

The architect of ‘Botham’s Ashes’

Former England captain and fearsome fast bowler Bob Willis, 70, dies following short illness

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
DECEMBER 4

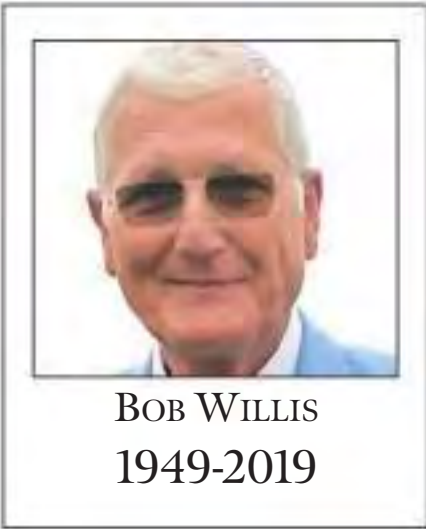
BOB WILLIS is often hyphenated with the charismatic Ian Botham. But he plugged all alone for nearly six years, before Botham's debut, and continued to shoulder the responsibilities after Botham's steady descent from the intoxicating peak of the early 80s. For much of his career — a period when England experimented with a variety of captains, under men as diverse as Ray Illingworth, Tony Greig, Mike Brearley, Geoff Boycott and David Gower — he was a one-man attack. The golden era of fast bowling was not so golden for England, but Willis shone, his mop of auburn curls and sparkling blue eyes endearing him to the masses and his blistering pace evoking fear in batsmen. He wasn't someone who hit them like the contemporary Windies quicks — though he did broke Rick McCosker's jaw — but hurried and harried him with bounce and pace.

While he couldn't match Botham for sheer personality or brazen machismo, Willis was a redoubtable match-winner on his day — a pity and a recurring theme of his career that his peaks were often overshadowed by a miraculous Botham feat. But it's worth retelling that if it was Botham who hatched the famous Headingley heist, it was Willis who turned the ruthless executioner, taking 8 for 43 in 15 overs of sustained hostility. He let it rip as per Brearley's orders and ripped out the Aussies. And then he let it rip on the press, which had ridiculed him. A rare outburst, but reflective of his inward volatility.

Arguably the last great tearaway England produced — he didn't slow down despite recurring ankle and knee injuries — he conserved his best for the Australians (128 wickets in 35 Tests). He wasn't a fairweather bowler either — averaging 22.37 in India, 26.22 in Pakistan and 29 in Australia. It was broadcaster Christopher Martin Jenkins who best described him. "A deceptively awkward-looking young beanpole, mop-haired, silent and mean".

Sprightly fielder

Tall, lanky bowlers can be clumsy catchers. But Willis wasn't. He often manned third slip, forming a safe house with Brearley at first slip and the enormous Greig at second. He barely flung or stretched but completed his catches so effortlessly that it seemed he had choreographed the sequence in his mind. It was his catching that first caught the attention of John Snow and Derek Underwood on Willis's first tour to Australia. His batting, though, evoked humour,



BOB WILLIS
1949-2019

‘ONE-MAN ATTACK’

325

Number of Test wickets Willis took in 90 matches

899

Number of first-class scalps in 308 matches he played for Surrey and Warwickshire.

He was a huge Bob Dylan fan... He was a bright man, very good company and a wine connoisseur. He was very civilised and erudite, maybe too erudite for most, he didn't suffer fools gladly. He was very eclectic in all sorts of things.”

DAVID GOWER
FORMER ENGLAND CAPTAIN

though he averaged a handsome 11.70 (by 1970s standards) and held fort for 171 minutes (scoring 24 not out) against the rampaging West Indies quicks in an extraordinary last-wicket stand of 117 with Peter Willey. But he's more bantered for walking into the middle in full guard but without a cricket bat.

