

Saina battles the uncontrollables after All England ouster

SHIVANI NAIK
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THERE HAVE BEEN a few Olympic heartbreaks that Saina Nehwal has dished out to some iconic names of the game over the last 12 years. In 2008, she went up against fourth seed Wang Chen of Hong Kong, then 31 - who had the most excellent crosscourt half smash - and dashed her Olympic hopes with an upset that shook up the badminton world. In 2012, she summarily dismissed Danish Tine Baun, 32 then, in the London quarterfinals. The young bouncing upstart of earlier was making the senior pros aware of the wear and tear of the body after punishing years on a badminton court.



Akane Yamaguchi beat Saina Nehwal 21-11, 21-8 in only 28 minutes. File

There's no clarity this moment. Just waiting for a day to get a clearer picture. We want to play and fight for our chance but it's very stressful and confusing. If quarantined for two weeks, then anyway we can't play India Open and Malaysia Open so not understanding our situation."

P KASHYAP
ON THE REASON SAINA IS STAYING BACK IN BIRMINGHAM

her devil-may-care combative facade. "When injuries were piling up in my career, I thought of quitting," Kashyap says. Saina though will have to go through a very public downward slide - complete with unsolicited advice from trolls and a bizarre shaming of her injuries. There are Twitter pleadings and visa kerfuffles with her fate in the hands of ministers. And then there's the limbs that want to dominate opponents like before but don't move like the glory days.

Brimming with hope in Beijing, medalling at London, over-training and re-treating in tears at Rio, Saina would want to add Tokyo to her epilogue. It might start with being quarantined at home in India, because she travelled to Spain to desperately collect ranking points. Or start with reading the unwritten words on the sanitised walls of an isolation ward.

PTI adds: Sindhu in quarters, Lakshya bows out

Star Indian shuttler PV Sindhu cruised into the quarterfinals of the All England Championships women's singles with a straight-game win over Sung Ji Hyun of Korea here on Thursday. The sixth-seeded Indian Olympic silver medalist won 21-19 21-15 in a round of 16 match that lasted 49 minutes. Sindhu next meets the winner of the round of 16 match between fourth-seeded Nozomi Okuhara of Japan and Line Hojmark Kjaersfeldt of Denmark.

Rising shuttler Lakshya Sen, however, was knocked out of tournament after losing in straight games to Victor Axelsen in the men's singles. Lakshya went down to the world number seven Dane 17-21 18-21 in a hard fought second round battle which lasted 45 minutes. The 18-year old Indian, who won five titles last season, had defeated Hong Kong's Cheuk Yiu Lee 17-21 21-8 21-17 in the opening round.

In the men's singles, Parupalli Kashyap retired from his first-round contest against Shesha Hiren Rhustavito while B Sai Praneeth lost his match on Wednesday. Kashyap's match lasted just one minute. He was trailing 0-3 when he decided to call it quits. The mixed doubles pair of Pranaav Jerry Chopra and N Sikki Reddy advanced to the second round.

Volley of criticisms

Saina's also been bombarded from many sides with criticism, each of which gets nastier and more personal when she loses on court. "The comments by her fans and all the people, it all hurts... no one knows the issues, so it's very tough to cope," he says trying to walk her through this phase of tentative body and vulnerable mind which Saina tends to hide behind



DRENCHED START

Relentless rain forced the abandonment of the first ODI between India and South Africa in Dharamsala. *Vishal Menon*

■ Persistent rain and a wet outfield led to the first ODI between India and South Africa at Dharamsala getting abandoned without a ball being bowled.

■ This is the second consecutive match to be called off at this venue - the last match a T20I fixture - incidentally featuring these two teams.

■ Despite the grim weather forecast and the health advisory being put in place, spectators wearing masks, flocked to the HPCA Stadium.

■ South Africa batsman Rassie van der Dussen, in a lighter vein, reckoned the washout gave his team a couple of days more to acclimatise to the conditions.

