



Big moment: Vinesh Phogat, who won the women's freestyle 50kg wrestling gold at the Asian Games 2018, is thrilled to be in the company of great sportspersons. *AP

After her Laureus moment, Vinesh eyes Tokyo

Ace wrestler is proud to be nominated for the Comeback-of-the-Year award

P.K. AJITH KUMAR
MONTE CARLO

Vinesh Phogat is a bit disappointed when she is told that neither Roger Federer nor Serena Williams will be present at the Laureus Sports Awards this year.

She has always admired those tennis greats, who are also the most successful champions at the Laureus; Federer has been Sportsperson-of-the-Year five times and Serena won the Sportswoman-of-the-Year on four occasions.

The 24-year-old gold medalist at both the Asian and Commonwealth Games may not be able to take selfies

with them, but she still is happy to be in Monaco.

First Indian

She is justifiably proud that she has been nominated for the Comeback-of-the-Year award. She is the first Indian in the two-decade-old history of Laureus to make it to the list of nominees.

"I was delighted when I came to know that I was nominated," Vinesh told *The Hindu* on Monday.

"It is a big honour. It is good for the sport of wrestling, and even better for Indian wrestling."

Among her rivals for the award is golfing legend Tiger

Woods. "It feels great to be in such company," she says. "It is really nice to be among so many great sportspersons from around the world. And I have enjoyed my time here in this beautiful city."

From here she will travel to Bulgaria for her next assignment, a ranking tournament. She has already set her eyes on Tokyo, where the Olympic Games will be held next year.

"There is nothing like the Olympics," she says. "Watching wrestlers like Sushil Kumar and Yogeshwar Dutt win Olympic medals was a huge inspiration for me."

She is glad that the profile

of wrestling has improved in India.

"More people now know about wrestling and the hard work we put in; the Hindi film *Dangal* has helped certainly," she says. "And more and more girls want to do wrestling now."

Foreign coaches

Vinesh, however, feels India needs better coaches. "With foreign coaches we could do better," she says. "I am glad that I am working with my Hungarian coach Woller Akos."

(The writer is in Monte Carlo at the invitation of Laureus)

India has the ability to host Olympic Games: Bubka

Says good coaches can help country produce fine athletes

P.K. AJITH KUMAR
MONTE CARLO

For Sergey Bubka, soaring high above the bar was as natural as breathing.

Breaking World records too was just as natural. He did that 35 times in pole vault.

Often, he was competing with himself, as he broke his own record on 14 occasions. The last of those – 6.14m – stood for 21 years after he set it in 1993.

Bubka continues his association with athletics. He is IAAF vice president, executive member of the IOC and president of National Olympic Committee of Ukraine.

"Athletics is my blood; it is my passion and that is why I was able to set all those World records," Bubka told *The Hindu* here during the Laureus World Sports Awards.

Careful

While athletics is all about such competitive spirit, he feels athletes have to be careful about getting influenced by the wrong people, especially coaches, who could influence them to take performance-enhancing drugs.

"In one survey by the IOC it was found that over 80 per cent of the information an athlete receives is from his or her coach," said Bubka. "As in any other walks of life, people take wrong decisions in athletics, knowingly or unknowingly."

One thing he is happy about today's sport is that politics isn't as interfering as much as it used to be in his

Les Bleus named Team of the Year

No team caught the imagination of the sporting world in the past year the way France did at the football World Cup in Russia.

The French had played dazzling, dominant football to triumph in a tournament in which giants like Brazil and Argentina disappointed their considerable number of fans across the world. Not entirely surprisingly, France won the Team of the Year at the Laureus World Sports Awards here on Monday night. And it did in this small neighbouring country of Monaco.

Quite a memorable night it turned out to be

at the Sporting Club, which hosted several stars of them – some of them nominees for the awards in various categories – from around the world. Among them were the World No.1 Novak Djokovic, marathon's World record holder Eliud Kipchoge, swimmer Missy Franklin and footballers Cafu, Luis Figo and Alessandro del Piero.

