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# PLAYFIELD<sup>TM</sup>

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HOW SOFTBALL  
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**SWEEPING  
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## EDITOR'S TAKE



## PERILS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

**S**ocial media trolls (I use this word deliberately, well aware of the fact that the people I am referring to also include the upright, principled and intellectual segment of our society) have managed to do what none of his adversaries could in the twenty years of top level cricket that he played; silence Sachin Tendulkar into submission. His message, #IndiaTogether #IndiaAgainstPropoganda has since acquired the infamous tag. Without getting into the merits or demerits of that tweet I would, however, like to express my dismay at how an army of keyboard warriors have robbed us, the cricket fans, of some fine insights on the game, courtesy one of the sharpest thinkers cricket has known. His twitter posts – gems such as, how Siraj's unconventional ball release allowed him to bowl in-cutters in Australia, why ICC's DRS rule was flawed in its current avatar and how Mitchell Starc's subtle change in his wrist position helped him become a better bowler – have now gone silent. I squarely blame the new age political commentators for it.

Sachin had told me once why he refrained from overtly praising or criticising a cricketer in public. He had endured guilt during his playing career when his well-meaning comments in admiration of a spinner led to another losing his place. Why do we expect celebrities to express their opinion on every issue of national importance? Why should it be incumbent upon them to speak, especially when they know so little about such complex issues. And if an 'A-list' does choose to put forward his point of view – whether on his own or following someone's advice – why must we treat it as the gospel?

Fact is, as great as these legends are, do they qualify to speak on every subject? Just because Sachin could hit a cover drive better than anyone doesn't mean he would understand issues of national importance any better than the rest. Same applies to other assorted sportsmen and film stars who tweet about subjects outside their area of expertise. There's a lesson in it. In the current political environment, where all issues are limited to the binary of left and right, there is no scope for nuanced discussions. After all, in sport, a left-right partnership is a reality, even an advantage in most cases. Meanwhile, for the shy and reticent Sachin, I suspect this episode might serve as a case of once bitten twice shy, as we wait for his next tweet...

– NIKHIL NAZ



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Rohit Sharma's 161-run knock in the first innings of the second Test set the tone for India's win.

# COMEBACK KINGS AT IT AGAIN

INDIA RODE ON ROHIT'S  
INCANDESCENCE AND ENGLAND  
IMPLODED IN THE FACE OF  
ASHWIN'S EXCELLENCE TO KEEP  
THE SERIES ON EVEN KEEL

R KAUSHIK

F

or over half a decade since his international debut in mid-2007, Rohit Sharma occasionally enthralled, but often exasperated. His stroke-play was magical, all laidback elegance and sinuous extension of hands and bat; he also had a propensity to look a gift horse in the mouth, which didn't

endear him to many that mattered.

The pitfalls of making batting look effortless are numerous. Prime among them is being labelled lazy, indifferent, unambitious, easily satisfied. Such is the lot of the gifted that they are pilloried when they are dismissed playing strokes; all the sympathy is reserved for a batsman who might get out in the same fashion repeatedly while offering a defensive blade. That's just how it is, whether you like it or not.

Rohit's career seemed headed towards the familiar category of 'what might have been' until Mahendra Singh Dhoni pulled another of the myriad rabbits out of his munificent hat. In January of 2013, he re-radicalised India's approach to limited-overs cricket by thrusting Rohit up the order to the top of the batting tree. The timing was impeccable; Sachin Tendulkar had bid adieu to white-ball play, the law of diminishing returns had caught up with Virender Sehwag; India didn't have one settled opener, let alone a stable opening combination.



# COVER STORY

Of Dhoni's multiple masterstrokes, this has to rank right up there with the very best. Responding to the enormous show of faith, Rohit unleashed one giant knock after another. Double-hundreds cascaded off his wonderful willow in 50-over internationals, centuries flowed in its shorter sibling in country vs country battle. The legend of Rohit the white-ball behemoth, the preface to which was written eight years back, is now well and truly established.

Even as his limited-overs stature took a meteoric upturn, Rohit's red-ball credentials continued to be debated, and rightly so. Pencilled in for a Test debut in February 2010 after injuries ruled Rahul Dravid and VVS Laxman out of the Nagpur opener against South Africa, Rohit played himself out of contention by doing his ankle on match-morning, just before the toss. It was an expensive injury; the Mumbaier had to wait a further three and a half years until he was finally pushed into the cauldron of the Test arena.

As if to make up for time lost, Rohit smashed centuries in his first two Tests, against Daren Sammy's West Indies, in Tendulkar's farewell series. It appeared as if the last component of the middle-order jigsaw had fallen in place.

As with many things Rohit, the promise of the fiery start didn't extend to a consistent middle. For all the faith of think-tanks and his own aspirations, Test cricket wasn't too kind to the stylish right-hander. Sporadic masterpieces with deft, decisive, silken touches of the brush he used for a bat were drowned in a sea of mediocre replicas. Rohit spent as much time on the sidelines as in the playing XI, all-round patience running out, with an untimely thigh injury when he just appeared to be hitting his stride in 2016 doing little to dispel the gloom.

Virat Kohli is an original in so many ways, but without pride coming in the way, he chose to fall back on history and emulate his predecessor as the Indian captain, perhaps in a final throw of the dice to resurrect Rohit's career. Consequently, in October 2019, as India embarked on the first home challenge of their World Test Championship campaign, the skipper and head coach ally Ravi Shastri elevated Rohit to the opening position in the Test format too.

