



India and Pakistan players at the draw ceremony. The Pakistan side features three rookies—Muhammad Shoab, Huzaifa Abdul Rehman and Yousaf Khalil.

## A dramatic tie with an undramatic script

SHAHID JUDGE  
MUMBAI, NOVEMBER 28

"IT'S NOT about winning or losing," begins Rehman Gul, the coach and manager of the Pakistan Davis Cup team. "We have already won the game of tennis just by coming here and showing our sportsman spirit..." It's a loaded statement for a tie that is likely to be 'oh so tame'.

It's a tie that once promised a whole lot of drama for the right reasons, a tie that delivered drama for all that is bad, and a tie that is now taking place in Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan, and not Islamabad, Pakistan. The Indians were always going to be the favourites, no matter the venue or the surface, just because of the depth of the team and the gulf in class between the two sides.

Given the stature of the youngsters the Pakistan federation has been forced to send for this tie—the three players neither have a great presence on the ITF or ATP websites, nor much experience of playing tennis at a high level—the result is a foregone conclusion.

As expected, India has put their best team forward. Sumit Nagal and Ramkumar Ramanathan would play the four singles rubbers, and Davis Cup debutant Jeevan Nedunchezhiyan would team up with 18-time Grand Slam champion Leander Paes for the sole doubles match. Saketh Myneni is the fifth member in the team, while Sidharth Rawat will be the reserve.

Pakistan, meanwhile, chose to send only three freshers—Muhammad Shoab, Huzaifa Abdul Rehman and Yousaf Khalil—to Kazakhstan. According to the draw on Thursday, world no 176 Ramkumar will play Shoab in the opening rubber, followed by India's most improved player of 2019, the world no 131 Nagal taking on Rehman. The two Pakistanis will then pair up on Saturday to play doubles against Paes and Jeevan before playing their reverse singles ties.

Last week, when the International Tennis Federation (ITF) declared that this tie would be shifted out of Islamabad and to neutral Kazakhstan, Pakistan's two stalwarts Aisam-Ul-Haq Qureshi and Aqeel Khan—whose presence may have arguably given their team half a chance—decided to boycott the tie in protest. In their stead, Davis Cup debutants Muhammad Shoab (aged 17), Huzaifa Abdul Rehman (also 17), and 20-year-old Yousaf Khalil make up the four-member contingent that includes Gul.

To be fair, Shoab and Rehman are considered among the brightest tennis prospects from Pakistan in their age group. But that's not to say that their standing is of much significance in the world junior stage.

Shoab, who comes from the family of legendary six-time squash world champion Jahangir Khan, has a combined junior ranking of 1005. A student at a university in Peshawar with a two-handed forehand, he's played most of his tournaments in Pakistan.

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His compatriot Rehman though comes to this Davis Cup tie having recently reached the final of a junior ITF event in Fujairah, UAE. He has travelled for events in the last two years, playing in the UAE, Turkey, Kenya, Jordan and Qatar, and has a combined junior ranking of 447.

The team's senior most player, Khalil meanwhile, does have an ATP ranking—tied at 1680—but last played an event, a Futures tournament, in December last year.

So depleted is the Pakistani squad that Shoab has been listed as playing 'captain' for this tie. In comparison, India has taken along a sizeable entourage of 12, which includes a non-playing captain, coach, physiotherapists, and a manager.

Yet the situation might have been different had the tie not been shifted to a neutral venue. Nagal and Ramkumar made it clear that they would not compete should the tie be played in Pakistan owing to security concerns. The Indian team may too have been depleted if they were to play in Islamabad, on grass courts, where Qureshi and Khan are known to be rather proficient. But that remains one of those 'what-could-have-been' moments for Pakistan.

And so on Friday, one of the world's greatest rivalries will get another chapter, but it may just be one of the most mismatched competitions ever played.

