

# Sreeja crashes out but India taste plenty of success

PTI, DOHA: India number one Sreeja Akula crashed out in the first round but the country's contingent enjoyed plenty of success in other matches with Diya Chitale and Manush Shah progressing to the second round of women's and men's singles competitions in the Table Tennis World Championships, here, on Saturday.

The Mukherjee duo -- Ayhika and Sutirtha -- and the pairing of Diya and Yashaswini Ghodpade also won their respective women's doubles opening matches on the first day of the premier tournament.

The Indian pair of Manav Thakkar and Manush Shah

too tasted success in their first round men's doubles match. An error-prone Akula lost to Thailand's Suthasini Sawettabut 1-4 (11-9, 8-11, 6-11, 5-11, 2-11) rather tamely.

It was a disappointing outing for the Indian as she made an early exit after losing to the world number 84.

Sreeja won the opening game, but after that, lost her momentum, dropping innumerable points and making unforced errors to go down in just 33 minutes.

The Indian contingent though had plenty to smile about as Asian Games med-

allists Ayhika and Sutirtha beat the Turkish pair of Ozge Yilmaz and Ece Harac 3-2 (4-11, 11-9, 10-12, 11-9, 11-7) in a five-game thriller. The result meant that the Indian pair ended a six-match losing streak while progressing to the next round of the ITTF

World Championships. Diya and Yashaswini advanced with a win over Uzbekistan's Magdieva and Erkebaeva 3-1 (9-11, 11-2, 11-9, 11-8).

They started off on the wrong note and lost the opening game by a close margin but bounced back

to win the next three games and confirm their place in second round.

The Indian duo of Thakkar and Shah continued their good form this season with a straight-game win over Slovenia's Deni Kozul and Peter Hribar. They won 3-0 (11-7, 11-8, 11-6).

Later in the evening, Shah began his men's singles campaign with a 4-2 (11-6, 2-11, 11-7, 11-6, 5-11, 11-6) win over Portugal's Tiago Apolonia.

Youngster Diya progressed to the second round with a straight-game 4-0 (11-4, 11-7, 11-3, 14-12) win over Spain's Sofia-Xuan Zhang.

## TABLE TENNIS WORLD C'SHIPS

## Praggnanandhaa wins Superbet Classic

PTI, BUCHAREST (Romania): Grandmaster R Praggnanandhaa defeated Maxime Vachier-Lagrave of France to win his first-ever tournament on the Grand Chess Tour by showcasing his supremacy in the Superbet Classic, here.

The Indian, after drawing with the Armenian-American GM Levon Aronian in the final round, was assured of a tie for the first place.

Maxime Vachier-Lagrave and Alireza Firouzja also won to match Praggnanandhaa on 5.5 points. This led to a tiebreaker between the three, with five minutes and a two-second increment after every move.

In the first game with black pieces, Praggnanand-

haa had to work hard in a slightly difficult position against Firouzja but the end result was a draw. In the second game Firouzja drew with Vachier-Lagrave.

In the last game of the event, Praggnanandhaa crashed through the defences of Vachier-Lagrave to earn the top prize. The Indian scored 1.5 points in his blitz games, half a point more than Firouzja and one more than the other French Grandmaster.

It was a sweet comeback for Praggnanandhaa after

last year's debacle when he lost all his games in the play-offs.

"I didn't do so well last time. I guess getting to rest a few hours before the tiebreak certainly helps," Praggnanandhaa said at the prize-giving ceremony.

After his relatively early draw with Aronian in the Classical game, the Indian had rested in his room for a few hours.

Praggnanandhaa also thanked his second for the tournament, GM Vaibhav Suri, and his permanent trainer Grandmaster RB

Ramesh on the occasion. The Indian won a cash award of USD 77,667 (around Rs 66 lakh) for his efforts.

Results (Round 9): R Praggnanandhaa (Ind, 5.5) drew with Levon Aronian (USA, 4); Deac Bogdan-Daniel (Rou, 4) lost to Alireza Firouzja (Fra, 5.5); Maxime Vachier-Lagrave (Fra, 5.5) beat Jan Krzysztof (Pol, 3); Wesley So (4) drew with Nodirbek Abdusattorov (Uzb, 4.5); D Gukesh (Ind, 4) drew with Fabiano Caruana (USA, 5).

Tie-break result: Praggnanandhaa drew with Firouzja; Firouzja drew with Vachier-Lagrave; Praggnanandhaa beat Vachier-Lagrave.



## Rain washes out RCB-KKR match

Royal Challengers Bengaluru move a step closer to play-offs while Kolkata Knight Riders knocked out of the race

PTI, BENGALURU: Royal Challengers Bengaluru moved a step closer to the IPL play-offs, while defending champions Kolkata Knight Riders were knocked out of the race as incessant rain washed out their match, here, on Saturday, forcing the teams to settle for a point apiece.

Rain of varying intensity that started around 6 pm never relented as even the toss could not take place, and the officials eventually called off the game at 10.24 pm.