A year and a half on, that move continues to pay off. Rohit's way of thanksgiving to skipper and head coach was to make hundreds in both innings in Visakhapatnam, in his first Test as opener, against South Africa. A Test later, he brought up his maiden double-century, but doubts remained over his efficacy in overseas conditions. Unrelated injuries ruled him out of the New Zealand series early last year and the first two Tests of



The first Test in Chennai marked the resumption of international cricket in India after the pandemic while the second Test saw the return of fans inside the stadium, adding more colour to the proceedings.



R Ashwin took centre-stage and the Man of the Match award in the second Test by taking eight wickets and scoring a hundred to help India level the series 1-1.

**BY TAKING FIVE  
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THRICE, ASHWIN HAS  
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THAT CATEGORY,  
ONLY BEHIND  
SIR IAN BOTHAM.**

the series in Australia towards the end of 2020. But when he did cut his teeth as an opener away from home, Rohit was compact and impressive in Sydney and Brisbane without going on to make a truly massive contribution.

That, it became clear, he had saved for the English. On a challenging but hardly diabolical pitch for the second Test at the MA Chidambaram Stadium, Rohit produced a masterclass while piecing together 161 of the finest. As brilliantly flowing as the knock was, its beauty lay in the conception. Rohit played the sweep shot to awesome effect, but not in pre-determined or reckless fashion. He sussed the percentages, realised English fields provided a safety net even in the



# COVER STORY



Rishabh Pant has been in red-hot form with the bat since the tour to Australia but surprised everyone with his tidy keeping on pitches that offered a lot of turn and variable bounce.

event of a top-edge, and buried the visitors under an avalanche of runs, though he was not just a one-trick pony that didn't play anything other than the sweep.

India needed Rohit to stand up and set the tempo as they sought to bounce back from a heavy 227-run defeat at the same venue in the first Test. Likewise, it was also imperative for them that their lead match-winner with the ball come to the party. R Ashwin had taken six wickets in England's second innings in the first game but India had yielded too much ground in the first for that to make a significant dent. This time, armed with the cushion of a good total after batting first, the off-spinner supreme ran rings around England's clueless batsmen with five wickets in the first innings, and three in the second.

For good measure, the man who once aspired to open the batting for the country put the much-scrutinised and unfairly maligned playing surface for the second game in perspective. Having shown England's spinners how to bowl on a helpful surface, he set about offering lessons to their batsmen on how to knuckle down and compile runs in those very same conditions. A prolonged drought had precluded the addition of a fifth Test century to his collection for more than four years, but in front of his

adoring home fans, the man from Chennai banished the haunting memory of frustrating batting failures with a remarkable third-day century while batting at No. 8.

By taking five wickets in an innings and scoring a century in the same Test thrice, Ashwin has slotted into second place in that category, only behind Sir Ian Botham (five times), and ahead of such stalwarts like the peerless Sir Garry Sobers, Mushtaq Mohammed, Jacques Kallis and Shakib Al Hasan (twice each). That's a fabulous accomplishment any way you look at it; what makes the latest feat even more special is that it has (or at should have) helped silence the wagging tongues that have heaped scorn on the 22-yard piece of prime land at Chepauk for the second Test.

England, or rather some of their former players who have voluntarily embraced cheerleader status - to be fair, the team has not had a go at the playing surface - had no issues with similar, if not more spin-oriented tracks in Galle last month, when they won both Tests with plenty to spare. They were happy to bask in the glory of their 227-run win in India, fashioned on a sleeping beauty that only sprang to life on day three in the first Test, and where Joe Root hit it lucky with the coin. But the

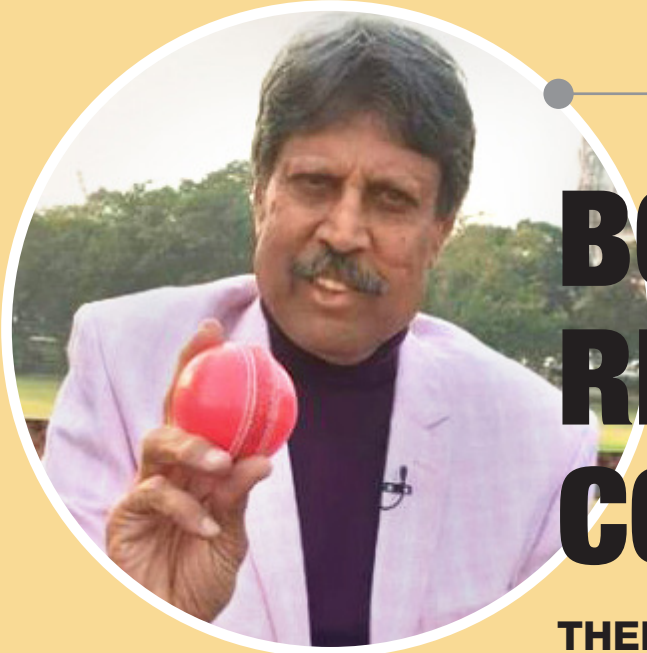
moment Root called wrong, the ball spun from day one (which effectively took the toss out of the equation), India rode on Rohit's incandescence and England imploded in the face of Ashwin's excellence to be shot out for 134, the whining began. That's precisely why Ashwin's third-innings 106 was worth its weight in gold. In allegedly the worst batting conditions of the match until then, the specialist off-spinner whose last Test fifty came three and a half years back portrayed the skills, the discipline, the patience and the temperament needed to not just survive but positively thrive. Alongside batting lynchpin Kohli, he was primarily responsible for India reaching 286 in their second innings, to go with 329 in the first. Perhaps, it's time for England's designated complainers to introspect and wonder whether England batted and/or bowled well enough to deserve better. It can't be that the pitch was at its worst for batting on day two when England held the willows, but played beautifully when they didn't. Until the beginning of day four, at the very least, not one wicket had been surrendered by either team to the vagaries of the pitch. As unpalatable as that might be to some, it's a significant pointer to how the surface has behaved.