**PTI adds: Bhupathi cannot get over the hurt**

Mumbai: India's former Davis Cup skipper Mahesh Bhupathi on Thursday said he cannot get over the "hurt" caused by the national federation's manner of sacking him but it was hardly a surprise given how the body has dealt with players in the last two decades. Bhupathi was removed from the captain's position by the All India Tennis Association (AITA) for refusing to travel to Pakistan for a Davis Cup tie on security grounds. The tie is now being held in Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan starting Friday.

"I am still in touch with the boys on a daily basis. I was disappointed with the way the Federation dealt with it. When they wanted me to become captain, they flew down to Hyderabad, had a meeting with me," Bhupathi recalled. "I don't mind if they think that it is time for me to step out, but a courtesy phone call saying 'listen we think it is time to put someone new in the system' and I would have respected that," he added.

# Mumbai gets a Manchester touch

City's stakes in the ISL club could benefit the latter immensely in terms of footballing expertise

MIHIR VASAVDA  
NEW DELHI, NOVEMBER 28

LAST YEAR, Simon Chadwick, a sports business expert, compared the franchising policy of City Football Group - English champions Manchester City's parent company - to McDonald's. Bigger the group, he explained to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, "the more the individual parts can help each other with co-branding opportunities and intelligence sharing."

On Thursday, as CFG added Mumbai City to its chain by purchasing 65 percent stake (actor Ranbir Kapoor and film producer Bimal Parekh will together hold the remaining 35 percent), it is this 'intelligence sharing' that the Indian Super League side will hope to benefit from.

European clubs foraying into the Indian market is not new. But intentions of most have been doubted as none have made any tangible difference to Indian football. Earlier this year, Basel did something no foreign club had done earlier in India when they purchased a minority stake (26 percent) in I-League champions Chennai City.

But City Football Group's deal trumps that. It is for the first time a foreign entity has bought a controlling stake in an Indian club. "This is one big difference and shows their seriousness. They have spent a lot of time and effort in understanding the market before taking the jump," Mumbai City's CEO Indranil Das Blah said.

Mumbai is the eighth club in CFG's bouquet. Apart from Manchester City, the group - controlled by Abu Dhabi United Group - also owns New York City FC, Melbourne FC, Uruguayan side Atletico Torque, China's Sichuan Jiuniu while holds stakes in Japanese side Yokohama Marinos and Spain's Girona. At most of these clubs, the City brand was swiftly introduced - name and colours brought in sync, dressing rooms at some turned into a replica of the one at Etihad and training grounds refurbished.

In New York, the CFG is also in the process of constructing a new stadium. From Mumbai's point of view, the last three points might be tough to execute.

Mumbai, who finished third in the last ISL season, right now play at the 8,000-seater Andheri Sports Complex, a tiny piece of real estate in the middle of a congested Western suburb, with very little scope for expansion.

"The chances of us getting our own training facility are more with CFG than without them," Blah said. "We need to see what's feasible. Mumbai is a unique market because real estate is at a premium. I'm not saying it's an immediate plan but it is something we will evaluate."

CFG's more significant contribution to the clubs they own is sharing technical expertise. It's something the group's chief executive Ferran Soriano touched upon on Thursday. Instead of making tall claims of pre-season friendlies and such, Soriano



Mumbai City FC are currently lying seventh on the table, having won just one of their five matches this season. ISL

spoke about 'sharing experiences and sharing technology.'

Instead of the high-profile club officials and players, the pattern at the CFG clubs is the staff from various departments routinely visiting each centre to advise. Each training session—be it in Melbourne, in New York or in Sichuan—is recorded using the same camera system that exists at Manchester City. These videos are uploaded to a central system from where CFG's technical department analyses and provides feedback.

**Intelligence sharing**

In an interview to Reuters earlier this year, New York city coach Claudio Reyna spoke about how the insight obtained by 'tapping into the network that Manchester City has' helped the team improve drastically. The intention, he said, was to allow coaches, and analysts move seamlessly between teams.

