

Ranji Trophy final: Sachin Baby and Co lost a nervy, mistake-filled title clash, but here's how Kerala can shine in the future

NEW DELHI, MAR 2: At the presentation ceremony, Kerala captain Sachin Baby fired a friendly warning, turning his head towards Vidarbha cricketers: "You guys have beaten us in all three knockout stages. Next time, guys, we'll beat you. We'll give you a tougher time!" The banter, finally, sprinkled some cheer on the face of Kerala's downcast cricketers, hands wrapped over each other's shoulders, collective in their passage of grief. Commiserations and consolation flowed. Some of Vidarbha's cricketers, had arms of comfort around the disconsolate Kerala counterparts. Vanquished in last year's final, they could relate to their plight. Kerala players reciprocated with uneasy smiles, but the pain was evident in their hollow eyes. What would pique them when they reflect on a memorable journey but with a heart-break twist at the climax is the moments that they didn't seize and the tactical naivety they betrayed in clutch junctures. From bestowing Vidarbha with the best of conditions to bat after winning the toss, to defensive field placings throughout the game, to



instances of individual letdowns – like Sachin slog-sweeping two runs adrift of his century with the lead in the vicinity – and Akshay Chandran spilling a dolly of eventual centurion Karun Nair at first slip. Kerala let moments pass by with the passivity of nervous freshers. Sachin owned up his moment of indiscretion. "As the leader, I'll take the

blame. My shot changed the momentum of the game. I wanted to be there for the team, and we were six down. I wanted to be there till the end to get the lead. Wanted to have a lead of 100-plus if at all we got a lead. That would have made a difference," he says. He still can't put into words what went through his mind. "I was playing all along the

ground till that moment, but then I don't know what happened and why I played that shot. But that and the dropped catch of Karun were important moments of the game," he says.

When the pain ebbs, coach Amay Khurasiya and Co would find the comforts of a resurgent season. It's the first time Kerala had ever featured in a final; they were nervous in the grind to the eventual destination, seeing out close games and surviving intense pressure; there is a sturdy base to string together a more competitive team for the future.

They could glean lessons too. Like the need to discover top-order hands who could consistently compose hundreds, so that the middle-order bulwarks, Salman Nizar and Mohammed Azharuddeen, could shine brighter. The pairs' best years are yet to come. The rough edges of Rohan Kunnumal and Ahammed Imran could be polished and they could sparkle. Eden Apple Tom, only 19, could be groomed into a strike force of the future. Vidarbha coach Usman Ghani, who had trained him at the NCA was happily surprised by his improvement.

Krishna Jayasankar, 22, throws shot put at 16.03, sets Indian indoor record with a bronze at Albuquerque



MUMBAI, MAR 2: Krishna Jayasankar currently studying in Texas, United States, sent happy tidings from the Mountain West Indoor Track and Field Championship held in Albuquerque, as she became the new record-holder in indoor shot put among the Indian women. The 22-year-old Krishna tossed the iron sphere to a new

distance of 16.03 metres that bettered the previous Indian indoor best of 15.54m by Maharashtra's Poornarao Rane, another US residing student athlete. Krishna ended with a bronze medal for her effort which came in the last round, pushing Colorado State's Makayla Long to the fourth spot as she was holding a medal chance with 15.98m

until the last round. The youngster is the second daughter of former basketball internationals Prasanna and Asia All Star Jayasankar Menon in Chennai. Krishna stayed in contention till last round but two other Coloradans finished in the top two with Mya Linsar (19.02) and Gabby Morns (17.09) delivering better marks in Albuquerque. With her medal on Sunday, Krishna got selected to take part in the American inter-University NCAA indoor Championships to be held on March 14-15 in Virginia Beach. It's been a good week for Indians in indoor meets in the States with distance running star Gulveer Singh posting a highly impressive 12:59.77 in 5000m to become the first Indian to clock a sub-13 minutes performance, helping the Asia mark qualify him for World's.

