

# Tale of a storied ground

Sidhu's sixes, Dharmani's break, Ranjitsinhji's ton, Dhruv's memories and now Markande's fiver

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WHENEVER MERCURY dipped below comfort level in Patiala, cricket stopped but cricket talk picked up. Walking over peanut shells, among huddles of spectators, one could listen in on muttered tales of the historic ground, modeled after Lord's by Maharajas, the red soil brought in from Australia. On the final day, the sun was in full force as Punjab cleaned up Hyderabad, securing an innings and 125 run win thanks to Mayank Markande's 5/19. Action over in a session, over endless cups of chai, finally unraveled conversations about the several legends surrounding the Baradari cricket ground.

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You know how the story goes. Navjot Singh Sidhu, spurred by criticism of his batting approach, would hit 125 sixes daily and practice for hours. Not a hint of hyperbole, according to those who watched him do so at the ground. "Like a man possessed. His father too, sat there by the nets and kept watch daily," says Jagdeep, who has been a groundsman at the stadium since the late 70s.

"You will get tired if I list Sherry's memorable innings on this ground. So many centuries, big sixes to count," says septuagenarian Talwinder Singh, former Punjab Ranji coach who helped Sidhu become the first Patiala-born Test cricketer.

Then there was the match where Sidhu didn't get to bat at all. In 1986, when Ranji ties used to be three-day affairs, Haryana came visiting and batted for two-and-a-half days, allowing Punjab the final session to bat during which Sidhu didn't take the crease. Next season, Punjab returned the favour at Faridabad.

Current coach Munish Bali came to Patiala as a young hopeful from Hoshiarpur in 1989. Bali recalls: "One special match I remember is when the champion Punjab Under-19 team faced England Under-19 here in 1993. These stands were filled with my schoolmates, and I felt extra swagger as I was captaining Pankaj Dharmani, Amit Sharma, Anurag Thakur against Michael Vaughan."

It is the ground that rocket-strapped Dharmani to the Indian team. An unbeaten century in the practice match against Mark Taylor-led Australian team featuring Gilchrist, Waugh Brothers, McGrath and Gillespie got him a nod for the 1996 Titan Cup. "Usually, the ball would hit the centre of my bat at this wicket. Against them, it hit the sticker," says Dharmani. "They were a tad quicker and got bounce. But I dug in and frustrated them. That was the turning point for my career."

Dharmani, who played an ODI and was in the squad for the Tests in South Africa, was part of Punjab's only Ranji Trophy triumph in 1992-93 alongside Navjot Sidhu. "It's a good sign for the future that Punjab is doing well and that the matches are back in Patiala."

In spirit, it's a Ranji's-come-home moment.

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He had already beguiled the English with his leg-glances in County and Test cricket, but it was in Patiala that Ranjitsinhji got his first taste of Indian cricket. Playing for the Seventh Maharaja Rajinder Singh, Ranjitsinhji scored centuries against 'Simla' and 'Umballa', and received Purdey guns and jeweled studs for his efforts.

Debates flare up on whether Rajinder wanted to recreate Lord's or not, enough to send multiple sets of thumbs dancing on the Google search bar, scouring old Lord's photos. The old-world charm of the neo-gothic Raj architecture is undeniable. But the most alluring sights, as often are, remain out of bounds. The old pavilion has been cordoned off while the dressing rooms, which seated Amarnath and Sons, are stand behind a fence and are strictly for the members and guests



The old-world charm of the neo-gothic Raj architecture is undeniable at the Baradari cricket ground in Patiala. Harmmeet Sodhi

at the adjoining Mahindra Club and Gymkhana.

Sure, it's Lord's: if you trade Regent's Park for Children's Park and are willing to give up St. John's Wood station for 21-number faatak behind the west stands. The visual of trains passing behind the west stands does further the aesthetic, and the sound can mask small edges, as happened once during Hyderabad's first innings.

A comparison with 'The Home of Cricket', however, is not far-fetched, seeing how son and eighth Maharaja Bhupinder named the stadium in Bombay after Lord Brabourne and called it 'the Lord's of India'.

Talwinder extends the idea of the setting to a general, idyllic, County ground.

"Maharaja Rajinder was a big fan of County cricket. He was also aware that not everyone can go to England, so this stadium was to bring County to India," says Talwinder.

Bhupinder went several steps ahead, organising the 1911 England tour of the Indian team, employing elite cricketers such as Frank Tarrant as player/coach for the Maharaja XI (Tarrant, in turn, scouted a young Lala Amarnath and gifted India its first Test centurion) and covered expenses for pavilions and trophies, including the Ranji trophy, established at the time of his close friend Ranjitsinhji.

