

Cricket inches towards Olympic fold as BCCI allows NADA to test players

MIHIR VASAVDA
MUMBAI, MARCH 19

THE CRICKET board's decision to allow the National Anti-Doping Agency (NADA) to test its players has opened the door for cricket's inclusion in the Olympics. The Board of Control for Cricket in India's (BCCI) tussle with NADA has been one of the key reasons for the sport not being considered for the Games. But with talks about cricket's inclusion in the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics gaining momentum, this is seen as the first step in that direction.

NADA director general Naveen Agarwal said BCCI's decision will lead to the International Cricket Council (ICC) being declared 'fully compliant' with World Anti-Doping Agency's (WADA) Code, thus helping cricket's bid for future Games. "This decision will help cricket's inclusion in the Olympics. It is important for the ICC to be WADA-compliant. Just because of BCCI, they have so far not been fully code compliant," Agarwal told *The Indian Express*. "If they want their participat-

ing in the Olympics and such competitions, this is needed."

The BCCI, on Monday, agreed to work with NADA for six months on a trial basis, although their decision comes with a rider. Sources said BCCI will allow NADA to test roughly 10 per cent of the total samples collected from Indian cricketers annually. They are likely to be given access to only under-23 or junior players, while international and domestic cricketers will continue to be tested as per the current process.

The BCCI, at present, has outsourced its sample collection programme to Sweden-based International Doping Tests and Management (IDTM). The samples collected by IDTM are analysed at Delhi's National Dope Testing Laboratory, thus keeping NADA out of loop in the testing process.

Agarwal expressed reservations about BCCI's anti-doping arrangement. "The decision on who needs to be in the testing pool and when should the athlete be tested has to be with NADA. BCCI can't decide that. IDTM is a sample collecting agency and not a recognised testing authority. It doesn't make any sense for

any foreign company to do the testing here."

Agarwal, however, said they are open to 'accommodating some requests' as long as they fall under WADA's code. "We'll have to examine what they exactly say. We are open to accommodating requests of federations to a certain extent as far as it's permissible under the code," Agarwal said. "We are willing to deal with BCCI if they come to us and can make some slight modifications here and there. In the last year or so, we have improved our systems tremendously. NADA is one of the best dope control agencies in the world right now."

The BCCI-NADA thaw has come about after a long standoff. The Indian cricket board has historically cited flaws in NADA's procedures as one of the reasons for not signing up with it. BCCI's reluctance kept India at the centre of ICC-WADA negotiations. Earlier this year, WADA had reportedly threatened to declare ICC 'non-compliant' if the BCCI did not fall in line. Such sanction would have put cricket's future in multi-sport events like the Olympics, Asian and Commonwealth Games under a

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cloud. The sport is due to return to the Asian and Commonwealth Games in 2022 while ICC is considering presenting its case for the sport's inclusion in the LA Olympics.

While doping in cricket is not as deep-rooted as in sports such as athletics or weightlifting, the sport has had its share of positive tests in recent years, with Yusuf Pathan, West Indies' Andre Russell and Pakistan's Yasir Shah failing dope tests.

Understanding WADA compliance

TO MONITOR its programme, the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) has devised a Code that is binding on all its signatories. One of WADA's core activities is to monitor the compliance of this Code. To make the system robust, WADA launched an ISO-certified Code Compliance Programme in 2016.

"The programme, which represents the most thorough review of anti-doping rules and programs that has ever taken place, aims to reinforce athlete and public confidence in the standard of Anti-Doping Organizations' (ADOs) work worldwide," the WADA says on its website. To be eligible for the Olympics, every international federation has to be

'code compliant.' Becoming 'code compliant' is a three-step process: the organisation has to first accept the WADA code, amend its rules to include mandatory principles of the code, and finally, enforce those guidelines on its members.

The ICC is one of WADA's signatories. While the ICC has accepted WADA's rules and included it in its laws, it has not been able to enforce it on all members. The BCCI, in fact, is reportedly the only ICC member that hasn't accepted these rules.

