from conservative families in Dhanana, Choudhury and Nitu train under renowned coach Jagdish Singh at the famed Bhiwani Boxing Academy. "I feel proud to train at the same academy where Vijender Singh trained. Ever since I started boxing, I have dreamt of winning a medal on a big stage like him," said Choudhury, a former junior world champion in 2015 and a gold medallist at the Balkan Open in Bulgaria in October.

FOLLOWING LONG PERIODS of infighting and political turmoil, that even led to its athletes competing without the national flag, the BFI has witnessed a good turn of events recently owing to the effort of several faces including the recently appointed foreign coach for the women's youth team, Raffaele Bergamasco. Despite challenges, including the communication gap, the Italian has had a massive impact on the boxers with his unique training methods. "Indian girls are very strong and have good stamina. Even though they come from villages, their technique is good. But they were mentally not prepared for big fights. They are improving now," Bergamasco says. He added music to their training sessions, and the girls loved it.

Head coach Bhaskar Chandra Bhatt emphasised that the last six-seven months of training were crucial. "The girls were also sent for several invitational meets and it really helped boost their confidence. They have already faced the top players in several meets this year, so they

Following long periods of infighting, that even led to national boxers competing without the national flag, the BFI has made positive changes for the betterment of the sport.





were prepared. We have done video analysis of their opponents and were observing every player and their style of play in competitions and have trained them accordingly.”

“Normally, the training included more hours, less speed work but before competitions it was less hours and more speed. The balance of volume and intensity is important. After Bergamasco joined the girls in July, he mixed some European techniques with Indian methods and worked on specific areas based on the opponent, round or situation. The work has been more on tactics,” said the coach, adding that his next assignment will be to make the girls ready for the Youth Olympics, Youth World Championships and Youth Asian Championships.

BFI president Singh is also credited for the positive changes in the national boxing set-up, right from providing training and appointing foreign coaches to athletes’ exposure trips and competitions. When SI got in touch with him to know how he is helping change the fortunes of boxing in the country, Singh said: “The focus now is on the boxers, on the sport, the coaches and technical officials and not on politics. India has tremendous potential in boxing

and as you can see, in one year there has been a massive change and our boxers are doing really well. We are making sure that they are being trained throughout the

THE GUIDING FORCE

Italian coach Bergamasco's (left) presence at the camp had a massive impact on the girls, who produced a string of good performances.

year and participating in every major championship in the world. AIBA (International Boxing Association) recognises that India can organise good championships.”

With no recognised federation for four years, the initial months were challenging for the new organisers as they had to start from scratch. “We made sure that the national championships were being held when they were supposed to, and selected boxers there. Now, they are training in national camps, which run for 365 days. We ensured that boxers get the best possible coaching, best infrastructure, nutrition and best international exposure.

“But there is a long way to go and we need to do well in the Asian, Commonwealth Games and the Olympics. I think we are on the right path. You can see it from the enthusiasm here and how the country will react when India succeeds in the world of boxing,” he said, adding that various programmes like upgradation of the level of coaches and referees, a cut-man course (on how to scientifically deal with cuts in the ring) were recently held, something which is a new addition to BFI’s plans. It seems a sport that was struggling to even follow its national championships calendar is now set to be the one that promises the most medals in the coming years. □



BASKETBALL

G TIME'S VIRTUAL REALITY

HOW DO YOU COPE WITH
A GRUESOME INJURY
THAT DERAILS WHAT SHOULD
HAVE BEEN A DREAM
SEASON? IF YOU'RE BOSTON'S
GORDON HAYWARD,
YOU LAUNCH YOURSELF
INTO YOUR REHAB—AND
FIND SOLACE IN YOUR
ONLINE GAMING WORLD

BY
LEE JENKINS

PHOTOGRAPH BY
MADDIE MEYER/GETTY IMAGES

GORDON HAYWARD

After the pain came the doubt, that nocturnal beast, always awakening as Gordon Hayward searched for sleep. He would lie in bed next to his wife, Robyn, head swirling with questions he couldn't swat away: *Will I be able to play again? Will I be able to jump again? What am I supposed to do now?*

He could have scrolled through the million well-wishes on his time line—literally, a million—but he is uncomfortable accepting attention for an injury. “I want it to be for a game-winner,” he laments. He could have read the dozens of self-help books he has received about overcoming adversity (*Grit*, by Angela Duckworth, is one he started), but the words don't soothe him. “They just get me thinking more about my ankle.” He could have watched the Celtics—their latest triumph reairing on NBC Sports Boston—but then he'd stew until sunrise. The only elixir sat on a desk in the third-floor den, glowing.



“[BEFORE THE INJURY] we had a way about us,” STEVENS SAYS. “YOU'RE THINKING, WE HAVE A CHANCE TO BE PRETTY GOOD.”



Hayward would slide out of bed, careful not to disturb Robyn, and pad down the hallway toward the light. The den, which overlooks his snow-covered front yard in the Boston suburbs, is furnished with a Costco-sized container of cashews, a football given to him by Peyton Manning and a basketball painted by Hayward's twin sister, Heather, depicting the logos of his former teams. Guests pull up the number 20 stool he used in the locker room at Butler; Hayward sinks into a high-backed leather chair. He slips on a HyperX headset and faces twin monitors attached to a PC with his initials.

NBA players devour video games, but few master them like GTime, as he is known in cyberspace, studying strategies on YouTube and streams of professionals on Twitch.tv. Asking him to play *Madden* on Xbox is like inviting him to the Y for pickup. “I don't do RPGs,” he says, having graduated from role-playing games when his *Halo* team at Brownsburg High outside Indianapolis entered tournaments for cash prizes. He has earned a platinum rat-

ing in *League of Legends*, reserved for the top five percent of players in the world, and has convinced some fellow gamers that he could turn pro if not for the intrusions of basketball and family. For the past three years he has taken meetings about potential purchases into an eSports organization.

Since Hayward suffered a dislocated left ankle and a fractured tibia on opening night, five minutes and 11 seconds into his Celtics debut, he has been flanked by doctors, trainers, physical therapists and a sports psychologist. They are all trying to rehab his body and mind from one of the most gruesome and public injuries ever suffered on a court. But another element of his recovery unfolds alone in the darkness, where he opens the Discord app to check whether any members of his clan are online.

“If Gordon is there,” says Will Fahrenbach, “I'm hopping on with him.” Fahrenbach is a 28-year-old MRI technologist who lives in a two-bedroom condo in Salt Lake City. He met Hayward seven years ago through *Halo*, when GTime was a rookie for the Jazz, and later invited him to a New Year's Eve party. They celebrated each other's weddings and mourned a friend's death. They shifted from *Halo* to *StarCraft*, *Overwatch* and the turn-based card game *Hearthstone*. But their pastime this winter, along with buddies in Utah and Indiana who compose their clan, is the futuristic first-person-shooter game *Destiny 2*. They need six players for a raid. Hayward relishes raids, the stiffest challenge the game offers: a test of

EASY BEING GREEN

Stevens (far left) has relied heavily on Irving (above) and Tatum (O), who is leading the NBA in three-point shooting and is fourth in defensive win shares.



vision, instinct and teamwork. They're as close as he can get to a last-minute possession. Over the keyboard, he pours the competitive juice that normally spills on the court.

He clicks to exhaustion, trash-talking into the microphone on the headset, until his mind is still and his lids are heavy. Then he clambers back to bed and falls asleep next to Robyn, dreaming not of the playoffs or the Finals, but of a day when he can throw on that shamrocked jersey and play a game in three dimensions.

At 25–7, Boston has the best record in the Eastern Conference. Point guard Kyrie Irving is a top five MVP candidate. Power forward Al Horford could be the Defensive Player of the Year. Rookie Jayson Tatum and second-year wing Jaylen Brown are revelations. But when president of basketball operations Danny Ainge watches the juggernaut he assembled, he can't help but scan the arena for the missing piece. "What do we need?" Ainge wonders, the question that haunts general managers everywhere. "A versatile 6'8" defender who can switch one through four, handle the ball, create offence for others and make shots. That's what we need. That's Gordon Hayward."

When the Celtics are on the road, Ainge sits next to Hayward in the weight room at the club's headquarters in Waltham,

distracting him from monotonous calf raises. "What do you think of the adjustment we made last night?" he asks, the day after a win in Detroit, atoning for a loss to the Pistons two weeks earlier. "Andre Drummond had 20 and 20 last time," Hayward replies. "So we packed it in the paint, dared them to shoot, and they couldn't throw it in the ocean. Maybe it caught them off guard." When the Celtics are home, head coach Brad Stevens spells Ainge. Even though a flight from Chicago landed at 4:45 a.m., Stevens was at the facility by 11, ensuring he would overlap with Hayward.

Much was made of the bond between Hayward and Stevens during the free-agent signing period last summer, when the former Butler star rejoined the former Butler coach. Their college connection has been overstated, but they were always more than the typical power broker and lottery pick, using each other for five months and one tournament run. Stevens was the first recruiter to show up for Hayward's 6 a.m. practices at Brownsburg, the first to offer him a scholarship, the first to tell him he might make the NBA when he still viewed himself as a Steve Nash wannabe. Initially, Hayward was dismissive, arguing with his father that Butler was in Division II. "If that's my only choice," he said, "I'd rather go to Purdue and just be a student." But Stevens hung around, watching Hayward in showcases from three courts away so rivals wouldn't notice



GARDEN PARTY

By avoiding going to games, Hayward is missing a great show: Boston, which has the league's stingiest defence, is 13–3 at home.

gushed about the facilities and the gear, but even the most direct route took too long. He was committing to Butler. A decade later, Stevens picked him up at Logan International Airport in Boston for his free-agent visit, and the 27-year-old forward felt a hint of homecoming. Hayward looked so different, his floppy hair styled, his slender physique chiselled. Stevens looked the same.

Ainge overhauled the roster, adding Hayward, Irving and Tatum, discarding Isaiah Thomas, Jae Crowder and Avery Bradley. Stevens and his staff were forced to reimagine the offence, with Hayward as a secondary ballhandler alongside Irving. Hayward and Irving could feed each other off pin-downs or weakside screens, and they could play a two-man game like Steph Curry and Klay Thompson in Golden State. “We did that a lot in training camp,” Hayward says. Horford was their Draymond Green, a third playmaker who could space the floor for Hayward and Irving or find them cutting. Normally, super-

whom he was tailing.

Stevens won him over, at least until Michigan called. Hayward wanted to drive to Ann Arbor for his official visit and Stevens generously sent directions—through Columbus, Cleveland and Toledo, detours that would have added about four hours. When Hayward returned from Michigan, he

star clusters take more than a month to congeal, but Boston’s additions blended quickly. “The game was so easy, so natural,” Ainge says. “They fit so beautifully.” In the preseason finale at Charlotte, the Celtics polished their new pet actions, starting with Hayward and Horford at the elbows, or Hayward and Horford spaced on the weak side. They would lean on those sets in clutch situations.

Opening night was a spectacle, not because of Hayward but rather Irving, back in Cleveland for the first time since he asked out over the summer. Little can be gleaned from the first five minutes of a season, but Stevens was enthused. “We had a way about us,” he says. “You’re thinking, We have a chance to be pretty good.” With 6:52 left in the first quarter, and Irving cradling the ball on the left wing, Hayward cut behind Crowder on the weak side for a lob. It’s a play he ran all the time in Utah, and it always seemed to produce a dunk. But when the Celtics ran it in the preseason, it lacked the same rhythm, and Irving’s pass over Crowder came out low. At home in Chicago, Mark Bartelstein saw the tangle of bodies and turned away from the television. “I got this weird intuition,” says Bartelstein, Hayward’s agent, “like something bad was about to happen.” When he turned back to the screen, he felt a wave of nausea. He had to walk outside.

Stevens kneeled over Hayward in the key, the coach as shaken as the player, at the image of two feet pointed in opposite directions. The Celtics staggered to their bench and locked arms

GORDON HAYWARD

around assistant Micah Shrewsberry. “We have to lean on each other,” Shrewsberry implored. “Stay together.” Rookie forward Semi Ojeleye led a prayer. Boston was in a fog, falling behind by 18 points, and Hayward was in a panic, quizzing Bartelstein by phone from the locker room: “What does this mean? Is this the end?” As doctors scrambled, the Celtics rallied, cutting the final margin to three. “We lost, but I think that comeback helped lay a foundation with this group,” says Shrewsberry. “I think that started something.”

Boston lost again the following night to Milwaukee, but instead of the usual off-day after a back-to-back, Stevens called practice. He did not deliver an impassioned address. He simply relayed information. “Gordon’s going to be fine. Surgery went great. He’s in good spirits and now we have a job to do. We have 80 more games.” The Celtics knew they could coax more scoring from Irving and more playmaking from Horford. The wild cards were Tatum and Brown, No. 3 picks out of Duke and Cal, respectively, interchangeable two-way wings



Early on, Hayward would hobble down to his basement theatre at tip-off, fidgeting with the ball Stevens brought him in the hospital. “I could usually make it to halftime,” he says, “and then it would be like, ‘All right, I’m done, I have to turn this off.’” If the Celtics were winning, he felt sorry for himself, because he was missing out. If they were losing, he felt sorry for everybody else, because he couldn’t help.