Ninth Maharaja Yadavindra Singh played a Test but gravitated towards the administrative aspects of cricket before becoming a diplomat in the post-independent India. The unofficial tenth, current Chief Minister Captain Amrinder Singh's valued contribution to the stadium was during his first stint in the early 2000s, when he restored the tower and got the clock ticking, which allegedly had "been standing still since the partition".

During last month's Kartarpur Corridor meeting with Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan, Amrinder informed the World Cup-winning captain that his uncle Jahangir Khan had played for Maharaja Yadvinder Singh's XI in Patiala in 1934-35, "along with Mohammad Nisar, Lala Amarnath, fast bowler Amar Singh and the two Ali batsmen (Wazir Ali and Amir Ali)".

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Dhruv Pandove, left his name imprinted on the Ranji Trophy and the cricket stadium which led to its genesis. Widely considered to be the next big thing in Indian cricket, Dhruv was killed in a road accident near Ambala while returning from the 1992 Deodhar Trophy quarterfinal, days after becoming the youngest to score 1000 Ranji runs at 17 years.

"His peers Kambl, Ganguly, Kumble would tell you how great a talent he was. But he was a better human being," says coach Amar Singh. "He once gave Rs 20,000 to a groundsman for his daughter's wedding. Paid the fees of six of the trainees at the academy here."

Dhruv's cousin Akul Pandove, who made his debut this week, says the heaviness in his heart overshadowed any nerves present.

"It was very emotional for me," says the 22-year-old off-spinner, who took three wickets in Hyderabad's second innings. "It also feels like destiny, that I made a debut at the place where Dhruv made his name and it's now named after him. I hear stories of how great he was as a cricketer and a human, and in both senses, I've got big shoes to fill."

Including Akul, there were seven players from Patiala who played against Hyderabad, a sign of the power shift in the state after Chandigarh's exit. The ground didn't host a Punjab match for 17 years between 1997-2014. When a match was played at the ground, a bus was reserved to daily ferry top stars from Chandigarh, on account of inadequate hotels in Patiala. This was the first Punjab match in three years, with two more are scheduled; ample chance for this crop to create a fresh batch of memories. "I don't know the history, or Maharaja stories. My best memory is starting as a fast-bowler here," laughs the 22-year-old Markande. "The five-wicket haul today is another."

It's been out in the cold awhile, but the sun currently shines on the cricket ground in Baradari. **BRIEF SCORES:** Hyderabad 242 & 76 all out (Himalay Agarwal 21; Mayank Markande 5/19) lost to Punjab: 443 for 6d (Mandeep Singh 204; Mohammed Siraj 4/77)

## Baroda's Abhimanyu holds nerve in thriller

DEVENDRA PANDEY  
MUMBAI, DECEMBER 20

ABHIMANYU SINGH waits for such "MS Dhoni moments", as he terms them. Ever since he started playing cricket and was awed by Dhoni's famous changes, he wanted to be like his idol. The young 21-year-old Baroda all-rounder starred with a match-turning 27 in a low-scoring thriller to enable Baroda beat Madhya Pradesh. The equation had come down to 17 runs with two wickets in hand and they would lose one more wicket but he took them home.

"My colleagues call me 'finisher'. They believe I will come back only after finishing any game," Abhimanyu says. Like Dhoni, he always wanted to be the one who doesn't choke under pressure, instead performs even as the pressure suffocates the opposition. And he got his chance on Friday in Indore.

On a green top, chasing 174, Baroda had lost their No.8 batsman Anureet Singh after a vital 34-run stand for the eighth wicket that had revived them from 123 for 7.

The No.10 batsman Soheb Sopariya hung around valiantly as Abhimanyu bridged the gap down with twos and the odd four.

When they needed just four more, Sopariya fell, bowled by Kuldeep Sen and Lukeman Meriwala came to the crease.

"I just told Meriwala to somehow play out those remaining deliveries in that over. I told him that I will manage if you give me strike but don't get out. I wanted to win this won, one doesn't get so close games often," Abhimanyu says.

Lukeman Meriwala survived and the field spread out.

Eight men were patrolling the boundary but when Abhimanyu got a full ball, he crashed it through covers for the match-winning boundary to enable Baroda get maximum points from the game for an outright

**The young 21-year-old Baroda all-rounder starred with a match-turning 27 in a low-scoring thriller to enable Baroda beat Madhya Pradesh.**

victory. It was a vital win as Baroda had lost to Mumbai in their first game.