Receiving the award, France's coach Didier Deschamps paid a tribute to the team work of his boys. "I would also want to thank the French football federation, which supported us greatly," he said.

time. "Because of the cold war between the Soviet Union and the United States, I could not compete at the Los Angeles Olympics, while I was at my peak and could have won the gold," he recalled.

"The boycott by Soviet Union destroyed my dream, but I could at least compete again at the Olympics and win the gold in 1988, but many athletes were not as fortunate. You know only 50 per cent of athletes last till the next Olympics, so you could imagine the number of dreams the boycotts ended

for ever." Talking of dreams, Bubka feels India could afford to make a mark on the international arena.

"India is a huge country with so much potential," he said. "If India could get good coaches, the country will succeed in producing more fine athletes."

He feels India bidding for the 2032 Olympics is an excellent idea.

"India has the ability to host Olympics," he said. "And if India does that, it would help its athletics too; after all it is the No.1 sport at the Olympics."

FC Goa seals play-off berth

SPORTS BUREAU
FATORDA

FC Goa became the second Hero Indian Super League (ISL) side to book its place in the play-offs after a convincing 3-0 win over Kerala Blasters FC on Monday.

Goals from Ferran Corominas (22nd), Edu Bedia (25th) and Hugo Boumous (78th) helped the hosts do the double over the Kerala outfit this season.

The Gauris have leapfrogged Bengaluru FC to go top of the table. Goa has 31 points from 16 games, the same as Bengaluru FC but with a better goal difference, and now occupies the top spot.

Pedro stars in CCFC's win

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
SHILLONG

Pedro Manzi scored two goals and set up another to guide table-toppers Chennai City FC to a 4-2 win over hosts Shillong Lajong in a return leg fixture of the Hero I-League here Monday.

Pedro, the current highest scorer with 18 goals, changed the complexion of the match in the space of 12 minutes. Spaniards Sandro Rodriguez and Nestor Gordillo also scored for Chennai. Kitboklang Pale and Samuel Lyngdoh found the target for the hosts.

Chennai consolidated its position at the top with 37 points from 17 games. Shillong remained at the bottom with 10 points.

The results: Shillong Lajong 2 (Kitboklang Pale 23, Samuel Lyngdoh 85) lost to Chennai City 4 (Sandro Rodriguez 7, Pedro Manzi 78, 90, Nestor Gordillo 81).

I-League teams lodge complaint

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
KOLKATA/CHENNAI

Eight I-League clubs have written to All India Football Federation (AIFF) President Praful Patel, requesting him for an urgent appointment to discuss the future of I-League and the clubs playing in it.

The clubs – Mohun Bagan, East Bengal, Aizawl FC, Chennai City FC, Churchill Brothers, Gokulam Kerala FC, Minerva Punjab and Neroca – have come together to "seek clarity on our future in the current scenario of Indian football and express our anguish and fear about a plan to kill the clubs."

"Recent news reports suggest that this could be the last season of the I-League, with the Indian Super League (ISL) all set to be branded the top league of the country," a letter from Bagan said on Monday.

Rohit Ramesh, Partner and CEO, Chennai City FC (CCFC), has demanded a truly unified league and has

sought an appointment with AIFF "to give us a time" on February 20 to discuss the issues.

According to CCFC, the top division of the league is sacrosanct and cannot be privately owned and operated.

It must be operated only by AIFF and not by any private entity like FSDL (Football Sports Development Ltd.), it said.

CCFC was very critical of FSDL, whose interference in Indian football, it felt was a clear case of conflict of interest.

Rohit also said it was unfair to target the defending I-league champion Minerva FC for being vocal against FSDL.

"Minerva FC has been targeted by sudden cancellation of broadcast of their [Minerva] matches for being vocal against the interference of FSDL."

"We appeal immediately to AIFF to make sure they are not targeted further by FSDL."