He tried going to a home game against the Warriors. “That was the worst,” Hayward says. “I was so close.” He retreated from the bench to the locker room for the second half as Boston topped Golden State, a source of immense pride and unspeakable agony.

He settled into a rehab schedule, beginning at 7 a.m. to mirror his offseason workout routine. He was trying to deceive himself into believing it was still summer, with lifts at UC San Diego and breakfast at Claire’s on Cedros in Solana Beach. The first nor’easter of the winter shattered that fantasy. Jason Smeathers, Hayward’s personal trainer, who

WATCHING THE C’S, HAYWARD COULD MAKE IT TO HALFTIME, “then it would be like, I’m done, I HAVE TO TURN THIS OFF.”

who can score without dominating the ball. Tatum seemed bright, grasping defensive concepts in summer league, and Brown resilient, grinding through rookie trials last season. During three-on-three drills in camp, Stevens would put five seconds on the shot clock, and they wouldn’t panic. “The age thing is not an excuse,” Stevens told them. “We’re not going there. You have to expedite it. You don’t get to fall asleep in a film session because you’re 19. No, you have to learn because we need you to be good.”

Tatum and Brown could not replicate Hayward’s ball-handling, so coaches installed more post actions for them. The next night, the Celtics won at Philadelphia, in front of a hysterical crowd. And then a strange thing happened to the contender that supposedly dropped from contention. They didn’t lose again for a month, coming back from 18 points down at Oklahoma City, 13 down in the fourth quarter at Dallas and 12 down in the fourth without Irving against Charlotte. “I think Gordon’s injury made us closer,” says guard Terry Rozier. They were a blast to behold, for everyone but the person who brought them together.

has known him since he was five, moved into the basement. Hayward craves distraction and Smeathers engages all his debates, whether the subject is the NFL slide rule or a compound math problem. “What do you get when you solve $48 \div 2(9+3)$?” Hayward asks, scrawling it on a piece of paper. “It could be 288 or it could be 2, right, depending on how you read it.”

Gordon Hayward Sr. is an engineer who devised an algorithm to evaluate potential agents. His son started at Butler as a math and computer engineering double major. “He’s always been analytical,” Stevens laughs. “I would say overly analytical.” Hayward could not watch the Celtics as a cheerleader. He had to watch them as a scout. *How are guys being guarded? What’s open? What’s not? What’s working? What’s not?* Assistant Scott Morrison asked him about defending Kevin Durant. “Haha,” Hayward replied. “Good luck.” Stevens, alternating between big and small lineups depending on opponents, requested his input against Western foes.

Gradually, Hayward made it past halftime, extracting more joy from Celtics’ victories as he notched a few of his own. He shed the crutches and then the boot, hit the pool and then

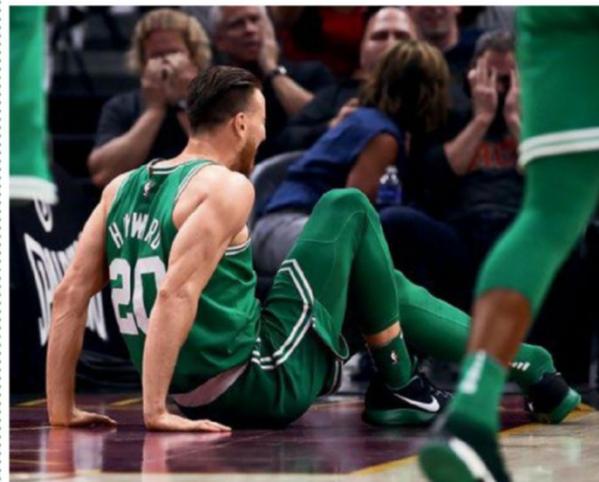
GORDON HAYWARD

the bike. He shot from a chair and then discarded it, flipping underhand layups high off the backboard in his best Irving impersonation. Money keeps him engaged—\$5 bets with Smeathers on around-the-world and Ainge on half-court chair shots, as do Eminem and Breaking Benjamin on the stereo. There are fans who have sent him get-well tweets every day since Oct. 17—“I can’t tell you how many from Cleveland,” he says—and friends who update a daily text thread. On his 31st day of healing they sent a picture of Reggie Miller, number 31. On the 41st day it was Dirk Nowitzki. On the 55th, White Chocolate, Jason Williams.

Hayward still won’t watch the 2010 Butler-Duke national championship game, lost when his half-court heave banked off the rim, but he calls up old highlights to remind himself what he can do. Morrison recently asked him to deconstruct video

matter of how long it takes to get his strength and mobility back. Different people get that back at different rates, but he is an elite athlete with a terrific work ethic, so I don’t see any reason why he doesn’t get all of it back relatively quickly.”

Hayward appreciates any optimism, but he is reluctant to entertain it, not when he is finally sleeping again. “Wishing to be on the court, trying to be on the court, those are the thoughts that kept me up at night,” he says. Cobbs and Randolph cannot relate to the attention focused on Hayward’s ankle, now protected by a small black brace. According to Google, the most-searched athlete in the United States in 2017 has been Floyd Mayweather. Second is Gordon Hayward. He does not venture out in public often, staying home with Robyn and their daughters, two-year-old Bernie and one-year-old Charlie. The family’s German shepherd, Siber, patrols a backyard ringed



NO ONE EXPECTS HAYWARD TO RETURN THIS SPRING, BUT no one completely shuts the door. IT’S CRACKED.

of his first three seasons in Utah with Celtics rookie Abdel Nader, a screening that benefited both of them. Ainge finds more solace in clips of the Indiana football team, specifically junior receiver Simmie Cobbs Jr., who broke his ankle in September 2016 and corralled 72 passes for 841 yards this fall. “He had the same surgery as Gordon, and eight to 12 months later, he was unbelievable,” Ainge says. “Cutting, jumping, looking like a first-round pick.”

No one expects Hayward to return this spring, but no one completely shuts the door. It’s cracked, because who knows how far Boston will advance and how fast Hayward will mend. In 2006, 76ers forward Shavlik Randolph was practising four months after a broken ankle, though he wasn’t at full strength for about a year. “I was terrified when it happened that I wouldn’t be able to ever play again because it hurt and looked so bad,” Randolph texted from China, where he is with the Beikong Fly Dragons. “But it did not affect me long-term. . . . It will be just a

with pine trees. But Hayward visited two Boston children’s hospitals this month, and as he sat at bedsides and listened to stories, he felt the patients were doing more for him than he was for them. “Man,” he thought, “I’ve got it made. I just broke my ankle. That’s nothing.”

Hayward will step on the parquet again, whether in June or October, and the raid will be on. While Irving has forged an identity away from LeBron James, Tatum and Brown have seized opportunities spawned by Hayward’s absence. The Celtics’ war chest now includes headliners in their prime, prospects on the verge and, because of Ainge’s angling last June, another lofty draft pick to come. The present is gold. The future, as GTime might put it, is platinum. □

SOLACE

Following his injury (right), Hayward couldn’t be a part of the Celtics’ wins, so he scripted his own in the virtual world.

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THE ADAPTABLE GENIUS

Hardik Pandya's rise to prominence is not a rags to riches story.... It's the story of a player who dreamt of playing for the Indian cricket team and then became an integral part of it despite setbacks

By Vimal Kumar

Photograph by Mal Fairclough/AFP/Getty Images

UPWARD TRAJECTORY

In barely a year, Pandya has gone from playing domestic cricket to becoming an important cog in the Indian cricket team. He hopes to repay that faith.



WHILE RAW NUMBERS aren't the ideal way to gauge a player's potential, Hardik Pandya's stats after 26 One-Day Internationals (ODIs) do make for interesting reading—530 runs, 29 wickets, 10 catches. Kapil Dev, one of India's greatest players and first World Cup-winning captain, had 472 runs, 28 wickets, seven catches after the same number of ODIs.

Of course, this comparison between a legend and an emerging talent can be termed unfair. Yet, it gives some idea about the potential Pandya possesses. However, throughout his ascent from oblivion, Pandya has never been judged by numbers—either by the selectors, coaches or his captains in various age groups. When Pandya was selected for India's tour of Australia (2016) for T20 matches, his numbers were not outstanding in either first-class cricket or the IPL. Ever since Irfan Pathan began fading from the national scene, India has been desperately looking for a seam-bowling all-rounder. "I have always said that selection depends on a lot of factors, and most important is what the team is looking for and if one particular player can fill that gap. In that sense, Pandya came at the right time," says former India player and chief selector Kiran More.

Ironically, Pandya has been mentored and guided by Pathan at Baroda and has now taken on the same responsibility that his Ranji captain had a few years back. It also brings back fond memories of an interesting introduction by Pathan to a young player from his state on Jan. 15, 2015, at a five-star hotel in Delhi. Pathan was in the middle of a TV interview and, while it was being recorded, a shy young man stood behind the cameraman and watched intently. Once the interview was over, Pathan introduced the man, saying: "Keep an eye on this boy. He is very talented and will be playing for India soon." That player was Pandya who had innocently asked why only national players are interviewed, not Ranji players. The next day, Pandya missed out on his debut Ranji ton against Railways by just 10 runs. During the second week of October, Pathan was reminded of that introduction and he smiled with a 'I told you so' kind of look.

"You know his journey. It is pleasing to know that I am also a part of his journey and I hope it continues," said Pathan.

In 2014, Pandya along with his elder brother, Krunal, made his List A debut for Baroda. During a domestic game in Mumbai in 2014, he caught the attention of former India coach John Wright, who witnessed Pandya's belligerent knock of 82 runs off just 57 balls against a strong attack that included Zaheer Khan and Dhawal Kulkarni. Subsequently, Wright, who was coach of Mumbai Indians at the time, decided to call him for trials for the IPL team. A couple of months later, Pandya was picked up at base price (₹10 lakh) by Mumbai Indians during the IPL auctions. It still remains one of the most inspired buys in the league's history. And, once Ricky Ponting spoke profusely of his talent, there was



IN HIS SHOES

Pandya had Pathan as a mentor during his formative years, and has now been tasked with taking over his role in the national team.

no looking back for Pandya. "You know the kind of person Ponting is. He is not somebody who would say something for the sake of it. It was

great bonding with him as a coach and the day I got selected for India, he was delighted at my break," says Pandya.

According to the 24-year-old, Sachin Tendulkar had told him (during his first season in the IPL) that within the next couple of years he would represent India and that in itself would be a great accomplishment for him. However, he surprised everyone by being selected for India's tour of Australia in January 2016, a good nine months earlier than Tendulkar had predicted.

"My ears did hear the news but my eyes refused to believe it. Of course, people were talking about my candidature before the Australia tour but when I saw my name on the BCCI [Board of Control for Cricket in India] website along with Dhoni, Yuvraj, Kohli and Harbhajan, for a second I felt it couldn't be true. Seeing my name in that list will be an unforgettable memory of my life," says Pandya.

DURING HIS FORMATIVE years Pandya desperately wanted to impress Pathan. "I remember when he came back from the Champions Trophy (2004) and was playing a league match in Baroda. I was visualising how to play a pull shot on his short ball and he somehow got a little offended. My brother was umpiring in that match and Irfan asked him



“YOU KNOW HIS JOURNEY. IT IS PLEASING TO KNOW THAT I AM ALSO A PART OF HIS JOURNEY AND I HOPE IT CONTINUES,” SAID PATHAN.

who I was trying to impress. Then, I hit him for 24 runs in one over. He was hugely impressed,” recalls Pandya.

As luck would have it, 13 years later with another Champions Trophy in England, the selectors banked on Pandya’s development as a potential all-rounder. Captain Virat Kohli described him as priceless for the team during the tournament, in which India lost in the final. “I would back a guy like Hardik who provides you so much balance. He can be effective as a bowler and his batting is priceless,” Kohli said during a press conference. Childhood coach Jitendra Singh feels that such backing has transformed Pandya as a player. “One key factor behind his sudden growth and evolution is primarily attributable to the team management. Be it Dhoni or Kohli, both have backed him to the hilt and so has the support staff. The good thing about Pandya is that he is a great listener and learner. When you are surrounded by fine people, you are bound to improve,” says Singh, who is often invited to watch the games in India when Pandya is playing.

Not too long ago, Pandya was not considered good enough for a quota of four overs in T20. His improvement has been so rapid that, apart from being a regular in ODIs, he has now become a great prospect in Test cricket as well. Pandya has taken a giant leap in just two years of international cricket. Of course, the Baroda all-rounder has to work a lot on his bowling but considering that he was not a “natural” fast bowler, his performance is staggering. A few years back, during a club game, when all the fast bowlers were occupied with either Ranji or Under-19 duty, Pandya was

asked by his club coach to bowl a few overs with a new ball since he was an athletic cricketer. Not only did he take the shine off the new ball, he took a fiver as a bonus. This was a major turning point in his career.