Consequently, WADA had threatened to declare ICC 'non-compliant', which would've dented cricket's hopes of being a part of the Olympics in the near future.



BRIEFLY



Lakshya breaks into top 100; Saina and Sindhu stay put

Hyderabad: Young Indian shuttlers Lakshya Sen and Riya Mookerjee Tuesday broke into the top-100 to be placed 76th and 94th among men's and women's singles players in the latest world badminton rankings. In the latest BWF rankings, Lakshya made a massive jump of 28 places while Riya climbed up 19 spots. B Sai Praneeth, who stunned Olympic champion Chen Long before losing in the final of the Swiss Open against China's Shi Yuqi at Basel on last Sunday, also moved up three places to 19th.

Kidambi Srikanth remained static and is the best placed Indian in the men's rankings at seventh, followed by Sameer Verma (14th), H S Prannoy (24th), Subhankar Dey (43rd), Parupalli Kashyap (48th), Ajay Jayram (52nd) and Sourav Verma (53rd).

In the women's singles rankings, P V Sindhu and Saina Nehwal are static at sixth and ninth positions respectively. In men's doubles, the pair of Satwiksairaj and Chirag Shetty are the best placed Indians at 24th, while Manu Attri and B Sumeeeth Reddy have dropped a rung to 27th.

Prithviraj, Kynan on course for final

New Delhi: India's Prithviraj Tondaiman shot two perfect rounds of 25, while teammate Kynan Chenai missed just one bird to stay on course for the men's trap finals at the ISSF Shotgun World Cup being held at Acapulco, Mexico. Monday was the first day of qualifying in the men's trap event. Prithviraj was in a group of seven shooters, in a field of 107, who shot a perfect 50 after the first two rounds.

Chenai shot 49, while the seasoned Manavjit Sandhu secured a score of 46, a press release from the National Rifle Association of India (NRA) stated. Three more rounds of qualifying will take place on Tuesday before the top six make it to the finals. There are two Tokyo 2020 quota places up for grabs in this event.

Mirabai, relieved and refreshed

Ace weightlifter has put mystery back injury behind her and hit the straps in pursuit of the Tokyo Games

NIHAL KOSHIE
PATIALA, MARCH 19

ONE DAY in late September last year, weightlifter Mirabai Chanu clutched her back and felt no pain. Just as she had suddenly felt a stiffness in her back last May, the pain was gone. Just like that, without any summons, though it had dragged her through considerable physical and mental anguish.

Subsequent to the unabating pain, she had to skip the Asian Games in Jakarta last year, where she was expected to break India's lengthy medal-drought in her discipline, and undergo rehab in Mumbai.

But it was just part of her pain. Bizarrely, specialists couldn't diagnose what exactly caused it and how it healed. Whatever, a relieved Mirabai returned to the national camp at the National Institute of Sports in Patiala by the end of September.

In February, she made a comeback after a nine-month injury-layoff. She won the gold in the 49-kilogram category at the EGAT Cup in Thailand. The tournament was the first of the six lined up for Indian weightlifters to gain quota places for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. She lifted a total of 192 kilograms but more than the weight, competing without feeling a twitch in the back gave Mirabai immense confidence.

During her time on the sidelines, Mirabai would watch training videos. By studying the recording, Mirabai would do a revision of her technique. As she could not train, so this was the second-best option. And she is, by nature, an incredibly studious athlete, someone who pores over her footage to find technical errors herself.

The pain started out of the blue in May when the Indian team was at a high-altitude camp in Shilaru, the base camp of the weightlifters. "I was worried if I would be able to do well after I recovered from the injury or be able to win a medal. There were lot of questions in my mind as to why the injury had happened. The physios and the doctors I met could not figure out why I had the back pain. But I felt a lot of pain in my lower back. I could not lift at all. Pain was increasing even after treatment, I wondered if I could lift again. Winning the gold at the EGAT Cup gave me a lot of confidence. All the coaches and players say after an injury it is difficult to recover so it is good to be pain-free and able to lift," she said.