Minerva moves Delhi HC

SPORTS BUREAU
BENGALURU

Minerva Punjab moved the Delhi High Court on Monday after the All India Football Federation (AIFF) refused to relocate the I-League match against Real Kashmir.

Minerva did not travel to Srinagar, claiming it was not given the "written" security assurances that it sought, even as the hosts turned up for the match.

"We have filed a writ petition seeking relief from playing in Srinagar at this volatile time," Minerva owner Ranjit Bajaj told *PTI*.

"Even on Monday there was a 12-hour encounter where four army men have been martyred. And they are saying 'come and play football here'."

"Unless the court intervenes, we are not expecting natural justice."

In a statement, the AIFF said that the match commissioner's report

following the no-show had been sent to the League Committee for further action even as it chose not to comment on the consequences.

The AIFF added: "Despite the tragic events, football for the people of Jammu and Kashmir has been maintained on schedule, with assistance from the security provided by the authorities."

"Qualifying matches for Santosh Trophy were completed on February 16, in Katra, which was, and is still under curfew."

Disappointed Real Kashmir co-founders Sandeep Chattoo and Shamim Meraj expressed disappointment.

"We had made the necessary arrangements for the visiting team. Despite apprehensions, a lot of locals turned up for the match," they told *PTI* in a joint statement.

U Mumba Volley makes semifinals

The team rallies from a set behind to down Ahmedabad Defenders

PRO VOLLEYBALL

S. DIPAK RAGAV
CHENNAI

U Mumba Volley came back from a set behind to beat Ahmedabad Defenders 4-1 (10-15, 15-12, 15-13, 15-12, 15-8) and reach the semifinals of the RuPay Pro Volleyball league here at the Nehru Indoor stadium on Monday.

For Defenders, it marked the end of a forgettable tournament wherein it lost all its five matches and dragged along Black Hawks Hyderabad out of the tournament.

Hyderabad and Mumbai were tied on four points each but Mumbai had a better set difference of 0 to Hyderabad's -3.

In the first semifinal on Tuesday, table toppers Calicut Heroes will take on U Mumba while Kochi Blue Spikers will take on Chennai Spartans on Wednesday.



Getting one across: Nicolas Del Bianco of U Mumba Volley about to put it past Ahmedabad Defenders. *R. RAGU

In the first set, both teams traded points and were tied at 7-7 at the halfway stage with quite a few points com-

ing from unforced errors than any brilliance. Two more unforced errors from Mumba gave Defenders a

three-point lead at 10-7.

Vinit Kumar then produced two good spikes including one super point to narrow the lead at 11-10 but Defenders' Mandeep Singh returned the favour with a spike on super point before two more unforced errors from Mumba gave the first set to Defenders 15-10.

Mumba, however, came back strongly in the second set led by Deepesh Kumar Sinha and Vinit who produced brilliant spikes and blocks.

The third set also saw Mumba take the early lead racing to a 10-3 lead with its foreign player Nicholas Del Bianco doing the damage with his powerful spikes and blocks.

The fourth set mirrored the previous two sets in Mumba taking an early lead at 10-5 with Deepesh and Pankaj leading the charge with three points each.

UEFA Champions League 2018-19

LAST 16, 1ST LEG - FEB 19 Form **W D L**

LYON v BARCELONA
Groupama Stadium
Head-to-head
Won 0 Drawn 2 Won 4

Form **W D L**
12/11 Goals for / against 14/5

Competition statistics (per match)

6.17	Shots on target	7.33
6.00	Shots wide	7.50
3.99	Passes	6.32
3.00	Corners	5.83
46%	Possession	60%

LIVERPOOL v BAYERN
Anfield
Head-to-head
Won 2 Drawn 4 Won 1

Form **W D L**
9/7 Goals for / against 15/5

Competition statistics (per match)

4.67	Shots on target	7.17
7.00	Shots wide	4.83
4.77	Passes	5.31
5.83	Corners	6.83
54%	Possession	57%

Robert Lewandowski
Bayern striker netted 50th Champions League goal against Benfica in group stage

