

## Paris Olympics: Dhiraj Bommadevara, Ankita Bhakat shine in Archery Ranking round as India make quarterfinals in men's and women's team events

NEW DELHI, JUL 26:

How the archers perform in the ranking round determines, to a large extent, their prospects for the rest of the Games.

At Esplanade des Invalides, the Indians came up with some solid performances to make it directly to the men's and women's team quarterfinals.

Leading the way was Dhiraj Bommadevara, arguably the country's best archer at the moment, as he bounced back from a slow start to shoot a superb 681 and finish fourth in the men's individual ranking list. His impressive outing helped the Indian men's team (perhaps the best bet for an archery medal) clinch the third seeding and avoid facing powerhouse Korea until the final.

Both the men's and women's teams finished in the top four, thus making it directly to the quarterfinals.

Given the Korean domination in recurve archery, it's significant that India have avoided them before the quarterfinal stages in all three team events (men's, women's and mixed team).

On the women's side, it was Ankita



Bhakat who outshone teammates Deepika Kumari (former world No.1) and Bhajan Kaur to finish 11th in the individual standings. The Indian women's team clinched the fourth seeding in the process, but will have to contend with Korea in a potential semifinal. The 26-year-old Ankita scored 666 to be placed 11th, followed by

Bhajan Kaur (22nd with 559) and Deepika (23rd with 558). India finished fourth with 1983 points. South Korea topped the standings with 2046 points, an Olympic record.

The Indian men collected a total of 2013 points, led by Dhiraj (681). For the first half of the ranking round, in which every archer has to shoot 72

arrows, Dhiraj was trailing Tarundeep Rai, who is appearing in his fourth Olympics. But Dhiraj stormed back in the second half of the event, shooting a 346 after 335 at the 36-arrow halfway mark. Rai ended 14th with 674 points while Pravin Jadhav finished 39th with 658. India will face either Turkey or Colombia in the men's quarterfinals.

In the women's team, it was Ankita leading the way right from the word go as Deepika shot a 6 in her first End of six arrows and never quite recovered (she'd go on to shoot a 5 later). Deepika is on a comeback trail and while she is still the country's most decorated archer, she missed out on a chance to top her team's standings and get into the mixed event with Dhiraj.

But the team can be pleased with a top-four billing even though that puts them on course to take on Korea in the final four. For a measure of how difficult that task is, Korea has never lost a match in the women's team event in the history of the Olympics, and are 9-time champions. Before that, Ankita and Co have to face the winner between France and the Netherlands.

## Ravi Shastri on Gautam Gambhir's appointment as Team India's head coach: 'It's refreshing'



MUMBAI, JUL 26:

Former India captain and coach Ravi Shastri feels Gautam Gambhir will flourish in his new role as head coach, and calls his appointment "refreshing." "He's (Gambhir) contemporary, he just had a great season in the IPL. I think he's the right age where he's young, he'll come with fresh ideas. He knows most of the players, especially in the white-ball format, having been

part of teams in the IPL. So I think it's refreshing," Shastri said. "And we know with Gautam, he's a no-nonsense guy. He'll have his ideas as well. And the good thing for him is he's got a mature team. He's got a settled team, a mature team. I think even though you might think you're mature, you might benefit from some fresh ideas. So I think it'll be interesting times." Shastri feels managing

the workload of players, especially bowlers, will be Gambhir's biggest challenge.

"Obviously, player management becomes the key as a coach. So it'll be interesting to see how he goes. I think he's got the tools, he's got the goods for the job and he's got the experience."

Gambhir's first assignment as India coach is the white-ball series in Sri Lanka which starts with a three-match T20 series in Pallekele on Saturday. "There's so many (good India) players out there and it's just about getting the right mix. I think a lot of the players that won this T20 World Cup will still be around two years later (at the 2026 T20 World Cup)," Shastri said. Shastri feels Gambhir's biggest task would be to find replacements for the trio of Rohit Sharma, Virat Kohli and Ravindra Jadeja, who retired from the T20I format after last month's T20 World Cup triumph.