Julian Alvarez takes Atletico top with narrow Bilbao win

MADRID, MAR 2: Atletico Madrid scraped a nervy 1-0 win over Athletic Bilbao to move provisionally top of La Liga on Saturday. After Real Madrid, third, lost 2-1 at Real Betis, Diego Simeone's side capitalised at the Metropolitan stadium thanks to Julian Alvarez's second-half strike. The Basque side, fourth, hit the woodwork three times in the hunt for an equaliser but Atletico held on to move top. Barcelona, second and trailing by two points, can reclaim pole position with a win against Real Sociedad on Sunday. "It's an incredibly important win, we knew it would not be easy," Alvarez told. "We managed the game well, we had it under control, we knew how to bear their pressure and we take three very important points.. "We're in the fight for the title but we know there's a long way to go, a lot of very important games are coming close together, but with hard work and humility we'll achieve (our goals)." Robin Le Normand headed over early on for Atletico, with Jan Oblak off his line quickly to make a superb save to deny Athletic's Inaki Williams at the other end.

Atletico coach Simeone's son Giuliano probed frequently down the right and was his team's most threatening player in the first half. Dani Vivian blocked well from Samuel Lino's effort and cleared Alexander Sorloth's header off the line as the hosts pushed for the opener. Ernesto Valverde's Athletic were quick on the counter and Williams lashed a shot into the side netting for the Basque side. Atletico have often relied on their substitutes making huge impacts this season and so it proved again as they opened the scoring. Simeone brought on Marcos Llorente and Alvarez just before the hour mark and the duo combined to open the scoring after 66 minutes. Llorente delivered a fine low pass for the former Manchester City striker to run on to, and he finished with minimal fuss for his eighth league goal of the campaign.

Asmita Hockey State League to feature 16 districts of Maharashtra

NEW DELHI, MAR 2: In all 16 teams from all over the state will vie for the top honours in the inaugural Asmita Hockey State League, which will be played at the Maj Dhyani Chand Hockey Stadium, Nehrunagar-Pimpri here from Saturday. The tournament will be played in two categories — the sub-juniors and juniors — which will begin on March 7 and end on March 14. The tournament is being held under the aegis of Hockey India, Sports Authority of India, and Hockey Maharashtra. In the junior girls section, competition will be held for teams from eight districts while the same number of teams will compete in the sub-junior girls category. The teams in each category will engage in a round-robin league initially. The top two from each category will play in the knock-out semifinal round followed by the final. Both winners – sub-junior and juniors – will be given cash awards for their respective efforts in the competition. Abhinav Sharma, Deputy Director, Sports Authority of India (Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, MYAS, Government of India), SFW, explained, "The Asmita Women's League is a program under Khelo India to promote sports among women in India. In association with Sports Authority of India (SAI) and Hockey India, the league aims to increase the participation of women in Sports by organising various leagues, to utilise the leagues as a platform for identification of new talents, evaluation of existing Khelo India athletes and to provide competition exposure to women athletes of different age categories across the Country." The Asmita Hockey State League will get underway with an exhibition match between ex-Olympians and international players from the State playing against school girls, which will be followed by the unveiling of the Asmita Trophies.

Champions Trophy: Travis Head says Dubai conditions a bit more low-scoring, making the situation challenging

MUMBAI, MAR 2: Travis Head was asked about the suboptimal travel arrangements, forcing both Australia and South Africa to travel to UAE with one team returning, should they be slotted for the semis against NZ, the vice captain said, it was a tricky situation but one they would deal with. Acknowledging the difference in conditions between Lahore and Dubai, with the scheduling boggling the team's preparation, Head stressed they would keep their heads about the unique scenario. "We'll watch the next couple of days, stay relaxed and then get to work. I guess there'll be two different scenarios where it could be two different conditions," he was quoted as saying by Fox Cricket.



can, so we'll see how we go," he added.

Earlier, South African batter Rassie van der Dussen had said the tournament scheduling gave India an effective home advantage without being the host nation, acknowledging the uneven playing field.

