

# Ranji comes home

The premier domestic trophy reaches the land of the man the tournament is named after, the irrepressible Ranjitsinhji

DEVENDRA PANDEY  
RAJKOT, MARCH 13

THE GAME effectively ended when Saurashtra ran through Bengal's lower order but they had to bat for the second time until tea before the game was officially terminated. The threat of Covid-19 virus had ensured that the final day of the Ranji Trophy final would be played without any fans but Saurashtra players' family members had gatecrashed to witness the historic moment of the team winning the tournament for the first time. Every team-member got autographs of all players signed on their jerseys, a special memento for life. The players clicked selfies with former players and the association officials snapped I-was-there moments with the players.

Saurashtra captain Jaydev Unadkat, who took two wickets in the morning, including the vital wicket of Anustup Majumdar, later revealed how three players were running high fever on the opening day. Cheteshwar Pujara, Arpit Vasavada and Dharmendrasinh Jadeja all played with medications and Prerak Mankad gritted it out with an injured finger.

They all knew it could be now or never, and wanted to extend themselves for their collective dream. In the morning, Unadkat too had told himself that he will give his best shot with the ball: "Aaj nahi toh kabhi nahi, (if not now, then never)."

The special day was also an occasion for Saurashtra's players to remember the people they cherished. Chirag Jani had a black band on his arm for the late NC Gohil, a cricket administrator in Bhavnagar who had first given him the opportunity to play district cricket. Sheldon Jackson hasn't seen his new-born yet and was on the phone with his family. The game effectively ended when Saurashtra ran through Bengal's lower order but they had to bat for the second time for 34 overs until the play was officially terminated. Jackson talked about how tough it was to bat in the second innings as he would keep thinking about the moment when he would get to lift the famed trophy. He would be imagining running to the dressing room with the stumps if he remained not out till the end.

Pujara shared the words he spoke in the team meeting earlier in the game. "Those who overcome nervous moments will win Ranji Trophy." Pujara has been twice part of the losing team in Ranji finals and has experienced remarkable highs with the Indian team but winning a domestic championship will be always special, he said. His childhood friend Arpit Vasavada had played all three Ranji finals and felt huge relief-tinged-joy this time around. "It feels as if a huge load is off, I feel lighter and enjoying the moment," he says.

The load didn't seem to lighten as easily as it did on the final morning. Throughout the fourth day, Bengal had fought valiantly and they needed 72 runs more to get the match-winning lead. Saurashtra needed four wickets and it seemed it could be a fight to finish.

## Buoyant Unit

It came down to the captain Unadkat. He had taken 65 wickets prior to the game but despite bowling well, he was defeated by combination of stubborn Bengal batting and a couple of iffy limited-DRS decisions. He was flooded with calls and text messages on Thursday night and on Friday morning from his friends and well-wishers. Moved by the goodwill, he too began to feel the same, and even conveyed to his team that he felt there is going to be a "twist" on the final day. It was thus a buoyant unit that took the field to defend the runs and win the crown.

Bengal too had revved up for the battle. As players tend to do worldwide, they even indulged superstitions to see if luck goes their way. The management had told all the players in the dressing room to continue sit at the same spot as they had done on Thursday, a day that had gone their way. The newly elected Cricket Association of Bengal president Avishek Dalmiya too flew in from Kolkata in hope that Bengal would end the Ranji Trophy drought under his leadership.

Often, at the start of his run-up, Unadkat told himself that he will bowl the delivery of his life to take the wicket. "One ball, one ball," he kept muttering through his spell, he says. That one ball came through eventually.



Saurashtra players celebrate their maiden Ranji Trophy triumph at the Saurashtra Cricket Association Stadium in Rajkot. CAB



**Jaydev Unadkat, the Saurashtra captain, was flooded with calls and text messages on Thursday night and on Friday morning from friends and well-wishers. Moved by their goodwill and assurance, an energised Unadkat told his team that he felt there is going to be a "twist" on the final day.**

Unadkat ran around the stumps, the shiny side was tilted in towards the stumps, and it was almost a perfect delivery. It came in with the angle, started to tilt in further with the shiny side, landed on a length and rushed past the attempted defensive prod from Majumdar to rap him on the pad. Unadkat knew he had done it before the umpire raised his finger.