“Very few people know that he started bowling pace as late as 18. He used to be a leg-spinner. However, since then he hasn’t looked back and has only improved. Baroda’s former Ranji coach, Sanath Kumar, also played a vital role by keeping faith in his ability as a pace bowler,” says Singh.

Equally ironical is another facet of his game. As a batsman, Pandya wanted to emulate Wasim Jaffer and Jacques Kallis, but his clean and fearless hitting has been a revelation. So much so that Pandya, who never had a first class hundred before India’s tour of Sri Lanka, scored his maiden Test ton by breaking the record for most runs (26) in a single over by an India batsman. Such audacity and clarity of expression are rare in Indian cricket. Pandya scored a half-century in his first innings and had to wait for one more to score his first Test ton. And this was a hundred very few could anticipate because India had just lost their ninth wicket when he reached his half-century in the Pallekele Test. Sensing that there was nothing to lose, Pandya went berserk and dominated the 10th-wicket stand of 66 (No. 11 Umesh Yadav contributed three off

14). From 50 off 61 balls he finished with 108 off 96 balls. Many observers also feel that Pandya's six-hitting ability separates him from the rest. "What stands out in his method is that, unlike most batsmen, he doesn't need to use his feet to gain momentum while going aerial down the ground. Anyone who can hit sixes against spin without using the feet will be an asset because the bowler doesn't have any inkling of the batsman's plan and can't adjust. The other thing that stands out is his preference for targeting the straight boundary as much as possible," former India opener Aakash Chopra says.

Stories of his father's sacrifice, shifting base from Surat to Baroda for his son's dream, are well known. Hardship compelled Pandya to play as a guest player for different village teams for just ₹500. Yet, he was never low on confidence or shy of expressing himself. And sometimes it landed him in trouble.

WENEVER TRIED to gain sympathy out of our struggle. We didn't have much money, but still had one car. When we used to go for practice by car, people used to think we didn't have any financial problem," says Krunal Pandya, Hardik's elder brother. "But very few know the story that we never went to a petrol pump as it was embarrassing to ask them to fill fuel for just ₹100. Instead, we used to walk with one bottle when someone wasn't watching us," recalls Krunal who is more of a friend and guide than an elder brother to Hardik.

It is difficult to find a modern Indian cricketer who comes from a city and hasn't completed his schooling. However, Pandya was always sure of his ability and knew that his heart was on the cricket field and not in classrooms.

"I am very good with studies," Pandya says in a self-deprecating manner. "I dropped out after Class IX. I always felt that it's not about what you do but how you do it. My parents never stopped me from chasing my dream and I am indebted to their trust," he adds emotionally.

"I always have big expectations from life and still do. I don't have education so cricket is the only thing which can give me something. I was lucky that my coach (Singh) is a selfless man and he played a huge part in my life."

Is Pandya the next Pathan or Kapil Dev?

"I think he will be the first Hardik Pandya. Let's not compare him with anyone. Don't put pressure on him. Let him play freely and he will carve a niche for himself," says Pathan. Former India coach Anil Kumble too had cautioned last year about putting pressure on Pandya. "For someone who is just starting his international career, we don't want to put pressure on him by giving him definite plans as this is what is expected of him," he had said. "He is someone who likes the freedom and that's exactly what we have given someone like Hardik. Even with regard to his bowling, we have told him to bowl

with freedom and not worry about getting hit."

Pandya had once said he wanted to be the Kallis of India. "For me, he is right now 60 percent batting and 40 percent bowling all-rounder but it can always change for a series or for a year, depending on his form and conditions. I know for a fact that no one is equally good in both but he will certainly evolve as a very dependable player for India," says Singh.

Despite all the hype around him, Pandya has now matured as a player. It's been a roller-coaster ride for him. After playing the T20 World Cup in India, he struggled in the IPL and even lost his place in the Mumbai Indians' playing XI. That was a big reality check for him. "In hindsight, perhaps I got carried away by the hype after making my debut for India," confessed Pandya. "Maybe that kind of *jhatka* (setback) was necessary. I realised that this kind of flamboyance in



CHASING A DREAM

Pandya knew from an early age what he wanted to do in life, and dropped out of school to chase his dream. Thankfully, that chase ended sooner than expected.

lifestyle would not work if I was to play for India. You need to present yourself in a better way because you can't be seen as careless."

Once the IPL's ninth season was over in May 2016, his coach had a lengthy one-on-one with him on many aspects of his game. They decided to start from scratch. He went to play a KSCA tournament in Bengaluru for Baroda. There he got a call for the Australia 'A' tour as a replacement for Vijay Shankar, who was injured. In the last match of the tour, Pandya played an innings which was pivotal in his revival.

"(Rahul) Dravid sir had told us that one might not remember what we do on the whole tour but the performance of the last match is often talked about. We were 46 for six when I joined Jayant (Yadav) as I was batting at No. 8. I scored 79 and I consider that my career's defining innings."

Valuable time spent in the company of Dravid also played a role in his comeback. "Cricket is a situational sport and one has to play according to the demands of the team," he told me. You can't say this



NOVEMBER 2013 Pandya made his Ranji Trophy debut for Baroda. He scored only four runs against Madhya Pradesh. Today, he has a total of 924 runs and 28 wickets from 20 first-class matches.

APRIL 2014 The all-rounder (22 runs, one wicket) played a vital role in Baroda's three-run win over Uttar Pradesh in the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy final.

MAY 2015 Pandya's quick-fire 61 off 31 balls in Mumbai Indians' must-win game over Kolkata Knight Riders stole the show in that season of the Indian Premier League. He was judged Man of the Match for his performance.

OCTOBER 2016 Owing to his IPL blitzkrieg, the youngster made his ODI debut on Oct. 16, 2016, against New Zealand and he claimed three wickets. The all-rounder has scored 530 runs in 26 ODIs, and the 83 against Australia in September 2017 tops the list. He also has 29 wickets to his name for the Indian team.

JULY 2017 He made his Test debut against Sri Lanka with a half-century, and India won the match by 304 runs. Pandya went on to get his maiden hundred (108) in the third Test in August, his only century in all three formats.

"I THINK HE WILL BE THE FIRST HARDIK PANDYA. LET'S NOT COMPARE HIM WITH ANYONE. DON'T PUT PRESSURE ON HIM. HE WILL CARVE A NICHE FOR HIMSELF."

is your natural game and shrug off your responsibility," Pandya says. "Flexibility and adaptability were always his strength since he was always taught these at the Kiran More Cricket Academy in Vadodara. Of course, it helps when someone of Dravid's stature says the same thing, its impact is huge," adds Singh. Dravid is not known for praising an emerging talent profusely as he feels that may go to a youngster's head. However, in Pandya's case, the India A coach couldn't resist praising his evolution. "A good example about Hardik from my perspective is, he's willing to play situations and not just the natural game we often speak about. Credit goes completely to him. He's the one who has actually turned his career around," Dravid said on the sidelines of India A's unofficial Test against New Zealand A in Vijayawada. "It's not about playing just the one way you want to play. If he bats at four, he bats in a particular way. If he's at six, he bats in a particular way. That shows maturity and that's what you want to see."

Of course, these are still early days yet, the significant and contrasting half-centuries scored by him against Australia in the recently concluded ODI series have given much hope for India's challenging tour of South Africa in 2018.

"It's only about how you play different situations. Are you good enough to play when the score is 30 for three, or 250 for three? Are you good enough to bat when you go in for the first over or are you good enough to go in for the first ball after lunch? You have to learn to bat differently in different conditions and if you can do that like Pandya is showing at the moment, those are signs of a developing cricketer, someone who can make consistent contributions and not someone who is a one-off, who can produce brilliance once in a while," adds the former India captain. □





H·O·C·K·E·Y

BREAKING THE HABIT

Despite the quantity of talent at the disposal of the Indian men's hockey team, it can't seem to play as a unit and find consistency. With a busy 2018 upon it, the team must find the missing link

By K. Arumugam



HAS THE PERFORMANCE OF the Indian men's hockey team improved or declined? Or is there status quo? Even as India clings to sixth position in the world rankings, questions remain and there are no definitive answers. This was more than evident after the team's performance in the Hockey World League Final (HWL) that was played at the Kalinga Stadium in Bhubaneswar in December.

The Indians walk with their tails up in Asia. They are the unchallenged kings of the continent. They have both the Asian Games and the Asia Cup crowns and also maintain top position across all age-group championships. Yet, they flopped against one of the Asian sides in the semi-final of a major global event. The 2-3 loss to Malaysia, fourth in Asia, at the Hockey World League Semi-Final in London in June last year, still rankles. It's a grim reminder of India's chink in the armour: inconsistency. India finished sixth of 10 nations in London.

The fiasco led to Hockey India (HI) working overtime. It said that the team underperformed at London, that it wanted to control the damage, though incumbent coach Roelant Oltmans would insist the processes were going fine and results would follow. The coach's patience did not cut much ice with HI and it did what it does best—sacked him after consulting 24 experts for three days in closed-door meetings at a five-star

ernment grants for hiring coaches, training elite players, and international exposure tours. But it retains the right to fire them. Stung by the stubborn stand of SAI, HI withdrew its advertisement seeking a national coach within 72 hours of putting it out.

Harendra Singh, who coached the junior team to gold at the Men's Junior World Cup, pitched in. He had wide media approval and social media sanction. But having been out of the good books of the powers that be, HI staged a swap—Harendra was given charge of the women's team, while the existing women's coach, Sjoerd Marijne, was handed the reins of the senior men's team. Marijne, whose coaching highlight was leading the Dutch girls to an Olympic medal, got to manage a senior men's national team for the first time in his career. He was touring Europe with the women's team when the decision was made.

Upon his return, Marijne picked the most experienced players for the Dhaka Asia Cup that was held within a month of his ascension. Sardar Singh, S.V. Sunil, Ramandeep Singh and Manpreet Singh, among others, were in the lineup. Notable absentees were celebrated goalkeeper P.R. Sreejesh and penalty corner expert Rupinderpal Singh, both injured.

Any Indian team was expected to clinch the Asia Cup. With Pakistan hockey as mismanaged as it is, and South Korean hockey starved of funds, India enjoys rare comfort



The same Indian team that **WHIPPED MALAYSIA 6-2 IN THE LEAGUE STAGE** of the Asia Cup, huffed and puffed for a 2-1 win in the final.

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hotel. But HI, remote-controlled by Narinder Dhruv Batra, president of the world body, was in for a shock. The paymasters for foreign coaches for any Olympic sport in India, the Sports Authority of India (SAI), put a spanner in the search for another 'new' foreign coach and refused to terminate Oltmans' services midway through his contract, which was to run until the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.

Hockey India may be the richest national body in hockey, but it routinely seeks gov-

on the Asian scene. The title win, therefore, was accomplished without much ado or hiccup. It was not Pakistan or South Korea who posed a challenge in the final, but Malaysia. The same Indian team that had whipped Malaysia 6-2 in the league stage huffed and puffed for a 2-1 win in the final. This fluctuating form within days highlighted Indian hockey's biggest weakness once more.

THE STAGE

It was following the mixed feelings of

disappointment in London and the Asia Cup triumph that India hosted the Hockey World League Finals—a top-notch global event. It might be worth noting that with the total support of the Odisha government, the Indian team's participation was assured as the host nation. Generous sponsorship support for HI over the years meant India has hosted all three editions of the biennial tournament since its inception in 2013. To that extent, HI must thank the Odisha government for India's participation in the



METTLE

While teeming with talent, the Indian men's hockey team must learn to cope with pressure.



2017 edition of the HWL Finals.

Naturally, expectations were high in Bhubaneswar in December. They soared as crowds surged in every day at the Kalinga Stadium. Tickets were sold out on the opening day of sales. That India had won bronze in the previous edition stoked the fire among the hockey fans in the state. Odisha, with its regular supply of quality hockey players, is one place in India where hockey enjoys a huge fan following. At Raipur, in the previous edition, Sardar Singh's team—he was

dropped this time—beat Germany in the quarterfinals and the Netherlands for bronze in a 10-goal thriller. The Raipur bronze was the first medal in a top FIH tournament since the 1982 Champions Trophy.

This time, India repeated the feat in Bhubaneswar after a roller-coaster ride, but it was not followed by any wild celebrations. The Indian team that Marijne took to Bhubaneswar saw the return of Rupinderpal Singh, but also the omission of Sardar Singh and Ramandeep Singh, while Sreejesh was still recovering from injury. The chief coach reasoned that he was experimenting with all players so as to pin down the best team for a demanding 2018.

India started fantastically. They outplayed eventual winners Australia in every department of the game but could not

move the scoreboard beyond a goal. Still, it was an entertaining 1–1 draw against the No. 2 team in the world. The low came the next day against an experimental England, who won 3–2. The English were without their mainstay—Ashley Jackson, centre-forward and drag-flicker, who commanded high bids of around \$100,000 in each Hockey India League season, before moving to ice hockey permanently. Germany then punctured India (0–2), but the Indian spectators still had hopes owing to the format of the competition.

