



Ambitious: Shivpal Singh is targeting the 91m mark this year. ■ FILE PHOTO

Javelin thrower Shivpal qualifies for Olympics

Says he will work on the 'block' issues after winning in a South African meet

ATHLETICS

STAN RAYAN
KOCHI

He has been having issues with the 'block' while throwing the javelin for some time.

Still, Shivpal Singh produced an impressive 85.47m effort in the Athletics Central North West League meet at Potchefstroom, South Africa, on Tuesday evening, a throw that helped the 24-year-old to qualify for the Tokyo Olympics.

He is the second Indian javelin thrower to make the cut. Neeraj Chopra, the World No. 4 and the Commonwealth Games and Asian Games champion, had qualified with an 87.86m effort in another ACNW League meet, also at Potchefstroom, in late January. The entry standard for Tokyo is 85m.

"I was not surprised with this throw because I had

done a bigger one last year," Shivpal, the World No. 16, told *The Hindu* shortly after winning the gold.

"But my block is still not good, I still have issues with it, I've got to work on it."

Shivpal, who had won the Asian championship in Doha in April last year with a personal best 86.23m, has been very inconsistent after that. He could only manage a best of 78.97m in the qualification round of the Doha World championships in October and failed to progress to the final.

Improving

Surprisingly, he was in impressive form in smaller meets towards the end of last year with an 83.33m effort in the World Military Games in Wuhan in October and 84.16m in the South Asian Games in Kathmandu in December.

Shivpal, coached by Germany's former World record

holder Uwe Hohn, feels this year could be his best and surprised one when he spoke about his 91m goal for the year.

Neeraj's impressive performances in international meets have removed the mental barrier for javelin throwers in the country...a sort of Saina Nehwal effect in badminton. And it looks like the javelin throwers now believe that nothing is impossible!

But it will be wonderful if Shivpal's big throw comes in a big meet.

Annu also wins

Meanwhile, National record holder Annu Rani, also an Asian silver medalist who finished eighth in the Doha Worlds last year, won the women's event in the meet with a 61.15m effort.

The 27-year-old, who has a personal best of 62.43m, is chasing the 64m that will carry her to the Olympics.

Leipzig punishes lacklustre Spurs

Ilicic nets four as Atalanta romps past Valencia

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

AGENCIES
LEIPZIG

RB Leipzig's Marcel Sabitzer scored two early goals as it eased past last year's Champions League finalist Tottenham Hotspur 3-0 in its last 16 second-leg tie on Tuesday to reach its first quarterfinals by 4-0 on aggregate.

Sabitzer fired the lively German side in front with a low shot from about 20 metres after 10 minutes and it never looked back, pinning the visitor, which was without injured strikers Harry Kane and Son Heung-min, in its own half.

Leipzig's captain was then given far too much space in the 21st to head home Angelino's cross at the near post after Serge Aurier's poor clearance as the Spurs' players heads started to drop.

Emil Forsberg completed the victory with a third goal from inside the box in the 87th as Leipzig, which only got promoted to the Bundesliga in 2016, reached its first quarterfinal in Europe's premier club competition.

Stunning display

Atalanta's Josip Ilicic scored the four goals in a stunning individual display to lead it to a



Josip Ilicic. ■ AP

4-3 Champions League last-16, second-leg win over Valencia, that completed an 8-4 aggregate victory, at an empty Mestalla.

Playing in the Champions League for the first time this season, Atalanta's European adventure continued in emphatic fashion as Slovenian Ilicic netted twice in each half to guide his side comfortably into the quarterfinals.

Valencia defender Moutar Diakhaby conceded two penalties in the first half, both converted by Ilicic, either side of Kevin Gameiro's equaliser.

Gameiro headed home a second and Ferran Torres put Valencia ahead on the night but Slovenian playmaker Ilicic completed his

hat-trick and then curled in a sumptuous fourth as his team reached the quarterfinals.

Valencia started badly, with the hapless Diakhaby bringing down Ilicic inside the second minute and the Slovenian converted from the penalty spot to give the visitor a dream start.

Gameiro pounced on a loose ball and slotted home to level but Gian Piero Gasperini's Serie A side could not be repressed.

The Italians went back ahead two minutes before the break after Diakhaby handled in the area to concede another penalty, dispatched by Ilicic.

Remo Freuler crashed an effort against the crossbar for Atalanta but Gameiro headed home Torres's cross to level on the night after 51 minutes. Electric winger Torres, recently linked with Barcelona by Spanish media, lobbed home to give the host some hope, but the sublime Ilicic wrapped up the tie with two classy finishes.

The results (last-16, second-leg): RB Leipzig 3 (Sabitzer 21, Forsberg 87) bt Tottenham Hotspur 0 (Leipzig won 4-0 on aggregate); Valencia 3 (Gameiro 21, 51, Ferran Torres 67) lost to Atalanta 4 (Ilicic 3-pen, 43-pen, 71, 82). (Atalanta won 8-4 on aggregate).



Two-goal hero: Marcel Sabitzer, left, was the star of the day for Leipzig. ■ REUTERS

Harika loses to Stefanova

CHESS

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
LAUSANNE

Indian Grandmaster Dronavalli Harika went down to Bulgaria's Antoaneta Stefanova slipping to seventh place with only four points after the eighth round in the FIDE Women's Grand Prix chess tournament.

95-move game

The lower-rated Stefanova (Elo 2453) outlasted the Indian no.2 (Elo rating 2518) in a 95-move game late on Tuesday to improve to 3.5 points.

Kashlinskaya, who was the joint leader with compatriot Alexandra Goryachkina after the seventh round, lost to world champion Ju Wenjun to slip to joint second spot.

It was the first win in the tournament for Ju Wenjun, who made the most of a blunder by her opponent on the 22nd move and took her tally to four points.

