

# Soldiers watching from the trenches, families stuck in war-torn regions: Ukraine battle adversity to qualify for Euro 2024

**MUMBAI, MAR 28:** Mykhailo Mudryk went down on his knees and prayed after the full-time whistle. Around the Ukraine winger, a sea of yellow and blue exploded in ecstasy.

At 'home' in Wroclaw, Poland, the war-torn country defeated Iceland to qualify for the Euro 2024, their first major tournament since Russia invaded the country in 2022. They came very close to qualifying for the World Cup in Qatar two years ago. Back then, Wales crushed their dream at the last minute, leaving the players in tears.

As the thousands of Ukrainians celebrated the historic win inside the stadium in Poland, millions more at home, who have had very little to cheer about since the invasion, got a rare reason to rejoice amid a war.

Even the country's president, Volodymyr Zelensky, joined in. "Thank you, guys! Thank you, team! For significant emotions for the entire country," he wrote on social media platform X, formerly Twitter. "For the important victory and making it to EURO. For proving once again: whenever Ukrainians face difficulties but do not



give up and continue to fight, Ukrainians certainly win. In times, when the enemy tries to destroy us, we demonstrate every day that Ukrainians are and will be. Ukraine is, and will be! Thank you for the victory! Glory to Ukraine!"

Indeed, the players from Ukraine have been defiant in the face of adversity. That feeling culminated on the football turf with the team winning their last two matches from losing positions. Against Iceland and Bosnia and Herzegovina, they were losing by a

goal before they mustered a comeback to win both matches 2-1 to punch their tickets to Germany.

According to the Athletic, after the victory against Iceland, the players led by captain Oleksandr Zinchenko led his team around the pitch as the crowd chanted "Z-S-U! Z-S-U! Z-S-U!" which stood for 'Zbronyi Syly Ukrainy' — the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

The tribute was for the forces who were seen on social media watching the match through tiny TV screens, cooped up in metal huts as the war rages on out-

side. The players, and the fans, subtly used the moment to ensure the crisis did not fade from public consciousness.

"It will be so important. All the world is going to watch this competition. It's an unreal opportunity to show how good we are as a team and how good it is to be Ukrainian," Zinchenko said as quoted by the Guardian. Ukraine coach Serhiy Rebrov added: "This win is for our people, for the soldiers who are protecting our freedom."

Midfielder Georgiy Sudakov called for more international support for his country. "Look at what has happened in Ukraine in the last days, the last weeks. The drones, the missiles, the bombs that arrive at different cities. It's incredible. That's why we need support," Sudakov was also quoted by the Guardian.

According to several reports, Ukraine's vice-captain Taras Stepanenko has several family members in the Donetsk region which is still under Russian control while fullback Oleksandr Karavayev has family in Kherson which was under Russian occupation for several months before being liberated.

# Controversy in IOA as athletics legend Anju Bobby George questions move to ignore Neeraj Chopra as flagbearer for Paris Olympics

**NEW DELHI, MAR 28:** Anju Bobby George on Thursday questioned Indian Olympic Association (IOA) decision for not considering Neeraj Chopra as India's flag bearer for the upcoming Paris Olympics.

"Surprisingly, the Indian Olympic Association did not consider our golden boy Neeraj Chopra as a flag bearer for the 2024 Olympic Games. Ultimately it's Neeraj's choice based on his own assessment of the situation. Still why..," she wrote in her Instagram.

Last week, the IOA had named veteran table tennis star Sharath Kamal as India's flagbearer for the upcoming Paris Olympics 2024.

Meanwhile, Olympic bronze medalist MC Mary Kom was named as India's chef de mission for Paris 2024 while Winter Olympian Shiva Keshavan has been appointed as the Deputy Chef de Mission for Paris 2024.



"We are delighted to have such a distinguished and capable team of officials leading our contingent for the Paris 2024 Olympic Games. Their expertise, dedication, and passion for sports will undoubtedly inspire our athletes to achieve their best and make the nation proud," IOA President Dr PT Usha said.

The IOA had also announced other appointments for India's contingent

for the Paris Olympics. Rifle shooter Gagan Narang, who won the bronze medal in the 10m air rifle event at the 2012 London Olympics, has been placed in charge of overseeing the shooting village operations for the Paris Olympics. Shooting, which brought India its first individual Olympic medal at Beijing 2008, has not seen an Indian medalling at the Olympics since London 2012.