It's amazing how sub-continental teams are panned for lack of skills when they are found wanting by swing and seam outside of Asia, and again panned for preparing 'doctored' pitches when the English, in particular, are unable to counter the turning ball. You can't have it both ways; either England are as poor at playing spin as the Asians are at handling seam and swing, or all teams try to make the most of home conditions. Why a surface is deemed perfectly legitimate when pacers take 25 wickets in the first two days is more acceptable and less worthy of condemnation than when spinners hold sway from the off beggars the imagination. After all, aren't all of these integral elements of bowling, integral to wicket-taking? Or are we just being naïve, expecting pace and spin to be viewed through the same prism of balance and fair play? ■



The series-levelling win has put India back in second position in the World Test Championship table, and within striking distance of booking a ticket to the final at Lord's in June later this year.

KAPIL DEV



# BOWLERS SHOW REMARKABLE COMMITMENT

**THERE IS RESPECT FOR INDIA'S BOWLERS,  
FAST OR SPIN, AND IT HELPS THE TEAM  
ESTABLISH A REPUTATION OF A GOOD  
TRAVELLING UNIT**

It is such a lovely feeling. Indian cricket is in a prosperous state, with some of the finest young talent of the world bringing unstinted joy to the followers of the game. From the turnaround that was triggered with that inspiring win in Melbourne followed by the incredible stamp of authority in Brisbane, the Indian team has continued to scale great heights. There was an aberration in Chennai in the first Test against England but it was so emphatically corrected in the second encounter. When I look at this team, I am convinced India will dominate world cricket for years to come. It has the strength and skills to outwit any opposition, as we saw in the series in Australia.

I have seen Indian cricket experience a huge change in the last 15 years. The emphasis is on winning, and this quality makes the current Indian side such a formidable unit. The desire to win is what propels the ambitions of a team. I like this attitude. The boys are taking the field with awesome confidence and are well equipped in all depart-

ments of the game.

I think the bowlers have shown remarkable commitment. It helps the team management when it has an impressive pool of performing fast bowlers to pick from. We have come a long way from the time when playing a medium-fast bowler was considered a huge privilege because we did not have many. It gladdens me to see robust competition among the fast bowlers to earn a playing spot.

My debut series taught me valuable lessons. My teammates were happy when I compelled the opponents to bat with a helmet. I thought the top batsmen showed reluctance to wear the helmet because it hurt their ego. I was never carried away by this development. My job was to take wickets and not force the batsmen to wear a helmet. Of course, now it is a welcome trait to wear a helmet at all times because safety matters most.

Even as I was moving out of the game, I knew the system was developing fast bowlers. True, spinners continued to command their places but then more and more bowlers were aspiring to bowl quick. The



## COLUMN



**I AM AWARE OF THIS MODERN EMPHASIS ON WORKOUTS IN THE GYM BUT I AM NOT A BIG FAN OF THIS IDEA. I THINK THE BOWLERS HAVE TO BE ATHLETIC AND FLEXIBLE AND THAT CAN COME FROM COMPULSORY RUNNING EVERY DAY.**



result is there for us to see. At any given point, the team management has ten talented fast bowlers to perform the job in all formats of the game. It reflects on not just the talent but the process of identifying and grooming the youngsters at the domestic level.

The fabulous career of Ishant Sharma is an example for this generation. To have taken 300 Test wickets only underlines the consistency and longevity of Ishant, who is on the verge of playing his 100th Test. I have always found Ishant a bowler of substance in all conditions. He has the pace and the skill to make an impact. Indian cricket has benefited from Ishant's contributions over the years. He has used his height to good advantage and I am fascinated by his wrist position and the ball he brings in to the right-hander. To excel on Indian pitches puts Ishant in a special category due to his skill to use the old ball effectively.

I am most impressed with Jasprit Bumrah. I must confess I never thought he would play for this long because of his action, which I thought left him prone to injuries. But I am happy he has proved me wrong by rattling the best of batsmen with pace. Bumrah is a fantastic success story. He is able to adapt to all formats and loves taking the responsibility

of being the strike bowler. It is not easy to bowl on pitches in the subcontinent, but not if you are a Bumrah.

There is respect for India's bowlers, fast or spin, and it helps the team establish a reputation of a good traveling unit. Bowlers win you matches and we have seen this in the recent times when India have cemented their place in the top bracket of international cricket. The support staff has played a crucial role in injury management and it is a good idea to rotate bowlers to keep them fresh and focused.

I am aware of this modern emphasis on workouts in the gym but I am not a big fan of this idea. I think bowlers have to be athletic and flexible, and that can only come from compulsory running every day. Gym assignments may be the need of the hour but you can't just develop the muscles in your upper body. A bowler should also have strong legs to help him increase his endurance to produce long spells.

I take this opportunity to congratulate R. Ashwin for playing the role of a match-winner to perfection. I am sure he has much more in store as an all-rounder. India can look forward to some exciting cricket from the current bunch of cricketers, who have shown the right attitude to approach a contest. ■

**BUMRAH IS ABLE TO ADAPT TO ALL THE FORMATS AND LOVES TAKING THE RESPONSIBILITY OF BEING THE STRIKE BOWLER. IT IS NOT EASY TO BOWL ON PITCHES IN THE SUB-CONTINENT BUT NOT IF YOU ARE A BUMRAH.**

## CRICKET

**A SLEW OF FITNESS-RELATED PULLOUTS STRETCHED INDIA'S BENCH STRENGTH TO THE LIMIT, RAISING LEGITIMATE CONCERNS OVER THE TEAM'S INJURY REDRESSAL SYSTEM AND WORKLOAD MANAGEMENT**

# ANATOMY OF A BREAKDOWN

SHANTANU SRIVASTAVA

**L**ast month, a second-string Indian team played out extraordinary cricket to win a memorable Test series in Australia. While the unflinching grit of Ajinkya Rahane's men has been rightly lauded, the cyclic breakdown of India's touring bowlers implores a scientific introspection of its own.

