

*A TO Z OF MEN AND WOMEN WHO
EXCELLED IN SPORTS*

SITHARAAM JAYAKUMAR



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First Edition

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To
My Daughter
Subhashini

Author's Note:

This book is a compilation of essays on sportspersons from all over the world. There are twenty-six chapters in this book and the names of the sportspersons described in the chapters are related to the English alphabets taken in order. The first chapter begins with a sportsperson whose last name starts with the alphabet A. Each subsequent chapter describes sportspersons with either the first name or the last name beginning with the next English alphabet in line.

I have tried to cover well-known personalities from many sports. I have included sportspersons from varied fields like hockey, cricket, football, badminton, boxing and many others to make the book versatile. I have also tried to bring in a judicious mixture of sporting greats from the past as well as the present. Some of the selected sportspersons are well-known personalities while some of the choices may make you raise your eyebrows as they are not so famous but do hold a lot of promise for the future.

Some essays try to do a comparison between the sporting skills of two or more contemporary sportspersons. I have tried to select the subjects for the essays in such a way that the book would cater to people of all ages and lovers of all sports. All details like statistical records and details of player's achievements, awards and other data presented in this book are true to the best of my knowledge.

***A is for Viswanathan (A)nand the lad from
Tamil Nadu who could check mate the best***



Image Courtesy: [Wikimedia.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Viswanathan_Anand.jpg)

I considered several people whose names began with the letter A as a candidate for the first chapter of this book. Being a cricket lover, the first name that popped into my mind was Adam Gilchrist, the renowned Australian wicket-keeper batsman who is a very well-known personality in the cricket world. I also considered Cassius Clay aka Muhammed Ali the world-renowned boxer, whose life story is also equally inspiring.

But after a lot of pondering, I decided I would begin this chapter with the story of the world-famous chess grandmaster Viswanathan Anand from my own native state of Tamil Nadu in India. Anand is three years my junior, having been born in the year 1969 in the town of Mayiladuthurai in Tamil Nadu. His parents are Krishnamurthy Viswanathan, a retired manager of Southern Railways and Sushila, a homemaker, socialite and keen player of chess.

Anand is the youngest of three children. He has an elder brother Shivakumar who is a manager in Crompton Greeves and an elder sister who is a professor in the United States. Anand learned the rudiments of chess from his mother Sushila at the age of six. At this point in time, Anand's family was living in Manila, Philippines. Anand was schooled in the Don Bosco Matriculation Higher Secondary School and holds a bachelor's degree in commerce from the Loyola College, Chennai. Anand was considered an average student academically.

The first signs of his prodigious talent in chess came when Anand was fourteen years old. He won the National Sub-Junior Chess Championship with a score of 9/9 in 1983 followed by the Asian Junior Chess Championship in Coimbatore a year later. Again, in the same city of Coimbatore Anand won the Shakti Finance International Chess Tournament in 1988 and became India's first Chess Grandmaster.

Gary Kasparov introduced a form of chess known as Advanced Chess in 1998 in which a player is allowed to consult a computer to aid them in certain aspects of their moves. Anand won three advanced chess tournaments in a row in Leon, Spain. Anand is recognised as the world's best player of Advanced Chess. Anand's first victory in the FIDE world chess championships came in the year 2000 when he defeated Alexei Shirov in the finals. Anand thus became the first Indian to win the FIDE world chess championship.

In the year 2006, he became the fourth player in history and the first Indian to cross the 2800 mark in Elo chess ratings. He again won the title in 2007 and became the undisputed world champion. Anand continued his winning streak and successfully defended his title in 2010 and 2012. It was at this juncture that Anand's long reign as the undisputed champion ended when he lost the title to the brilliant youngster Magnus Carlson in 2013. The championship was played in Chennai.

Much earlier in October 2003, a new kind of chess championship known as the Rapid Chess tournament was organised by FIDE, the governing body of chess. In this tournament, each player was given twenty-five minutes at the start of the game with an additional ten seconds after each move. This tournament was conducted in Cap d' Agde. Anand won this tournament easily, ahead of ten of the twelve best players of the world. Overall Anand has been ranked world no 1 in 2007 and 2008 and for a brief period in 2011.