Indian teams have been light years behind Asia's elite, let alone rest of the world, in such technical aspects. The team's current coaching staff, led by Portuguese Champions League winner Jorge Costa, will hope to take advantage of the CFG's technical expertise. "Even something like the software they use for analysis and scouting," Blah said.

Soriano added: "The coach will have a relationship with (Manchester City manager

Pep) Guardiola. All the Mumbai games are going to be watched by a lot of people, in our systems."

Both parties have so far refrained from making big promises, perhaps realistic about the task that stares them in the face. In a city that is spoilt for choices in terms of entertainment options, and cricket occupying the sporting space, football clubs have struggled to exist. Poor attendances and lack of sponsors have forced clubs like Mahindra United, Mumbai FC and Air India to shut shop.

Mumbai City, too, have had their share of struggles in establishing themselves as a brand in the city. Like other ISL clubs, they too have been suffering losses in the range of Rs 30 crore annually since entering the fray in 2014. Damian Willoughby, who was named CFG India's CEO, said they hope to generate revenues by exploiting the group's global partnerships - the 'co-branding opportunities' that Chadwick referred to. "We have enjoyed significant success across our organisation by bringing in leading blue chip brands. We have seen the power of having a globally connected family of football clubs," Willoughby said.

Neither Manchester nor Mumbai, however, are expecting overnight changes. "We know this is the path and this is what the future holds," Blah said. "Both parties have gotten into this relationship with our eyes open."

**EXPLAINED**  
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**Why CFG deal bodes well for Mumbai City FC**

UNLIKE OTHER instances of European clubs entering the Indian market, City Football Group's track record at the clubs they have bought stakes in should bode well for Mumbai. The Group buying a majority stake in the ISL side shows their seriousness. Mumbai, like other clubs in CFG's portfolio, can benefit from the technical expertise, which can ultimately help improve the quality of coaches and players. In the long term, Mumbai can also expect an improvement in training and stadium facilities, as seen at CFG's other acquisitions.

## Deepika strikes gold in Asian c'ship; seals Olympic quota

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
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THE SEASONED Deepika Kumari struck gold, while Ankit Bhakat bagged a silver after securing India an Olympic quota place at the Continental Qualification Tournament held on the sidelines of the 21st Asian Championships here on Thursday.

Three individual places were up for grabs from the qualifications and Indian archers, who are competing without a flag due to the national federation's suspension, made a big statement with top seed Deepika and sixth seed Ankit's stellar show. Entering the brackets as the number one ranked woman, Deepika put up a flawless show to defeat Nur Afisa Abdul Halil of Malaysia 7-2, Zahra Nemati (Iran) 6-4 and local girl Narisara Khunhiranchaiyu 6-2 to



Deepika hit two perfect 10s and one nine to seal gold in Bangkok.

make the last four, thereby securing an Olympic quota. "We were a little bit nervous earlier in the day... There was too much wind also. I just concentrated on my

breathing and told myself 'just do it'. I'm feeling good right now," Deepika said.

It was before the final round against the local challenger Narisara. Deepika promised her fiancé and teammate Atanu to shoot a 28 but Deepika did one better by hitting two perfect 10s and one nine to seal the issue. "We wanted to give our best. Also I promised (mixed team partner and fiancé) Atanu that I will shoot 28. He told me go and shoot. He understands my mind too and it turned out nicely," she said. "Now we hope to qualify a team berth from the Berlin stage of the World Cup next year," she added.

Later in the day, Deepika stormed into the final with another one-sided 6-2 win over Nguyen. Ankit, on the other hand, defeated Lam Shuk Ching Ada of Hong Kong 7-1, Nguyen Thi Phuong of Vietnam 6-0 and Anastasiya Bannova (Kazakhstan) 6-4 and Karma of Bhutan 2-2 to make it an all-Indian fi-

nal. The Indian trio of Deepika, Ankit and Laishram Bombayala Devi competed under a neutral flag due to the current suspension of the Archery Association of India (AAI), which is in administrative turmoil right now.

