

## Ankita helps India bag historic Fed Cup play-offs berth

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
DUBAI, MARCH 8

THE INDIAN Fed Cup team created history by progressing to the play-offs for the first time ever with Ankita Raina leading the side to a 2-1 win over Indonesia, here.

Ankita on Saturday night pulled off a crucial singles win against talented Aldila Sutjiadi to lock the tie 1-1 after Rutuja Bhosale suffered a crushing defeat against an unranked Priska Madelyn Nugroho.

Up against the 16-year-old Indonesian, who is ranked 15th on the ITF junior circuit, Rutuja lost 3-6 6-0 3-6 in one hour and 43 minutes in the opening singles.

Ankita, who lost her previous two singles, demolished the challenge of Sutjiadi 6-3 6-3 in the second rubber. She then combined with seasoned Sania Mirza to beat Sutziyadi and Nugroho 7-6(4) 6-0 to seal India's place in the play-offs where they will take on either Latvia or the Netherlands in April.

They overcame a sluggish start as they were trailing 1-4 but regrouped to dominate the decisive set.

India finished second in the six-team Group with four wins in a row after losing the opening tie to China, who remained unbeaten in the tournament.

Since earning their place back in Asia/Oceania Group I in 2016, India has remained in the regional group.

With the rise of Ankita, things began to improve. Rutuja also played a key role as she provided winning starts in a few ties, sharing the burden with Ankita.

Sania's return to Fed Cup after four years also helped as her inspirational presence and guidance helped the side immensely.

India's non-playing captain Vishal Uppal is delighted with the result.

"It's a historic moment and to be part of it feels surreal. I am proud of each and every member of our team -- the players, physio, coach, manager. We all came together and worked towards a common goal," Uppal told PTI. "The key was to do the fundamentals well and keep it simple on court. As a team everyone stepped up one day or the other which is very important. I hope this win will give a big boost to women's tennis in India."



Ankita Raina on Saturday night pulled off a crucial singles win against talented Aldila Sutjiadi.

# Chance of a lifetime

Saurashtra, with home advantage, and Bengal know they may not get a better shot at Ranji Trophy glory

DEVENDRA PANDEY  
RAJKOT, MARCH 8

BENGAL COACH Arun Lal could not control himself when shutterbugs frequently trespassed the practice area at the Rajkot stadium. Media from 18 organisations have come from West Bengal, apart from other national and local media, and it was a bit of a scrum out there.

"We have a Ranji final tomorrow. I request you to please leave this place," Lal said out loud, calling for administrators to prevent players being bothered. The area was soon cordoned off. Even as both camps talk about "keeping it simple", they know that this is as great an opportunity as any to win the premier domestic competition of the country.

Lal calls the game bigger than a Test match. He says this is their best chance, who knows when their time will come next. Saurashtra will hope to be fourth time lucky, their previous three final experiences in the last few years were at away venues. Four finals in eight years is a big achievement but they are at a point now when that feeling seems like only a consolation.

They now want to get their hands around that old trophy that weighs a good 15 kilograms. Saurashtra have Cheteshwar Pujara, Bengal possess Wriddhiman Saha and Manoj Tiwary, who would be playing his 100th Ranji Trophy game.

The last time Bengal was in a final was 13 years ago. The last time they lifted the trophy was in the early 1990s; their current coach Lal was then the captain. In some ways, Lal has almost been a piper for Bengal this season.

Who doesn't like a heartwarming story, especially when he is considered one of the nicest men in Indian cricket? He beat cancer a few years back and put his hand up to lift Bengal cricket, took some tough and considerate calls to get the team up and into the final.

### Experience galore

Even Saurashtra's coach is an old India hand; at 68, Karsan Ghavri is four years older than Lal. A passionate cricketer and coach, Kadubhai, as he is called, has ensured his life continued to revolve around cricket even after retirement. He grew up in Rajkot and soon found that he was too fast for the city and shifted his cricketing base to Mumbai and punctuated his medium pace with deceptively-quick bouncers for India.