# Andhra Cricket Association serves show-cause notice to Hanuma Vihari: 'This is a chance for him to come out with his grievances'



**MUMBAI, MAR 28:** The Andhra Cricket Association (ACA) has served a show cause notice to Hanuma Vihari, in response to the former Andhra skipper pointing out political interferences in the association that led to his ousting as the captain

in the recently concluded Ranji Trophy season. "Yes, we have served him a show-cause notice and we are awaiting his reply," an ACA official told. "This is just to find what made him react the way he did last month. He has not reached out to us, so this is a chance for

him to come out with his grievances. After all, we value Vihari and his contributions to the growth of state cricket as he has played a big part in Andhra going up in the ranks in domestic cricket."

ACA's notice comes a month after Vihari had taken to his social media to announce that he will "never play for Andhra again", alleging that he was forced to step down from his role as captain. "I was captain in the first game against Bengal, and during the game, I shouted at 17th player, and he complained to his dad (who is a politician)," Vihari wrote. "His dad in return asked the association to take action against me. Although we chased 410 against last year's finalists Bengal [for a first-innings lead], I was asked to resign from captaincy without any fault of mine.

# Indian football fans want Igor Stimac sacked, but he isn't national team's main problem; failed domestic structure, ISL are



**NEW DELHI, MAR 28:** Igor Stimac, a compulsive crowd-pleaser, wouldn't have seen it coming.

Minutes after India sunk to a new low following the 2-1 loss to Afghanistan in the 2026 World Cup and 2027 Asian Cup joint qualifier, hundreds of fans surrounded the team bus as the players and coach

exited the stadium, chanting "Stimac out!" amidst a din of boos. The man who pulls no punches is now Indian football's favourite punching bag.

Indeed, his volte-faces, which would embarrass even a seasoned politician, constantly shifting goalposts, giving lame excuses and the tendency to throw everyone else under the

bus give a glimpse into the mind of a football manager who seems bereft of ideas or a bigger vision. But as things stand, Stimac isn't the only problem confronting Indian football. India can still finish second in their group and make the cut, for the first time, for the third round of World Cup qualifiers. Though historic, it might not necessarily be a good thing. It will only paper over the cracks and give the administrators at Football House a false sense of achievement despite deep structural problems.

Stimac's tenure will be remembered for his frequent Cruyff turns with his actions and statements as per convenience. But in doing so, he also routinely flung a truth bomb or two, showing Indian football the mirror. No one could have said.

# Warner, Stoinis, Agar left out of CA's 2024-25 central contracts list

**MELBOURNE, MAR 28:** Veteran opener David Warner, who has retired from ODI and Test cricket, along with all-rounders Ashton Agar and Marcus Stoinis, was on Thursday dropped from Cricket Australia's list of centrally-contracted players for the 2024-25 season.

Besides, Victoria opener Marcus Harris and pacer Michael Neser have also missed out on contracts that were offered to 23 players, stated a report by 'cricket.com.au'.

Australia have a hectic season ahead that will feature the T20 World Cup in the USA and West Indies in June and a home Test series against India towards the end of the year among other engagements.

Warner's omission was expected as he intends to call it quits from the game after the T20 World Cup. He is current-



ly in India, playing in the IPL for Delhi Capitals.

Stoinis is the most notable omission. However, the 34-year-old, who is currently playing with Lucknow Super Giants in the IPL, remains in contention for the upcoming T20 World Cup despite missing Australia's recent tour of New Zealand with a back injury.

Pacers Xavier Bartlett and Nathan Ellis are among those who have been offered contracts for the first time.

Bartlett (25) and Ellis (29) are joined by Victoria and Adelaide Strikers batter Matt Short (28), and Western Australia all-rounder Aaron Hardie (25) as the four new faces on this year's central contract list.

# Hardik Pandya's tactics left Steve Smith 'perplexed'; all-rounder's captaincy has been 'ordinary', says Irfan Pathan

**MUMBAI, MAR 28:** After Mumbai Indians lost their second match in the 2024 edition of the Indian Premier League, former cricketers again pointed out flaws in MI skipper Hardik Pandya's captaincy and the tactics he employed.

Mumbai Indians' bowlers were tonked for 277 runs in a game that saw 523 runs being scored overall. In reply, Mumbai's batters could only manage to score 246/5 as their chase fell short by 31 runs. Australia cricketer Steve Smith, who is on the commentary panel for Star Sports, expressed his surprise at some of the tactics employed by Mumbai Indians captain Hardik during the match.

"I was perplexed with some of their bowling



changes in the first innings for Mumbai. Jasprit Bumrah bowled in the 4th over where he went for 5 runs. Then, we didn't see him again till the 13th over when SRH were on a 173. All the damage had been done, you needed your best bowler to be coming back and take some wickets in

that period and I think they missed a trick there bringing him back only in the 13th over," Smith said before adding: "I think he (Hardik) got a few things wrong, and that was the main one for me. I mean you can't have one of the best bowlers in the world bowling 1 over."