On-field impact injuries aside, a slew of fitness-related pull-outs stretched India's bench strength to the limit. Jasprit Bumrah (abdomen), Umesh Yadav (calf), Ravichandran Ashwin (back), and Navdeep Saini (groin) found themselves on the physio's table at various points during the tour, raising legitimate concerns over India's injury redressal system and workload management.

While the COVID-enforced break may be cited as a readymade cause for the spate of injuries, the bigger issue, experts believe, is not as straightforward.

Ramji Srinivasan, India's former strength and conditioning coach,

says the breakdowns were a culmination of faulty training and fitness regimens.

"Injuries do not happen overnight. There is definitely something wrong with our training protocols. We need to go back to the drawing board and see what sort of training methodology is in place, and what kind of workload management is in place," he said.

Srinivasan refrained from singling out the pandemic for bowlers' injuries, but agreed that cricketers' less-than-perfect transition from lockdown to full-fledged Test series did play its part.

"I don't agree that lockdown or pandemic are solely responsible for the injuries. Yes, players were hammered psychologically and physiologically during the lockdown, but the transition or progression from training indoors to outdoors is crucial.

"The ground reaction force and running mechanics are completely different while running on a treadmill vis-a-vis running outdoors. This is where progression monitoring should come in. Then, coming into match mode is another task. It is not easy to just turn up and bowl 20 overs a



# CRICKET

IMAGES CREDIT: TWITTER @BCCI

day,” he explained.

Additionally, Srinivasan suggests “individualised” and “Indianised” training programmes for injury prevention.

“I think we need to have our own fitness patterns, like we had at MRF Pace Foundation. We need to Indianise the diet, strength, and fitness protocols. You need to adapt your training modules as per individual needs. Each athlete’s genetics, lifestyle, access to facilities is different. It makes little sense to copy workouts and training regimens.”

Former India pacer and coach at MRF Pace Foundation, TA Sekhar, was not surprised at India’s injury list either. The 64-year-old pinned the blame on a combination of lack of Test-specific preparations due to COVID-enforced break, faulty bowling technique, and inadequate fitness.

“Fast bowlers getting injured was more or less expected because they had not bowled enough overs for seven-eight months. You need to bowl at least 10 overs a day to get basic match fitness. Then, there were no first-class games either. Sure, there was IPL, but bowling four overs a day will not prepare you for the Test match grind,” he said.

A long tour of Australia, Sekhar reckons, demands a minimum of two months of preparation, but because of the pandemic, that couldn’t be done. Consequently, the fast bowlers landed Down Under with far from ideal conditioning.

“Bowlers should have strong quadriceps, calves, hamstrings, glutes, back, and core.” Sekar alludes to the kinetic chain: “When a fast bowler runs and lands on the foot, first the ankle stabilizes, then the knee, followed by pelvis and then the torso. Finally, your hand starts rotating and the ball is released from your fingertips. So, you see, there’s a chain reaction happening, and for every action, you need to have proper balance. That can come only by bowling, not in the gym,” he said.

Sekhar described Bumrah’s abdomen strain as “freak” and Umesh Yadav’s calf pull a possible result of over-exertion. But Saini’s groin trouble, he believes, is a function of wrong bowling mechanics.

“I will attribute Saini’s injury to his technique. He generates pace alright, but his technique is not correct. Groin injuries are related to lower body alignment and incorrect feet placement.”

Explaining what exactly is amiss with Saini, Sekhar said, “He doesn’t use his body much. He uses more of his arm and his run-up is not very athletic either which puts a lot of



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**– TA SEKHAR,  
FORMER INDIAN  
FAST BOWLER  
AND COACH**

strain on his body.”

The way forward, Sekhar believes, is an intelligent rotation policy riding on a healthy pool of international quality fast bowlers. He also sounded a note of caution for pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah.

“I really believe we need to rest Bumrah. His action is freakish and he is the only fast-bowling match-winner we have. If we want him to play for another five-six years, we really need to rotate him wisely. For that, we should have a bench strength of eight to ten good fast bowlers,” he said.

For Srinivasan, rest and recovery hold the key, particularly in COVID times.

“Rest and recovery are as individual as fitness, and these protocols have to be customised too. You need to plan well. Trainers and athletes need to gauge the quarantine rules, access to outdoor and indoor training facilities and intelligently implement the training module,” he concluded. ■



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## INTERVIEW



# I BATTED TO SECURE MY PLACE: SEHWAG

**THE DASHER FROM DELHI REFLECTS ON THE HIGHS AND LOWS OF A MOMENTOUS CAREER THAT NETTED HIM TWO TEST TRIPLES**

VIJAY LOKAPALLY

**V**irender Sehwag defied the coaching manual to create magic of a different kind at the crease. Batting for him was a platform to celebrate his awesome potential to destroy the bowler. He was a rare batsman who had no fear of failure. Critics mocked his technique and lack of footwork, but Sehwag had the last laugh during a career of 104 Test matches which yielded 23 centuries, and the first two of India's triple-centuries.

In this interview with The Playfield, he speaks on a few aspects of the game and his forthcoming plans to launch a coaching App.

**How do you look back on your career all these years later?**

So many memories. First Test hundred. First triple-century, second triple-century. Getting dropped. The Chennai Test against England (2008). NatWest final (2002). 2003 World Cup final. Winning the 2011 World Cup final. I am happy with my career except for one regret, when I got out for 293 (against Sri Lanka in Mumbai in December 2009). I have videos of all my innings, I watch them regularly with my sons and stress on them the importance of Test cricket.