Some Indians would remember seeing Lal walking in slow motion out of a Kolkata metro train in the video for the national integration song, mile sur mera tumhara, in the 1980s. Ghavri's India career was a more accomplished one but over the years, both have continued their love affair with the game.

Playing in Rajkot will be a big deal for Saurashtra. Their previous three finals away from home were one-sided affairs. In 2012, they lost to a star-studded Mumbai team by an innings and 125 runs.

In a neutral venue final in Pune in 2016, Saurashtra lost again to Mumbai by an innings and 21 runs.



India internationals Wriddhiman Saha (left), who will represent Bengal, and Saurashtra's Cheteshwar Pujara during a training session in Rajkot on Sunday.

Last year, they went down to Vidarbha in Nagpur by 78 runs. Pujara played in the last two finals but had minimum impact. But at home, Saurashtra is certainly a tough team to handle. It would also be a sweet feeling for him to turn up for the final with Ghavri as coach as when he was a boy, it was the latter's validation of his talent -- "Chhokra upar mehnat karva jevi che (the kid is worth investing your time on) that had driven his passionate father Arvind.

It's just not the old faces or established Indian stars that this final is about. Jaydev Unadkat is Saurashtra's captain who has taken 65 wickets to lead from the front.

He learnt his cricket at the famous Duleep school of cricket started in 1945 in Porbandar and as an upcoming bowler, his greatest worry, as recalled by his coach Rambhai Odedera once, was whether he would have to start having non-vegetarian food to sustain as a pacer. When he was se-

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CHETESHWAR PUJARA

lected for the Indian Premier League, Odedera found a few fans in Porbandar losing their head in pride and told Unadkat that IPL is good but the aim should be to play for India.

"I told him in 1932, Maharaja Natwarsinghji of Porbandar, who eventually started the Duleep School of cricket, was the original captain for India's first tour but was replaced in the end by CK Nayudu. You have this great chance to play for India, someone from Porbandar, imagine." He has done that; can he now become the first captain of Saurashtra to win the Ranji trophy?

For that, he would need more than a little help from Pujara. The India batsman was keeping an eye on Saurashtra's Ranji progress and in touch with Unadkat even while involved in a tough Test series in New Zealand. Pujara says home advantage will definitely come into play.

"Whatever final matches we have played were played away from home. We have young players, playing good cricket and playing at home will be an advantage for us. I have an idea of conditions here, everyone here knows how the pitch behaves and definitely it will be home advantage for us," Pujara told The Indian Express.

Two days before the game, the team watched the movie 'Point Break' to gain some motivation from the adventure drama. Unadkat wants everyone to be in their comfort zone and away from pressure.

### Photo session

Bengal had a light net session and kept the photographers from Bengal newspapers busy. Tiwary and Saha were requested for a combined photo; they obliged. To make it seem 'candid', a photographer asked them to act as if they are chatting with each other; they oblige again. At some point, Tiwary says that he has got his son Yuvaan's name on the back of his bat, and flips it to show it to Saha.

Once he finished training, Saha said he had never been part of a Ranji final, something he had wanted for years. "The feel and experience of a Ranji Trophy final is something different," he said, before ducking questions on being left out of both Tests in New Zealand. Tiwary has been in two Ranji finals, but victory eluded him. "Twice we came close but couldn't finish off the game. We have a good chance here as our team has been playing good cricket for the last two months. Touch wood. I have got good stats at this venue, had hit a double hundred too," he said.

TV: Star Sports 2, from 9:20 am.

## Fit-again Hardik, Dhawan recalled for SA ODI series

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
AHMEDABAD, MARCH 8

BRUISED AND battered in New Zealand, India's ODI squad on Sunday got a major boost as a fit-again Hardik Pandya returned for the three-match series against South Africa, having successfully recuperated from a back surgery.