The Royal Challengers now have 17 points from 12 matches, and a win from their remaining two games will be enough for them to

seal a berth in the play-offs. Currently, they are the table-toppers ahead of Gujarat Titans (16 points).

The RCB will face the already-ousted Sunrisers Hyderabad at home on May 23 followed by the away game against Lucknow Super Giants on May 27.

However, the Knight Riders' stuttering campaign in this IPL season came to an end with this washout.

Kolkata Knight Riders now have 11 points from 13 matches and it is impossible for them to enter the knockouts even if they win their final league game against Hyderabad to increase their tally to 15 points.

## TODAY'S IPL FIXTURES

Punjab Kings vs Rajasthan Royals, at the Saiwaj Mansingh Cricket Stadium, Jaipur, at 3.30 pm  
Delhi Capitals vs Gujarat Titans, at the Arun Jaitley Stadium, Delhi, at 7.30 pm

## Sinner lines up Alcaraz in Italian Open final

AFF, ROME: Jannik Sinner set up a blockbuster Italian Open final with Carlos Alcaraz by beating Tommy Paul 1-6, 6-0, 6-3 on Friday.

World No. 1 Sinner fought back from a set down in front of a packed crowd to continue his march towards a first title at the Foro Italo.

After a strangely slow start, Sinner again showed good form on centre court where, since returning to action last week from a three-month doping ban, he has taken his unbeaten run to 26 matches.

And the 23-year-old will face down Alcaraz, the last man to beat Sinner in the final at the China Open in

early October, with all eyes on another potential final between the pair at the French Open next month.

A win for Sinner against his rival would see the men's Rome title go to an Italian for the first time since Adriano Panatta in 1976.

"If I want to win Sunday I have to play one of my best tennis for sure," said Sinner. "Carlos has played incredible tennis today, so let's see what's coming but from my side you know incredible to be here in the final."

Alcaraz booked his place in the showdown by beating Sinner's countryman Lorenzo Musetti 6-3, 7-6 (7/4).

## sportspopup

### Bhambri, Galloway progress to semis of Bordeaux Challenger

NEW DELHI: India's Yuki Bhambri and his American partner Robert Galloway moved into the semifinals of the Bordeaux Challenger with straight-sets win over unseeded French pair of Quentin Halys and Albano Olivetti, here, Saturday. The second-seeded Indo-American combine registered a 7-5, 6-3 win over their unseeded rivals in one hour and eight minutes. They will next take on third seed Brazilians Rafael Matos and Marcelo Melo. India's other contenders have exited the tournament. N Sriram Balaji and his Mexican partner Miguel Reyes-Varela had lost the doubles quarter-final and in the singles draw Sumit Nagal had suffered a first-round defeat.

### Brazil Football Confederation to pick new president shortly before introducing Ancelotti

SAO PAULO: The Brazilian Football Confederation will pick a new president shortly before it introduces Real Madrid's Carlo Ancelotti as the new national coach. CBF Vice President Fernando Sarney, who was named by a judge as the caretaker president after Ednaldo Rodrigues was removed from office, announced on Friday that the vote will take place on May 25, the same day as the last round of the Spanish league. When Rodrigues was in charge, Ancelotti was expected to arrive the next day at the CBF headquarters in Rio de Janeiro to announce his squad for two World Cup qualifiers against Ecuador and Paraguay in June. The coach has confirmed his move to Brazil at the end of La Liga but has not mentioned when he arrives. The CBF election will also include eight vice president positions.

### HI names India junior women's hockey team for Four Nations tournament in Argentina

NEW DELHI: Goalkeeper Nidhi has been named captain, while Hina Bano will serve as her deputy, as Hockey India on Saturday announced a 24-member Indian junior women's team for the upcoming Four Nations Tournament in Rosario, Argentina. Scheduled to be held from May 25 to June 2, the tournament will feature four countries - Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, and India. The defensive unit comprises Mamita Oram, Lalhantluangi, Manisha, Puja Sahoo, Parwati Topno, Nandini, and Sakshi Shukla. The midfield will feature Priyanka Yadav, Anisha Sahu, Rajni Kerketta, Binima Dhan, Khaidem Shileima Chanu, Sanjana Horo, Supriya Kujur, and Priyanka Dogra, with Huda Khan and Munmuni Das listed as standby midfielders. The forward line includes Hina Bano, Sonam, Sukhveer Kaur, Geeta Yadav, Lalrinpuii, Kanika Siwach, and Karmanpreet Kaur, while Selestina Horo has been named as a standby forward. India will face Chile in the opening match on May 25.

### Carlsen faces showdown against The World

BERLIN: Norwegian grandmaster Magnus Carlsen is playing a single game of chess against 1,40,000 people worldwide in a mega-match that could overturn expectations by ending in a draw in the next few days. Billed as "Magnus Carlsen vs. The World," the online match began April 4 on Chess.com, the world's largest chess website, and is the first-ever online free-style game to feature a world champion. While Chess.com had predicted Carlsen would win by a wide margin, his Team World opposition could force a draw if it checks Carlsen's king three times. "Right now we're heading towards a draw by perpetual check," Carlsen said in a statement.