"I have been in such situations before. I love to bat in pressure situations. I learned it from watching MS Dhoni. Just take it till the last and let pressure decide the course of the game. I loved to bat in pressure situations. In junior cricket too I have been in such situations and have done well under pressure," Abhimanyu said.

A few years ago, during an under 19 match, on a turner, he had slammed 149 against Karnataka, which had caught everyone's eye. But not long after, a back injury forced Abhimanyu to take a break from the game for more than a year. The comeback process was tough but he found emotional support from his family.

His father Viramsingh wanted to be a cricketer himself but couldn't pursue his dreams and he decided to help his son. Vikramsingh moved his family from the small district of Maharashtra - Nandurbar - to Vadodara to get proper cricket coaching for his son. To ensure his son got quality practice, Vikramsingh built a cement pitch to train at home.

"He used to bowl to me for hours. It's because of him and support of my coaches I'm here," says Abhimanyu.

**BRIEF SCORES:** Madhya Pradesh 125 and 270 lost to Baroda 222 and 174/9 (Kedar Devdhar 48, Abhimanyu Singh Rajput 27 not out; Avesh Khan 4/54, Kuldeep Sen 3/28) by 1 wicket.

### RANJI ROUND-UP

#### Delhi thrashed by 9 wickets

**Ongole:** Medium pace duo of K V Sasikanth and Cheepurapalli Stephen returned with five wickets each as Andhra Pradesh notched up a comprehensive nine-wicket win over Delhi in their Group A Ranji Trophy match here on Friday. Sasikanth claimed three wickets on Friday to go with his two on day 3, while Stephen, who broke Delhi's back with four wickets on Thursday, picked up another one as the visitors folded for 169. **PTI BRIEF SCORES:** Delhi: 215 & 169 (Lalit Yadav 55; KV Sasikanth 5/41, CV Stephen 5/91) lost by nine wickets to Andhra: 368 and 20/1 (G Manish 15 not out; Simarjeet Singh 1/12). **POINTS:** Andhra 6, Delhi 0

#### Nazir, Mudhasir shine in J&K win

**Pune:** Debutant Digvijay Deshmukh's gritty 83 while batting at No. 8 went in vain as Jammu and Kashmir beat Maharashtra by 54 runs on the final day of their Group C game. In his debut first class match, the 21-year-old Deshmukh was the lone Maharashtra batsman who made a semblance of a fight as his 83 came from just 71 deliveries. For Jammu & Kashmir, right-arm medium-pacers Mohammed Mudhasir (4 for 83) and Umar Nazir (4/86) did most of the damage. Nazir finished with match figures of 9 for 116. **PTI BRIEF SCORES:** Jammu & Kashmir 209 & 263 bt Maharashtra 109 & 309 all out in 86.1 overs (Digvijay Deshmukh 83, Rituraj Gaiikwad 71, MS Trunkwala 54; M Mudhasir 4/84, Umar Nazir 4/86). **POINTS:** J&K: 6 points, Maharashtra: 0.

#### UP battle for draw, Karnataka take lead

**Hubli:** Hosts Karnataka took the first innings lead against Uttar Pradesh, as their Elite Group B Ranji Trophy game ended in a draw. After bundling out Uttar Pradesh for 281 in the first innings, courtesy a valiant half-century by all-rounder Shreyas Gopal (58), Karnatka posted 321 on the board to take a slender 40-run lead. In their second essay, Uttar Pradesh resumed the fourth and the final day at 29/1. Uttar Pradesh had to bat the entire day to salvage a draw and opener Almas Shaukat (103 not out) scored an unbeaten ton to ensure that the visitors don't end up losing the game. Shaukat had to bat as long as possible and he exactly did that. Shaukat remained on the crease for 210 balls. In the next round starting from December 25, Karnataka take on Himachal Pradesh in Mysuru, while Uttar Pradesh play against Saurashtra at Rajkot. **PTI BRIEF SCORES:** Uttar Pradesh 281 & 204/3 (Almas Shaukat 103 not out; Madhav Kaushik 45, David Mathias 1-27) versus Karnataka 321. **POINTS:** Karnataka 3, UP 1.