Anand won the FIDE rapid chess championship in 2017 and subsequently, he is considered the finest rapid chess player in the world. Anand is the only player till now to have won the world chess championships in the tournament, match and knockout formats as well as rapid time controls. Legendary chess grandmasters regard Viswanathan Anand to be one of the greatest players to have ever played the game.

Says FIDE president Alexander Grischuk,

'Anand has always struck me as the strongest player of chess, of course after Gary Kasparov.'

Lubomir Kavalek describes Anand as one of the most versatile players he has ever witnessed. The one thing that characterises Anand's game is the speed with which he plays. It is this lightning quickness in thinking and making moves that usually baffles his opponents and

goads them into making blunders. No wonder he is a brilliant rapid chess player.

Anand has several awards under his belt. Notable among these are the Arjuna award (1985), Padmashri (1987), Rajiv Gandhi Khel Ratna Award (1991- 1992) and the Padma Bhushan (2000). As regards Anand's personal life he married Aruna in 1996 and has a son Akhil who was born in 2011. Anand is the first international star in the game of chess from India. Chess is a game that originated in India and migrated to other countries. Anand is the first Indian who has brought accolades to India in a game which originated in India. It was only after Anand's phenomenal success in the international arena that more youngsters began taking up the game of chess and chess regained its popularity in India. Let us hope the trend continues.

B is for (B)jorn (B)org the ice-cool Swede



Image Courtesy: [Wikimedia.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bjorn_Borg_1979.jpg)

In the previous chapter I presented you with the story of Vishy Anand the chess grandmaster from India who made us proud in the international arena. From a sedentary sport like chess, in this chapter I will move over to a sport that requires phenomenal athletic ability, skill and stamina. This is none other than tennis in which we Indians have produced some great stars like Leander Paes, Mahesh Bhupathi and Vijay Amritraj.

But the player whose story I am going to present in this chapter is my personal favourite, Bjorn Borg. Many of today's generation might probably turn around and ask Bjorn who? Borg used to play tennis when I was a school kid which is nearly thirty-nine years back. So, I don't think there are chances that too many of my readers have heard of him.

Bjorn Rune Borg was born on 6 June 1956 in Stockholm. He was the only child of Rune and Margarethe Borg. Borg's father won a Golden tennis racket at a table-tennis tournament which he handed over to Borg. Thus began his tennis career. The rest is history. By the time Borg was thirteen he was proving himself capable of beating the best of Sweden's under-eighteen tennis stars.

Borg debuted internationally in the 1972-73 season when he played in Sweden's Davis Cup team. He was just fifteen at that time. In the same year, he won the junior Wimbledon. Borg's first top-level singles title was the Italian Open when he was eighteen. He defeated none other than Ilie Nastase who was a great champion of those times. Borg then went on to become the youngest ever French Open champion in 1974.

Borg was essentially a baseline player. Many players in the modern era feel that the serve and volley technique is a better tactic to use, but Borg preferred to stay at the baseline after serving. Another characteristic of Borg's game was his psychological toughness. He was one of those players who would never allow the conditions on the tennis court to get to his nerves. He would never argue with the umpire and would remain calm and collected no matter what the circumstances.

He retained the French Open in 1974 and his first Grass Court success came at Wimbledon in 1976. At this point in time, Borg was the youngest ever to win Wimbledon at twenty. That was when his rival Ilie Nastase famously said,

'We're all playing tennis. But he's [Borg] playing something else.'

But in 1975 Borg could not retain the French Open. Borg reached the semi-finals of the US open in 1976 but lost to Jimmy Connors in the final in a five-set thriller.

In 1977 Borg again faced Connors in the Wimbledon final, but this time he got the better of Connors and for the first time was ranked World No 1. Through the years 1978 to 1980 Borg was in superlative form. In the year 1978 Borg won both the French Open and Wimbledon. The year 1978 was a very important one in Borg's career because that was the year, he played his arch nemesis and rival John McEnroe for the first time in a semi-final at Stockholm and lost. This was just an indication of things to come in the later years.

