

Rodrigo de Paul: A bodyguard, a troubleshooter, the tired legs that make Messi magic work

NEW DELHI, JUN 23:

Lionel Messi and Rodrigo de Paul are not just structural parts of the same sentence, but de Paul is the verb that makes Messi the subject moving. Messi can be watched in isolation, at walking pace, with an impermeable halo around him, a fulfilling experience in itself. But to admire Messi, the viewer should admire de Paul too. It is difficult because they are not often together, not in each other's shadows, not indulging in one-tuos or interplays, and not passing the ball to each other or assisting. But you miss de Paul, you miss a part of Messi too.

To watch de Paul is to watch where Messi should have been; to understand de Paul is to understand what Messi should have been doing. Messi roams, but de Paul ensures that he leaves no vacuum. He fills the space. Messi doesn't press. He needn't, because there is



de Paul pressing for two men. Messi doesn't run, because de Paul is running for him, covering his own distance as well as Messi's. Messi doesn't lunge

into tackles, again there is De Paul, who incidentally began his career as a goalkeeper for a small club in his hometown Sarandí, a suburb of Buenos Aires.

Messi doesn't appeal for fouls committed on him, because de Paul does the talking. "I care a lot about Leo, and I know he cares a lot about me," he said before the World Cup. When Messi scored his record-breaking 17th goal, he searched for de Paul's face, and when he found him, he embraced him like best friends would.

The Argentinian press have coined a non-quirky but fitting epithet for him. The bodyguard. Messi's protective shield. Not only in the sense that he compensates for Messi's declining physical prowess, but he is the first to badger the referees when Messi is fouled, he makes a mental note of those that had fouled him, and waits for his ripe moment to exact revenge. Messi's revenge is his revenge too. He sketches the men inhibiting Messi-world, and takes it upon himself to bind them. Perhaps, there should be a new name for his role—The Rodrigo role.

Suryansh Shedge replaces Nitish Reddy in India T20I squad for Ireland, England series

MUMBAI, JUN 23:

India have drafted in Mumbai all-rounder Suryansh Shedge as a replacement for Nitish Kumar Reddy in the squads for the upcoming T20I series against Ireland and England. The change comes after Nitish reported discomfort in his left quadriceps following the third ODI against Afghanistan in Chennai.

Subsequent medical examinations conducted by the BCCI medical team recommended a rehabilitation period, thereby ruling him out of both the bilateral series. "Nitish reported left quadriceps discomfort after the third ODI against Afghanistan on June 20. Following a subsequent medical assessment, the BCCI Medical Team has recommended a period of rehabilitation, ruling him out of both T20I series," BCCI said in a statement. Nitish's absence left India short of seam-bowling all-round options, with Hardik Pandya also unavailable, prompting the selectors to turn to Shedge, who has impressed consistently over the past year in domestic and India A cricket.



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IPL trade: Rishabh Pant returns to Delhi Capitals with Rs 12-crore paycut, Kuldeep moves to LSG



MUMBAI, JUN 23:

India wicket-keeper Rishabh Pant and wrist-spinner Kuldeep Yadav have been involved in one of the most high-profile IPL trades, triggering major movement between Lucknow Super Giants and Delhi Capitals on Tuesday. Pant will rejoin his former franchise just two sea-

sons after expressing a desire to leave. During the IPL 2025 Mega Auction, Pant was acquired by LSG for a record-breaking INR 27 crore – the highest winning bid in auction history. The switch back to Delhi will come with a substantial pay cut, trimming his earnings from Rs 15 crore to Rs 12 crore.

Pant endured two lean seasons as captain and batter at Lucknow, with the team failing to qualify for the Playoffs in the 2025 and 2026 seasons.

Individually too, Pant suffered two of his least productive seasons in his IPL career with LSG. He managed to score just 269 runs in the 2025 season, his worst return since his debut year in 2016, at a strike rate of 133.16 and average of 24.45 in 13 innings.

The returns remained stagnant this year, with 312 runs coming at 28.36. Shortly after Lucknow's elimination, the franchise announced on May 29 that Pant had stepped down from his role as captain. "Lucknow Super Giants (LSG) wish to formally announce that Rishabh Pant has requested to be relieved of his captaincy duties with the franchise, and the franchisee has accepted his request with immediate effect," said.