Dour skipper

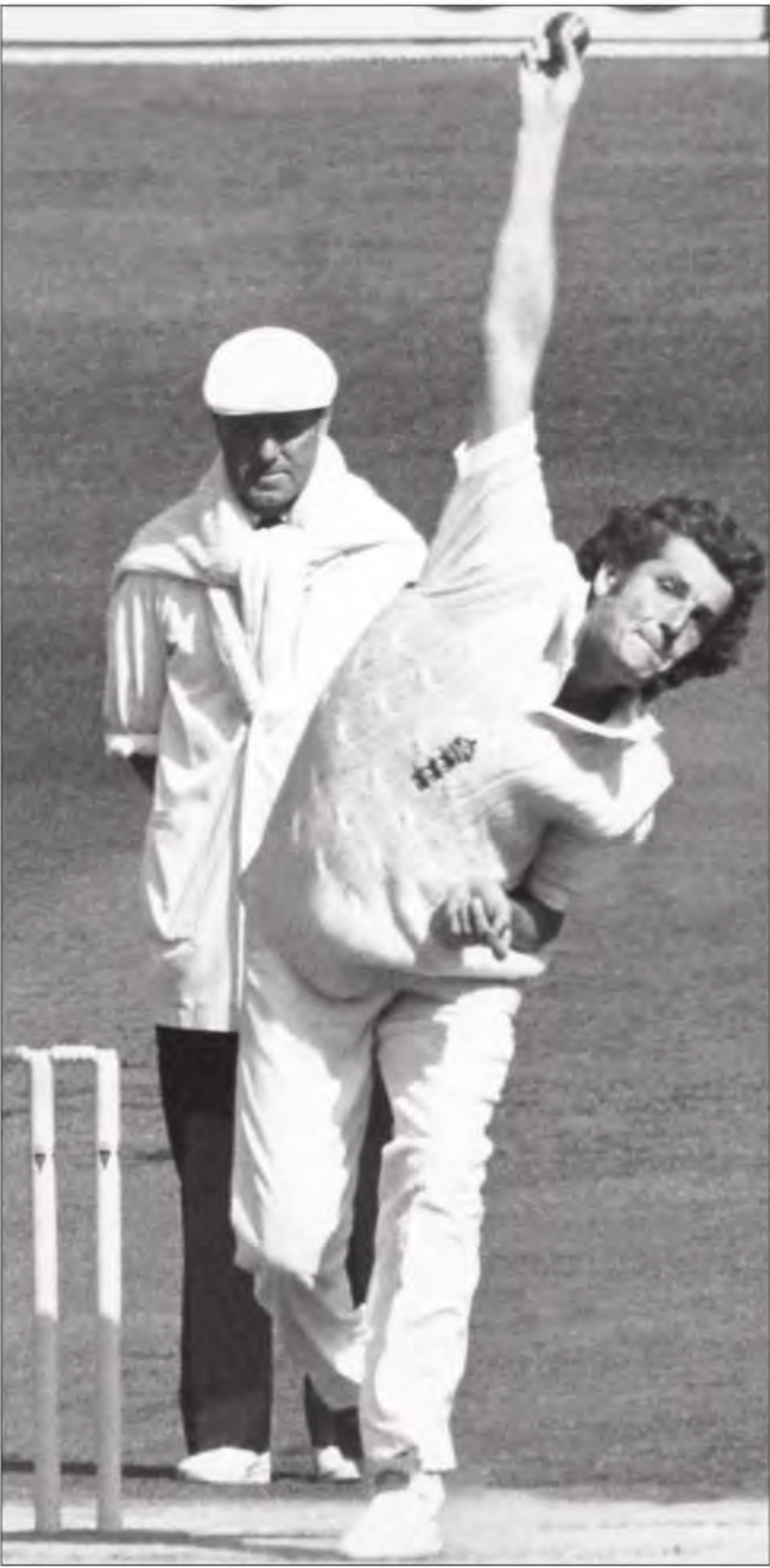
His captaincy stint went awry — his side was weakened by defections as Graham Gooch, Boycott and Underwood were banned from international

cricket for three years from 1982 for going on a rebel tour to South Africa - but he seldom mumbled or cribbed and played wholeheartedly under David Gower till his retirement.