# Spain Masters: For PV Sindhu, Madrid offers another chance to end a long title wait on badminton's World Tour

**NEW DELHI, MAR 28:** Before their Swiss Open campaigns began last week, PV Sindhu and Carolina Marin each shared the same photo of catching up at St Jakobshalle in Basel. "We wage war every time we play, but off the court, the smiles and friendships persist, as they always should," Sindhu's caption read. "Always wonderful to cross paths with you, dear friend!"

"Friendship never ends, hope to see you on court this week," Marin's post said.

Indeed a semifinal meeting between the two old-time frenemies appeared on the cards but Sindhu's week was ended early by Japanese teenage sensation Tomoka Miyazaki. Marin, on the other hand, went on to make it two titles in as many weeks, to follow up her superb run at the All England.

A potential reunion in front of her fans against Sindhu in the final was a possibility, but as a result of two taxing weeks, top seed Marin decided to pull



out of her home event in Madrid. That leaves Sindhu as the effective top seed at the Spain Masters Super 300. The Indian started off with a comfortable 21-16 21-12 win on Wednesday against Wen Yu Zhang of Canada, which took only 30 minutes. Sindhu began slowly in a match that wasn't of the highest quality. Both players were making errors and clean winners were few and far between. But post the

mid-game interval, Sindhu started to find a better tempo, and somewhat cleaned up her game. When she starts hitting crosscourt whipped smashes from the forehand corner, it is usually a sign she is feeling good on court. That started happening a bit more often towards the back end of the opener as she pushed on the pedal from 14-14. The Canadian youngster, ranked 49 in the world, struggled with

her lengths throughout the match, and once Sindhu started pulling ahead in the second game, her challenge fizzled out. It marked a solid enough beginning for Sindhu in a week where she stands a real chance of going the distance. Not including the gold she won at the Asia Team Championships earlier this year in Malaysia, Sindhu hasn't reached a final since doing so at this very tournament last year. As was the case in 2023, Madrid once again offers Sindhu the best opportunity to end a mini-title drought that stretches back to the Birmingham Commonwealth Games in 2022, where she suffered the first of her two recent significant injuries. On the World Tour, the last title she won was just before the CWG, at the 2022 Singapore Open.

Apart from Marin, the Fab Four – An Se Young, Chen Yufei, Tai Tzu-Ying and Akane Yamaguchi – have all skipped Madrid.

# Foreign players were frustrated by KKR coach Pandit's militant style of functioning: David Wiese

**NEW DELHI, MAR 28:** Several foreign cricketers in Kolkata Knight Riders were frustrated by head coach Chandrakant Pandit's "militant" style of functioning during the previous edition of the IPL, former South Africa and Namibia all-rounder David Wiese, who played for the franchise last year, has claimed. The 38-year-old all-rounder, who played three IPL games for KKR in 2023, said foreign cricketers weren't happy at being tutored on how to behave or what to wear by the coach. "He (Pandit) is known in India as a very militant type of coach. He is very strict, very disciplinarian that type of stuff. Sometimes in franchise cricket, when you have overseas guys, who've played all over the world, they don't need anyone coming and telling them how they need to behave, what they need to wear and what they need to do the whole time. So, that was tough," said Wiese on the pod-



cast 'Hitman for Hire: A year in the life of a franchise cricketer' recently. Pandit took charge as KKR's head coach after New Zealander Brendon McCullum quit the job in 2022. The much-admired coach, who played five Tests for India, coached Vidarbha to successive Ranji Trophy titles in 2018 and 2019.

He later guided Madhya Pradesh to its maiden Ranji

title in 2022.

Wiese, who was part of the Namibia side that played the 2022 T20 World Cup, said he saw players unhappy with Pandit's style of coaching. "He liked to do things a certain way and that didn't sit well with certain players. It caused a little bit of tension in the changing room.

"Guys were frustrated, there was a lot that changed over the

last couple of years (when McCullum was around) and the new coach brought in some new things that he thought would bring success to us," Wiese, who first played the IPL in 2015, said.

Wiese added he wasn't too bothered about the environment around him.

"I'm like 'listen it's your circus, you run the show. End of the day, I am here just to play. If you tell me to do this, I'll do it'. I'm not the guy who's going to bump heads or anything. But there are certain players who are a bit more stubborn than me," he said.

Two-time champions KKR had a disappointing season last year finishing seventh and Wiese said he felt frustrated because he didn't get more opportunities to showcase his talent.

"That frustration was more because of the fact that I played those games. I didn't really get the opportunity to do much.