Majumdar also knew the writing was on the wall when he took use of DRS but his worst fears were confirmed. Unadkat was on the ground by then, screaming in joy even as his team-mates mobbed him. "It was the best ball of this season," the man who took 67 wickets this season would say later.

Two balls later, a bizarre dismissal followed. A brain fade from the next batsman Akash Deep. He had poked at a Unadkat delivery and was beaten. So far so good. The wicketkeeper Avi Barot immediately fired at the stumps as he had noticed that Deep's feet were outside the crease. The ball missed the stumps and went to Unadkat who picked it on his follow-through and shrugged and winced. Still no reaction from Deep, who turned behind to look at his back foot, which came down on the line. Nothing behind it.

Yet, Deep didn't try to slid it back. Unadkat had recovered quickly, sensed Deep's head-space, and fired a direct hit at the stumps to dismiss him. During semi-final game, Saurashtra were in similar position after Gujarat's Parthiv Patel had threatened to take the game away before Unadkat removed him and then took another wicket to end Gujarat's

campaign. Last year, Bihar's Ashutosh Aman had taken 68 wickets in the season but he had played in the Plate group. So in some ways, Bishen Singh Bedi's 64 wickets in 1974-75 season was still the bar to climb and Unadkat has ended up with a dreamy 67 wickets.

Left-arm spinner Dharmendrasinh Jadeja soon had Mukesh Kumar caught at short leg before Unadkat got Ishan Porel leg before with another curler from round the stumps to enable Saurashtra take the all-important first-innings lead - and the match with it.

Pujara wanted to come on to the field but couldn't due to his back spasm. He knew what this triumph meant not just for him but for all the players. Many in the IPL team don't have any IPL contract and most have moved up from hard economic backgrounds. Some of the players' fathers have worked as tempo-driver and clerk to advance the dream of their sons. Pujara believes that this win will change their cricket as people will take them more seriously now. "I remember those defeats, for me this is the best day of my life in domestic cricket," he said.

With the 15-kilograms Trophy beside him, Unadkat summed up the situation. "The dream season could only have been special if we actually won the title.

At the end, we had had three defeats in finals and it doesn't feel good. It is a long season, lot of blood and sweat. I gave everything that I had - mentally and physically this season. I wouldn't have enjoyed any sort of record if I hadn't won. I wanted to do it one more time for my team today."

## A legacy that's older than the trophy

SANDIP G  
NEW DELHI, MARCH 13

IN THE neatly-furnished hall of Rajkot's century-old The Rajkumar College, once known as the Eton of the East, is an imperious photograph of KS Ranjitsinhji playing his iconic leg-gance, a stroke that symbolises the essence of Oriental batsmanship. The description beneath the sepia frame is without elaborations. "The Maharaj of Indian cricket".

The treasured photograph was a gift to his alma mater during a visit in the mid-20s. It's an apt sobriquet since Ranji was a Maharaj in the truest sense, the Jam Sahib of the prosperous and generous Jamnagar kingdom for 26 years. Some chroniclers of the period argue that he was the first famous Indian in the British Empire.

None in his kingdom has seen him bat, but each time he returned from England, the story goes, he brought a pile of bats, leather balls, and other cricketing paraphernalia that he gifted to his friends, nephews and relatives. Whether it was the sole reason the Kathiawar Peninsula, which sticks out like an ear in Western India and which once comprised 200 fragmented kingdoms, embraced the game and produced so many cricketers, is unverifiable, but the cricketing legacy of the region is undisputed. So is the Ranji connect.

The roughly 61,000 square kilometre region has churned out notable cricketers for three countries - there wouldn't be a more unique geographical entity on the cricketing map. Ranji and his nephew Duleepsinhji played for England (and famously refused to play for India), the legendary Hanif Mohammad and his brothers were raised in Porbandar before they moved to Karachi. More than a dozen turned up for India, from Amar Singh and Vinoo Mankad, to Cheteshwar Pujara and Ravindra Jadeja, the present torchbearers of the Kathiawadi inheritance.

Though at no time did Saurashtra exerted dominance in the domestic circuit. It all changed on Friday - the Ranji Trophy finally returned to Ranji-land. Now, they could brag that they own the man who the trophy is named after.