India now have a team qualification in the men's section and an individual quota in the women's event of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. Deepika, Ankit and Laishram Bombayala Devi competed under a neutral flag. It is India's second Olympic quota place in archery after the men's recurve team of Tarundeep Rai, Atanu Das and Pravin Jadhav had secured the first in the World Championships earlier this year.

The Berlin stage of the 2020 World Cup is the last qualifying event in archery. "The whole team is very happy at least we won one quota. This tournament has been very good show for us," she said, referring to their rich medal haul of one gold, two silver and four bronze medals in the Asian Archery Championships.

## [SPORTS BAR]



**Syed Modi: Srikanth, Sourabh enter QFs**

Former champion Kidambi Srikanth and Sourabh Verma advanced to the quarterfinals but young Lakshya Sen bowed out of the men's singles contest at the Syed Modi International Badminton tournament here on Thursday. Third seed Srikanth, who had lifted the title in 2016, eked out a thrilling 18-21 22-20 21-16 win over compatriot Parupalli Kashyap, who is also a former two-time champion here. The world no 12 Indian will next square off against seventh seed Son Wan Ho of Korea in the Super 300 tournament.

**Committee to review Sports Code**

Olympic bronze-medallist shooter Gagan Narang, former football captain Bhairu Bhatia and national badminton coach Pulella Gopichand have been named in a 13-member expert committee formed by the Sports Ministry to review the controversial Draft National Sports Code 2017. Besides the trio, the committee will also have World Championships bronze-medallist long jumper Anju Bobby George. The expert committee will be headed by Supreme Court judge Justice (Retd) Mukundakam Sharma as its chairman. The panel will also feature a representative from the IOA, which has rejected the document in current form as it seeks to put an age and tenure cap on sports administrators.



Gayle was picked by the Challengers to play in BPL from December 11.

**Franchise demands action if Gayle fails to show up**

Bangladesh Twenty20 team Chattogram Challengers Thursday called for action against West Indies star Chris Gayle if he fails to show for an upcoming tournament, after he said he was taking a break from cricket. Gayle was picked by the Challengers to play in the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) from December 11. But he said after departing South Africa's Mzansi Super League on Monday - following a pitiful campaign for Jozi Stars - that he was surprised his name had been included in the squad, adding that he planned to "take a break" from the sport. "I am not going to the Big Bash (Australia's T20 league). I'm not sure what cricket will come up, I don't even know how my name reached the BPL, but I have been drafted in a team and I don't even know how that happened," he told *ESPNCricinfo*. Challengers team director Jalal Yunus said his team had held negotiations with Gayle's agent after the former West Indies captain was picked.

**SAG: Indian men beat Bangladesh in volleyball**

India made a fine start to their campaign at the 13th South Asian Games with the men's and women's volleyball teams registering wins over Bangladesh and Nepal respectively in their opening matches here on Thursday. The Indian men's team beat Bangladesh 25-18 25-14 25-15, while the women's side defeated hosts Nepal 26-24, 25-12, 25-16. Now in their last group A matches, Indian women's team will take on Bangladesh, while the men's side will clash with Nepal on Friday. Though formal opening ceremony of the 13th South Asian Games will take place on Sunday, some sports events have already begun. Over 2700 athletes will compete for 1119 medals, including 319 gold, in 26 game categories.



**Bajrang conferred with the Khel Ratna**

Ace Indian wrestler Bajrang Punia received the Rajiv Gandhi Khel Ratna award on Thursday from sports minister Kiren Rijiju at the Sports Authority of India headquarters. Bajrang was not available to collect the award at the Rashtrapati Bhavan from President Ram Nath Kovind earlier this year on National Sports Day. Bajrang, who has already secured a Tokyo 2020 Olympics berth in the 65kg freestyle wrestling category, was felicitated with a cash prize of Rs 32 lakh and 70 thousand. "Any sports person feels good after receiving an award and it is the biggest sports award anyone can ask for," Bajrang said after receiving the award. "My sole focus is on the Olympics now. And the responsibility has increased."