Georgian Nana Dzagnidze outplayed Frenchwoman Marie Sebag in 34 moves to joint Goryachkina at the top of the standings with five points.

There are three more rounds to go in the strong 12-player tournament including the world champion Wenjun, which is the third in the series of four Grands Prix from which the two with the highest points tally would qualify for the next candidates event.

The results (eighth round):

D. Harika 4 lost to Antoaneta Stefanova (Bul) 3.5; Anna Muzychuk (Ukr) 4.5 drew with Zhansaya Abdumalik (Kaz) 4.5.
Alexandra Goryachkina (Rus) 5 drew with Pia Cramling (Swe) 4.
Mariya Muzychuk (Ukr) 4.5 bt Alexandra Kosteniuk (Rus) 2; Nana Dzagnidze (Geo) 5 bt Marie Sebag (Fra) 2.5.
Alena Kashlinskaya (Rus) 4.5 lost to Ju Wenjun (Chn) 4.

A big inspiration for everyone: Ankita

Gives credit to entire team for the historic achievement



Proud teacher: Rutuja Bhosale, left, and Ankita Raina with coach Hemant Bendrey in Pune on return from Dubai. ■ SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

FED CUP

KAMESH SRINIVASAN
NEW DELHI

It took Indian women's tennis 30 years to make the breakthrough and make the World Group play-off. It has taken Ankita Raina only eight years. "This should boost Indian women's tennis. It is a big inspiration for everyone and should give the girls belief," Ankita said, delighted to be part of the historic achievement.

Impressive wins

The 27-year-old Ankita has been playing well on the circuit - won the 2018 Asian Games bronze and has had impressive wins in the Fed Cup, like beating Nao Hibino of Japan in 2016 and Yulia Putintseva of Kazakhstan in 2018.

Summing up the experience, when she played eight matches in five days, won two singles and three decisive doubles with Sania Mirza, the 163rd-ranked Ankita was sharp.

"Winning Fed Cup matches is completely different from winning on the pro tour, because no matter how good you are, you cannot win if you are not good as a

team. You can be top-50, but if you don't have two or three more good players from your country, it is tough," said Ankita, back home, after the unforgettable week in Dubai.

Originally, the tournament was scheduled to be played in China, and was postponed and shifted to Dubai, following the outbreak of the coronavirus.

Ankita has always pushed herself hard in the Fed Cup and while playing for the country.

"For me personally, it was a great example of pushing my limits much more than ever before, as I was playing two matches within half an hour. So playing a singles three-setter and then playing a doubles three-setter definitely showed how much you can challenge yourself physically," she remarked.

Ankita played the most crucial singles rubber against Aldila Sutjiadi of Indonesia on the last day, when she had to rescue the team from 0-1 down, "play under pressure and make sure the tie goes into the deciding doubles".

The best-ranked Indian woman in singles and doubles, Ankita gracefully shared the credit. "Our cap-

tain Vishal Uppal did a phenomenal job of getting the team together and making sure we were supporting each other," she said.

Also coach Ankita Bhabri and physio Anand Dubey were leading the cheering squad. Riya Bhatia and Sowjanya Bavisetti kept the atmosphere positive throughout and were always ready to help in practice, said Ankita.

While she was thankful for trainer Rutuja Patange being with her, Ankita was thrilled to accomplish the task with her fellow pro Rutuja Bhosale.

Significant presence

"It was great that Rutuja and me were part of this historic moment. We have played Fed Cup together and at different times. It was such a special moment that India qualified this time when we were together," she said.

She also had a word of thanks for Hemant Bendrey who has trained them both. "Hats off to his dedication, sacrifice and perseverance for so many years."

Having stopped looking for another Sania, Indian women's tennis has started finding performers who inspire confidence of a bright tomorrow.

Women's ODI WC to have reserve days for semifinals and final

CRICKET

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
WELLINGTON

A harsh lesson learnt after England women bowed out of T20 World Cup without actually playing the semifinal against India, the ICC has now allocated a reserve day each for the two semifinals and final of the 2021 ODI edition in New Zealand. The ICC released the 31-match schedule for the tournament, starting February 6 to March 7 in New Zealand with reserve days scheduled for all three knockout matches a day later.

Last week, England was forced to make an exit from the T20 Women's World Cup after their semifinal clash was washed out resulting in India, the higher ranked side in the group stage, progressing to the final. The ICC had faced a lot of flak for not keeping a reserve day of the recently concluded Women's T20 World Cup.

The Women's ODI World Cup will be played at six venues, including Eden Park (Auckland), Bay Oval (Tauranga), Seddon Park (Hamilton), University Oval (Dunedin), Basin Reserve (Wellington) and Hagley Oval (Christchurch).

The iconic Basin Reserve will stage the highly anti-

pated Trans-Tasman showdown between New Zealand and Australia on Feb. 13.

Auckland will host the opening game between the host and a qualifying team, the semifinals will be played in Tauranga and Hamilton on February March 3 and 4 respectively with the summit clash scheduled to take place in Christchurch on March 7.

"It's a match we absolutely fizzle about as players - taking on the Aussies is always a huge thrill. Cricket fans who come along to the Basin Reserve on Saturday the 13th of February will no doubt see a lot of passion from both teams," New Zealand captain, Sophie Devine said.

New Zealand, Australia, England and South Africa have already qualified for the World Cup. The remaining four teams will be established following the completion of the ICC Women's Championship and a subsequent qualifying tournament in Sri Lanka in July.

The eight-team round robin format will see all teams play each other, with the top four teams qualifying for semifinals. The prize money for the showpiece of women's international cricket will total NZ\$ 5.5million, and all matches will be broadcast live to a huge global audience.

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