In 1979, Borg again won both the French Open and Wimbledon. The fact that Borg was uniformly able to perform well in the French Open which is played on a clay court, as well as Wimbledon which is played on grass, showed his true greatness and versatility as a tennis player. Tennis players are usually either clay court players or specialists on grass courts. Borg was phenomenal because he could excel in both.

Borg won the French Open in 1980 and this time he came up against John McEnroe in the Wimbledon final. I remember watching that match on television myself and believe me, both the players were simply class personified. This five-set thriller is often cited as the greatest Wimbledon final ever played. McEnroe came out with all guns firing and it took all of Borg's phenomenal ability to ward off McEnroe's challenge.

Borg won his last grand slam title in 1981 when he won the French open but at Wimbledon, a determined McEnroe put an end to Borg's never-ending reign of supremacy in four straight sets. Borg did not do well in matches after that and eventually retired. He attempted a comeback in 1991-93 but was a dismal failure. When he retired, Borg

was a rich man with three residences, a penthouse in Monte Carlo, a mansion on Long Island, New York and a small island off the Swedish coast.

He was also the owner of a fashion label which became famous in Sweden. Borg married the Romanian tennis player Mariana Simionescu and later divorced her. He fathered a child with the Swedish model Jannike Bjorling and for some time was married to the Italian singer Loredana Berté. In 2002 he married for the third time. His new wife was Patricia Ostfeld. Together they have a son Leo. Many of Borg's ventures failed and he avoided bankruptcy narrowly.

Borg has several achievements to his name. He was the BBC Overseas Sports Personality of the Year in 1979. In 1987 he was inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame. In the year 2006, BBC awarded Borg a Lifetime Achievement Award which was presented by Boris Becker. In 2014 Bjorn Borg was elected Sweden's top sportsperson of all time by the newspaper Dagens Nyheter. I hope you enjoyed reading about this Tennis maestro from Sweden. In the next chapter I will present the story of yet another sporting great.

C is for Dhyan (C)hand - The Wizard of the Hockey field



Image Courtesy: [Wikimedia.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dhyan_Chand_playing_hockey.jpg)

For the letter B, I brought you the story of Bjorn Borg of tennis fame. For C, I will shift to India's national sport Hockey and bring you the story of none other than India's pride, the man who was known as The Wizard or The Magician of the Hockey field, Major Dhyan Chand. Dhyan Chand was born in a Rajput family to Sharadha Singh and Sameshwar Singh on 29th August 1905. He had two brothers Mool Singh and Roop Singh. Roop Singh was also a Hockey player.

Sameshwar Singh was employed in the British Indian Army and the family had to move from one army post to another due to his numerous transfers. This meant that Chand had to terminate his education after six years of schooling. Sameshwar Singh used to play Hockey in the army. Finally, Chand and his family settled in Jhansi, Uttar Pradesh and he graduated from Victoria college in 1932.

As a young man, Chand was not inclined seriously towards sports though he was fond of wrestling and did indulge in casual games with his friends. You might be wondering why Dhyan Chand's name is not

Dhyan Singh and how the Singh got replaced with Chand. There is an interesting anecdote about this.

Dhyan Singh had to practice a lot in the night as he had to mostly work during the day. He would wait for the Moon to come out in the nights and then practice Hockey in the fields in the moonlight. The reason for this was that there were no floodlights those days. As a result, his eyesight became very sharp. His friends began calling him Chand which means Moon in Hindi and that was how he became popularly known as Dhyan Chand.

On his 17th birthday, Dhyan Chand enlisted as a sepoy in the British Indian Army. Chand played several Hockey tournaments between 1922 and 1926 in the army. Chand was selected for the Indian Army team that toured New Zealand and the team returned victorious in that tour. The Army team won eighteen matches, drew two and lost one. Chand was promoted to Lance Naik in 1927.

An Inter-Provincial match was held in 1925 to select a team for the 1928 summer Olympics to be held in Amsterdam, Netherlands. Chand played as a member of the United Provinces team in the selection and was noticed widely for his excellent stick work and strategic passing. In the 1928 Olympic team, Chand was selected as the centre-forward.