#### Innings win for Saurashtra

**Visakhapatnam:** Medium pacer Jaydev Unadkat took six wickets for 23 runs as Saurashtra completed an innings and 90-run win over the Railways. Arindam Ghosh and Avinash Yadav made 30s for Railways but none of the others batsmen made any major contributions. Fast bowler Chetan Sakariya took two wickets and left-arm spinner Dharmendrasinh Jadeja took two wickets each. Arpit Vasavada made an unbeaten 134 for Saurashtra. **BRIEF SCORES:** Railways 248 all out & 141 all out in 54.4 ovs (A Ghosh 38, Avinash Yadav 38; J Unadkar 6/23) lost to Saurashtra 479/9d in 136 ovs. **POINTS:** Saurashtra 7, Railways 0.

## [SPORTS BAR]



#### Mirabai Chanu wins gold at Qatar

Former world champion weightlifter Saikhom Mirabai Chanu notched up the women's 49kg category gold medal to open India's account at the 6th Qatar International Cup here on Friday. Chanu won gold with an effort of 194kg in the Olympic qualifying event, the points from which will come in handy when the final rankings for Tokyo 2020 cut are done. However, it was a performance way below her personal best of 201kg. The 2018 Commonwealth Games gold-medallist, who managed to register only one clean lift in both the snatch and clean and jerk categories. The 24-year-old Manipuri lifted 83kg in snatch and 111kg in clean and jerk to finish on top of the podium.

#### IOA to decide on CWG bid on Dec 30

The Indian Olympic Association (IOA) will take a decision on whether it should approach the government for a bid to host the 2026 Commonwealth Games during its Annual General Meeting here on December 30. The 2026 CWG bid and IOA's proposal to withdraw from the 2022 Birmingham Commonwealth Games for dropping shooting from its roster will be the top agenda of the AGM to be held at its headquarters in New Delhi. IOA Secretary General Rajeev Mehta said it is up to the members to approve or reject the proposal.



Sumit Nagal is currently ranked at 130 in the world.

#### Nagal hopes to break into top-20

Indian tennis player Sumit Nagal on Friday said he was aiming to break into the top 100 of the ATP rankings and then look at being in the 80s in the quest for an Olympics spot. "Like I said first it is the top 100 then look for the top 80 and look for the Olympics spot. I think it is around 80-85 to make it to the Olympics," he told reporters here on the sidelines of an event organised by Aspire High Performance Tennis Programme. Nagal, who is currently ranked 130 in the ATP rankings, after having a good season during which he qualified for the US Open main draw and also took a set off the legendary Roger Federer, is presently training at the Aspire Foundation centre at IIT-Madras premises here ahead of the 2020 season. The Indian made it to the semi-final or better of eight ATP Challengers this year, going through to the final twice and winning the title in Buenos Aires. He had wins over former world no 17 Albert Ramos-Vinolas and former world no 24 Martin Klizan and made it to the main draw of an ATP 500 (at Hamburg) for the first time in his career.

#### Lohan records breakthrough win

Faridabad-based Abhinav Lohan recorded his breakthrough win on the PGTI, securing a narrow one-shot triumph at the Bengaluru Open golf championship here on Friday. The 30-year-old Lohan, who plays at the DLF Golf & Country Club in Gurugram, shot four-under 68 to take his four-day total to 13-under-275 at the Rs. 40 lakh event played at the Karnataka Golf Association (KGA) course. It was Lohan's first title on the TATA Steel PGTI and second win of the year as he had also emerged victorious at the PGTI Feeder Tour event in Lucknow two months back.

#### Panthers beat Rhinos in Big Bout league

Punjab Panthers on Friday registered an overwhelming 5-2 victory over NE Rhinos to set up a Big Bout Indian Boxing League summit clash against Gujarat Giants. The Panthers won four bouts in a row to overturn the 2-1 advantage that the NE Rhinos had got through Meenakshi and Francisco Veron after Sonia Lather drew first blood. Naveen Kumar used his extra height, reach and body weight to bring the Panthers back on track. The India Open silver medallist had ceded some ground to Ergashev Timur in the opening round of the 91kg bout but gradually took control of the bout.



#### Expert coaches needed, says Bhupathi

Former India Davis Cup captain Mahesh Bhupathi said young players in the country needed expert coaches to guide them to perform better at the international level. "Across India there is a lot of talent, but there is lack of expertise when it comes to coaching and proper guidance which prevents them from doing well at the international level," Bhupathi said. "I have seen this journey play out over the years. There's never been any doubt in anyone's mind about it." He recalled that there were several players who were in top five in the rankings at junior level in the 1990s, but could not go on to do bigger things. "I can tell you at the junior level, Sandeep (Kirtane), Nitin (Kirtane), Rohit Reddy and others were all top five in juniors, but they were not able to do well in the men's seniors as they were not able to get the right guidance," he added.