He briefly took to coaching, but it ended disastrously as well. He found solace in the commentary box. Not one who was easily excited, often dour and sombre, Willis was matter-of-fact and concise, though hypercritical. Then England in the 1990s beggared criticism for their consummate sloppiness. His commentary was quite like his bowling, unaesthetic and sharp, bereft of bling and brio. An antithesis of Botham.

'Goose' nickname

Robert George Willis was his baptised name, But when he was 12, he inserted Dylan into his name, smitten of course by the American folk-rock singer. He brandished a guitar and grew hair and soon they started calling him "Bob". It stuck on, like the moniker "Goose" because his action resembled the flapping of the bird.



Bob Willis took 325 wickets in 90 Tests, claiming a career-best 8-43 to help England to a famous win over Australia at Headingley in the 1981 Ashes. AP/File

SAG: India win 29 medals, including 15 gold, to take top spot

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
KATHMANDU, DECEMBER 4

TRACK AND field athletes led India's gold rush on the third day of competitions in the 13th South Asian Games as the country added a whopping 29 medals to jump to the top of the medals tally here on Wednesday.

India won 15 gold medals on Wednesday with athletics contributing five of them as the country's medal tally stood at 32 gold, 26 silver and 13 bronze for a total of 71. Nepal close second with a haul of 29 gold, 15 silver and 25 bronze for a total of 69 medals.

Athletics gave 10 medals (5 gold, 3 silver and 2 bronze) while six each from came from table tennis (3 gold and 3 silver)and taekwondo (3 gold, 2 silver and 1 bronze), five from triathlon (2 gold, 2 silver and 1 bronze) and two -- all gold -- from kho kho. India completely dominated in athletics yet again to take the total medal count from the discipline to 20. On the first day of athletics competition on Tuesday, Indian athletes had won 10 medals (4 gold, 4 silver and 2 bronze).

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Archana Suseendran won her second gold of the Games by clinching the women's 200m race in 23.67 seconds to add to her yellow metal in the 100m dash on Tuesday. Compatriot A Chandra Lekha was third with a time of 24.37 seconds. Suresh Kumar won the men's 10,000m race with a time of 29 minutes 32 seconds before the duo of Lokesh Sathyanathan and Swamyathan produced

South African cricket lurches from crisis to crisis

South African cricket is engulfed in crisis, both on and off the field, and matters turned for the worse on Wednesday with the players' union threatening to go on strike if its concerns weren't addressed. With England due to arrive for a marquee four Test-series, Cricket South Africa is racing against time to get its house in order. Some of the major issues facing South African cricket are:

ON THE FIELD

RESULTS: Once considered among the strongest teams in the world across formats, recent results have been quite embarrassing. The Proteas never came close to making the semifinals of the 2019 World in the UK, and have lost their last five Tests in a row.

ICON EXODUS: Any team will struggle if the likes of Dale Steyn, AB de Villiers, Hashim Amla, Mome Morkel and Imran Tahir call time on their international careers. To make matters worse, the word 'Kolpak' seems to be their bugbear. Talents like Rilee Rossouw, Kyle Abbott, Simon Harmer, Duanne Olivier, Wayne Parnell and Marchant de Lange can strengthen any side, if they had not moved full-time to English county cricket.

TALENT CRUNCH: The likes of Heinrich Klaasen, George Linde, Dane Piedt, Anrich Nortje, Senuran Muthusamy and Wiaan Mulder but seem out of depth in Test cricket.

OFF THE FIELD

NO DIRECTOR OF CRICKET: CSA has gone for a football-style management structure, with a director of cricket supervising all aspects. But months after announcing this change, the post remains vacant. Former skipper Graeme Smith's name has been touted for this position, but the matter hasn't gone beyond talks. He has said that he still has concerns over CSA's functioning and fears he may not be allowed to fulfill his mandate. It remains to be seen how the team for the England series will be selected.