A winless India locked horns against Rio silver medallists Belgium in the quarterfinals. For the crucial match the stands were overflowing with enthusiastic hockey fans ready to get behind the Indian team. They got much in return. Quick goals set the

stadium afire as India took the lead three times, but had to settle for a shootout. Indian goalie Akash Chikte, understudy of Sreejesh, emulated his senior to see India into the semis after a nerve-wracking tie-breaker. Chikte's stops in the shootout were astounding. However, India let themselves down in the semi-final. Those who were present at the state-of-the-art Kalinga Stadium that evening vouched for the fact that the crowd support made a big difference in the final outcome against the No. 3 team in the world.

With heavy rain throughout the day, the semi-final could have been postponed. It was understood that the reigning Olympic champions, Argentina, insisted the match be played. The reason: India would not be able to play their usual speed game. They were proved correct. The hosts struggled to cope with the wet conditions while their rivals fared better. Then came a half-chance which the Rio champions grabbed with both hands. Argentina got a single penalty corner and scored a goal. India got four but in vain. India's best chance to enter the final of a major competition went in smoke. It's worth mentioning that India were the only team to defeat Argentina in Rio. But on home soil it fell flat.

Germany, the bronze medal rival, had a strange problem. Seven of their players were down with either injury or had fallen ill. As a result, the playing eleven had two goalkeepers. Germany, therefore, did not have a single player on the bench. The Indians, on the other hand, were at full strength. Germany had the option of opting out but stayed put. Every player in the team wanted a match. Their spirit was the highlight even before the ball was set in motion.

India should have bulldozed their depleted opponents. When Sunil dived to intercept and connect a fierce rebound even as it was rolling towards the top edge of the circle, it looked like it would be an easy outing for the team. But the early goal did not energise the Indian team, instead, Germany began to dictate the pace. Midway through the game Mats Grambusch, who manned the right flank, sent a clever cross inside the circle to help Mark Appel grab the equaliser. While India should not have conceded against that German side in the first place, what was worse was that Appel was the reserve goalkeeper. India struck a



late goal to clinch bronze, but the Germans grabbed all the accolades.

The question is, why is the Indian hockey team so inconsistent despite being in the company of elites? Besides mental toughness and psychological issues, lack of precision and perfection in whatever it does during matches could be one reason.

POST SCRIPT

Some key players invite scrutiny. Striker Mandeep Singh seems excited whenever he gets the ball inside the circle and quite often fails to trap it and mishits. His blind shots would hardly trouble any battle-hardened European goalkeeper. Akashdeep Singh functions like an inside-forward and has poor forehand shots. India needs a forward battery who can dive and connect, slap balls, crosses and crashes. Sunil, with mesmerising speed, is good at everything but often lacks support. He

SOFT CORE

The narrow win over a depleted German side in the HWL showed a lack of leadership in the Indian team.



should be putting his pace to better use. The skills of Chinglensana Singh seem to be under-utilised. The mercurial Lalit Upadhyay dazzles, catches the eye with deft stick work but is not effective against Europeans. The well-groomed Raman-deep seems a better choice for India in front of goal.

Manpreet in midfield is exemplary one evening but mediocre the next. The forwards' failure can be compensated with drag-flickers' prowess but India were found wanting in this area as well at the HWL Finals. The Indians got a couple of penalty corners towards the end in crucial matches



The individual strengths and weaknesses of players can only do so much. **WHAT IS NEEDED IS** for this collection of great players to play as a team.



but failed. Harmanpreet seemed to be over-rated as scorer and defender, but the return of Rupinderpal lent India solidity in defence. His drag flicks need variations, though.

Was leaving out Sardar a mistake? There is no straight answer. With vast experience, he can be the best bet to help the team maintain its composure when the chips are down and leverage inconsistency to some extent. However, the aging star cannot last the demanding 2018 calendar. It's better to utilise his services till the Asian Games, but as a playmaker and not a defender, which Marinje would prefer. The mere fact that

India won silver in the 2016 Champions Trophy and now bronze in Bhubaneswar without him in the squad, is a sign that India can do without him. But he will be an asset against Asian teams when India need to take on Pakistan, South Korea, Japan and Malaysia in the Asian Games where stakes are high.

The individual strengths and weaknesses of players can only do so much. What is needed is this collection of great players to play as a team. Precision in everything they do is the need of the hour. India have a core group of 33 players at senior level. Each one has been playing

around 30 top-level matches in a year. Yet, they wilt under pressure at top tournaments and 2018 is a crucial year with the Commonwealth Games, Asian Games and World Cup. With the ever-changing Olympic qualification process, India need to retain the Asiad gold to book the tickets for Tokyo. They also need to overcome England, Australia and Malaysia for the elusive gold at the Commonwealth Games. The World Cup will be held at the end of the year, again in India but with more teams. India need a level of consistency much higher than they currently have to shoulder the challenges of 2018. □



MOTIVATED AND HUNGRY

Each time she has been down with injuries, **Saina Nehwal** returned stronger. For her, staying fit is the key to flourishing in a tough season ahead

By
Priyanka Sharma

Photograph by
Lars Ronbog/
FrontZoneSport via Getty Images

THE FIGHTER

The 2017 season has been a year of reinvention for Nehwal when she went on to win two titles besides her second World Championship medal in Glasgow.

IT'S DIFFICULT TO fathom what goes on inside the mind of a champion who has been laid low by injury and knows nothing can be done but to wait for it to heal. At such moments, it's easy to let self-doubt play tricks with the mind. But true champions, time and again, have slayed those fears and the dancing demons inside the head to rise again to break new barriers. Saina Nehwal is one such name who has proven her critics wrong, broken norms and set new standards. Every time she has been written off, she has come back fighting. Every time cynics raised questions about her form, she delivered results.

Like many unlucky athletes in the world of elite sport, Nehwal too had her share of tough times due to injuries. But she always returned to the court with a bigger bang that forced the world of badminton to shower even greater respect for her sheer perseverance and mental fortitude.

National chief coach (and her mentor) Pullela Gopichand has often spoken about how motivated Nehwal is after recovering from a debilitating knee injury that the shuttler carried into the Rio Olympics. He has always marvelled at her determination. He credits this aspect of her mental toughness for driving the London Olympics bronze medallist to overcome the lowest point of her career when she even contemplated giving up the sport. That was during one of those rare moments when self-doubt had crept into her mind as she was going through the tough rehabilitation process.

Late in 2015—the year she was crowned world No. 1 the week she won the India Open title in March—Nehwal went through the most challenging period of her career when she was down with Achilles tendonitis, a chronic inflammation of the soft tissue at the back of the heel, for six months. On her comeback, she won the Australian Open in June before limping out from the Rio Olympics with an intra-articular knee injury (inside the joint), which was operated on in Mumbai in August 2016.

The Hyderabad-based shuttler admitted that the injury and the post-surgery period had left her so crestfallen that she wanted to quit the sport. However, it was the support provided by her parents that gave her the strength and motivation to return to the court in style.

“That three weeks of bed rest following the surgery, I kept thinking, Should I play again or not? But whenever I felt demotivated, my parents were there to lift my spirits. They even teased me, ‘We are so old and yet going to the gym, why can’t you?’ I somehow didn’t give up. The only thing in my mind was either I come out of it and beat players again or sit at home, watch TV and be happy, which everyone does. I want to play as long as I can,” said Nehwal. In fact, she returned to the court in just six weeks (doctors had advised her a six-month break) and went on to claim the World Championship bronze besides titles at the Malaysian Masters and Senior National Championships.

“Everyone has to face difficult times, has to retire some day, but you have to prove that you can still do it, and do it differently. It’s like doing something unique like Roger Federer has done,” says the 27-year-old. Much of the credit for her quick return to the court should go to Heath Matthews, head of the sports science department at the Sir H.N. Reliance Foundation Hospital and Research Centre in Mumbai.

FITNESS IS THE KEY

For Nehwal now, “fitness” is the most important thing. “Performance comes later,” she stresses. With a packed 2018 calendar that features major events like the Commonwealth and Asian Games, Nehwal, like many of her compatriots, knows the importance of fitness for the year. For her, however, it’s a little trickier, being the oldest in the Top 10 of the world rankings (she is 27), while all the other top names like Tai Tzu Ying (Chinese Taipei), Akane Yamaguchi (Japan) or compatriot P.V. Sindhu are in their early 20s.

By the time Nehwal plays the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, she will be 30. Little wonder she has realised how crucial it is to raise the bar of her fitness level to match the younger players.

“My only focus is fitness now. I am not looking forward to any tournament or titles; getting fit is my priority now. I am moving well but I still don’t have the fitness needed to play five back-to-back matches in any tournament. I need to work on my movements and speed,” Nehwal said ahead of the Premier Badminton League Season 3 in New Delhi.

“In any sport, it is all about fitness, not experience, and I have this belief that if I’m fit then I can beat anyone. In the nationals, I could beat Sindhu because I was moving well. But it would have been tiring and stamina-draining if the match had gone into the third game. The result could have been different,” added the former world No. 1 after winning her third national title after almost a decade. Nehwal beat Sindhu 21–17, 27–25 in a high-quality women’s singles final in Nagpur.

However, a new low hit Nehwal recently. The marquee player



By the time **NEHWAL PLAYS THE 2020 TOKYO OLYMPICS, SHE WILL BE 30.** Little wonder she has realised how crucial it is to raise the bar of her fitness level.

of Awadhe Warriors had to pull out at the last moment from the high-voltage PBL-3 opener against Sindhu (Chennai Smashers) in Guwahati due to an ankle inflammation. “I pulled out of the PBL opener, keeping in mind the future. Sometimes your mind wants to play, but you can’t push your body.”

The 2010 CWG champion said that the injury wasn’t serious, and “it was an overused tendon injury,” which she encountered last October. “It will be better with more playing and strengthening. I just need to be a little careful,” she said.

MOVE TO GOPICHAND ACADEMY

Following her Glasgow worlds bronze medal show, Nehwal has moved her training base back to the Gopichand Academy



PRAGMATIC MOVE

Nehwal believes her move back to the Gopichand Academy will help her get some intensive training to be ready for a hectic 2018.

nant force in world badminton.

For Indian badminton, 2017 was all about the success of four-time Superseries title winner Kidambi Srikanth, the World Championship silver for Sindhu and the comeback of Nehwal. Despite the fact that Sindhu (world No. 3) has overtaken Nehwal as India's top shuttler and also in the world rankings, it was the success of the latter on the world stage that turned the attention of a cricket-crazy nation to badminton.

"The main reason behind this move is to get better than what I am now and discuss next year's tournaments with Gopi *bhaiya*. It's a lot easier to train in Hyderabad with several sparring partners which is necessary for intense training. When I came back I just told him I want to play (here) again and he said 'I know that' and it continued. It was really nice of him to be the same he was before.

"We have had no issues about whatever happened in the last

in Hyderabad—the place from where she took her first steps to glory, becoming an Olympic and worlds medallist and even the world No. 1, something unthinkable at a time when the Chinese were the most domi-

three years. We still have the same kind of discussions and all the players are like '*Kya hai yeh, inka kuchh panga nahin hai, kya?*' Nothing is different now, whenever we get time we are working on my fitness and movement," said Nehwal. For the past three years, Nehwal had been training with former India coach U. Vimal Kumar in Bengaluru.

Post PBL-3, the shuttlers will get just a day off to switch their team gear to individual outfits for the three back-to-back events that are lined up—Malaysian Masters (Jan. 16–21), Indonesia Open (Jan. 23–28) and the India Open Super Series (Jan. 30–Feb. 4) in New Delhi.

Nehwal, who mentioned that she still hasn't found the time to discuss her game with mentor Gopichand, said the break after the India Open will allow her to focus on training. "Only after the India Open I will be able to tell you about my training with Gopi Sir. We will have to sit and decide on the tournaments also. But I don't think there's even time to pick and choose tournaments. It is going to be a tough season for all," added the senior shuttler.

It remains to be seen how Nehwal balances her training and tournaments in a busy 2018. But with Gopichand on her side once again, we can surely expect some exceptional results this year. □



FOOTBALL

MARADONA: *Uncut And Raw*

He's battered and bruised. His temper as volatile as ever. But at 57, **DIEGO MARADONA**'s love for the game is still unfiltered and unconditional

By Arindam Basu Photograph by STR/AFP/Getty Images



In the tabernacle of World Cup images the one stand-out picture is that of Diego Maradona being confronted by six Belgians at the 1982 World Cup. The simple picture taken by the then *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED* lens of Steve Powell encapsulated the chutzpah of the Argentine and the terror of the six Belgians at the prospect of having to deal with him.

The latitudinous stretch of the Belgians soaked the image with a sense of comic panic. Maradona, meanwhile, looked serene, balletic even, with his left boot ready to create some unimaginable, delicate and intricate move that would leave them frozen in time.

For us who have lived with that image and the legends that accompanied it, Diego Maradona was God.

But the man who walked out of the Netaji Subhas Bose International Airport terminal late on the night of Dec. 10, to the muted greetings of a clutch of shutterbugs and a motley crowd, was a different man—stubby, rotund, with a salt and pepper French beard, hair brushed back and dressed in a blue T-shirt and shorts. He could stroll around Ripon Street, Marquis Street, Esplanade, New Market or Bow Barracks all day long, haggling with the hawkers, buying a rich plum cake from Nahoum's or looking up old Spanish records at Braganza's and no one would take a second look, but for one thing.