The Indian team was placed in division A with Austria, Belgium, Denmark and Switzerland. In the very first match, India defeated Austria 6-0. Chand had scored three of the goals. Next came Belgium and India won 9-0 but Chand scored only one goal. Finally, after a string of victories, on 26, May 1928, India faced the hosts, Netherlands, in the finals. Many Indian players were sick and Chand himself was feeling unwell. But even with a side that was vastly depleted of players, India managed to defeat Netherlands 3-0 with Chand scoring two of the goals. A newspaper report came out with the headlines,

'This is not a game of Hockey, but magic. Dhyan Chand is, in fact, the magician of Hockey'

When the Indian team had left for the Olympics, they were given a quiet send-off. But when they returned victoriously, they were greeted by a jubilant crowd of thousands at the Bombay harbour. In 1933 Chand's home team, the Jhansi Heroes participated in and won the Beighton Cup. Chand considered the Beighton Cup the most prestigious of all Indian tournaments.

Here is what he has to say about the Beighton Cup.

'If anybody asked me which was the best match that I played in, I will unhesitatingly say that it was the 1933 Beighton Cup final between Calcutta Customs and Jhansi Heroes. Calcutta Customs was a great side those days; they had Shaukat Ali, Asad Ali, Claude Deefholts, Seaman, Mohsin, and many others who were then in the first flight of Indian hockey.'

I had a very young side. Besides my brother Roop Singh, and Ismail, who played for the Great Indian Peninsular Railway in Mumbai, I had no other really great player in the team. But I had a team which was determined to do or die. It was a great match, full of thrills, and it was just opportunism that gave us the victory. Customs were pressing hard and our goal was at their mercy. Suddenly I broke through and from midfield gave a long through pass to Ismail, who ran with Jesse Owens' speed half the length of the ground. A misunderstanding occurred between the Customs left-half and the goalkeeper, and Ismail, taking every advantage of it, cut through and netted the only goal of the match. We felt very proud of our triumph.'

In 1934 the Indian Hockey Federation decided to conduct the Inter-Provincial cup to select the players for the 1936 Berlin Olympics. Chand was appointed the captain of the team that was to go to Germany. The team reached Berlin on 13th July and on the 17th they

lost a practice match to Germany 4-1. The Olympic matches began soon, and the Indians hit a winning streak.

They won the first match against Hungary (4-0) and proceeded to dominate all the group matches. They defeated USA (7-0 with Chand scoring two goals), and then they defeated Japan next. Then came the big final between Germany and India on 19th August 1936. The Indians were very nervous as they had lost the practice match against Germany 4-1.

In the locker room, Pankaj Gupta produced the Congress Tricolour and the Indians saluted the flag, prayed and marched to the field. Till the first interval, the Indians could score only one goal, but after the interval, the Indian team launched an all-out attack and defeated Germany 8-1. Chand top-scored with three goals.

This is what Chand had to say about the final match with Germany,

'Every member of the team was feeling the strain of the defeat to the Germans in the practice match, and no one was in his usual self. I never saw a hockey team from India, where the game is definitely of a superior standard compared to the rest of the world, being so obsessed on the eve of the match. The players were nervous as to what the result of the match would be, which was heightened by the feeling that the burden of the country's honour was on their shoulders.'

When Germany was defeated, Adolf Hitler the German Chancellor was so annoyed that he left the stadium in frustration. But he later came back to present the medals. There is some belief that on the following day Hitler invited Chand to come and meet him. Chand was naturally worried as he had heard several tales of the German regime's racist policies of those days.

When the two met, it is believed that Hitler asked him what he did for a living and on hearing that he worked in the British Indian Army, Hitler offered Chand a lucrative position in the German army and asked him to relocate. Chand is believed to have politely turned down this offer and explained to the Fuehrer that he was born and brought up in India and was happy there. Hitler is said to have appreciated Chand's position. The truthfulness of this tale cannot be verified but it seems true to the extent I could find out from the internet.