**A hard-hitting batsman like you giving importance to Test cricket?**

I have always wanted to play cricket. The format did not matter. Even playing in the streets and with

**"I WAS PLAYING CRICKET, NOT LOOKING TO CHANGE THE STYLE (OF BATTING). I ALWAYS TOLD MYSELF THAT I MUST MAKE RUNS GOOD ENOUGH TO SECURE MY PLACE, NOT SET RECORDS."**



## INTERVIEW



my children energises me. Test cricket has longer Power Play, and I capitalised on that. Bowlers are looking to get you out and have attacking fields. Also, in Test cricket, you can play the big shots whenever you want to. You can block the ball too. But in white-ball cricket, you are dictated by the situation.

**You had a distinct style of attacking from the first ball?**

I was playing cricket, not looking to change the style (of batting). I always told myself that I must make runs good enough to secure my place. That was the approach. Not to set records or set a new style. I had so many partners who kept coming and going. I just batted to secure my place.

**You have not forgotten being dropped from the Test team...**

Getting dropped with a Test average of 50 did hurt. I have been dropped in one-dayers but that did not count. I had one bad series; to get dropped after scoring consistently well before that was not good, really.

**Do you realise your colleagues felt happy you took the pressure of them at the top?**

I played my game. I did not realise I was taking pressure off them. In Test cricket,

**I HAD CROSSED HIS FANTASTIC SCORE OF 281 AND WANTED TO CELEBRATE THE MOMENT WITH HIM. VVS WAS DEEP ASLEEP BUT I CALLED HIM TO MY ROOM TO CUT THE CAKE.**

et, teams come after analysing you. I just concentrated on making runs.

**How much do you value runs made in Australia?**

India-Australia cricket was always the

best. In 2003, we were determined to do well after the 3-0 drubbing in 1999-2000. Australia is the best opposition. You excel in Australia and people remember that. Doing well against a team like Australia was the ambition of everyone. Rahul Dravid always motivated me to do well overseas against big teams. I knew to earn respect, I had to make big scores against big teams and Australia was the one. The hard bouncy tracks throw a huge challenge and their bowlers know how to exploit those conditions.

**Why do you rate the 195 at Melbourne in 2003 very high?**

The 195 at Melbourne was special for many reasons - the opposition, the pitch, the overall conditions. I had two hundreds before that innings but this was the innings that earned me a reputation among the former greats.

**Which other innings made you happy?**

The century against England in 2002 (in Nottingham). It was my second match as opener and the ball was swinging so much. (Wasim) Jaffer, (Sachin) Tendulkar and Dravid had got out quickly. I think I surprised myself that day. I told myself not to spare the loose ball because they had set attacking fields. I was happy to prove some



## INTERVIEW

people wrong who said I won't succeed in those conditions.

**How would you describe your defence? Many said it was weak.**

Defence is simple. Leave it or block it. How does your position matter? I was good at it. I would get the ball in the middle of the bat. Sometimes, even the defensive shot against the new ball would produce a boundary because my bat would come from a height.

The mindset is the key. Technique and shot selection are important. You have to be positive. Hit the ball which begs to be hit. If you are tough and tune your mind to play well, you can. I used to do that.

**Special memories of the 309 against Pakistan in 2004?**

Waking up, VVS (Laxman) to come to my room. I had crossed his fantastic score of 281 and wanted to celebrate the moment with him. VVS was deep asleep but I called him to my room to cut the cake. He was so sporting. He came and shared my joy and was happy that I broke the record.

**The 293 against Sri Lanka?**

When we went out to bat (on the second day), there were 20 overs left for the day. I remember Jaffer telling me to see off that passage. I told him I will make the most of the situation. In those 20-odd overs, I returned with 50 not out. My son (Aryaveer) was six months old. I prayed he did not disturb me. I had dinner early and slept with him cuddled in my arms. He woke up with me. Even Aryaveer was keen that I bat well the next day. When I decided to take it easy (on the third day), we still had some overs left. Dravid wanted me to survive and come fresh the next day. He thought I could break Brian Lara's record (of 400 not out). So Dravid kept the strike and ensured I did not get out. I was also exhausted. Maybe I should have smashed three sixes and got to the 300 as I fell short the next morning.

**The 2010 phase - scores of 109, 165, 109, 99, 109, 173, 96?**

The best, no doubt. But I threw my wicket away in the 90s trying to get the century with a six. Everything was clicking for me. It was my golden phase - 2008 to 2010. I timed the ball best during that phase. You get tired when hitting those fours and sixes. I just wanted to make big scores and that was the reason I would look to score mostly through boundaries. Big scores are a cushion for your failures.



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**RISHABH PANT PLAYS WITH SUCH A FEARLESS MINDSET. HE IS NOT WORRIED ABOUT GETTING OUT.**

**The knock of 83 against England in Chennai in 2008?**

I know it is rated high in Test history. I don't know why. I was talking to Gary Kirsten, telling him that I would go after the bowlers so that the others can play their normal game. I remember him saying, "Are you mad? Just play normal cricket." I told him, let others play their normal game and I will try to hit the bowlers. He said, "Do what you want. It's up to you." That was the signal for me and I just went after the bowlers. I took my chances that day. I did not play any extraordinary shots. The bowlers gave me the opportunities and I pounced on them to put the team in an excellent position at the end of the day. The next day, Sachin and Yuvraj (Singh) finished the game.

**Your take on Shubman Gill and Rishabh Pant?**

From what I have seen, Gill looks very good. He will serve the team long but Pant is so exciting to watch. He plays with such a fearless mindset. He is not worried about getting out. He is never in two minds. Maybe he looks ugly getting out, but he is a very, very dangerous player in Test cricket.