Along with Pandya, opener Shikhar Dhawan and seamer Bhuvneshwar Kumar will also add depth to the 15-member squad, selected under the chairmanship of Sunil Joshi.

However, it could be curtains for veteran Kedar Jadhav as Shubman Gill's return in the white-ball fold is a good enough indicator.

Vice-captain Rohit Sharma is yet to fully recuperate from his calf muscle injury and is expected to return to action during the Indian Premier League later this month. Thus, Prithvi Shaw retained his place in the ODI squad, while Mayank Agarwal, after a dismal New Zealand tour, had to make way for Dhawan.

The Mumbai duo of Shardul Thakur and Shivam Dube paid for their shoddy showing in New Zealand as Pandya and Bhuvneshwar rightfully got their places back. Dhawan had dislocated his shoulder during the final ODI against Australia at home and missed the New Zealand series. Bhuvneshwar, on the other hand, had a sports hernia surgery but has successfully completed his rehabilitation at the National Cricket Academy. But the biggest news was Hardik's comeback, which, though, was on predictable lines.

Pandya's last ODI was against New Zealand in the World Cup semi-final in Manchester and the last international game was a T20 against the Proteas in Bengaluru in September.

His absence affected the balance of the ODI side as Dube's underwhelming show in the 14 chances he got showed that he is still not cut out for international cricket. Pandya's performances at the DY Patil Corporate Cup was not about the 150 odd he scored or the wickets he took but was about how fit he looked out there in the middle.

At the same time, the soon-to-be-35 Jadhav, who has literally stopped bowling in ODIs and is also not doing well batting at the No 6 slot, has been finally dropped from the side. With the next 50-over World Cup in 2023 when Jadhav will be 38, it is highly unlikely that he will add to his 73 ODIs.

Shardul, who did improve as a batsman, leaked runs during the T20s as well as ODIs. Bhuvneshwar's experience as a swing and seam bowler was sorely missed in New Zealand conditions. The three ODIs will be played in Dharamsala (March 12), Lucknow (March 15) and Kolkata (March 18).

**INDIA'S ODI SQUAD:** Shikhar Dhawan, Prithvi Shaw, Virat Kohli (C), KL Rahul, Manish Pandey, Shreyas Iyer, Rishabh Pant, Hardik Pandya, Ravindra Jadeja, Bhuvneshwar Kumar, Yuzvendra Chahal, Jasprit Bumrah, Naveed Saini, Kuldeep Yadav, Shubman Gill.

## BOXING: ROAD TO TOKYO 2020

# Pooja to carry Hawa Singh's legacy into Olympics

GAURAV BHATT  
NEW DELHI, MARCH 8

"I'LL ADMIT, I was very nervous and under pressure today. For one, I hadn't seen my opponent box before," Pooja Rani says after the dominating unanimous win over Thailand's Pornnipa Chutee on Sunday. "But more than that, I realised that it was this one bout between me and the Olympics. Agar ab bhi nahii hua, to mujhe stop kar dena chahiye. I shouldn't be boxing."

She laughs it off, but Pooja's words had put in context the stakes in her 75kg bout. Eight years ago this month, she fetched a silver at the Asian championships but admits she wasn't ready for the Olympics. In March 2016, she lost in the first round of the qualifiers but believes a federation-less Indian contingent was handed a raw deal by judges -- "Can you believe that I was given a warning for landing a clean uppercut?"

The ongoing Asian qualifiers in Amman, Jordan, were realistically the last chance. Win the bout and go to the Olympics. Lose, and end an unsung 12-year career.

Stakes were further raised given Pooja's status as the de facto torchbearer of two-time Asian Games gold medallist Hawa Singh's legacy.

The 28-year-old trained at the Hawa Singh Boxing academy in Bhiwani, under the late Arjuna and Dronacharya awardee's son Sanjay Kumar, who wants Pooja to succeed more than his own daughter Nupur.