SHOOTING BOOTS: Lewandowski is competition's top goalscorer with eight goals

HEAVYWEIGHT CLASH
Jurgen Klopp will face old rival Bayern for first time since leaving Dortmund in 2015

All goals scored from attempts inside penalty area

How goals were scored
Left foot Right Header

Sources: UEFA, Gracnote Picture: Getty Images © GRAPHIC NEWS

India is the next frontier: Ranadive

'Hosting pre-season games in the country a dream come true'

NBA

ASHWIN ACHAL
CHARLOTTE

Vivek Ranadive is living the American dream.

Born in Mumbai, Ranadive moved to USA at the age of 16. After earning his academic stripes at MIT and Harvard University, he went on to become a successful entrepreneur.

In 2013, Ranadive became the first person of Indian descent to own an NBA franchise when he purchased the Sacramento Kings.

A couple of months ago, Ranadive's grand dream came true when it was announced that the city of his birth would host two NBA pre-season games, between Sacramento Kings and Indiana Pacers.

At a media interaction here, the 61-year-old spoke about how the pre-season games will impact basketball in India, and more...

Excerpts
Bringing the NBA to In-



Vivek Ranadive. *FILE PHOTO

dia: The NBA has been a big success in the Chinese market. India is the next frontier. I want to show the world how amazing India is. Bringing the pre-season games to India is a dream come true for me.

Importance of India producing an NBA star: Having an Indian-descent NBA franchise owner helps in that direction, as does making the right investments with the NBA India Academy and other grassroots programmes.

India will produce an NBA star – it's going to happen no matter what. But we're not

waiting for that to happen. We're just moving forward. Right now, we're in the phase where we are trying to popularise the game in India.

NBA's economic impact: There are huge economic opportunities that come with NBA basketball. We've created thousands of jobs around the Golden 1 Centre, which hosts the Kings' games. Sacramento is also now the fastest growing city in the State of California. So this goes way beyond just being a basketball game. I'm sure that India will look at it in a similar way.

First tryst with basketball: Growing up in Mumbai, I was a huge cricket fan. Sunil Gavaskar was my idol. Many years later, when I was living in the USA, I was called to coach my then 12-year-old daughter's basketball team, despite me having never touched a basketball before that. That experience led to me falling in love with the sport.

Team LeBron takes the bragging rights

Durant voted MVP; Nowitzki and Wade turn back the clock

ASHWIN ACHAL
CHARLOTTE

The 68th NBA All-Star Game at the Spectrum Center here on Sunday retained all the showmanship associated with an exhibition match.

Flashy plays came on both ends of the court. The best of the lot was a jaw-dropping off-the-floor pass from Stephen Curry, who bounced the ball nearly over the shot clock before it came down to find Giannis Antetokounmpo for the dunk.

Curry showed his athletic prowess as well, finishing the game with a smooth reverse dunk off the bounce.

Dirk Nowitzki and Dwyane Wade, both special additions to the roster, turned back the clock.

Wade reminded fans of the deadly chemistry he once had with LeBron James during their time together at Miami Heat, when he threw a perfect off-the-backboard alley-oop to James in the third quarter.

Nowitzki, who like Wade



Cashing in: LeBron James poised to basket. *AFP

is in the final stretch of his career, sunk back-to-back three-pointers to prove that he has lost none of his shooter's touch.

Giannis tops scoring Milwaukee Bucks star Giannis led the scoring charts with 38 points, to go with 11 rebounds and five assists. But it was not enough to prevent Team LeBron from recording a 178-164 win over Team Giannis.

Kevin Durant won the All-

Star MVP award, for his 31 points.

The game also broke away from the usual festive spirit, when Durant was challenged by Joel Embiid.

The two players exchanged verbal barbs right through the outing, which brought out a fierce competitive spirit that is usually reserved only for regular season and playoff fixtures.

(The writer is in Charlotte on invitation from NBA)