## Rashid Latif on Hardik Pandya captaincy snub: Players who weren't super fit still became great captains...it was just an excuse

NEW DELHI, JUL 26:

For the upcoming series against Sri Lanka, India made Suryakumar Yadav the skipper which raised a few eyebrows as Hardik Pandya was named as the vice-captain to Rohit Sharma in the T20 World Cup 2024 co-hosted by West Indies and the United States which India emerged victorious. Chairman of Chief Selectors Ajit Agarkar would give "fitness" as the reason behind the decision. "No, here they (the claims) just hand him a certificate saying he isn't fit and there are concerns about his fitness. There are plenty of players who weren't super fit but still became great captains. So, I think it was just an excuse. Because if Surya wasn't around, then Rishabh (Pant) would have been the captain since you have to look at the future," said.

"Fitness has been something that he's struggled with. As selectors, it becomes difficult then. The thought behind it was that we want someone (as captain) who is likely to be available more. We also feel we can manage Hardik better, we've seen what he can do with the bat and ball in the World Cup. We speak to every player, about whether their role has changed. And yeah we've spoken to him" Agarkar told. The selection meeting that has redrawn the Indian dressing room hierarchy went on for several hours over two days. Those in the know talk about differences of opinion, negotiations and heated debates. During the meetings, calls were made to several players and long-term plans were shared with them.

## Paris Olympics: French athlete Sounkamba Sylla might miss opening ceremony because of hijab



MUMBAI, JUL 26:

France's 400-meter women's and mixed relay teams athlete Sounkamba Sylla claimed that she has been banned from the opening ceremony of the Paris Olympics 2024 on Friday because she wears a hijab. "You are selected for the Olympics, organized in your country, but you can't participate in the opening ceremony because you wear a head-

scarf," the 26-year-old wrote in her social media post earlier in the week. On Wednesday, David Lappartient, president of the French Olympic Committee, said that French Olympians are bound by the secular principles that apply to public sector workers in France, separating state and church, which includes a ban on hijabs. Sylla's current situation is because France's min-

ister of sport said athletes representing France would be prohibited from displaying religious symbols during sporting events which included headscarves last September. Lappartient said discussions are underway with Sylla to find a solution that adheres to the French Olympic team's secular requirements while also respecting the athlete's "legitimate wish that her beliefs are respected." Thousands of athletes, including some who wear a hijab, are arriving for the Paris Olympics, placing an international spotlight on tensions in France over national identity and perceived discrimination against Muslims. Foreign athletes are not affected by the secularism rules and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) does not have rules against wearing religious head coverings.

## Vinesh Phogat at Paris Olympics: Who will be Indian wrestler's top challengers

NEW DELHI, JUL 26:

Vinesh Phogat's road to Paris has not been an easy one. In the past one and a half years, Vinesh Phogat had fought more bouts outside the mat. After accusing former Wrestling Federation of India chief Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh of sexual harassment: leading the protests against the BJP MP, sleeping in tents on footpaths, getting dragged on the streets of the Capital by the Delhi Police, returning national awards and fighting a battle in the courts.

In April earlier this year, the wrestler competed in her first international tournament since September 2022 and, without conceding a single point, secured a Paris Olympics quota place for India. Phogat needed less than six minutes to win her three bouts and get the job done. Since Vinesh is not seeded, she won't know about



her opponents until the day before her competition starts. Vinesh has now secured her third straight Olympic quota, having featured in Rio Games (2016) and in Tokyo (2020). Looks at her closest rivals standing in her way of a podium finish. Yui Susaki is a four-time World Champion and is the reigning Olympic champion, who won the gold medal without conceding a point in Tokyo. Susaki has only lost three since 2015, all of them to compatriot Yuki Irie.

## Paris Olympics: How boxer Nikhat Zareen's medal hopes got hit because of IOC, IBA war that left her unseeded

NEW DELHI, JUL 26:

Nikhat Zareen's draw luck continues to follow her. After being unseeded at the 2023 World Championships and then the 2023 Asian Games, the Indian boxer was handed a tough draw due to being unseeded, despite a host of medals in this Olympic cycle.