RESIGNATIONS: Professor Shirley Zinn quit as an independent member of the CSA citing problems with its "principles of corporate governance". "We fall from one crisis to another and there is no end in sight," she said.

CONFUSION OVER DOMESTIC STRUCTURE: CSA plans to increase the number of domestic teams from six to 12. It is facing resistance because it is likely to result in a reduction in players' earnings, some even losing their jobs. CSA also tried to take over the leadership of one of the provincial unions.



Ex-captain Graeme Smith is in talks for director of cricket role.

FINANCIAL TURMOIL: The Mzansi Super League (MSL) was touted as the panacea for CSA's financial woes, but it has burnt a hole in its pocket without catching the imagination of fans around the world. The losses are projected at 654 million rand (approximately ₹320 crore) over the next four-year cycle.

TIFF WITH THE MEDIA: Accreditation of five journalists seen to be critical of CSA's functioning was revoked. They were revoked only after a huge outcry and CSA Chief Executive Officer Thabang Moreo — who is seen by many as the person responsible for the current state of affairs - had to apologise.

UNHAPPY SPONSORS: Standard Bank, the biggest sponsor of the game in South Africa, has also expressed grave concern about developments in CSA. They have called upon CSA to "clean up their act".

STRIKE THREAT: The South African Cricketers' Association (SACA) has threatened to go on strike in the lead-up to the England series. While they have said that it remains the last resort and they will not like to disrupt international cricket, "agreements are breached, we raise concerns, we try to resolve issues, and the result from the other side (CSA) is just to carry on. At some stage you must decide whether you will accept that." One of the major bones of contention is the image rights of the players. A Fantasy League product endorsed by CSA for the MSL is using names and images of players without their permission, potentially putting them at risk of flouting the Board's own anti-corruption code. There was delay in players getting their share of commercial rights fees from the first edition of the MSL.

Radiation hot spots found at Olympic torch relay start

REUTERS
TOKYO, DECEMBER 4

RADIATION HOT spots have been found at the J-Village sports facility in Fukushima where the Tokyo 2020 Olympic torch relay will begin, Greenpeace Japan said on Wednesday. Greenpeace found that radiation levels around the recently refurbished venue, which also hosted the Argentina team during the Rugby World Cup earlier this year, were significantly higher than before the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear reactor meltdown following the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami.

Greenpeace's survey found radioactivity readings taken at J-Village on Oct. 26 as high as 71 microsieverts per hour at surface level. People are exposed to natural radiation of

2,000-3,000 microsieverts a year, so anyone staying in the vicinity of J-Village for two or more days could be exposed to more than that. These readings, although not deemed life-threatening if exposed for a short length of time, are 1,775 times higher than prior to the March 2011 disaster, according to the NGO. The Olympic flame is due to arrive from Greece in Japan on March 20, with the torch relay officially starting from J-Village on March 26.

Greenpeace said in a statement that it had sent its findings to Japan's Ministry of Environment, but had received no response. "There is a risk that heavy rain will spread these higher levels of contamination on public roads, and thus re-contaminate already decontaminated surfaces," warned Greenpeace nuclear specialist Shaun Burnie, team leader of the J-Village survey, in a statement.



Djokovic adds Adelaide to New Year calendar

World number two Novak Djokovic will play in the inaugural Adelaide International tennis competition in January ahead of his Australian Open title defence, tournament organisers said on Wednesday. Djokovic will start his competitive preparation for the new season at the Mubadala World Tennis Championship in Abu Dhabi from Dec. 19-21, before representing Serbia in the inaugural ATP Cup in Australia in early January. The 32-year-old Serb, who beat Rafa Nadal to claim a record seventh Australian Open title earlier this year, will then arrive in Adelaide for the combined WTA and ATP tournament from Jan. 12-18. The women's field will feature Venus Williams, alongside world number one Ash Barty, Simona Halep, Petra Kvitova and Kiki Bertens.