At the centre of the Kathiawar peninsula is Rajkot with its nondescript charm. At the western coast is Jamnagar, with its bustling refineries. Until independence, they had separate representations - Kathiawar featuring players from in and around Rajkot and Nawanagar consisting of players from Jamnagar and Porbandar. The latter was a force in the early days of Ranji Trophy, they (incidentally) beat Bengal to clinch the 1938 edition, before reaching the final two years later. The team photograph was almost lost to moths and termites before it was restored - one adorns the corporate box of the SCA Stadium in Khandri, another does the walls of the Ajitsinhji Pavillion in Jamnagar.

The title-winning side featured Mankad, who opened and scored 185. His stately statue, when he's just breaking into his classical action, adorns the square just outside the Cricket Bungalow Ground opposite the district court. Cricket Bungalow Ground is where every cricketer from Jamnagar baby-stepped into the game. These days, you hear more stories of the other left-arm spinning all-rounder, Ravindra Jadeja. Chalk and cheese, but enriching the region's folklore.

A few streets down the Cricket Bungalow is the Willingdon Crescent Market. Bang in the middle of it a cast-iron statue of Ranjitsinhji. The sculptor has traded the bat for a sword, cap for the turban. Not far from Willingdon is the Pratap Vilas Palace, which is a treasure trove of Ranji artifacts. It includes his artificial eye, ashtray, cigar case, rings, shirts, medals, pads and bats (a few of which were stolen in 2009). All that was perhaps missing was the trophy named after him. And now the Ranji Trophy has returned to Ranji's land, reached its spiritual home after rolling over countless sweaty palms.

## SCORECARD >> Saurashtra vs Bengal

Ranji Final | Rajkot | Toss: Saurashtra

SAU 1ST INNS 425 IN 171.5 OVS

BEN 1ST INNS 381 IN 161 OVS

OVERNIGHT 354/6

A Majumdar lbw b Unadkat 63 (151b, 8x4)

Shahbaz Ahmed b Sakariya 16 (39b, 2x4)

A Nandi not out 40 (126b, 5x4, 1x6)

Akash Deep run out 0 (2b)

Mukesh Kumar c V Jadeja b D Jadeja 5 (16b, 1x4)

I Porel lbw b Unadkat 1 (5b)

Extras: (b 20, lb 14, nb 1, w 1, pen 5) 8

Fall of wickets: 1-35 (Sudip Kumar Gharami, 13.4 ov), 2-35 (Abhimanyu Easwaran, 14.5 ov), 3-124 (Manoj Tiwary, 52.2 ov), 4-225 (Sudip Chatterjee, 101.2 ov), 5-241 (Wriddhiman Saha, 110.4 ov), 6-263 (Shahbaz Ahmed, 120.4 ov), 7-361 (Anustup Majumdar, 152.4 ov), 8-361 (Akash Deep, 152.6 ov), 9-370 (Mukesh Kumar, 157.6 ov), 10-381 (Ishan Porel, 160.6 ov)

Bowling:

J Unadkat 37-10-96-2

C Sakariya 28-10-55-1

D Jadeja 52-14-114-3

P Mankad 21-7-45-2

C Jani 23-8-32-1

SAU 2ND INNS 105/4 IN 34 OVS

H Desai c sub b Shahbaz Ahmed 21 (31b, 3x4)

A Barot c sub b Chatterjee 39 (102b, 7x4)

V Jadeja c Saha b Akash Deep 17 (20b, 3x4)

A Vasavada c sub b Shahbaz Ahmed 3 (11b)

S Jackson not out 12 (41b, 2x4)

Extras: (b 8, lb 4, nb 1) 13

Fall of wickets: 1-38 (Harvik Desai, 11.1 ov), 2-65 (Vishvaraj Jadeja, 18.1 ov), 3-82 (Arpit Vasavada, 21.5 ov), 4-105 (Avi Barot, 33.6 ov)

Bowling:

I Porel 3-1-15-0

Mukesh Kumar 12-2-33-0

Shahbaz Ahmed 14-5-32-2

Akash Deep 4-0-13-1

S Chatterjee 1-1-0-1

Saurashtra won on 1st innings lead.