Jolt before Jakarta

After winning the gold at the 2018 Commonwealth Games, Mirabai had to skip the Asian Games owing to the injury. "Commonwealth Games medal was there for the taking, but the Asian Games is where the top lifters are and the competition is tougher. The Asian Games was a big target, but unfortunately I could not go."

In a month's time she will get an opportunity to test herself at the Asian



Making her comeback in February after a nine-month lay-off, Mirabai Chanu clinched a gold medal in the 49-kilogram category at the EGAT Cup in Thailand. PTI

Weightlifting Championships in Ningbo China, a qualification event for the Tokyo Games. The weight classes were rejigged last year—Mirabai has moved up from 48 kg to 49, the category in which she won gold at the EGAT Cup. Chief national coach Vijay Sharma says the one kilogram increase is both a boon and a challenge.

"An additional one kilogram of muscle is good because it means she will be stronger, can lift more weight and will be less prone to injury. At the same time, in international competition we are seeing lifters in this category doing between 116 and 120 kilograms in the clean and jerk, up from about 110-112 kg. So the competition will be much tougher and she will have to lift much more," Sharma said.

When she set the Commonwealth record in the 48 kg class in Gold Coast last year, Mirabai had topped at 110kg in the

clean and jerk and 86 in the snatch for a total of 196, a performance that conformed to Olympics standards.

"Competitors from the 53kg category may also come down to the 49. I know I will have to lift upwards of 200 kg. I have been able to do about 199 in training so I am confident that over the next few months I will be able to lift much more," Mirabai said.

Training rejig

Coach Sharma, who keeps a close eye on Mirabai's progress during training, believes, she will only get stronger now as she has shown the mental fortitude to overcome the injury. "Mentally, she is very tough and physically she is strong. Yes, there were times when she was worried if she would be able to return to her best. But once the pain disappeared she has been making good progress. She is focused," Sharma said.

I was worried if I would be able to do well after I recovered from the injury. There were lot of questions in my mind as to why the injury had happened. The physios and the doctors I met could not figure out why I had the back pain. But I felt a lot of pain in my lower back."

MIRABAI CHANU

Mirabai stays off social media (her Instagram account is handled by her agent) and does not browse the internet on her phone, which is used only to make calls home. Her only screen addiction is watching videos of her training session in which coach Sharma makes corrections in her technique as she preps for the Asian Championships.

India start as favourites against Bangladesh

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
BIRATNAGAR, MARCH 19

UNBEATEN SO far in the tournament, four-time defending champions India will start as overwhelming favourites against Bangladesh in the semi-finals of the SAFF Women's football championship here Wednesday. Since the tournament's inception in 2010, India have never been on the losing side, clinching all the four editions of the event. In the last edition of the tournament in 2016, India had defeated Bangladesh 3-1 to clinch the crown.

Maymol Rocky's side heads into the encounter on the back of victories against Maldives (6-0) and Sri Lanka (5-0) in the group stages and the coach feels that her wards are focused on the job at hand, to be played on Wednesday at the Sahid Rangshala Stadium. "The girls are in good shape ahead of the semifinal match," she said.

"On Monday, the emphasis was on recovery and we had a couple of fun activities as well. Then, we followed it up with a heavy training session and the players are focused and ready for the match," she added.

The Indian team has been together since December last year and has played international fixtures in Hong Kong, Indonesia and Turkey besides the inaugural Hero Gold Cup in India, before travelling to Nepal. As they look to inch closer towards their fifth straight SAFF crown, the coach hailed the efforts shown by the players during this period.

"I highly appreciate the girls for the work they have put in. I'm sure they must be missing home and travelling for so long can take a toll. I'm happy that these youngsters are so focused. Football keeps all of us united and so does the honour of representing the country," she said.

In the last meeting between the two sides, it was India that finished on top with a 7-1 scoreline at the 2020 Olympic Qualifiers Round 1 in November 2018 in Myanmar. "The previous result is not on our minds. This is a knockout fixture, so it will be a different ball game," said Maymol.