India's best boxing medal hope at the 2024 Paris Olympics was drawn into a group of some of the best boxers in her weight category and will have to fight five highly competitive matches against a myriad of boxers all with a skill set that can test the 28-year-old — a story that has been repeated and rinsed in this Olympic cycle if you are Nikhat Zareen. The Olympics are meant to be tough. Nikhat's teammate Amit Panghal would be the first person to tell her that. There are no free lunches here but as has been the case recently, the way that the International Olympic Committee has handled the



seeding for the Paris Games has essentially put some of the topmost boxers of different countries in the same bracket.

Terrible for her. The Nizamabad boxer gets a start against Germany's Maxi Karina Kloetzer in the Round of 32. That bout is then followed by a showdown against Wu Yu, the top seeded boxer at the Paris Olympics 50 kg category and the 2023 World

Championship gold medallist in the 52 kg category.

The advantage for Zareen will be that Wu's first Paris Olympics bout will be against her. A rusty start for the Chinese pugilist and suddenly all bets are off. The trouble though is that even if Zareen is able to pull off a win here, she would next have to face Thailand's Chuthamat Raksat — a boxer that has forever trou-

bled the Indian and beat her on the way to a silver medal at the Asian Games. If Raksat loses her bout, then Nikhat goes up against Uzbekistan's Sabina Bobokulova — a boxer she only recently lost 2-3 to at the Strandja Memorial.

After that, the semi-final of her bracket could see her face Ingrid Valencia — a top Colombian boxer, Y Oyuntssetseg — the Asian Games bronze medallist, or Kazakh boxer Nazym Kyzaibay. And if Zareen is able to overcome the four matches in her bracket, chances are she will face Turkey's Tokyo Olympics silver medallist Bus Naz Cakiroglu — a boxer she recently beat 4-1.

Due to the International Olympic Committee not recognising the International Boxing Association, both of the two World Championships won by Zareen in this Olympic cycle did not give her a top seeding in her category.

## Satwik-Chirag at Paris Olympics: A look at three main rivals for India's star men's doubles pairing

MUMBAI, JUL 26:

Leading the talk of India's medal hopefuls at the Olympics, Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty are gearing up for their rebout in Paris, three years after bitersweet Tokyo.

Clubbed with mightier opponents, the Satwik-Chirag pair remained unflinching as they finished third. They fell short of the knockouts on point difference behind a top two which included the then World No. 1 pair and eventual champions. While they could not overpower the top-seeded Indonesians Marcus Gideon and Kevin Sukamuljo, "SatChi" edged Chinese Taipei's Lee Yang and Wang Chi-lin who would eventually waltz to the title. With ever-improving fitness and glowing achievements, Satwik and Chirag head into the Games this time as the third-seeded pair and are duly placed among the favourites. The French Open title win in early March



at the Porte de la Chapelle, the badminton venue at the Games, will be a shot in the arm for the exuberant Indians. However, the road to gold may get ragged with tricky contenders breathing down their necks. Men's doubles field is littered with potential medal favourites as it is one of the most unpredictable badminton disciplines currently, but here's a look at three potential obsta-

cles on their way. Far from the draw in Tokyo, Chirag and Satwik will relish some breathing space in the group stage in Paris. The allowance is nominal as they will bump into Indonesia's Fajar Alfian and Muhammad Ardianto in the last match of Group C. Having suffered exits on fine margins, the Indians cannot take their initial group games against

Frenchmen Ronan Labar-Lucas Corvee and world No. 31 Mark Lamsfuss and Marvin Seidel from Germany too lightly. Both pairs have yet to beat the Indians across three combined meetings. Meanwhile, Alfian and Ardianto can appear mercurial for Chirag-Satwik, as could other lower-ranked opponents in the knockouts. The sixth-ranked pair have topped Satwik-Chirag twice in the past, albeit during their formative years in 2017 and 2018. However, the Indians have since won three successive matches, including the Indonesia Open and Korea Open in 2023, where Alfian-Ardianto was the top seed. Winning the group will be important for the Indian duo.