Slow-burner turns thriller

Bengal's grim resistance on the fourth day keeps the Ranji Trophy final on a knife's edge

DEVENDRA PANDEY
RAJKOT, MARCH 12

THE TUG of war at Rajkot for the Ranji Trophy continues to slow boil ever so fascinatingly. The arena simmered with gritty fightback from Bengal, Saurashtra stirred up three wickets in the afternoon, and the pressure cooked in the final session but Bengal not only held on, but didn't lose any wickets. Just 72 runs more for the first-innings lead for Bengal. Only four wickets more for Saurashtra. Sudip Chatterjee and Wriddhiman Saha dug in first before Anustup Majumdar, who hit hundreds in quarter-finals and semifinals, trenched in with Arnab Nandi.

Heart-warming stories about the men still with a chance to seize the game. Majumdar, 35 years, had to switch to Railways Ranji team in 2014 to keep his job at Railways but didn't get to play many matches for two years. He returned to play for Bengal but had to take a tough decision to quit his job last year as he was asked to return to Railways; he chose cricket and has now dragged Bengal towards a dreamy finale. Nandi only played this game because of his skill to bowl off-breaks, else would have been replaced by a specialist batsman.

Heart-aching stories, too. Jaydev Unadkat had a mindboggling 65 wickets in the tournament leading up to the game but has been unable to take one more in 30 overs. Saha was dropped off his bowling once and the limited DRS plausibly denied him the lbw wicket of India's wicketkeeper another time.

He has tried everything, explored all angles from over to round the stumps, from different points at the crease, and has even got it to reverse but no reward yet. He would hope to end on a high. Spare some thought to Harvik Desai, who dropped Majumdar on 10 at first slip off the spinner



Anustup Majumdar (left) and Arnab Nandi strung an unbeaten 91-run partnership to revive Bengal's hopes of winning the Ranji Trophy.

Dharmendrasinh Jadeja with Bengal still needing 176 runs for the lead.

Unadkat and his men kept poking and probing but were met with grim resistance on the fourth day. Unadkat could have plausibly had Saha, on 6, but the limited DRS led to a debatable call from third umpire - he overruled the on-field umpire's lbw decision as he felt he heard two sounds. When Saha was on 46, Vishwarajsinh Jadeja couldn't get down quickly at gully to pouch a sharp catch. Only near the half-way mark of the day, Bengal lost their first wicket of Chatterjee who fell for a valiant 81 after a 101-run stand with Saha, wearing down Saurashtra for nearly 50 overs.

Then two more fell in the same, second, session as Saha and Shahbaz Ahmed were

dismissed to leave Bengal at 263 for 6. Chatterjee fell to bat-pad-catch at short-leg off Dharmendrasinh, and Saha's attempted cut had the ball run off the inside edge and brush the stumps and it took a replay to confirm that he was bowled by Prerak Mankad. Chetan Sakariya got one to straighten around the off stump to clean up Ahmed.

When play resumed after tea, Bengal were 264 for 6 with Majumdar on 17 and Nandi yet to score. This was the session where conditions have really helped the bowling in all the three previous days.

The ball has reversed, kept low more than anytime else in the day and Bengal didn't score a run off the bat in the last 59 minutes on third day. But on this fourth evening, they scored 91 runs and haven't lost a wicket as

Majumdar and Nandi pressed on.

A few things went wrong for Saurashtra. Like their decision to have the wicketkeeper Avi Barot stand up to the stumps this session. The rationale was understandable: with the batsmen trying to stand outside the crease to tackle reverse swing and low bounce, it made sense for Barot to stand up. But they leaked 16 runs off byes, and Bengal even got five penalty runs as the ball once hit the fielding helmet parked on the ground. In a tight game, Saurashtra have leaked 37 extras.

Clarity of thought

Majumdar's clarity of thought shone through. He didn't try extending himself too much. Only when the seamers slipped in lines and lengths, did he score of them. He used his feet to spinners smartly but never rushed out too early.

When the left-arm spinner Dharmendrasinh bowled on the restricting line outside leg for a while, he and Nandi kept padding them away. Majumdar also used the sweep shot smartly, collecting couple of boundaries off Dharmendrasinh.