## More 90m throws to come this season: Neeraj Chopra

The Haryana-lad will enter the September 13 to 21 world championship in Tokyo as the defending gold-medallist in his event, the throw here would do a world of good to his confidence

PTI, DOHA: Relieved, happy but a touch disappointed too, Indian javelin throw star Neeraj Chopra said now that he is done breaching the 90m mark, he would be striving to go farther as his body is more or less free of the niggles that plagued him in the past few years.

The 27-year-old two-time Olympic-medallist sent his spear to 90.23m in the Diamond League season-opener, here, on Friday but finished second overall after Germany's Julian Weber took the top spot with a 91.06m effort in his final throw.

"I am very happy with the 90m mark but it's a little bit of a bitter-sweet experience actually. But never mind, I and my coach (the legendary Jan Zelezny) are still working on some aspects of my throw." "We started working together only in February this year. I am still learning things," Chopra said after the event.

Zelezny, who holds the world record for the longest throw (98.48m), doesn't normally attend Diamond Leagues but the Czech came with Chopra last night because he felt "today is the day to achieve 90m."

"I was always feeling something in my groin in the last few years. I did not give my best because of that. This year I feel much better, we will also work on some aspects and so I believe I can throw more than 90m in the upcoming events this year till the World Championships," Chopra said.

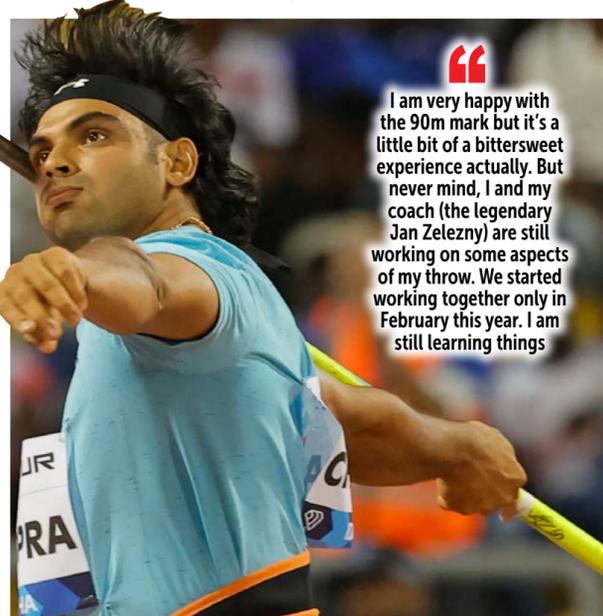
The Haryana-lad will enter the September 13 to 21 world championship in Tokyo as the defending gold-medallist in his event. The throw here would do a world of good to his confidence. It was his third attempt of the night and one that made him only the third Asian and 25th overall to cross the coveted mark, that was eluding him for the last five years.

The Zelezny effect on him would be hard to ignore. He was roped in as Chopra's coach in November last year but they started working together only in February this year.

"I am very happy that Jan Zelezny is my coach and we worked very hard in South Africa. We are still working on some aspects," he said.

Asked about his next goal, Chopra offered a cheeky response. "My next goal remains 90m," he said.

On a more serious note, the affable



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superstar said he is confident of bettering what was a career-best effort last night. "I believe I am ready to throw farther. It's just the beginning of a long season," he said.

Dwelling on what made the landmark throw possible on a windy night, Chopra said the conditions worked in his favour. "When I was having warm-up throws my coach said, 'today is the day when I can throw 90m'. After my 90m throw also, he told me I can throw 2-3m farther," he said.

"The wind helps for sure and the weather is a little warm and that helps. It's the first competition of the year, so everyone came with a fresh mindset after a long time and had the hunger inside for the throwing part (sic)," he added.

As always, Chopra exhibited exemplary grace despite his disappointment at missing the top spot. He applauded Weber for his performance and said they help each other push the boundaries.

"I also told Julian (Weber) that we can throw 90m. I am also happy for him. We have tried very hard for 90m for so many years, and so we are happy.

"It's like a good push between us and in the next competition we will

push each other again and will throw farther," he said.

But Chopra did rue the fact that he has finished second whenever he has breached the national record.

"It had happened earlier also. When I threw an NR with over 89m in Turkey, I finished second (sic). In Stockholm DL, when I threw 89.94m, I was second again, so also here," Chopra said.

Weber, on his part, said he did not do anything extra but had a feeling that he can breach the 90m mark here. It was Weber's first 90m-plus effort as well, and he became the 26th javelin thrower to breach the coveted mark. His effort was the world leading mark this season so far.

"I did not know how it happened. I had a very good massage thanks to my physiotherapist. It was fun today. Neeraj threw his first 90m plus and I went past the mark in my last throw and that was just perfect.

"I was very happy for him. We have been fighting for the 90m throw for a long time and we both achieved that today. So, it was very special for us."

Two-time world champion and Paris Olympics bronze-medallist Anderson Peters of Grenada was third with his opening throw of 84.65m.



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