The last two matches at the SAFF Championship have seen India seize the initiative in attack right from the word go, with the first goals coming in the first 10 minutes of the games on both occasions.

The coach feels their opponents will be wary of the same and it will make the match more exciting. "I'm sure the match will be interesting and good to watch. We will play our attacking game and even if we do not get an early goal, we will get them sooner or later. Bangladesh will come out strong and the girls will respond too and go all guns blazing," Maymol said.

ON CUE

A rare match-up, a see-saw battle and ungrudging admiration

SHIVANI NAIK
MUMBAI, MARCH 19

ADITYA MEHTA was coasting through the season and on a high after making the finals of the India Open, an unprecedented feat for an Indian, last April. Then came the sharp fall – rather a sharp pang of realisation that the disc issue in his neck was acting up, forcing him into a break, which would eventually stretch to nine months.

Heading into 2019, the snooker ace's technique had been overhauled with a higher-chin stance to factor in the disc and pain-management, but his game could unravel quickly. It is against this backdrop that his 7-3 victory in a cracking final against Pankaj Advani at the CCI Snooker tournament on Tuesday gives him confidence for the rest of the year.

"I had absolutely no idea about what I was doing, after having completely changed my technique. I hadn't played for nine months between April and January, and I needed to figure a system that would work," he said, after rallying from 1-3 down to string together a bunch of clearances in a solid display, that held the crowd captive as two of India's top

snooker players, both 33, matched wits.

The edge to the rivalry was unmistakable, though the two share immense respect for the forked paths that their careers have taken – Mehta heads back to Q-school (qualifying for the pro tour) after the break, while Advani is the dominant winner in India and on the amateur circuit after a short but creditable stint among the pros.

"I have achievements abroad to show on the pro circuit where I've done better than any other Indian, but Pankaj has carved his niche here and is a fantastic athlete. We are looking at different ideas of success, but of course when we play, we are desperate to not lose to each other," Mehta says.

The crowd was thoroughly entertained on Tuesday when Advani raced to a 3-1 lead, after which Mehta had to eke out a 56-clearance going to 3-2, and then immediately a 79 for 3-all. Mehta would then steal three solid frames from him, with the Mumbai cueist clearing with an outstanding 42, not allowing the Bangalorean any openings.

It was one of the more entertaining matches the two have played ("no one wants to see a drab 7-5 Mehta-Advani faceoff", he says) since they first faced off in the junior na-

tionals in Jammu and Kashmir, a tie Advani won 4-3. In the last seven years though, given their paths diverged, they've played just four times.

"We obviously want to put it across the other when we play and today the quality of play was real good," Advani says of the cordial rivalry that rarely turns prickly, and adds, "We are the two flag bearers of snooker in India, so we both recognise it's a big responsibility to take the game forward, when it gets competitive."

Advani was pipped 4-3 in the quarters at the India Open last year, and the two have since focused on their reboots, with years of wear and tear on the neck and back taking their toll. They have fed off each other's experiences, sharpening their own games – Advani attacking a bit more against Mehta, while Mehta riffing off Advani's safety-play.

While the depth in snooker has increased, the two remain practitioners of top-level consistent games. Mehta is considered defensive on the pro circuit, but in India, he doesn't over-indulge in safety, using it only to draw out mistakes. He was gunning for sharper match-play, and got going once he had levelled from 3-1 down after Advani had done the simple