Those eyes.

They held the same spar-

MAGICIAN

The sight of Maradona running circles around the Belgian defence at the 1982 WC perfectly encapsulates the fear he put in defenders.

akin to the Wild West for its sheer physicality and machismo. So, when everyone was expecting him to walk up to the impromptu football clinic and like any legend pass on the mystic charm of footwork, he walked up to Charles Anthony, the guy singing an Italian number—"O Sole Mio"—and joined him. But that was not all. "Your Spanish pronunciation is perfect. Can we sing another song together?" Maradona asked, and then they sang "Bésame bésame mucho/ Como si fuera ésta noche/ La última vez" (Kiss me more? As if the beautiful night/is going



The hour and 20 minutes of **THE MARADONA SHOW** was anything but disappointing.

kle that shone following his first Serie A victory with Napoli. The sparkle that one saw for the first time as he got onto the football ground of a sports academy on day two of his visit, 25 km from the city. The otherwise sedate Maradona suddenly burst to life. His body at 57 may not be living up to his spirit, but the incandescence of his passion dimmed the mid-day sun on a chilly winter afternoon.

Some 25-odd boys and girls had hesitantly jogged on to the ground minutes before the man, now in a grey T-shirt and matching shorts, appeared. Naturally, they were unsure of what exactly they were expected to do before this living legend. The man was supposed to step onto the ground and head for the clinic where he would spend some time with these young footballers.

But Maradona had never been bridled by any form of regimentation, for he belonged to the attitude era when football was

to be the last one). "You are a wonderful singer," Maradona said, before heading back to the clinic.

The denouement of Tuesday's programme was supposed to be an exhibition match between two teams led by Maradona and the *dada* of Indian cricket—Sourav Ganguly. Maradona's solitary contribution to the game, though, was a ceremonial kick-off before he left the venue. But the hour and 20 minutes of the Maradona show was anything but disappointing. He was the cynosure of all eyes for the period he was present at the venue, playing to the gallery and assuming a myriad avatars. Sometimes he played the role of a trainer, at other times a singer and above all, sometimes he was *el animador par excellence*.

"I'm here for football. Whenever I see this ball, it gives me a kick," he said soon after he made sure he was holding court.

"Viva India! Football has given me everything. The game has

FULL NAME
Diego Armando Maradona

BORN
Oct. 30, 1960

PLACE OF BIRTH
Lanús, Buenos Aires, Argentina

POSITION
Attacking Midfielder

JERSEY NUMBER
10

HEIGHT
1.66 m

NICKNAME
El Diez, Pelusa, The Golden Boy

MAJOR HONOURS

BOCA JUNIORS

Argentine Primera División:
1981 Metropolitano

BARCELONA

Copa del Rey: 1983
Copa de la Liga: 1983

NAPOLI

Serie A: 1986-87, 1989-90
Coppa Italia: 1986-87
UEFA Cup: 1988-89
Supercoppa Italiana: 1990



FIFA World Cup: 1986

Matches	Goals
590 <small>NATIONAL</small>	312
91 <small>CLUB</small>	34

Maradona managed just 34 goals in 91 matches for Argentina, making him fifth in the all-time top scorers list. However, those goals came at crucial times, like in the team's 1986 World Cup winning campaign.



given me a chance to travel everywhere in the world. I want Indian football to grow,” he continued in his inimitable style to lusty cheers of “Diego! Diego!” from the stands.

On the field, he made it a theatre of fantasy and incredulity. As he rolled along the sidelines with a batch of cronies, admirers and security forming a rich tail like that of a meteor, the man changed direction, plodded towards the closest barricade, swirled his jacket, said something in inaudible Spanish, waved at the now frenzied crowd, threw a few flying kisses and then disappeared into the ground again.

So much for rules. For he grew up playing the beautiful game when it was a place of wild human possibilities.

Maradona still holds the record for most fouls suffered by a player in a World Cup, at Mexico 1986, and most fouls in a single World Cup game—23 against Italy at Spain 1982. And let’s be honest, these were not little, fragile tumbles. These were often planned strategic assaults. And the results showed in the slight limp and camouflaged hobbles as the turf went soft underneath.

But once on the ground, he was the ringmaster. When a student drove his volley well over the crosspiece, he walked up to him and explained something in Spanish. This boy seemed to understand him, for at that moment both were talking one language—football. His next shot bulged the back of the net. The smile on the face of the maestro said it all.

He showed his wards how the body should be bent and where their eyes should be trained while taking a shot. As he swerved balls into the net with the instep of his left foot, he sermonised on how to take a short run before releasing a volley and where to keep it—within the uprights, just out of reach of the keeper. On one occasion, when he managed to beat a student posing as a goalkeeper with his trademark left-footed precision, the child in him popped out. As he clenched his fist and punched the air, his eyes still filled with the wonder and excitement of having seen his delivery tangled in the back netting.

Two weeks before landing in Kolkata, Maradona had undergone a shoulder surgery. This was one of the many surgeries that helped repair broken bones in his body. Football in his time was like outlaws on parole.

In *Touched by God*, Maradona wrote about how after his ankle was snapped by an infamous Andoni Goikoetxea lunge in 1983, he was carried off on a blanket and driven to hospital in a small borrowed van. Before one qualifier, he was kicked in the knee by a random passer-by as he was getting off the team bus. He stayed up until five in the morning before the game, trying to ice it in his bedroom. Imagine this happening to the Messis or Ronaldos of today. The internet could go bust, North Korea could send the world into a nuclear winter or Russia could embrace capitalism. But in those days when the Argentine team washed and shaved in the open at their campsite in Mexico, it was part and parcel of the game.

But now his body cannot take it anymore and his mind can cave in. So when he was pushed around and jostled at one of the sponsored visits, he left—angry and perhaps a little afraid of picking up yet another injury. During another visit, he refused to get down from his car as hundreds tried to catch a glimpse of the



ICONIC

His visit was brief, but along with cricket great Ganguly (right), meeting Maradona will be a memory to cherish for the children present.

man who made modern football. He sat, ignoring the calls from fans. He was now a far cry from the Maradona who steeped himself in a month-long celebration of food, fun and fireworks after Napoli’s

first crown. He now sat, acerbic, buckram and far removed from the days when he only cared for the goals he scored.

Earlier, the man, accompanied by his partner, Rocio Oliva, arrived on the outskirts of the city to unveil his own 12-foot statue. Flawed or not, perfect or contested, Maradona seemed overwhelmed, seeing himself in bronze in his iconic pose, holding the World Cup. A trail of memories must have rustled up a mini-storm in his mind, for he looked lost within as he sat on the chair with a showreel playing out his emblematic moments. Next, he did something very uncharacteristic of the Argentine: “I am not the god of football but a simple footballer. I’m happy to be here in Kolkata again,” he said.

His second visit after nine years may have been a low-key one, unlike in 2008, but the legend still charmed a thousand-odd crowd at this charity event. Maradona handed out cheques worth ₹10,000 each to 11 cancer patients and flagged off an air-conditioned ambulance, before volleying a set of balls into



Maradona was the last of his kind. **FREE FROM COMMITMENTS.** Liberated from endorsements.

the crowd. He then set off for the next destination.

Maradona was perhaps the last of his kind. Free from commitments. Liberated from endorsements. Independent of agents. To see him tied down to the pegs of silly tours around community clubs was like the climax of King Kong on the Empire State Building, tragic yet true. The only place where he felt at ease was not a scheduled stop during this sojourn to the city—a visit to Mother House. He was seen kneeling before the tomb of the Catholic order's founder, Mother Teresa, and praying quietly for some time before lighting candles.

During his previous visit to the city nine years ago, he had drawn hordes of men, women and children of all ages as they

lined roads, filled rooftops, spilled over road corners to catch a glimpse of the ball charmer, the communist, the rebel in the red citadel that Bengal was at that time. He lapped up every minute adulations that came his way. The God reigned.

This time around, the city may be wearing the colours of his national jersey, but Maradona lost his temper three times. First, at the immigration counter at the airport on arrival when he was made to wait; second, when he was car mobbed on a visit to a local club; and the third time was when he injured his shoulder as the Kolkatans wanted to be touched by their God.

Though he spent a quiet moment or two at the Fanatics Sports Museum, there are never really any quiet moments in the world of Diego Armando Maradona, for he is not stagemanaged. □

CYCLING

MIND GAMES

Cycling as a recreational and sporting activity has grown in India over the past few years, but it is about much more than testing your limits. It's about going beyond them

By
Vaibhav
Raghunandan

Photographs by
Chenthil
Mohan

At some point, I realise I'm going to make it. I've come too far. The day has enough light. All I have to do is keep pedalling. At this point, I decide to take a break. The climb is torturous. The view is great. The weather is beautiful. What better way to celebrate than to take a picture. I reach into my jersey to pull out my phone and am greeted by nothing. There is no phone in my pocket.

It must've popped out, a few kilometres back, when my front wheel took to the air. A part of my brain says I should go back and check. The more rational part says, No f--- it. It's not worth climbing back up.

This gamut of emotions hits me as I am about to enter Ooty, through the legendary Kalahatty road, an "hors" category climb with an average gradient of above 10 degrees, and stretches that have an incline graded above category 15. In the 17-km stretch at Kalahatty, one gains altitude of 1,400 metres.

A bunch of us had gone through the numbers in the earlier part of the day—a 'leisurely' 80-km ride with constant rolling hills. We had run through the elevation gain, the kilometres, the service stops and the 36 hairpins, which we used as motivation to count down and coerce our legs to keep pedalling. What we didn't know though, was the mental challenge of the climb itself.

It didn't so much test the limits of your physical exertion, as it did your mental endurance. There was no end to Kalahatty, even when the end was actually pretty near.



Tour of Nilgiris

Cycling is an excruciating sport. A rider's power is only as great as his capacity to endure pain and it is often remarked that cyclists experience their physical agonies as a relief from private torments. The bike gives suffering a purpose. Strip it away, and life happens.

Dinner, after the Kalahatty climb, is a festive affair. In the 10th edition of the Tour of Nilgiris (TfN), day four was the halfway mark. Literally. Of the promised 1,000 km, we had completed 577 and had climbed over 8,000m in altitude. The next day was a rest day. Every beer at dinner was cheered, and deserved.

Alexi Singh Grewal wasn't having one. He had, instead, loaded his plate up with bean salad and was going at it with some rolls. Except, he wasn't really doing that either. Between bites, he would be interrupted by fellow diners, constantly asking him questions and breaking the nutrition flow to his system. Polite as he was, every time someone asked him a question, he would drop his knife and fork to answer it.

Someone asked, "My son is 10 right now. When do you think is the right age to get him into cycling?"

"Let him study. Once he's done with school and has an education, then he can start cycling," replied Grewal. It was the kind of response expected from Indian parents, not from Olympic gold medallists and American path-breakers. And yet, here it was.

Grewal won gold in road cycling at the 1984 Olympics. He was the first American to do so. This is how the U.S. Cycling Hall of Fame describes his victory: "With an estimated crowd of 300,000 lining the 190.2-km route, Grewal edged Canadian Steve Bauer to claim the gold medal in the men's road race, breaking away from the field with 20 km remaining and opening up a 24-second lead after 11 of 12 laps and then being caught by Bauer with 10 km left, setting up a dramatic final-lap showdown. This scene, replayed many times since, is one of the most emotional Olympic victories of the modern Games."

What should've been the nadir of his cycling career, in retrospect was the peak of a brief high. Grewal went professional following the gold, and signed with the Panasonic Raleigh team and then with the 7-Eleven Cycling team. Through his professional days though, Grewal suffered from the age-old 'talented but volatile athlete' syndrome. His first response to confrontation was altercation and very soon, as teams went looking for success, Grewal was dropped by the side. He retired in 1993 and shifted back home to Colorado.

At the TfN, Grewal's Indian heritage and his Olympic credentials made him obvious media fodder. On the rest day, he obliged the organisers with a visit to a school to give a motivational talk to children. And yet, it was in his most candid moments—when splitting a roll and applying butter on it—that he really seemed to come to life.

I catch him alone at a table, a few hours later, still negotiating that salad, albeit this time in peace. I decide to break it and ask him about that 'education business' he advocated.