And in a twist worthy of a blockbuster, it was at the trials in December that Nupur and Pooja faced off for a spot in the qualifiers. When quizzed about her feelings on the eve of the fight, a fidgety Nupur couldn't shake off the exasperated grin.

"She's my elder sister. I am going to feel really weird fighting her for a berth. And I know my father would also be supporting Pooja against."

Sanjay was indeed actively praying against his daughter. "You always want your elder child to succeed first. Nupur's time will come. But if she had won the bout in the trials, we knew getting the quota would be difficult for her."

Meanwhile, Pooja, who won 10-0, "knew for sure I would win."

"So the night before, I was trying to get out



Coach Sanjay Kumar, late Dronacharya awardee Hawa Singh's son, wants her ward Pooja Rani to succeed more than his own daughter Nupur.

**My parents were against me taking up boxing. They were worried, ladki hai, chat vot lag jaayegi. Aur chat lagti bhi thi. When there were bruises or marks, I would stay at Rani ma'am's place. She would call my parents up and say, 'My husband is out of town. Please let Pooja stay with me for a couple of days'. She would only send me back once my face had cleared up. I have been calling her 'Ma' since those days."**

POOJA RANI, ON COACH SANJAY KUMAR AND WIFE MUKESH RANI'S ROLE IN HER SUCCESS

of the bout. I was asking around, 'please sir, do something that the bout doesn't take place. I get a direct selection.' I was told that the federation would oppose something like that, so I had to fight Nupur. I couldn't even celebrate

my win because I was feeling so sad for Nupur." Pooja's career began in 2009. "Back then, I didn't know Hawa Singh. For me, Sanjay sir was the superstar boxing coach."

It was Sanjay's wife Mukesh Rani, a lecturer at Pooja's college, who spotted her. She was already 5'8", even though she hadn't filled out her frame. Rani, a former national-level basketball player, convinced Sanjay to train her, who in turn had to convince Pooja's father, sub-inspector Rajbir Singh.

"My parents were against me taking up boxing. They were worried, ladki hai, chat vot lag jaayegi," says Pooja. "Aur chat lagti bhi thi. When there were bruises or marks, I would stay at Rani ma'am's place. She would call my parents up and say, 'My husband is out of town. Please let Pooja stay with me for a couple of days'. She would only send me back once my face had cleared up. I have been calling her 'Ma' since those days."

There have been bruises aplenty for Pooja, who admits she was no prodigy. It was also a

rough initiation, as other trainees would bully the newbie in the ring.

"Boys, girls... sabse pitayi hi ho rahi thi meri. I ran away a couple of times, but one time Sanjay sir called me back and said: 'Train diligently for a month, and if you still get beaten up, then you can quit.' After a month, I was beating up all of them."

Sanjay himself would pull a 'Haaikarak Baapu' once in a while.

"This one time, I was very angry. Pooja ran away, but I knew where she was headed. I went straight to my home, and she was hiding behind my wife," Sanjay laughs. "My wife would often be caught in the crossfire but that's the discipline that helped shape her into an Olympic medal hopeful."

Her ill-fortune and the resulting start-stop career has had Pooja contemplating retirement before. In 2016, a Diwali mishap left her right hand severely burned, keeping her out of action for seven months. After coming back, in an attempt to guard her hand, she injured her left shoulder. Then the wrist.

Then came the gold medal at last year's Asian Championships, her biggest triumph thus far, where she beat the reigning world champion Wang Lina of China to win the 81kg gold, despite being 6-7kgs lighter for the division.

"I didn't want to compete in 75kg because it was Nupur's category. Then (foreign coach) Raffaele Bergamasco explained to me, 'listen, India needs a middleweight and it is you. It's what's best for everybody'. Normally, a boxer has to fill an application for a weight change but Raffaele himself put my name in 75kg."

For now, she has repaid the faith of Bergamasco and, more importantly, that of the Hawa Singh clan.