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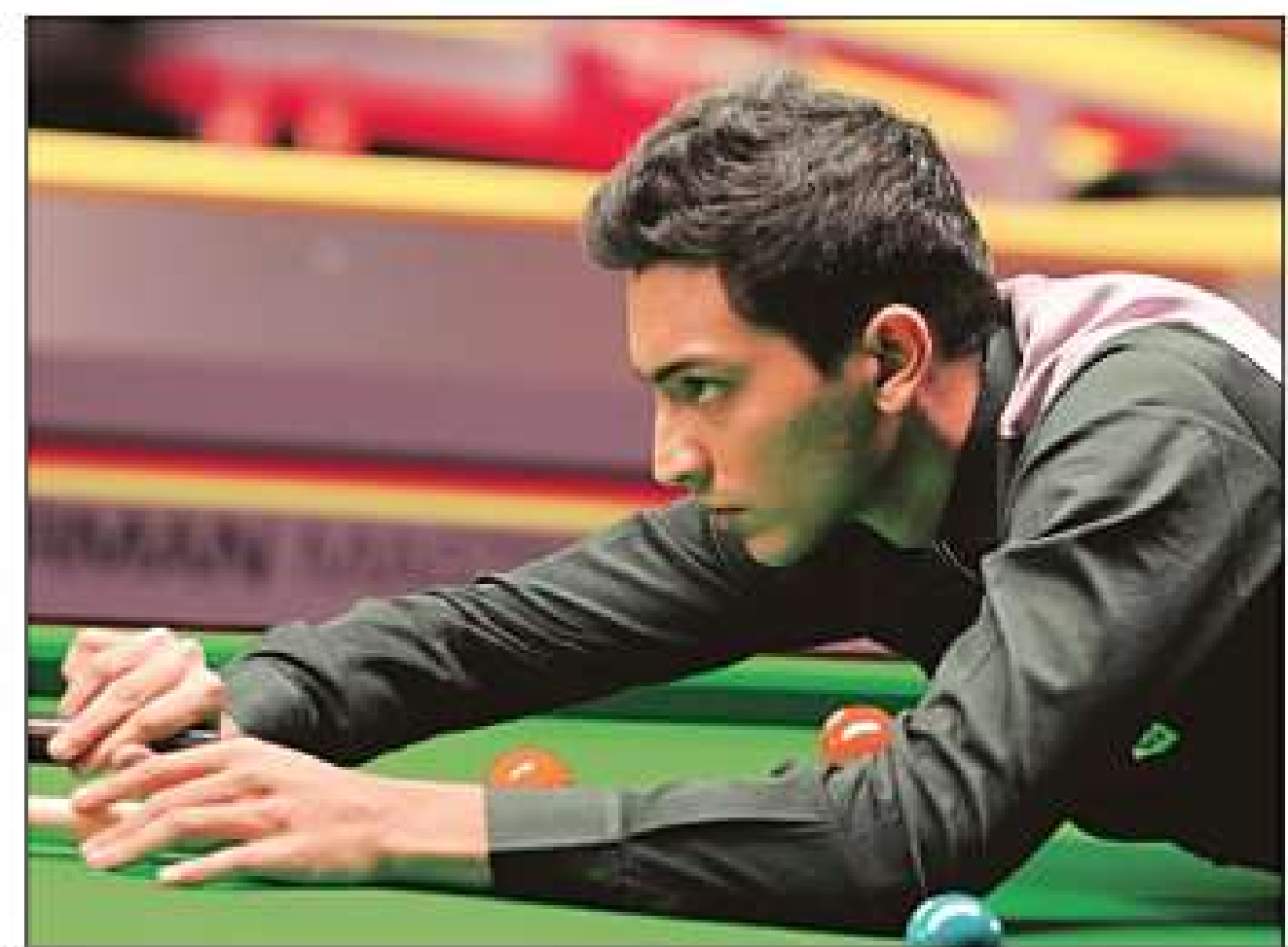
ADITYA MEHTA

things right.

"For both of us, it's just a match to be won. But those watching can feel it when we play each other. It feels like things are literally about to go berserk, and there's intrigue in placements," Mehta says about how the duo tried to outsmart each other.

In the race to the seventh frame, it slowly came down to Mehta having to merely avoid a foul, and he pulled out a one-in-hundred on a tight red, but Advani conceded Mehta had stolen a march over him a little earlier.

"He played the big points better and those clearances..." he ended, with ungrudging admiration.



Aditya Mehta upended archrival Pankaj Advani 7-3 in the final of the CCI All India Open Snooker Championship. PTI