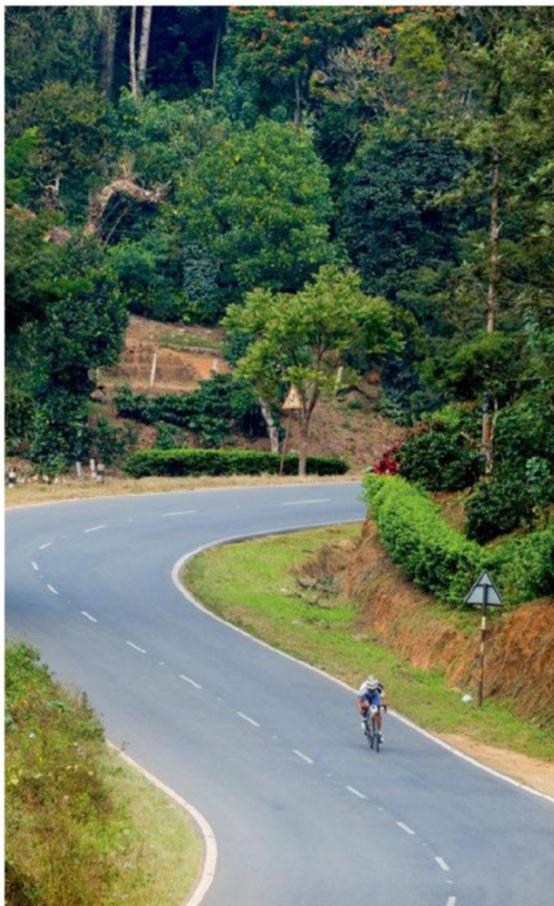
FEAST FOR EYES

The scenic beauty of the route was one of the redeeming features of this year's tour as it distracted the fatigued minds of amateur riders.

"If I had a choice to go back and remake the choices I did, I'd not cycle so young. I'd get educated," he says. "I mean, look at what cycling gave me. After I retired, I couldn't get a job because of a lack of education. I was the lowest class of labourer, doing manual jobs to fill my pockets. I was so broken that I didn't touch a cycle for 17 years after I retired."

U.S. cycling truly hit its peak in the Lance Armstrong era. Prior to that they were just a fringe nation hoping to challenge Europe's stranglehold on the cash. The biggest events were in Europe, and the biggest riders were based there too. Any Americans coming to Europe to ride were immediately met with culture shock and systemic steroid abuse, which you were expected to follow or remain shut about (Grewal wrote an essay on the steroid abuse on the cycling website VeloNews in 2008, detailing his own experiences on the Tour).

In his 17 years of cycling exile, Grewal went into a kind of



I've decided to tail Grewal today, do what he is doing, stop when he is stopping, and sprint when he sprints... actually, I give up after 10 km. He may be older by two decades but I have no chance of completing my ride for the day if I tail him. My body is no match for his.

Instead, I decide to enjoy the beautiful country. Not travel-brochure beautiful, but real and alive, and compared to the city, elegantly spare. Mountains run parallel to the road on both sides, the Doddabetta peak to the west and the Coonoor Betta to the east. From ridge to ridge, east to west, I can see every shade of green all the way to almost black.

I am stranded alone, kilometres in front and back with no one around me. Riding with Grewal has separated me from my pacers and partner riders. Dropping away from him has meant I haven't caught up with the lead pack. I consider what would happen if I had a puncture now. I'd probably catch a break, catch some wind. Maybe some tea.



*In his 17 years of cycling exile, **Grewal went into a kind of penury, for all the crimes he thought he had committed.** He educated himself, studying theology.*

penury, for all the crimes he thought he had committed. He educated himself, studying theology at university and slowly climbing up the ladder in the professional sphere, becoming a 'master craftsman' in woodwork, and now takes independent projects to design architectural interiors with hardwood.

When he did get back on the bike, the day he did get back on it he rode 100 miles. He has stayed on since, occasionally participating in the veterans category of various cycling events at home. When TfN called, he hadn't cycled much for 10 months—a mix of work and leisure had kept him away—but a couple of months of practice were all it took for him to get ready. He won the Veterans category of the Tour.

The body had gone, but the mind knew what to do.

Riding over 100 km a day in serene country gives you a lot of time to introspect. I go down the usual route. I think about what I'm doing, where all this writing is headed. I think about the larger purpose of my being, and then I think about how now, five days into this event, I'm not so daunted by the prospect of long distances.

For perspective, the longest ride I'd done prior to TfN was 50 km in Delhi. I may as well have not prepared at all.

This day of the Tour was the shortest of the year. It was just 97 km in distance but had about 2,100m of elevation gain. A lot of climbing. And yet, somehow, by now I had figured the routine. I wasn't daunted by the climbs anymore.

The day ended with a competitive section (CS), a seven-km straight uphill that led us back home. I sprinted up without abandon, using



I've decided to tail Grewal today, do what he is doing, stop when he is stopping and sprint when he sprints... actually, I give up after 10 km. I have no chance of completing my ride if I tail him.

four other riders as carrots, whips and subsequently, race fodder. It was my best CS of the Tour. Or at least, I thought so. Somehow, despite the distances, my body had adapted to survive. In my worst hour, there was still some battery left.

In 1999, three physiologists from the University of Cape Town Medical School put a group of cyclists to the test to establish the link between neurological control and athletic prowess. They worked them to exhaustion through a 62-mile lab ride and measured via electrodes the percentage of leg muscles they were using at fatigue limit. Standard theory dictated that the body would recruit more muscle fibres as it approached exhaustion as compensation for tired and weakening muscles.

Instead, the opposite happened. As the riders approached complete fatigue the percentage of active muscle fibres decreased until they were only using about 30 percent. Even as they felt they were giving their all, the reality was they weren't.

The brain was purposely holding back the body.

Through the test Timothy Noakes, head of the research group, concluded that the body had a central governor: a neural system that monitors carbohydrate stores, the levels of oxygen in the blood, the rates of heat gain and loss, and work rates. The governor's job was to hold our bodies back from the brink of collapse by creating painful sensations.

Fatigue, the research argued, was less an objective event than a subjective emotion, the brain's clever, self-interested attempt to scare you into stopping. The way past fatigue then is to return the favour: to fool the brain by lying to it, distracting it or even provoking it.

In case you cannot do this yourself (you lack the mental toughness), ride with Sanjay Mathrani.

Mathrani is one of the enthusiasts on the Tour, a civil engineer based in Pune, who began cycling to energise his exercise regimen. Mathrani played tennis through his younger days but a knee injury forced him off the courts and doctor's advice

Tour of Nilgiris

kept him away for years. He took to swimming first to fill the gap and through swimming he heard about the Ironman triathlon. He recruited a trainer and a training partner and completed his first Ironman in Dubai in 2016.

Every year Mathrani and his two childhood friends, Manan Soni and Rajesh Jain, take a couple of weeks off to go for a trek, a run or something similar—a break from the rigours of professional and family life. “It is a way for us to wind down, enjoy each other’s company, and generally feel better,” Soni told me on the first day of the Tour. This year



they decided to do the TfN.

The problem was, Jain and Soni had never cycled seriously until six months prior to the TfN and had never done distances like this before. They lagged behind Mathrani and what was a bonding exercise, in some ways, became an individual pursuit that they relived every evening with each other in the hotel room.

Mathrani and I rode together for a majority of the Tour. And he was the central governor over my fatigue levels. At points, when I tailed off physically, switched off mentally or just started cribbing, Mathrani would immediately take the pacer’s role and motivate me through it. His best line: “Chal na, itna kar liya toh ab kya rona.” (Come on! You’ve done so much, what are you crying about now?)

In many ways that is the brilliance of events like TfN in India’s sparse cycling landscape. This convergence of people with similar attitudes forges new relationships on the road. It is, in many ways, quite reminiscent of school playground sports. Striving for athletic supremacy is on everyone’s mind but of greater concern is collective success.

BROTHERS IN ARMS

Cycling in India is more of a shared passion among like-minded people, unlike in Europe where it’s considered pure sport.

It is a fact even the organisers bear in mind. During the toughest segments of the day, bike support units and mechanical support is always nearby. The bikers are constantly motivating you, cheering you on, refilling empty electrolyte bottles. The aim is to get maximum people to finish rather than just have the crust on top and pile the rest up in a bus. Of the 128 riders on the Tour this year, 98 finished the Kalahatty climb—walking, crawling or pedalling, as promised by the race director on the first day. It took some of them over three-and-a-half hours to negotiate those 17 dreaded kilometres but rather than tell them to drop



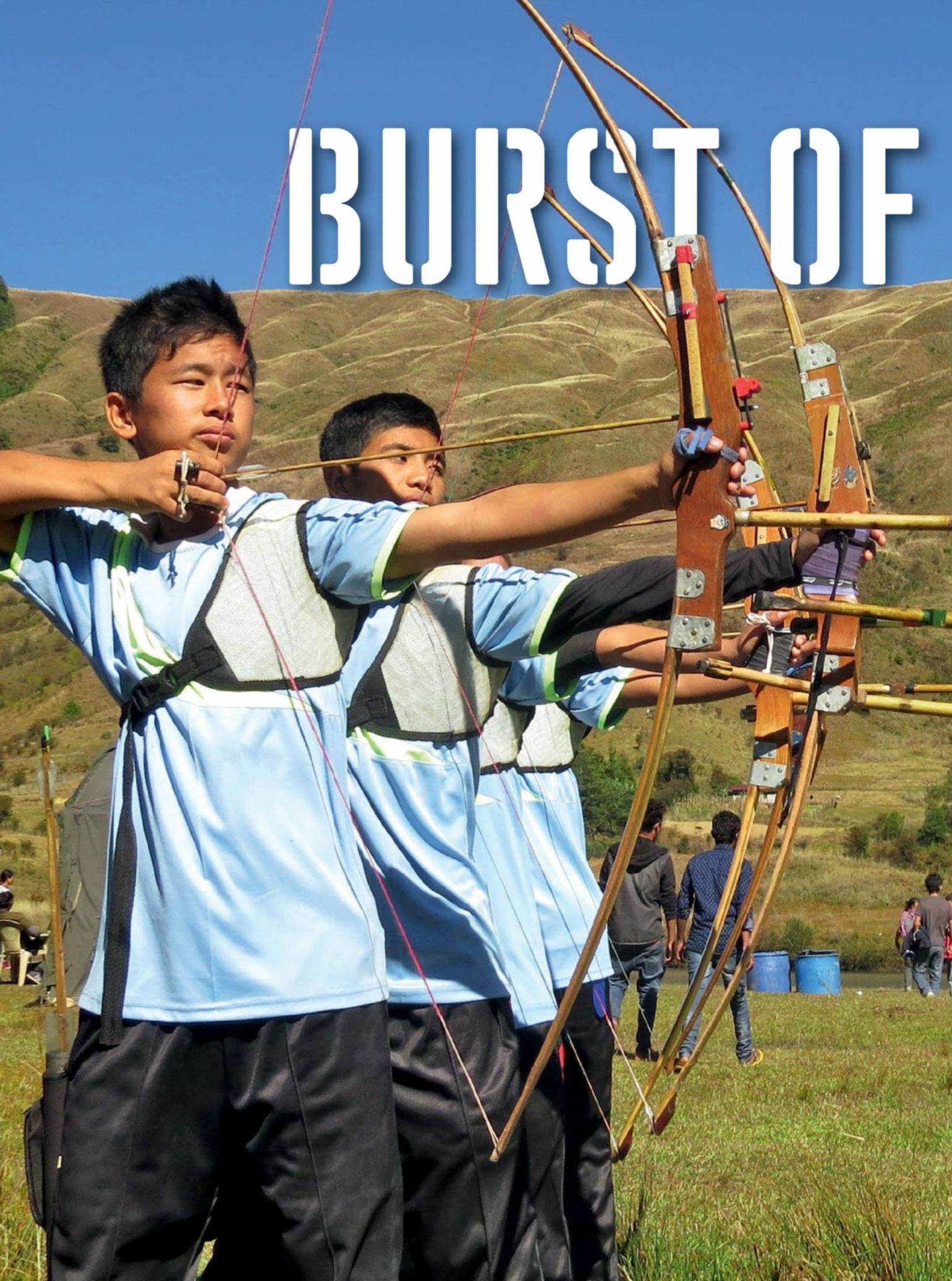
it, or just ‘sweep’ them up, TfN found a way to make sure they got to the top safely.

On the final day of the Tour I suffer five punctures—I’m later told the Tour record for a single day is seven—and my eighth puncture overall. I’d been warned about this and had prepared accordingly, but the mental toll this takes on me is indescribable. With a deflated tyre comes a deflated mind.

By the time I finish the day—just making it within the cut-off time—everyone has heard about this. India’s road racing and time trial national champion Naveen John comes up to me and says, “Full bloody marks for perseverance, dude.” It is the greatest compliment anyone could’ve ever given me.

Cycling is a rich man’s sport. In India, thanks to the limited structure, support and shops. An above average road bike with decent specs for long endurance rides can cost upwards of ₹60,000. In cities like Delhi, cycling is the new golf. The big bike brands in town market their expensive models, while the young and old who take up the sport belong to the affluent strata with money to throw into equipment. Will they ride it recreationally or commute on it? Regardless, the fact remains that the spurt in cycling activity in India is not fully based on a solid philosophy that revolves around its sporting aspects. □

BURST OF



ADVENTURE SPORTS

ADRENALINE

WHAT DO A
BUDDHIST MONK AND
MOTORCYCLIST HAVE
IN COMMON? THEY
ARE BOTH ADVENTURE
JUNKIES WHO
HAVE FALLEN FOR
MECHUKHA, A REMOTE
ARUNACHAL VALLEY

BY MANISH ADHIKARY
PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAMAN GAMLIN



ADVENTURE SPORTS

SIX THOUSAND FEET above sea level, when you are hurtling towards a snow-capped peak at the rate of knots, chances are there will be a parachute handy. In my case, the lone reassuring paraphernalia of safety consisted of a seat belt. I was in an SUV trying to master a dirt-race track up in the high reaches of Arunachal Pradesh, close to the Chinese border.