**What changes in cricket have you noticed the most?**

The mindset of the players has changed. Cricket is same. The T20 format has dictated their approach in other versions. Runs are coming but often, they are getting out to loose shots and to a big gap between bat and pad.

**Your future plans?**

I have developed a cricket coaching App. It has my cricket journey, my technique, my strokes. I have shot seven hours of my batting. I will be launching it in March. I want it to reach to the kids in rural areas, the subscription (fee) will be reasonable. I have involved 30 other players - Chris Gayle, AB de Villiers, Harbhajan Singh, Ashish Nehra, Parthiv Patel. Players teach the finer points and all aspects of the game have been covered in this App. It provides you knowledge but at the end of the day, you have to go and practice. This is a tool to help young people. ■

# BAJRANG, VINESH HOLD OLYMPIC HOPES

**THE WRESTLING FRATERNITY EXPECTS THE DUO  
TO STRIKE GOLD AT THE TOKYO OLYMPICS**

MANOJ JOSHI

**F**or quite some time, whenever there is a talk of an Olympic medal in wrestling the only two names that crop are Bajrang Punia and Vinesh Phogat. Both are outstanding. Both have come up with astounding performances in the last three years. While Vinesh has the distinction of having participated at the Rio Olympics in 2016 it will be a debut appearance for Bajrang, who had withdrawn from the qualifying trials in favour of his mentor Yogeshwar Dutt.

Bajrang and Vinesh are contenders for the gold at every international tournament they participate in. Far more than the Tokyo Olympics bound Ravi in 57 kg category and Deepak Punia in 86 kg. To watch Bajrang and Vinesh go through their training process is a thrilling experience - from rope climbing to every other exercise aimed at improving strength, stamina and endurance. This is precisely the reason for Bajrang and Vinesh conquering many a world champion.

Both Bajrang and Vinesh miss quality opponents at the national level. Vinesh found a platform to improve by competing in a higher weight category. The two have a strong bonding after being related to each other - Bajrang is married to Vinesh's cousin Sangeeta, an international wrestler herself. Bajrang is receiving training from a Georgian coach while Vinesh has a coach from Hungary to guide her.

IMAGES CREDIT: WFI





## WRESTLING



Bajrang is the only Indian wrestling with three medals at the World Championship other than gold at the Asian Games and Commonwealth Games. It was a moment of great pride for an Indian journalist when I saw Bajrang being mobbed by media from the western world at Kazakhstan in 2019. He was amazingly popular among the participants.

If Bajrang has not won a world championship title like Sushil Kumar or failed to clinch his third gold at the Asian Championship the stumbling block has been the awesome Japanese wrestler Takuto Otoguro. The Japanese won the title bout at the 2018 World Championship and the 2020 Asian Championship. The difference between two was eight points and nine points at the two title bouts.

Bajrang is an attacking wrestler which often leads to lapse in defence. On both the occasions against Otoguro he suffered for having tried to adopt aggressive tactics right through. For this very reason he lost to Daichi

Takatani at the 2018 Asian Championship quarterfinal but the margin of defeat was mere two points (5-7). Bajrang did well to defeat the same opponent 11-8 in the Asian Games final to improve upon his silver medal performance in the previous championship.

The most sensational show by Bajrang came at the 2019 Pro Wrestling League clash with three-times world champion Haji Aliyev of Azerbaijan whom he beat 8-6 in a dramatic 65kg category bout. Bajrang won the hearts of the audience with his competitive spirit against Daulet Niyazbekov of Kazakhstan in the final of the 2019 World Championship. Bajrang lost 9-9 with his opponent clinching the last point of the contentious bout with the Indian officials accusing the referee of bias. Bajrang was looking to avenge his loss to Daulet but the Kazakh lost to Takuto last year. Bajrang could pat himself for the silver even as Daulet went home empty handed. In what counts

as one of his finest performances, Bajrang went down to the 2017 world champion, Zurabi Lakobishvili of Georgia, 5-6 in a fiercely contested bout.

It is creditable that Bajrang achieved higher ranking than all the opponents he had lost to. In current world rankings, Bajrang is below top-ranked and current world champion Rashidov Gadzhimurad of Russia. The hopes of a medal at the Tokyo Olympics gain a boost due to the fact that since 2018 Bajrang has nine gold medals at various international competitions.

Vinesh too has enjoyed a spectacular run since 2018 - 11 medals including five gold. The title at the 2018 Asian Games and the sensational maiden world championships bronze at the Astana competition to secure the Olympic quota were feats she could take pride in. She is also the only wrestler to claim more than one gold medal at the Commonwealth Games - 2014 and 2018.

In the past meetings, Vinesh had lost twice to Chinese champion Sun Yanan in the Pro Wrestling League but she beat her in the first meeting at the Asian Games to underline the progress she had made. The 6-2 win in the final against the formidable Yuki Irie of Japan was a huge confidence booster for the Indian star, currently ranked third in the world. Yuki is a two time gold winner at the Asian Championships.

It is to be noted that Vinesh has overcome reigning world champion Park Yong-mi of North Korea (53 kg) thrice but her three defeats against World No 2 and twice world champion Mayu Mukaida of Japan have come quite comprehensively. Vinesh would also run into a Japanese Eri Tosaka in the 48kg and 50kg category even as she had shown her potential well when overcoming former world champion Sofia Mattson of Sweden at the 2019 World Championships.