"If you can stay in one place, stay in one hotel, practice in the same facilities, play in the same stadium, on the same pitches every time, it's definitely an advantage. I don't think you have to be a rocket scientist to know that," he said straight-faced.

Virat Kohli's 300th ODI: How many players have achieved milestone before India superstar's world record appearance?



NEW DELHI, MAR 2: Virat Kohli is set to appear in his 300th ODI match during the India vs New Zealand Champions Trophy 2025 league stage clash at the Dubai International Cricket Stadium

in Dubai on Sunday. The 36-year-old Kohli will join an illustrious club of cricket legends to reach the 300-match milestone in ODIs and the first player in six years to cross the landmark.

Kohli's former IPL teammate and West Indies powerhouse Chris Gayle was the last player to feature in 300 ODIs, achieving the mark in August 2019 against India. Former India captain Mohammed Azharuddin was the first player ever to reach the milestone of 300 ODI matches. Azharuddin played his 300th ODI against Australia in October 1998 and also became the first player to cross 9000 runs in the format. Since Azharuddin, 20 other cricketers have featured in at least 300 ODI matches with India batting legend Sachin Tendulkar eventually topping the charts with 463 matches to his credit. Kohli will be the seventh Indian cricketer to appear in 300 ODIs, joining Azharuddin, Tendulkar, MS Dhoni, Rahul Dravid, Sourav Ganguly and Yuvraj Singh in the elite club.

Isco's Betis upset Liga champions Real Madrid

SEVILLE, MAR 2: La Liga champions Real Madrid suffered a dent to their title defence with a 2-1 defeat at Real Betis on Saturday.

Isco scored the winner from the penalty spot against his former side, who are level on points with league leaders Barcelona, who face Real Sociedad on Sunday.

Atletico Madrid, third, host Athletic Bilbao later Saturday and can move top with a victory.

Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti picked a strong line up, with no breathing room in the title race, despite the impending Champions League clash against city rivals Atletico.

"If we play like this on Tuesday (against Atletico) we will not win," said.

The visitors took the lead at the Benito Villamarin stadium through Brahim Diaz but Betis struck back with a Johnny Cardoso header, as Real Madrid missed the suspended Jude Bellingham.

Isco secured the Andalusian



side a deserved victory with a penalty early in the second half.

"It's a big blow. We have to react," continued Ancelotti. "We started well, but later we did not have the same level of commitment, the game got out of control against a side that played better than us and deserved to win."

Isco returned to action in December after missing several months with a broken leg and has hit top form in recent weeks.

"I'm dead... it takes so much work to win games, against Madrid, who have so many options, it's very hard," an exhausted Isco told. "About halfway through the first half we stepped up our game, and I'm happy with the win against the best team around these days."

The 32-year-old playmaker said he always has "Madrid in my heart" after winning several major trophies with the Spanish giants before departing in 2022.

Yuki wins maiden ATP 500 doubles title in Dubai



DUBAI, MAR 2: India's Yuki Bhambri claimed his maiden ATP 500 men's doubles title after he and his Australian partner Alexei Popyrin staged a dramatic comeback to edged past world No 14 Harri Heliövaara of Finland and Great Britain's Henry Patten at the Dubai

Tennis Championships. Having lost the first set, the duo saved four match points in the second set against Heliövaara and Patten to seal a 3-6 7-6 10-8 win in a 51-minute contest on Saturday. With this win, Bhambri is set to achieve a career-high ranking of No 40 in the PIF ATP

Rankings on Monday. Their title-winning run featured a string of impressive wins. The duo had a stunning run, first eliminating World No.1, Marcelo Arevalo of El Salvador and Mate Pavic of Croatia 4-6 7-6(1) 10-3. In the quarterfinals, the Indo-Australian pair won 5-7 7-6(5) 10-5 against the British duo of Julian Cash and Lloyd Glasspool. Then in the last-four, they ousted Jamie Murray of Great Britain and John Peers of Australia 5-4-6 10-7. "It was just about having fun on the court," Bhambri told. "We went match by match. We were so close to losing in the first round, so it's unbelievable to be in the finals and to win it? I don't think I ever dreamt of that." Alexei is an incredible player, we all know that he's very good in singles, but I think he has a great doubles career ahead of him as well.