The highway jokes in these parts revolve around a car that suffered a brake failure and ended up at a repair shop in Lhasa where the Tibetan mechanic, a Lata Mangeshkar fan, was so emotionally let down by the driver's Arunachal Hindi that he agreed to do the job only if spoken to in English.

We weren't as lucky. We settled for heart-stopping, high-speed mud-slide manoeuvres in the gaze of the solemn,

adventure sport in the country.

"That's exactly the point," said Khandu, 42. State chief minister Pema Khandu's namesake, he was driving one of the five cars that made the 1,300-km journey to Mechukha from Thimphu in Bhutan in under four days.

"For me the learning never stops," he said. "I wanted to learn about Arunachal, its tribes, its cultures, everything. All my clients are from the developed world, they don't know a thing about this place. They have heard about Northeast India but don't know where to head once they have reached Guwahati. So I wanted a first-hand experience, wanted to see Arunachal for myself."

ONE WITH NATURE

Even for those who aren't into hardcore adventure sports, Mechukha promises to provide a peaceful retreat into nature.



clear-eyed Yargyapchu river, which cut through the brown slopes of the Mechukha valley like a dark snake wearing a silver jacket, a hundred feet below.

Khandu, the man at the wheel, is a Bhutanese motorcycle tour operator who got hooked to the idea when someone proposed a car rally from Thimphu to Mechukha to time it with the Arunachal adventure sports festival every November.

The Mechukha adventure sports festival is perhaps the world's most underrated festival of its kind. Getting there is no mean feat. Some argue that Mechukha is so remote, so out of the way, its roads so bad, its phone connectivity so poor that organising the festival itself is the biggest

Also in attendance was Karma Lhatrul Dorji Rinpoche. Asked what a Buddhist monk was doing taking part in a car rally, the Rinpoche said he has been one for adventure since he was a child. "Spirituality is a process of discovery," he said. "You have to discover everything. We are supposed to be practitioners of Buddhist teachings. So, unless you set out on a journey of discovery, it's difficult to put into practice all that you have learnt in your life. There are many similarities between this place and Bhutan. Even the language is similar. Getting here was a hard task, but having reached here, I am feeling very relaxed. It doesn't feel like I am not in Bhutan. The geography is very

similar to that of my country."

Asked if one could draw a parallel between meditation and travel, the Rinpoche said he had spent nine years in a cave as part of the technique to master different facets of meditation. "I was very keen on experiencing all that the world's countries have to offer after my meditation phase got over. I have been travelling ever since. Having travelled a fair bit now, what I can say is that meditation is the key. What you see after you use that key is travel."

Not sharing as romantic an idea of travel was paraglider Narayan Parajuly from Pokhara, Nepal. He and seven of his friends had reached Mechukha after 22 hours of a backbreaking jour-



“UNLESS YOU SET OUT ON A JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY, **IT’S DIFFICULT TO PUT INTO PRACTICE ALL THAT YOU HAVE LEARNT IN YOUR LIFE.**”

The festival was a three-day adventure gala organised through Nov. 7-9. The goal was to promote adventure tourism in the state. Almost all organisers came from state capital Itanagar and neighbouring Assam’s capital, Guwahati. “The festival is a dream event for adventure seekers, trekkers, weekend getaway visitors and tourists on the lookout for a niche and special tourism experience,” said Pasang D. Sona, the local MLA. “Mechukha is an amalgam of three distinct features of this land. *Men* means medicine, *chu* is water and *kha* is snow.”

Chief Minister Khandu later said that



ney on a private bus from Dibrugarh (in Assam) following a 12-hour train journey from New Jalpaiguri in West Bengal. They were taking part in an accuracy landing contest being supervised by Paragliding Association of India officials. Most of the contestants were from Sikkim and Nepal.

“We have been getting trained in Kamshet (near Mumbai),” Parajuly said. “For me, personally, this is a good platform to showcase my skills. Also, the prize money of ₹80,000 for the best paraglider is a good draw.” Helping in coordination of the contest was Mumbai’s Sunil Kare, a 65-year-old man who runs a trade journal on watches and took to the sport at the age

of 50. “This is my first time in Mechukha and the view here is breathtaking,” he said. “I have been to several places including Switzerland but the flying experience here is just amazing. All this place needs is basic infrastructure and it can compete with any place in the world that wants to become an adventure sports hub.”

“The administration must first build roads,” Kare said, mincing no words. “I heard people took two-three days to reach here,” he added, emphasising the poor condition of roads in the region. “You want this to be an adventure sports hub. But who will come here? I was of course lucky to have booked myself a seat in a chopper from Guwahati.”

in the five years since its inception, the adventure festival has helped bring about palpable change in the remote region and has put it on the adventure map of India. “The town that once lacked decent accommodation now has hotels, homestays and government tourist houses,” he said, crediting the change to local legislator Sona, who conceived the idea of the festival.

With thin population density of 17 persons per sq. km, Arunachal is looking at boosting job rates by providing adequate employment opportunities through adventure tourism. While no one can fault the vision, the state has a long road ahead as far as attracting real adventure sports talent is concerned. □



HARD COPY

Robbie, who had never heard of Harding before reading the script, earned a Golden Globe nomination for the role.

ON *SKATES* AND *SCANDAL*

By BEN REITER

Photograph by RICH POLK/GETTY IMAGES FOR AFI



They had the script, by veteran screenwriter Steven Rogers, the one that had burned up Hollywood with its dark humour, its cast of unreliable narrators and its promise of shedding new light on a story that had wrapped up a quarter-century ago. They had the star—Margot Robbie, the 27-year-old Australian who had seemed in most ways to be the opposite of Tonya Harding but who had put in months of work to embody the world-class figure skater. In the early stages of filming *I, Tonya*, though, its producers and director Craig Gillespie realised there was one thing they didn't have: the cooperation of the parakeet.

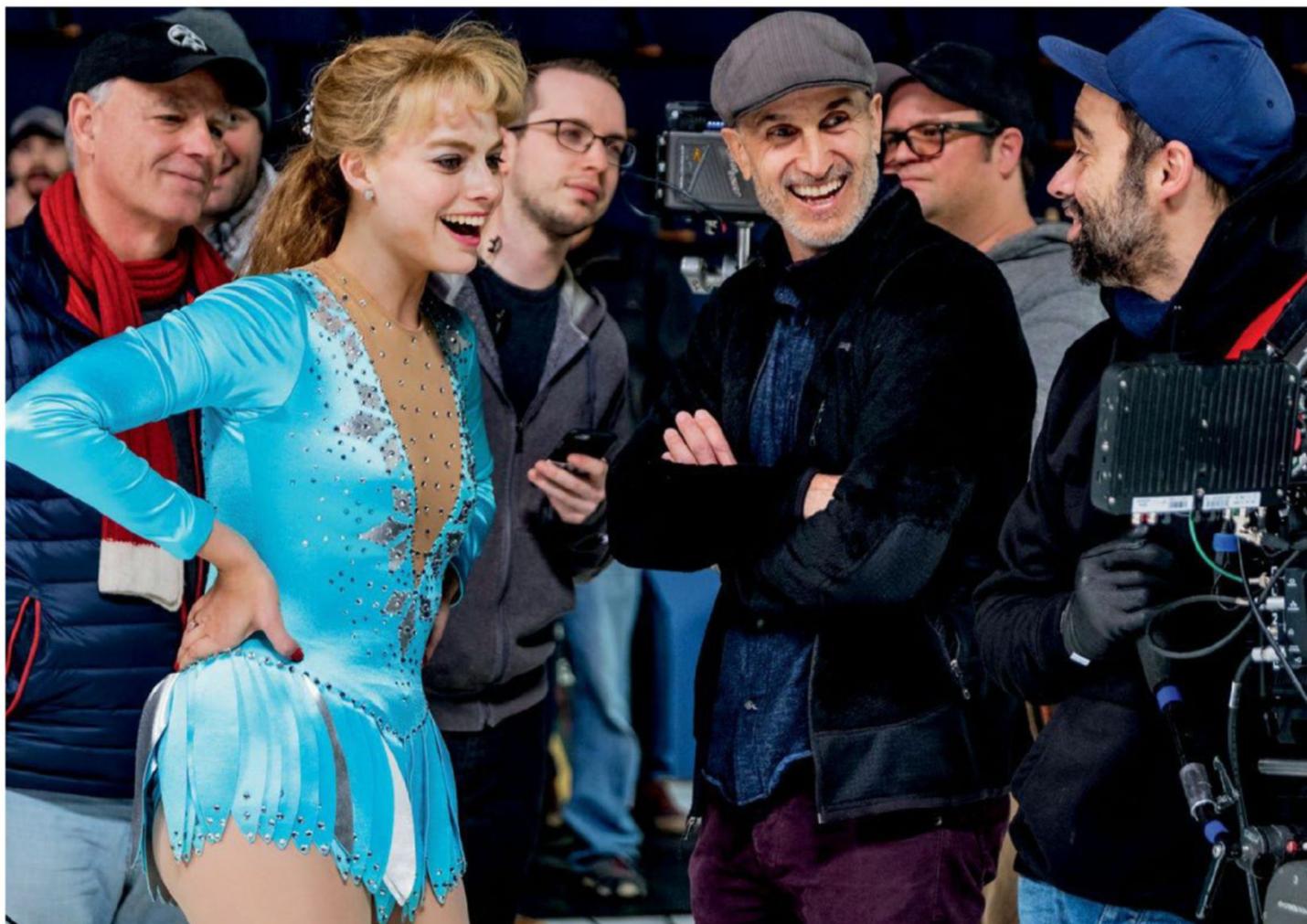
Specifically, of the parakeet's owner, who told them that the bird could not be exposed to smoke—a problem, as it was supposed to be perched on the shoulder of Harding's mother, LaVona Golden (played by Allison Janney), who was rarely without a cigarette. Janney suggested a solution: Perhaps her monstrous character could suck, instead, from an oxygen tank. Though the creature kept pecking at its tubes, the fix worked. The filming of what would become the year's best sports movie could proceed.

I, Tonya is bathed in cigarette smoke, not all of it curling from the lips of Golden. It underscores the unlikeliness of Harding's emergence from that poisonous haze to become the 1991 U.S. champion, the first American woman to complete a triple axel in competition—and then the villain in what remains one of history's great sporting scandals.

The film shows that Harding's life was one of abuse and violence, both before and after Shane Stant's baton struck the right knee of her rival, Nancy Kerrigan, in January 1994. (Though both skaters participated in the Lillehammer Olympics a month later—a recovered Kerrigan won silver, Harding finished eighth—Harding would plead guilty to one count of interfering with the prosecution of Kerrigan's attackers, who were linked to Jeff Gillooly, Harding's ex-husband, and his friend, Shawn Eckardt.) Much of that abuse, according to the movie,

*Revisiting the 24-year-old assault that rocked the Olympics
and the infamous figure at its centre, I, Tonya—*

*THE BEST SPORTS MOVIE OF 2017—goes beyond Tonya Harding, the
punch line, to reveal Tonya Harding, the person*



PUBLIC EYE

The film captures the frenzied media attention surrounding the skating final at Lillehammer, in which Harding (right, above) finished eighth.

was perpetrated by Golden, who devoted her life to throwing knives—only most of them figurative—at her improbably gifted daughter. “You skated like a graceless bull d---,” Golden tells a young Tonya after a competition. “I was embarrassed for you.” (Golden has denied allegations that she abused her daughter.)

But Harding, growing up in Oregon, suffered at the hands of others, too. Like Gillooly, whom she married when she was 19. While Rogers’s screenplay is largely based on interviews he conducted with both Harding and Gillooly—who tell stories often wildly contradictory—it’s hard to watch Sebastian Stan, playing Gillooly, slam Robbie’s head into a mirror and believe, as Stan’s character claims, that he never hit her.

Harding was also ill-treated by the skating establishment, which prized the refined image projected by Kerrigan (who’s only a fleeting character in the film) and rejected the hardscrabble Harding—who looked as if she chopped wood every morning because she did chop wood every morning—despite her skill.

“You’re just not the image we want to portray,” a cornered skating judge tells Harding at one point. “You’re representing our country, for f---’s sake. We

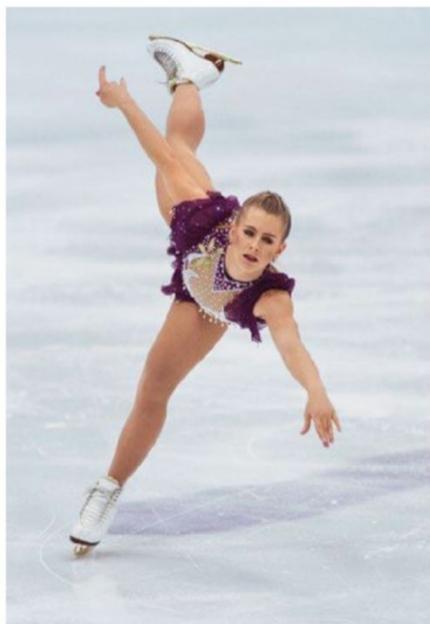
need a wholesome American family. You just refuse to play along.”