There was a time when Vinesh would shed six to seven kgs when competing in the lower weight categories but she is comfortable in the 53kg category. The wrestling fraternity expects Vinesh and Bajrang to strike gold at the Tokyo Olympics and write a new chapter in India's sporting history. ■

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# HOCKEY GIRLS ON THE RIGHT COURSE

**SHARMILA, SUMAN  
REFLECT ON THE  
TOURS TO CHILE  
AND ARGENTINA**

MANOJ CHATURVEDI

**We are constantly trying to improve on our take-ons and circle entries. Fitness counts a lot too. Every aspect of the game, I feel, is crucial: be it fitness or the technical side of things – Suman Devi Thoudam**

**W**omen's hockey is in a healthy state in India. By qualifying for the Tokyo Olympics the girls have given a positive message to the

hockey fraternity which has been longing for recognition for some time now.

The Indian junior team captain Suman Devi Thoudam was at the heart of her side's memorable tour of Chile last month. There were gains too for her from that assignment. "It was exciting for me to be back on the field. Playing against the [Chilean] senior players has improved my confidence immensely," she told The Playfield.

"It was a very good experience for all the players, particularly those who are new in the core group. Everyone enjoyed being back on the field, competing with a strong team after over a year."

Even as she raved about the experience in Chile, Suman looked ahead with caution, "The following months are crucial for us as we are gearing up for the Junior Asia Cup which is a qualifying event for the FIH Junior World Cup (Women). To qualify, we need to





# HOCKEY

IMAGES CREDIT: HOCKEY INDIA

finish in the top 3 and that's our aim at the moment."

The matches helped the team work on their defence. As Suman explained, "The Chileans tackle hard and stay very compact. With the Indian team – we try to construct play from the back. We are constantly trying to improve on our take-ons and circle entries. Fitness counts a lot too. Every aspect of the game, I feel, is crucial: be it fitness or the technical side of things. Being fitter, however, has helped my game immensely. Over the past few months in camp, we paid a lot of attention to fitness and it really paid off in Chile."

The junior team side picked up momentum as the tour progressed. In Chile, registering two wins over Chile's junior team and three wins and a draw against their senior team. "Our defensive work reflects directly on the manner in which we attack. Not only is it important to get ones tackles right, we need to show qualities on the ball that can create more goals-coring chances for us. My coaches have helped me in this aspect as defenders have a key role in the build-up play. It is a challenge to maintain a balance between the two roles."

Suman, a fast-rising talent in the world, is aware of the need to be flexible in modern hockey and upbeat about India's chances in the FIH Junior Women's Asia Cup and the FIH Junior World Cup later this year. "I think players are getting more versatile these days and are good across the field. Personally, I want to get better and contribute to the team, whether in defence or attack."

Before the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted the international hockey calendar, another youngster, India women's 19-year old forward Sharmila Devi was off to an impressive start to her senior career. The Hisar-born player was an integral part of the team's plans during India's run in the qualifiers.

Sharmila was recently seen during India's tour of Argentina and was unfazed by the prospect of clashing against the world no 2 side. She opened up about challenges she faced over the past year, a period where the Rani-led side was not in action. Reflecting on those tough times, Sharmila observed, "After getting off to a good start with the senior team, I was keen to play more games leading up to the Olympics. Though the entire quarantine phase last year was very challenging, being with the team in SAI campus ensured we had each other's support and the coaching staff always ensured we were comfortable. The entire time, our focus was on staying fit. I was able to exercise in the room. I believe that phase has made all of us mentally strong and



**SENIOR HOCKEY IS A BIG STEP-UP FROM THE JUNIOR LEVELS. THIS TOUR OF ARGENTINA HELPED ME UNDERSTAND THE SKILL AND THE TACTICAL SIDE OF THE GAME A LOT BETTER.**

**– SHARMILA DEVI**

has taught us to deal with the unexpected."

In Sharmila's opinion, fitness was a significant chapter in the team's preparation. "Fitness plays a key role in international hockey and I think the team really fared well in this aspect despite not getting the results we would have hoped for. There is a very good team spirit in the dressing room, and it helps having such approachable senior players in the group. We have also shown in recent times that India

are a side not to be taken lightly in any tournament."

There was much improvement in the team, according to Sharmila. "I think we competed well as a unit. Compared to our performances over the years, I think we fared much better and had chances to win. We can only get better as a team from here. Senior hockey is a big step-up from the junior levels. This tour [of Argentina] helped me understand the skill and the tactical side of the game a lot better. Of course, the competition is fierce, and one needs to be up for the contest."

On a personal front too Sharmila gained immensely. "I was happy with my performances against Argentina. My confidence levels improved as the tour progressed. I was excited to be playing against a top side like Argentina and definitely helped me settle into the rigours of international hockey. I want to use this valuable experience for future tournaments as well."

There is optimism in the senior team ahead of the Olympics. "We are aiming to finish on the podium. But we need to have a step-by-step approach and build on our game from here on. Playing against Argentina has given us a good parameter, a benchmark. Now we know what aspects need to be improved upon," says Sharmila. ■

# SPECIAL SHREY SURE CAN

**SPORT TRANSFORMED THE LIFE OF A YOUNG BOY SHUNNED BY SOCIETY; TODAY, HE IS THE INSPIRATION FOR THOUSANDS**

RICA ROY

It was the summer of 2002. Shrey Kadian, then seven years old, had yet to utter his first words. His parents were understandably anxious, waiting with bated breath for the moment when emotions became words.

And then it happened. "Please get me crayons," Shrey told his father in Hindi.

That was the turning point for the Kadian family.

Shrey's mother, Shalini, describes the moment like a frame she will never forget, a frame which included the child, his father, his mother and his aunt. She says, "It was a moment of disbelief for me. It was a moment that made every struggle well worth it. Shrey had spoken his first few words. Even though they were incoherent, they were worth their weight in gold."