"We were all watching the bout on a big screen today," says Sanjay. "My wife and Nupur were alongside me. I looked at my daughter and told her: 'Tu ye waali bout nahi nikal paati.'"

### Five book berth

PTI adds: Along with Vikas Krishan (69kg) and Pooja Rani (75kg), Satish Kumar (+91kg), Lovlina Borgohain (69kg) and Ashish Kumar (75kg) secured Tokyo Olympic berths on Sunday by advancing to the semifinals of the Asian Qualifiers.

## After earning Tokyo spot, Vikas hopes to get third time lucky

NITIN SHARMA  
CHANDIGARH, MARCH 8

VIKAS KRISHAN returned empty-handed from the last two Olympics, and on Sunday became only the second Indian boxer after Vijender Singh to book his place for a third Games. Krishan sealed the quota with a unanimous 5:0 decision over world number six and third seed Sewonrets Okazawa of Japan in the quarterfinals of the 69 Kg category at the Asia-Oceania Olympic qualifier in Amman, Jordan.

"Earning the quota is the first step in achieving the big goal of winning an Olympic medal," he said.

Okazawa unsettled Krishan initially with his long reach before the Indian responded with some clean punches to take the opening round in a split 3:2 verdict. In the second, Krishan's accuracy with his left jabs and body punches resulted in a 5:0 score.

Thereafter, Krishan, competing in only his second international tournament after his return to the amateur circuit, kept the attacking Japanese at bay and landed some clean punches in between to score a 30-27, 29-28, 29-28, 30-27, 30-27 victory. "My strategy has been to tire the opponent initially but it did not happen in the first round as Okazawa was taking advantage of his long reach. So my aim was to hit single punches and then step back. Once I unsettled him, it was easier for me in the second round to tire him and surprise him with my jab. Facing such a quality opponent means that one can't relax in the final round and I knew that my defence had to be up to the mark to deny him scoring chances," Krishan said.

### Return to the amateur fold

Krishan, who had been competing in the 75 Kg category since 2014, made the shift to professional ranks in 2018 signing with Top Rank in USA. The Haryana boxer won his two bouts in America but an urge to appear in his third Olympics brought him back into the amateur fold.

Prior to the national camp, Krishan trained

under coach Ronald Simms and he recalled the initial change.

"In professional boxing, the focus is more on high-impact blows to score knockout wins or lasting 10-12 rounds while in amateur; it's about impressing the judges. When I shifted to professional boxing, I made a lot of adjustments including my guard position. Even though I had competed at amateur level for more than 12 years, I had to learn things like foot movement and improving my pace on my return, apart from re-learning my guard position. Coach Ronald Simms made me try things like step-back and head slip action from making me run 15 Kms instead of 5 Kms earlier. I also worked on my jab, for a while in which Santiago Nieva too worked a lot in the national camp."

In the trials for the Asia-Oceania qualifiers, Yadav edged out Duryodhan Negi in 69 Kg, a category where he competed from 2011 to 2015 and won a bronze medal at the 2011 World Championships. Early in his career, Krishan had shifted to 69 Kg after struggling to maintain weight in 64 Kg. High performance Director Santiago Nieva believes Krishan's strength lies in the 69 Kg category. The Swede didn't get much time to train Yadav after joining post 2016 Olympics but the last six months has seen Nieva making some changes in Yadav's approach.

"When he joined us in the national camp last year, Vikas was flat-footed and stationary in the ring. So we had to work on improving his feet movement and worked to make him throw more punches as compared to middleweight (category). His ability to throw power punches in middle-weight helps him in welterweight. His blocking is good but he needs to counter immediately, which can help him win a medal in Tokyo. He has faced a lot of opponents in his career and his experience will come handy in Tokyo," says Nieva.

As for Krishan, he wants to win a medal in Tokyo for his three kids. "My elder son was an infant when I lost in London and the other two have not watched me competing. I want to win a medal with them watching and that has kept me going."