“I don’t have a wholesome American family,” she protests. “Why can’t it just be about the skating?”

Then, too, Harding was victimised by an American public just becoming hooked on a 24-hour news cycle, one in constant need of new heroes and villains. “I thought being famous was going to be fun,” Robbie’s Tonya tells the audience, directly. “I was loved for a minute. Then I was hated. Then I was just a punch line. It was like being abused all over again, only this time it was by you.”

Robbie, also a producer on the film, came to the story with the seemingly impossible: fresh eyes. She was a toddler living on the other side of the world when Harding

COURTESY OF NEON



MIKE POWELL/ANLESPORT/GETTY IMAGES (ABOVE); DAVID CROTTY/PATRICK MCMULLAN VIA GETTY IMAGES

and Kerrigan became daily fixtures on CNN and *Hard Copy*. When Rogers's wickedly clever script crossed her desk, she had never heard of either of the skaters. "As soon as I finished it, I got on Google," she says. "Whoa. It's all true."

Her nuanced portrayal of Harding—whom Robbie met just a couple of weeks before shooting began—allows us to see the skater anew, too. Robbie's Harding is never exactly likable, in part because she refuses to accept responsibility for any of her actions. But she does emerge as something our culture never allowed her to be: a full person, deserving of empathy.

Robbie's skating experience was limited to rec league hockey when she took on the role, and yet months of four-hour-a-day training—combined with seamless special effects, necessary in part because no stunt

THE BEST OF SPORTS MEDIA

RUNNER-UP FILMS

BATTLE OF THE SEXES starring Emma Stone, Steve Carell

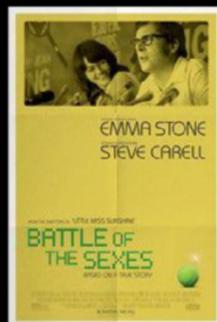
Directed by Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris

The story of the upstart WTA and its fight for gender equality in the 1970s—centred on the epic '73 match between Billie Jean King and Bobby Riggs—has just as much relevance today.

TOUR DE PHARMACY starring Andy Samberg, Orlando Bloom

Directed by Jake Szymanski

A ridiculously star-studded cast joins Samberg in HBO's latest foray into sports mockumentary (*7 Days in Hell*), spoofing the widespread doping culture in pro cycling. —Amy Parlapiano



DOCUMENTARIES

BEST ICARUS Directed by Bryan Fogel

If you're all familiar with the current events surrounding Russia's doping programme, the revelations won't be shocking. But the film soars in portraying the Sisyphean challenge of fighting for truth against a power that can create its own.

RUNNER-UP

DISGRACED Directed by Pat Kondelis

Even those who remember the scandal around the 2003 murder of Baylor basketball player Patrick Dennehy will be disgusted anew by the coach then, Dave Bliss, who gallingly used the death to cover up his own NCAA violations.

WHAT CARTER LOST Directed by Adam Hootnick

Retelling the story of the 1988 Carter High Cowboys, best known as the juggernaut from *Friday Night Lights*, the doc explores the fraught racial, social and educational dynamics of Texas football.

—Dan Greene



ICE QUEENS
Harding, the 1991 U.S. champ [left], and Kerrigan [right] will forever be linked because of the scandal.

was only supposed to orchestrate a series of threatening messages to Kerrigan, and he hired the hit men, including Stant, on his own.

So began Harding's descent through the circles of postfame hell: celebrity boxing, a sex tape. That would have probably been the

Robbie's Harding is never exactly likable, in part because she refuses to accept responsibility for any of her actions. But she does emerge as something our culture never allowed: A FULL PERSON, DESERVING OF EMPATHY.

double in the world could pull off a triple axel—allow her to capture Harding's athletic greatness.

More than that, though, Robbie's performance shows us that the ice was the one place where Harding experienced pure, almost weightless, joy. "Everything's different, Jeff," she tells Gillooly after she surpasses her childhood dream of joining the Ice Capades to become a champion. "People actually smile at me now."

So it is heartbreaking to see how those who surround her continue to drag her down and tragic when a circuit court judge in Portland rules that part of her punishment for interfering in the prosecution of the Kerrigan assault is that she resign from the U.S. figure skating association. (She was banned for life three months later.) "Just send me to jail, and then I can still skate," she pleads in court, in a scene that Robbie improvised beyond Rogers's words. "Just send me to jail, and then I can still skate."

About the famous assault: The movie doesn't conclude definitively whether Harding was a conspirator in her rival's kneecapping or not, though both her character and Gillooly's suggest she couldn't have been. That's because Eckardt—Gillooly's obese, basement-dwelling friend with delusions of grandeur—

end of her, if not for this gonzo new reckoning. "The haters always say, 'Tonya, tell the truth,'" she says in a voice-over. "There's no such thing as truth. I mean, it's b-----. Everyone has their own truth, and life just does whatever the f--- it wants."

Still, even Harding gets a happy ending: She now works as a professional landscaper, deck builder and house painter in Oregon and is married with a six-year-old son. "It's very clear that she became the kind of mother she never had," says Robbie. "And I think that's hugely important to her. It's all she wants to talk about."

Each of us, *I, Tonya* suggests, is more than the worst thing we've ever done—or, in Tonya's case, the worst thing she might have done. □

JOHN TUMAC/THE BOSTON GLOBE VIA GETTY IMAGES (HARDING, KERRIGAN); VIVIAN KULLER/AGETTY IMAGES FOR NEON

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MASTERS CLASS

→ BY MICHAEL ROSENBERG

■ **OKSANA MASTERS DOES** not take no for an answer. She also does not take yes for an answer. Who do you think you are, giving her the answers?

Surely, you're no better than the doctors who told her, in 2013, that her Paralympic rowing career was over. Masters, now 28, had won a bronze medal in the trunk-and-arms mixed double skulls at the 2012 Paralympics, and she wanted to win gold in '16. Now she was told she had spondylolisthesis. One of her vertebrae kept sliding forward, rubbing against the one below when she moved from side to side.

So that was it, the doctors said: She could not row anymore. She didn't believe them. "I'm just stupid and too headstrong," she says.

Masters wanted to stay in shape for the rowing career that was supposedly over, so she took up skiing. For the first three days, "I was horrible. I could not stay upright past 100 metres," she says. A year later she won silver and bronze in cross-country skiing at the 2014 Paralympics in Sochi. Well, that's one way to stay in shape.

Masters then went home to Louisville to see if she could resume her rowing career. Doctors replied: Duh. They had been through this already. Her body could not make the motions necessary to row with spondylolisthesis.

So rowing was out, again. But, hey, Masters was a skier now. And how do skiers stay in shape? They start cycling, of course. Masters quickly found that this was actually not the best idea: "You use your core in such a different way," she says. "It's insane going from skiing to cycling. Even though you are in prime shape, you feel like you have never worked out a day in your life."

But Masters enjoyed cycling, and she got so good at it that she made the 2016 Paralympics in Rio, where she might have won bronze in the hand-peddalling road race if her left hand had



When Masters had to give up rowing, she discovered that what she loved, even more than rowing, was a challenge.



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not gotten caught in a rival's spokes. She missed a medal by half a wheel length.

Masters came home and retired. No, wait, that's not right. She started focusing on the '18 Paralympics in PyeongChang, where she is a medal threat in both Nordic skiing and biathlon. She was fourth in the 6K biathlon in Sochi and eighth in the 10K.

At her age, Masters says she still has time to pick up basketball, powerlifting and fencing. In the meantime, she is writing one of the great life stories in sports.

It started when her birth parents had been the first people to tell her no. Masters was born with six toes on each foot, five webbed fingers on each hand and no thumbs, all because of radiation poisoning from Chernobyl. She spent her childhood in orphanages in Ukraine, where she was mistreated. An American woman named Gay Masters adopted her when Oksana was seven. It is a testament to Oksana's charisma and charm that if you spend 10 minutes with her, you will forget everything you've just read in this paragraph.

Masters did not set out to be a one-woman Paralympic superpower. When she was 13 and somebody suggested adaptive rowing, she winced at adaptive: "As a 13-year-old girl, I didn't want to do something different," she says. But when she finally got in a boat, she loved it. When she had to give it up, she discovered that what she loved, even more than rowing, was a challenge.

Paralympic athletes face obstacles that go beyond the physical. It can be difficult to find the right equipment, and good luck finding a coach. Says Masters, "When you're not on a national team, you're completely on your own."

It takes an incredible will to make the Paralympics in three different sports. Winning medals in two of those sports, with a narrow miss in the third, is extraordinary. Masters has a different description of her career: "Not good enough yet. I don't see myself as successful because I don't have that gold medal yet." She is crazy to view her career that way. But I will not be the one to tell her. □



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2018



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PRITHVI
SHAW

SHUBMAN
GILL



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GLENN
MAXWELL

JOE
ROOT

TRENT
BOULT



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LEWIS
HAMILTON

DANIEL
RICCIARDO

SEBASTIAN
VETTEL

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AUSTRALIAN GRAND PRIX [Melbourne]; **Indoor Athletics World Championships** [Birmingham, UK]; **Men's Indian Open Golf** [New Delhi]; **All England Open Badminton C'ships** [Birmingham, UK]; **Indian Super League Final** [Kolkata]



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DAVID WARNER

M.S. DHONI

VIRAT KOHLI

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SAINA
NEHWAL

P.V.
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KIDAMBI
SRIKANTH



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THOMAS & UBER CUP [Bangkok, Thailand]; **FA Cup Final** [London, UK]; **Champions League Final** [Kiev, Ukraine]; **French Open** [Paris, France]; **Grand Prix De Monaco** [Monte Carlo, Monaco]

MAY 2018

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FEDERER

RAFAEL
NADAL



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FRENCH OPEN [Paris, France]; **FIFA World Cup** [Russia]; **NBA Finals** [USA/Canada];
U.S. Open Championship [golf] [New York, USA]

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PARDEEP
NARWAL

RAHUL
CHAUDHARI

AJAY
THAKUR

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PRO KABADDI [India]; **Austrian Grand Prix** [Spielberg, Austria]; **Wimbledon** [London, UK]; **England-India ODI series** [England]; **British Grand Prix** [Silverstone, UK]; **British Open** [Scotland]; **Boxing World C'ships** [New Delhi, India]



JULY 2018

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PREMIER LEAGUE [England]; **England-India Test series** [England]; **Asian Games** [Jakarta, Indonesia]; **U.S. Open** [New York, USA]

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ROBERT
LEWANDOWSKI

PIERRE-EMERICK
AUBAMEYANG

MANUEL
NEUER



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BUNDESLIGA [Germany]; **Hyderabad Open** [Hyderabad]; **Youth Olympics** [Buenos Aires, Argentina]; **Ryder Cup** [Le Golf National, France]

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JEJE

SUNIL
CHHETRI

SANDESH
JHINGHAN

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SMRITI
MANDHANA

MITHALI
RAJ

HARMANPREET
KAUR



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CALENDAR 2018

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ICC WOMEN'S WORLD T20 [West Indies]; **Weightlifting World Championships** [Lima, Peru]; **Syed Modi Int'l Badminton Championships** [Lucknow]; **Abu Dhabi Grand Prix** [Abu Dhabi]

NOVEMBER 2018

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MANPREET SINGH

HARMANPREET SINGH

RUPINDER PAL SINGH

MUST WATCH THIS MONTH

HOCKEY WORLD CUP [Bhubaneswar]; **Australia-India Test series** [Australia]; **World Swimming Championships** [Hangzhou China]; **FIFA Club World Cup** [U.A.E.]



DECEMBER 2018

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11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	

AUGUST 2018

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
		01	02	03	04	05
06	07	08	09	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	31		

OCTOBER 2018

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
01	02	03	04	05	06	07
08	09	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

DECEMBER 2018

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
31					01	02
03	04	05	06	07	08	09
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30



FESTIVALS

13/01/2018	Lohri
14/01/2018	Makar Sankranti/Pongal
22/01/2018	Basant Panchami
26/01/2018	Republic Day
13/02/2018	Maha Shivratri
02/03/2018	Holi
18/03/2018	Ugadi
25/03/2018	Ram Navami
30/03/2018	Good Friday
01/05/2018	Labour Day
15/06/2018	Eid-ul-Fitr
15/08/2018	Independence Day
22/08/2018	Bakrid (Eid-ul-Adha)
25/08/2018	Onam
26/08/2018	Raksha Bandhan
02/09/2018	Janmashtami
13/09/2018	Ganesh Chaturthi
02/10/2018	Gandhi Jayanti
19/10/2018	Dussehra
07/11/2018	Diwali
13/11/2018	Chhath Puja
23/11/2018	Guru Nanak Jayanti
25/12/2018	Christmas