Thomas Tuchel on hydration breaks at World Cup: 'Breaks the match in 4 quarters'

NEW DELHI, JUN 23:

England manager Thomas Tuchel has voiced his discomfort with the hydration breaks being used at the ongoing World Cup, arguing that they are altering the natural rhythm and flow of matches more than he initially expected.

England's second Group L fixture against Ghana in Boston on Tuesday night, Tuchel said the interruptions – introduced to help players cope with extreme heat in certain venues – were now being applied too uniformly across matches, regardless of actual conditions. Forecasts suggest rain and relatively mild temperatures for the upcoming game, yet the stoppages are still expected to be enforced.

"I think that it interrupts and changes the identity of a football match much more than I thought," Tuchel said.

"I had hydration breaks before when it was really, really hot and needed, but they were shorter. They were short-



er, and they were just in a few matches. In the interests of fairness here, it is now done in every match for every team," he added. The 52-year-old argued that momentum is one of football's defining features and that the stoppages fundamentally alter the structure of matches, creating multiple pauses where pressure and rhythm would otherwise develop naturally. "It breaks

the match almost in four quarters. And I think it changes the characteristic of the match more than I thought," he said.

"It's hard to build momentum, and it's hard to keep the momentum, when there are breaks." Although Tuchel is unconvinced about the effect the breaks are having on the spectacle, he admitted there are benefits from a coaching perspective.

Rugby Premier League 2026: Chennai Bulls make it to final of inaugural women's edition

MUMBAI, JUN 23:

Chennai Bulls has stormed its way into the finals of the inaugural women's edition of the Rugby Premier League 2026 that will be played on Tuesday at the Gachibowli Stadium, Hyderabad. Led by Chantelle Miell, Chennai Bulls has topped the table after five league matches, earning a spot in the finals. "Super excited for the finals. Last night's game was super close, but getting across the line in the final play is a great tribute to the girls and how hard they have worked in the last few weeks. Happy to be the first team that has secured its spot in the finals. The team is recouped, refreshed and all set to come back and hopefully win the finals tomorrow," said Chantelle Miell, Captain, Chennai Bulls.

"Extremely happy to have made the finals and the whole squad is now raring to play the finals. We are focused on the end goal which has always been to become the inaugural champions of the women's edition of the Rugby Premier League," said Amandeep Kaur, Chennai Bulls. Captain Chantelle Miell, Adia Pyke, Carmen Izyk and vice-captain Savannah Bauder, have proved their mettle as capped international players. The Indians Amandeep Kaur and Sandhyarani Tudu remain the standout in the squad winning a few of the match awards as well. Sandhya Rai, a senior member of the Indian team as well was ruled out earlier in the season but that did not stop the Chennai Bulls juggernaut in their quest for the inaugural trophy. Chennai Bulls have had balanced results in the league stage with two draws against Delhi Redz and Mumbai Dreamers, respectively. They chalked up their lone defeat against Kolkata Banga Tigers before going on a three-match streak against Delhi Redz, Kolkata Banga Tigers and Mumbai Dreamers.

Ashwin on Sooryavanshi incident in India A tri-series: 'How can anyone hate him'

NEW DELHI, JUN 23:

Former India spinner R Ashwin has questioned the criticism directed at Vaibhav Sooryavanshi following the teenager's involvement in a physical altercation with Sri Lanka A players during the recently concluded tri-series in Dambulla. Ashwin argued that there was a difference between constructive criticism and hatred, while urging people not to rush to judge the 15-year-old. Sooryavanshi was involved in an altercation that turned physical following India A's Super Over defeat to Sri Lanka A last week.

"All we can do is talk with hate. And what happens then? If the person we are hating eventually reads those things, it might affect them a little. But what do we achieve by talking like that? That is why I am saying this. How can you hate Vaibhav Sooryavanshi?" Ashwin said.

"Tell me, how can anyone hate him? And everyone is saying, 'This kid should have shown maturity. He should have spoken with more maturi-



ty.' Have we forgotten that we too were children once? Have we forgotten that there are children like that in our own families? This is a very dangerous trend," he added.