Juanan fires Bengaluru to the top of ISL

Bengaluru FC extended their unbeaten run in the ongoing Hero Indian Super League to seven games with a narrow 1-0 win over Odisha FC at the Shree Shiv Chhatrapati Sports Complex in Pune. Centre-back Juanan (36th minute) scored his first goal of the season to secure Bengaluru's third win of the season and take them to the top of the table. After seven matches, Carles Cuadrat's side has 13 points while Odisha are sixth with six points. On Thursday, Mumbai City FC will be eyeing their first 'home' win of the season when they take on Kerala Blasters. The Jorge Costa-managed team have played two home games this season but suffered defeat on both the occasions.

East Bengal hold Real Kashmir to a 1-1 draw

Marcos De La Espada's 75th minute strike helped Kolkata giants East Bengal hold Real Kashmir FC to a 1-1 draw in their I-League encounter in Kalyani on Wednesday. Although East Bengal enjoyed 64 per cent possession over the course of the match, Real Kashmir held their nerves to leave the ground with one point. After Gnohere Krizo put the Kashmir-based side in the driver's seat in the 33rd minute, De La Espada heeled in the equaliser in the 75th minute to provide East Bengal supporters with some much-needed respite.



Houston Rockets guard James Harden drives past San Antonio Spurs players. AP

Spurs rally for thrilling win in overtime

James Harden had a slam dunk waved off by officials, the first sign that it might not be the Houston Rockets' night. Lonnie Walker IV helped make sure of that. Walker had a career-high 28 points and the San Antonio Spurs overcame Harden's 50 points by rallying from a late 10-point deficit to beat Houston 135-133 in double overtime Tuesday. Harden played a season-high 49 minutes coming off a 60-point outing Saturday over three quarters against Atlanta, but he was whistled for two charges in the second overtime. The second came against DeMar DeRozan with 0.8 seconds remaining, sealing San Antonio's victory. That followed a bizarre moment in the fourth quarter, when officials erased Harden's dunk with 7:53 remaining and Houston leading 102-89. Officials ruled the ball didn't clear the cylinder, but crew chief James Capers said after the game that, "in fact it did clear the net and should have been a successful field goal."

Junior hockey: India beat New Zealand 2-0

The Indian junior women's hockey team started its campaign at the Three-Nation tournament on a positive note, beating New Zealand 2-0 in its first match in Canberra on Wednesday. Striker Lalrindiki (15th minute) and midfielder Prabhleen Kaur (60th) were the two goal scorers for the winners. India started the match with an aggressive brand of hockey, pinning down New Zealand, who had defeated hosts Australia 3-1 in their first match on Tuesday. India will play hosts Australia in their second match on Thursday.

Gujarat beat Odisha in boxing league

Gujarat Giants registered a commanding 5-2 win over Odisha Warriors in the Big Bout Indian Boxing League at the Gautam Buddha University Indoor Stadium in Greater Noida on Wednesday. With a confident and efficient Ashish Kumar setting the ball rolling in the second bout of the evening, Gujarat Giants' big guns Sarita Devi (women's 60kg), southpaw Mohammed Husamuddin (57kg) and skipper Amit Pangal (51kg) ensured that the team claim an early win in their opening league match. For Odisha Warriors, it was their second successive loss. Ashish Kumar dominated his 75kg clash with Neel Kamal Singh, imposing two standing counts on his opponent in the third round.



Ibrahimovic fuels talk of Serie A return

Sweden footballer Zlatan Ibrahimovic has fuelled speculation that he is set to return to Italy, where he has played for AC Milan, Inter Milan and Juventus, by saying in an interview: "see you soon in Italy". The 38-year-old striker confirmed his departure from Los Angeles Galaxy last month following the club's elimination from the Major League Soccer playoffs. "I'll join a club which must get back to winning, which must renew its history and is in search of a battle against everyone and everything," Ibrahimovic told GQ Italia. "That is the only way I'll be able to find the necessary motivation to surprise you again. It's not just about choosing a team, as there are other factors that need to line up, including in the interests of my family. I'll see you in Italy soon."