Champions Trophy: How Matt Henry removed Shubman Gill by targeting his one batting weakness

MUMBAI, MAR 2: It's amazing really how Shubman Gill hasn't managed to erase that one weakness in his batting for all these years: the slow weight transfer onto the front foot. Sunday afternoon provided yet another iteration of the deja-vu. New Zealand in particular have done it often before; Kyle Jamieson on at least two occasions, Tim Southee and this time it was Matt Henry. Other bowlers too have got him with the same ball — Kagiso Rabada, James Anderson and Mohammad Shami (in the IPL).



The television coverage has saturated our minds' by now about what that good length is: say 6 to 8 metres from the batsman's stumps. Matt Henry's delivery landed on a length, say closer to the 8m and skidded in. Anything closer to him, Gill has no issues. Even closer to the 6m mark from his

stumps, he has relatively less issues as he lets his wonderful hands do the jailbreak for him. Henry's delivery skidded in a bit from that length and Gill was on the move, trying to work it around his front pad and was unsurprisingly trapped in front. It primarily stems from his tiny stride out; calling it a stride is an overstatement, a short step out. And that prima-

rily stems from his childhood days of developing his game on cement tracks. On cement, the backfoot becomes an instinctive play, and the front foot is something to be worked on. The muscle memory is deeply set; and hence his back-foot game is stellar, his stand-up and punch game is a sizzler, but the in-between length has always posed him problems. Batting is about transferring

weight and being still when playing a shot. At the top level one needs to be strong on the back foot but still have the balance and skill to play under the eyes, and be in a position to transfer the weight forward. Gill's trigger is quite simple: he moves back a touch, opens his front foot a bit, and is loath to take a big stride out. As that one change can completely upset his entire set-up, his balance. It's a tradeoff that batsmen like him accept when they change things. The things they do well might not be easy to achieve if they alter the way they move in the crease. Is it worth disrupting the technique built? Would this – let's say leaning forward with a positive step or taking an initial movement out – disrupt the entire balance and affect all other areas of his game? Isn't it better to manage this with the hands? And so he has ploughed on for years now.

'I feel very annoyed': Sir Vivian Richards wants West Indies to emulate Afghanistan to improve

NEW DELHI, MAR 2: Legendary player Sir Vivian Richards urged West Indies to learn from Afghanistan and re-establish themselves as a force in ODI cricket. The West Indies and Sri Lanka, both former world champions, have failed to qualify for the ongoing Champions Trophy with WI even failing to take part in the 2023 ODI World Cup in India. "I'm just hoping that my West Indies team can take a leaf out of these guys' book, because there is a passion and energy that the Afghans have brought to the game," Richards said. "They haven't been in the cricket world for so long as maybe some other teams around the world, but just their fighting spirit. To me,



the ability to learn as the years go by, that would have given them the experience that's needed in order for them to be where they're at. When you can see Afghanistan in the Champions League, and the West Indies not, it means that Afghanistan is doing

something right," he added. As compared to West Indies, Afghanistan have now become a decent force in the Asian region on the back of some consistent showing in ICC tournaments with the side eliminating England in the ongoing Champions Trophy

while also making it to the semifinals of the 2024 T20 World Cup. "In order for us to get ourselves back where we once were, it is going to take maybe not just the players, but individuals from the board, people who are in responsible positions," Richards said. "For them to believe that this is not just the players, but it takes people from the board to identify the things that are missing, (as to) why we are not there. I feel very annoyed with the fact that the West Indies team, with such (a) huge legacy, is not in the Champions Trophy and it hurts. It makes me feel very, very sad, because we are much better than that," he added.