Ashwin questioned the reaction to the incident, arguing that excessive criticism of a 15-year-old served little purpose and could affect a young player.

"What is criticism? If today you are hosting the show and I tell you, 'Vimal bhai, I didn't like the hosting so much today. Maybe we can pay attention here. Maybe this question

could have been asked differently. Maybe this point could have been handled differently.' That is criticism."

"Criticism means finding a path for someone to move forward and improve. But what is hatred? Hatred is when somebody has achieved something, and we keep attacking them with words. We keep trying to pull them down. That does not happen," he added. The 15-year-old could make his international debut in the upcoming two-match T20I series against Ireland, and Ashwin said he wanted the teenager to enjoy

the game without carrying the burden of expectations.

"Vaibhav Sooryavanshi is a cricketer. He performs for us. He is an entertainer with immense skill. Forget his family, his well-wishers, his fans and the team management for a moment. As a lover of the sport, I just want him to enjoy cricket and play without pressure. After playing cricket for so many years, I've realised that playing freely, without baggage, is one of the hardest things to do. As long as we can give him that freedom, let him enjoy himself. Whether he succeeds or fails doesn't matter. The way he plays is a spectacle. Let the kid enjoy himself."

"When we watch television and he gets out, we'll naturally be disappointed. But every batter can get out first ball. The thing about him is that he never backs away from a challenge. He shows us that he can perform on the big stage. And let me tell you this clearly: there should be no doubt about his ability to play cricket in any format — Tests, ODIs or T20Is.

Who is Michael Olise – Mbappé's wingman, as French captain chases Messi's goal count

MUMBAI, JUN 23:

There are 75 players at the 2026 FIFA World Cup who are born in France – representing around 10 nations. Michael Olise, the lynchpin of the French attack, the puppeteer pulling the strings from the right wing, while setting up Kylian Mbappé's strikes – isn't one. Olise was born in London.

He has been called the "today and tomorrow" of French football by Mbappé, after his assists first helped France steady early nerves and a ponderous first half against Senegal, when the French captain finally scored. Against Iraq in a rain-drenched game, Olise was quicker to get France going, when his pinpoint service to Mbappé took his captain to 15 World Cup goals in his 100th match. Roving on the right, well out of the defensive unit's peripheral sights, Olise kept ping-pong in precise passes that the French forwards could convert, with Dembele receiving an Olise assist and scoring the French third in a 3-0 win.



The reason Mbappé and Olise have hit it off so quickly is because his left foot on the right flank works out angles, strikes rotating acceleration with such rhythm that Mbappé is receiving deliveries at his footstep. Like a norden bomb-sight of an ancient bombardier, Olise has been gauging movement around the box, mapping his teammates' likely pathways and using his creative vision to open supply lines and pave the path for the captain.

There was grumpiness from English shores when Olise

chose to play for France.

He grew up in London, born to a Nigerian-English father and Franco-Algerian mother. "I possess four parts of each of these countries. All four parts enrich me," he has maintained.

Explaining why he picked France, he said, "I always had a connection with the French national team. It was a childhood dream to play for them given I spent a lot of holidays at my mother's home," he explained. His brother still plays for Chelsea, while Michael went over to Bayern Munich, after a fruitful stint at

Crystal Palace, where besides becoming the youngest goalscorer at the club, he showed a flair and generosity for rustling up the most assists in a single season – 10. As such, Olise is a perfect fit in this multi-cultural, multi-inspired French team.

He might not have grown up in the urban marginalised banlieues of Paris, but besides the blended nationalities in his genes, Olise was also shaped by several impressive influences. Youth stints at Arsenal, Chelsea and Manchester City coincided with his long-distance stargazing of French greats Zinedine Zidane and Thierry Henry. He was simultaneously enchanted by the trick-dribbles of Neymar and how he sizzled with pace moving up field. But at 18, Olise had no doubts about who he wanted to turn out for – he would slot into the 2024 Paris Olympics home squad finishing with a silver. A senior call-up from Didier Deschamps was on the horizon, and he would link up with Mbappé right away, lending France the creative coherence from his right half position.