Thirteen years later, the boy went on to win a gold medal at the Special Olympics in softball, in the United States. That same year, 2015, he was also named the vice-captain of the team at the Winter Games.

Special Olympics is the world's largest sports organ-

**"I HAVE  
ATTAINED  
RESPECTABILITY  
THROUGH SUCCESS ON  
THE SPORTING ARENA.  
PEOPLE WHO USED TO  
DISRESPECT MY PARENTS  
NOW COME UP AND  
APOLOGISE."  
– SHREY KADIAN**



isation for children and adults with intellectual or physical disabilities. Like the International Paralympic Committee, the Special Olympics organisation is recognised by the International Olympic Committee. However, unlike the Paralympic Games, the Special Olympics World Games are not held in the same year or in conjunction with the Olympic Games.

The Special Olympics World Games is a major event put together by the Special Olympics. The World Games alternate between summer and winter games, in two-year cycles, recurring every fourth year.

Shrey's initial years were spent in regular schools. His hyperactivity and inability to communicate properly, however, forced



## SPECIAL OLYMPIAN

his parents to change four schools.

Shrey reveals, "I would often hurt myself, cut my flesh with a knife or other sharp objects. I would always be frustrated, that would also result in aggressive behaviour."

His mother faced many moments of distress and isolation owing to her son's condition. "I was told not to bring Shrey to family gatherings. People were not open to welcoming us because they feared my child could hurt other children. We were ostracised by others because of his special situation. But that made my resolve stronger," recounts Shalini.

Things began to change with the family's acceptance that he was a special child and needed an empathetic environment in which to grow. At the advice of a teacher, Shrey was admitted to the Mata Bhagawant Chaddha Niketan, a special school in Noida.

That heralded a sea of positive changes. Like a flower, he had the atmosphere to grow, an atmosphere where he could be understood and nourished.

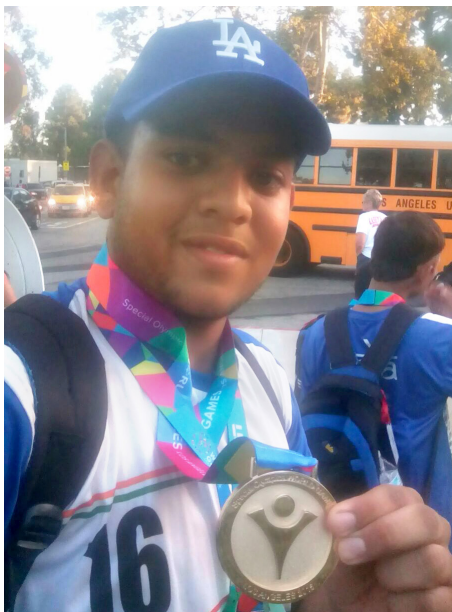
Shalini says it was here that his energy was tapped into several sporting activities such as running, cricket, football, softball and tennis.

"Shrey had a new life, and that change was transformational. Today, he has taken the Kadian name places because of his achievements," says the proud mother.

"I joined Special Olympics Bharat in 2008," recalls the 25-year-old Shrey. "From a boy who played many sports, I became an athlete. I represented India at the inaugural Asia Pacific Regional Games in 2013, when our team won the silver medal. And then in the inaugural round of the Special Olympics World Summer Games in Los Angeles, in 2015, we won the gold, a truly special feeling."

Shrey's Special Olympics journey began in school; with SO Bharat, it found direction. He is grateful to have found a direction most intellectually challenged kids are unable to.

Today, he plays sports nationally, but having participated at the international level twice before, he won't have the chance to make the



international cut again.

Ask him about his idols and out rolls the name of dashing cricketer Yuvraj Singh. "He is an athlete who knows the value of falling and rising. I am very fond of him as an athlete. He is my role model. I also admire Ajinkya Rahane. I was watching him lead the team in Australia. It gave me the sense that he was very focussed and visualised what he wanted. I learn from them, I learn from these moments."

Currently, Shrey serves as chairperson of the Program's National Athlete Input Council. He also served as a member of the Special Olympics Asia Pacific's Regional Athlete Input Council from 2018 to 2019.

He was a member of the core organising committee that led Special Olympics Bharat's very first National Youth Summit in 2019 for 250 participants.

"I want many more Shreys to get the opportunities I had. These days, I am motivated to reach out to parents and tell them how sport can change lives. I have attained respectability through success on the sporting arena. People who used to disrespect my parents now come up and apologise. They have realised I am neither an imbecile, nor a fool. Sport helped me overcome my shortcomings. I learn every day, I try every day."

As chairperson of SO's National Athlete Input Council, Shrey strives to encourage people with intellectual disabilities and their parents to try and become achievers through sport. He is also putting together a team for the 2023 Summer Special Olympic Games.

Being the poster boy of Special Olympics Bharat, he goes to schools in the capital, interacts with principals and convinces them to treat children with hyperactivity differently. "Leadership does not mean one limits oneself to one's own sphere. Leadership means getting out of the comfort zone."

Shalini says Shrey is a conscientious learner who constantly seeks to develop new skills. He is currently doing his BA at the Delhi University, and is hopeful that once he completes his graduation, he can enter the workforce like any other adult his age.

"I want financial independence too. I am capable of producing the goods. A life in sport has taught me many things."

Shrey strides forward with confidence as he wears with great pride his motto -- "Yes I Can." ■

**IT WAS A MOMENT OF DISBELIEF FOR ME. IT WAS A MOMENT THAT MADE EVERY STRUGGLE WELL WORTH IT.**

**– SHREY'S MOTHER SHALINI**



# SLOG SWEEP

By Austtin Coutinho



**Ash to ash,  
dust to dust!  
if the wicket don't  
get you,  
Ashwin must!!**