Five of his eight fours came off the left-arm spinner. It was a lot of team work, too. When Majumdar was new to the crease, Saha had pointed a spot to him from where the ball was likely to turn sharp. Around 100 people had turned up on the fourth day and the final day would be played without the fans as per directives from ministry of health due to the Covid-19 threat. Catch it on the telly, though, as it promises to be a gruelling fight to finish.

BRIEF SCORES: Saurashtra 425 in 171.5 (Arpit Vasavda 106, Cheteshwar Pujara 66, Dharmendrasinh Jadeja 33; Akash Deep 4/98; Shahbaz Ahmed 3/103) lead Bengal 354/6 in 147 overs (Sudip Chatterjee 81, Wriddhiman Saha 64, Anustup Majumdar 58 batting) by 71 runs.

[SPORTS BAR]



Reed blames media for focus on rule violation

Patrick Reed blames the media for the ongoing attention to the rules violation that continues to follow him three months after the incident, but such deflection does not sit well with former European Ryder Cup captain Paul McGinley. Reed is still being heckled by spectators, but the man dubbed by retired player turned commentator David Feherty as "Captain Oblivious" said on Wednesday that the players have "moved on". This might be news to recent world number one Brooks Koepka, who in a recent interview criticised his former team mate for a rules breach at the World Challenge in the Bahamas in December.

WGP: Harika draws, remains in 7th place

Indian Grandmaster Dronavalli Harika drew her ninth-round game against Alina Kashtinskaya of Russia to remain seventh on the points table of the FIDE Women's Grand Prix chess tournament here. Harika has 4.5 points. The Indian No.2 had to share a point after the Russian International Master, with a lower Elo rating (2485) to hers (2517), managed to hold her own. The duo signed peace in 31 moves in a French defence game late on Wednesday. Harika, the world No.9, faces Ukraine's Anna Muzychuk in the 10th and penultimate round later on Thursday.

Georgian Nana Dzagnidze jumped into sole lead with a superb win over world champion Ju Wenjun. She now has seven points and leads her nearest rival Alexandra Goryachkina, who has 5.5 points.



Team India desperately missed Hardik Pandya in New Zealand.

Felt mental pressure during rehab: Pandya

Flamboyant India all-rounder Hardik Pandya has revealed that he felt a lot of "mental pressure" when his efforts to recover fast from his back injury did not fructify. The 26-year-old had undergone a successful surgery in October last year to treat an acute lower-back injury, which kept him out of action for six months. He last played an ODI against New Zealand in the World Cup semi-final in Manchester and his last international game was a T20 against the Proteas in Bengaluru in September last year. "I missed this atmosphere in these past six months, playing for India and the feeling that you get wearing the team's colours. That had become mental challenge and there were a lot of setbacks," Pandya said during his appearance on 'Chahal TV' ahead of the series-opener. "I was trying to get back to full fitness quickly but that did not work out and there was a lot of mental pressure at that time. But everything went fine, the rehabilitation went well and a lot of people helped me," he added.

Players hide logo during anthem in protest

The increasingly bitter dispute between American women's national soccer team and the U.S. Soccer Federation spilled onto the field Wednesday night when players wore their warm-up jerseys inside out in a protest before their 3-1 victory over Japan. Players filed a gender discrimination suit against the USSF last year, a case scheduled for trial starting May 5 in federal court in Los Angeles. The USSF submitted legal papers this week claiming that the women are less skilled and have less-demanding roles than the men on its national team. By wearing their jerseys inside out for the national anthems and team photo, players hid the USSF crest on the jerseys but allowed the four stars - one for each World Cup title - to be visible.



Jones to equal record for test caps

Wales captain Alun Wyn Jones will equal the record for most test appearances when he leads his side out against Scotland in the Six Nations on Saturday, drawing level with All Blacks great Richie McCaw on 148 appearances. Jones, who also has nine caps with the British & Irish Lions, will make his 139th appearance for Wales in their final match of the campaign. "Alun Wyn is one of the most iconic figures in the game," Wales coach Wayne Pivac said about his 34-year-old lock. "He is our leader and I'm delighted for him as he continues to set the bar across the game. Saturday is a great opportunity for us to wrap up the campaign with a big performance at home in Cardiff. We want to finish with the performance we know we can deliver and we have been working hard to get there."