Savita Punia conferred Padma Shri, Bhagwandas Raikwar awarded posthumously; Vijay Amritraj gets Padma Bhushan



MUMBAI, JUN 23:

Veteran Hockey player Savita Punia and late Bhagwandas Raikwar have been conferred with the Padma Shri in recognition of their outstanding contribution to Indian sports. Raikwar was honoured posthumously with the Padma Shri for bringing international

recognition to 'Akhada' (traditional wrestling/martial arts), the most ancient weapon-based art form of Bundelkhand. His son Rajkumar Raikwar received the award from President Droupadi Murmu at the function held at Rashtrapati Bhavan on Tuesday evening.

Tennis legend Vijay Amritraj received the Padma Bhushan, while Vladimir Mestvirishvili was honoured with the Padma Shri posthumously, for his contribution in the field of Sports as a coach, becoming the first foreign coach to receive a Padma award. Punia in 2025 became only the second Indian goalkeeper, after PR Sreejesh, to reach 300 international caps, joining an elite club and underlining her remarkable longevity and consistency at the highest level.

She also played a pivotal role in India's historic fourth-place finish at the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, a landmark campaign that elevated the stature of Indian women's hockey worldwide. Her experience and presence between the posts were also invaluable in qualifying for the Rio 2016 Olympics for the first time in 36 years and the 2018 Hockey Women's World Cup, where India reached the Quarter-Finals.

ICC Women's T20I Rankings: Indian spinner Shree Charani becomes number one ranked bowler

NEW DELHI, JUN 23:

India's young spinner Shree Charani has been rewarded for her blistering start to the ICC Women's T20 World Cup by becoming the number one ranked player on the latest ICC Women's T20I Bowler Rankings. Charani overtakes England spinner Linsey Smith and claims the premier position for the first time in her fledgling career on the back of being the leading wicket-taker at the T20 World Cup so far, with the left-arter having collected 10 scalps from three appearances at the ongoing tournament, as per ICC. The 21-year-old only made her international debut a little over 12 months ago, but a second career four-wicket haul against the Netherlands in Leeds, followed by three more wickets in a loss to South Africa in Manchester, proved enough for Charani to take the top ranking from Smith following the latest update made by the ICC. Smith drops to third following a relatively slow start to the T20 World Cup by her lofty standards, with England teammate and fellow spinner Charlie Dean rising to second after five wickets from three matches at the tournament.

Former top-ranked bowler Sophie Ecclestone is on the rise as she improves four spots to fourth overall for T20I bowlers, while West Indies captain Hayley Matthews (up nine places to 11th), Australia pacer Kim Garth (up 25 runs to 20th), Pakistan skipper Fatima Sana (up 10 slots to 25th) and Ireland all-rounder Orla Prendergast (up 10 spots to 26th) all make ground in a tight rankings category. By comparison, it is more of a status quo on the latest rankings for T20I batters, with Australia opener Georgia Voll holding on to her spot at the top of the category despite just 62 runs from three hits at the T20 World Cup.

FIFA World Cup 2026: Will Cristiano Ronaldo overcome his barren 10-match run across major tournaments for Portugal?

NEW DELHI, JUN 23:

Portugal superstar Cristiano Ronaldo, who has not found the net for the last 10 consecutive games at major tournaments, will be aiming to overcome his poor run as his team takes on Uzbekistan in an all-important FIFA World Cup group stage clash on Tuesday.

The 41-year-old was underwhelming in Portugal's 1-1 draw against DR Congo in their opening match of the FIFA World Cup 2026 campaign, where the veteran striker struggled to make an impact. Ronaldo finished the match with 25 touches, three shots without hitting the target, and won just one duel, reflecting a tightly marked performance by the DR Congo defence. It was also one of the lowest involvement games of his World Cup career, marking the second-fewest touches he has ever recorded in a World Cup start, highlighting his limited influence in Portugal's attacking play. OptaJoe,



Cristiano has delivered just one assist and zero goals for Portugal across the last 10 matches in major tournaments, the World Cup and UEFA Euro Championship. This is a stark contrast with his record in the first 43 matches for Portugal, where he scored 22 goals and delivered eight assists. With

147 goals in 229 appearances, he is Portugal's leading goalscorer and appearance-maker. Meanwhile, Portugal defender Ruben Dias has downplayed recent criticism directed at skipper Ronaldo, describing the surrounding talk as "noise" and simply part of football.