**Jaydev has bowled exceptionally well throughout the season. If someone takes 67 wickets in a season, I don't think there is anyone who can perform better in the Ranji Trophy. There has to be lot of importance to Ranji Trophy performance to get picked for the Indian team."**

CHESTESHWAR PUJARA

## A GOOD YIELD AND A JINX

**67** Jaydev Unadkat picked 67 wickets at 13.23 including seven five-fors and three 10-wicket hauls. He fell just one short of the all-time record held by Bihar's Ashutosh Aman.

**12** It was the 12th instance that Bengal have lost the Ranji Trophy final. They've featured in the finals on as many as 14 instances, but have managed to win just twice. Their last title was back in 1990.

## ALL ENGLAND CHAMPIONSHIP

# Okuhara, Sindhu's pint-sized headache that keeps flaring up



World champion PV Sindhu squandered a terrific start and lost 12-21 21-15 21-13 to Nozomi Okuhara in the All England quarterfinal. File

SHIVANI NAIK  
MUMBAI, MARCH 13

JAPAN HAVE a 5 feet 10.5 inch problem on their hands in trying to win a home medal at the Tokyo Games. It answers to the name PV Sindhu. And it answers many questions - well, most - that Nozomi Okuhara can carefully construct.

In what is a Newtonian corollary, Sindhu has a pint-sized headache named Nozomi, that flares up every now and then, and which cannot be dismissed as nothing, after a particularly daunting Glaswegian afternoon that Okuhara denied her a World Championship.

A little to the South on the M6 this time at Birmingham's All England, Okuhara once again snatched a match from Sindhu's grasp with a counterattack that was so poised and precise that you wondered how a 21-7, 21-7 scoreline fetched up the last time they battled at Basel.

Sending her out of the All England in the quarters with all the polite manners and graces, Okuhara won their 17th encounter, 12-21, 21-15, 21-13. It's a textbook rivalry

that never descends to bad blood or excessive fist-pumping. It sticks to badminton - and peels off the sport's layers shot by shot; scuffles over the two flanks first, then a thorough battle of the baseline, then maybe a skirmish of the smashes flirting with the tramlines and finally a nudge-wink passive-aggressive inquisition of each other's backhands.

The Sindhu-Nozomi matches have it all. They almost get each other to drop the juvenile concepts of going one-up in a scoring contest, and delve deep into the nuance and resilience of each other's shots.

## Textbook rivalry

So there were long rallies, though nothing like Glasgow. But evolved - intellectual even, in trying to outwit each other. When she's not forcing her to dig deep, Nozomi makes Sindhu look very grown-up. No one has pickled Sindhu's game as much as the Japanese 25-year-old has. And every chapter added to their rendezvous is a story of its own.

This one started with Sindhu asserting her 5'10.5 mightiness on a scrambling Okuhara in the first. The plan was to send

the shuttle soaring so high so often that Okuhara would tire into mistakes. She found the net glumly often. The opener saw Sindhu win the baseline war even while brandishing the imposing big crosscourt smash.

A couple of her body defense parries from the erstwhile vulnerable hip height, ended up winners even, as did defensive blocks. Opponents will need to perish the thought that she's clueless when hit on the body. It's still awkward, but she's found a way out. Okuhara also lacked sharpness at this juncture at the net, before she started to pin Sindhu back.

Guided by her coaching team, the Japanese spun a web neutralising Sindhu's momentum and her roughshod attack. The Indian's power game then began to fluctuate in the second, as Okuhara, far more proactive in her attack than 2017, and determined to give it right back (also having the nous to execute that audacity), started unsettling Sindhu.

When the momentum shifted, it didn't swing back. And Sindhu's errors piled on as she looked less threatening with each passing point. She barely looked in with a

**Guided by her coaching team, the Japanese spun a web neutralising Sindhu's momentum and her roughshod attack. The Indian's power game then began to fluctuate in the second.**

chance in the decider, as Okuhara displayed her smiling stubbornness while carefully taking Sindhu apart. She never quite let go of the lead once she had her snout ahead.

Winning comfortably in the end, Okuhara would turn to all four corners with folded hands. And another round for the Indian. If killing with kindness was a shuttle player, it would be Nozomi Okuhara.

The Japanese has lost 6 finals in 2019. And Sindhu hasn't won much since Basel. But it's a rivalry the badminton cannot tire of. Not every match is a titanic battle, each has its unique vibe. With all things falling apart, the two decided to give a badminton masterclass in cerebral takedowns.