While they could not get past the quarter-finals at the Tokyo Olympics, Denmark's Kim Astrup and Anders Rasmussen continued to forge a potent combo on the road to Paris.

## Olympics: India's top medal prospects for Paris 2024



MUMBAI, JUL 26:

A total of 117 athletes will be representing India at the 2024 Paris Olympics. The goal? To better the seven medals tally from three years ago at Tokyo 2020. Only the second Indian athlete to win an individual gold medal at the Summer Olympic Games, Neeraj Chopra is India's strongest contender going into

Paris 2024. Despite having participated at only three competitions in the leadup to the Olympics this year, Neeraj is a firm contender given his consistency to shine at the big stage. His gold at Tokyo 2020 — before which he had already claimed the yellow medal at the Commonwealth and Asian Games — has been followed by a gold and a silver

at World Championships, a gold at the Asian Games in Hangzhou last year and many other accolades at events like the Diamond League.

The star men's doubles duo of Indian badminton has one of India's best chances to win a medal in badminton at Paris 2024. Having already won gold at the Commonwealth Games, Asiad, Asian Championships, and played a pivotal role in India's historic Thomas Cup win, an Olympic medal is missing from their cabinet. Recent form favours them — the duo also clinched its maiden BWF World Super 1000 title last year, becoming the first men's doubles pair from India to win a Super 1000 event. Also in their favour is that they seem to have an affinity for the host city of the 2024 Olympics. "We always play well in Paris.

## 'Bowling with the new ball is my strength, because I can swing it': Maheesh Theekshana



NEW DELHI, JUL 26:

The recently concluded Lanka Premier League in many ways reflected where Maheesh Theekshana's T20 career stands. He didn't top the wicket charts. He wasn't the most economical either. Yet, he sent more overs than anybody else,

a clear reflection that he cannot be ignored, especially if one factors his capability to bowl in the powerplays, in the middle-overs, and at the death. Not to forget the Super Over duties if the need arises. As Sri Lanka try to put the T20 World Cup misery behind in the series

against India starting on Saturday, Theekshana will have a huge role to play. In a team that has Matheesha Pathirana, Wanindu Hasaranga, Theekshana's role has been modified a bit these days. He still remains the bowler that captains turn to in moments of crisis, but he has to do it differently by first bringing the run-rate under check and allow the likes of Pathirana to attack from the other end.

"When I'm playing for the national team, since we have wicket-taking bowlers, sometimes I've to bowl more economically. Because of the team balance and the composition of the attack with Hasaranga, Pathirana in place, who go for wickets, you need someone to look after the economy as well. Nowadays in T20s, you need to contain as well because it will help others get the wickets.

## I enjoy leadership, learnt a lot of things from different captains: Suryakumar Yadav

PALLEKELE, JUL 26:

Newly-appointed Indian T20 captain Suryakumar Yadav says he has enjoyed being a leader on field despite not donning the captain's hat, adding that he learnt the tricks of the trade from different skippers over the years. Suryakumar was appointed as India's T20 captain last week ahead of Hardik Pandya after Rohit Sharma's retirement from the format. Suryakumar's first assignment will be the three-match T20 series against hosts Sri Lanka starting here on Saturday. "I have always enjoyed being a leader on the field even though I was not the captain. I have always learnt a lot of things from different captains. It's a good feeling and a great responsibility," the swashbuckling middle-order batter told. Indian cricket is set to embark on a new era under Suryakumar and new head coach Gautam Gambhir. Both Suryakumar and Gambhir share a strong bond since Kolkata Knight Riders days as they played together in 2014 for the franchise. And Suryakumar, known for his aggressive batting and innovative shots, described his relationship with Gambhir as both special and strong. "This relationship is special because in 2014 I played under him in KKR. It was special because from there only I got opportunities. The relationship is still strong." "He (Gambhir) knows how I work, what is my mindset when I come to practice sessions. I also know how he tries to work as a coach. It's all about the lovely relationship we have and very excited to see how it goes forward," the Mumbai batter said. By his own admission, Suryakumar wants to remain humble and grounded while leading the side on the field as he looks at cricket just as a sport, not a life.