After the war, Chand went on tours to East Africa and afterwards, he slowly withdrew from playing Hockey tournaments. Chand retired from the Indian army after thirty-four years of service as a Major in 1956. The Government of India has conferred on him the Padma Bhushan the third highest civilian honour.

After retirement Chand taught in several coaching camps. He held the post of Chief Hockey Coach in the National Institute of Sports, Patiala for several years. He died on 3, December 1979 at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences and was cremated in the Jhansi Heroes ground in his hometown.

Dhyan Chand is a legend in Indian Hockey. His skill at dribbling with the ball was simply fantastic. He had scored 400 goals in his career from 1926 to 1948. His birthday, 29th August is celebrated as National Sports Day in India. He was also awarded the 20th National Award 2012, the Gem of Day. This award was received by his son Ashok Chand on behalf of his deceased father.

The National Stadium at Delhi was renamed Dhyan Chand National Stadium in his honour. A commemorative postage stamp was issued in his honour by the Government of India. He remains the only sportsperson with a postage stamp in his honour. He was nominated for the Bharat Ratna in 2014 and there was plenty of support for it. But the awards went to Sachin Tendulkar and C.N.R Rao.

Dhyan Chand's family was disappointed and an RTI enquiry seems to suggest that his nomination was ignored by the Prime Minister's office. There is some controversy about this, but things are not very clear. I hope you enjoyed reading about this talented and brilliant Hockey player who took the Indian Hockey team to the heights of glory.

***D is for (D)ipa Karmakar, the young lass
from Tripura who is scaling the heights***



Image Courtesy: [Wikimedia.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dipa_Karmakar_2014.jpg)

India is a country that has never been known as a great sporting nation. Except for a few selected sports like cricket and hockey, our country has not produced too many international stars. Our medals tally at the Olympics has been uniformly dismal. As far as women are concerned, most Indian families frown on their daughters if they show any inclination to take up sports as a career.

For the letter C, I presented the story of Dhyan Chand, The Wizard of Hockey. For D, I am going to present the story of Dipa Karmakar the young girl who has revolutionised Gymnastics in India. Prior to Dipa, no Indian woman has ever participated in gymnastics in the international arena.

Dipa Karmakar hails from Agartala in the North-Eastern state of Tripura. She was born on 9 August 1993. She started her school life in Abhoynagar Nazrul Smriti Vidyalaya. She began practising gymnastics at the age of six. Her coaching team comprised of Soma Nandi and Bishweshwar Nandi. Her father was a weightlifting coach at the Sports Authority of India, and he was the one who introduced Dipa to gymnastics. The effort at gymnastics did not come easily to Dipa. She had flat feet which is a strict no-no for gymnasts. But with constant training, she managed to develop an arch in her foot.

She first won the junior nationals held at Jaipalguri in the year 2008. She was part of the contingent for the Commonwealth Games held in New Delhi in 2010. In the 2011 National Games, Dipa won the floor, vault, balance beam and uneven bars. She participated in the 2014 Asian games and stood fourth behind Hong Un-jong, Oksana Chusovitina and Phan Thi Ha Than. She secured a score of 14,200.

It was in the year 2014 that Dipa Karmakar became a household name by winning the Bronze medal in the Common Wealth Games held at Glasgow, Scotland. This made her the first Indian female gymnast to win a medal in an international event in the history of gymnastics. This was followed by a Bronze in the Asian Gymnastics Championships and she stood fifth in the World Artistic Gymnastics Championships.

Then came the Summer Olympics in 2016 held at Rio De Janeiro and Dipa Karmakar represented India. She thus became the first Indian female gymnast ever to compete in the Olympics and the 52nd gymnast if both men and women are considered. She secured an overall score of 15,066 and stood fourth in the event. She missed the Bronze by just a whisker. She fell short by a mere 0.15 points.

Though she missed the Bronze, her performance was eye-catching, and it included a move called the Produnova or the 'Vault of Death.' This made her India's pride overnight. Produnova is regarded as one of the most difficult vaults currently performed in women's

gymnastics. Dipa Karmakar is one of the five gymnasts who has successfully landed the Produnova.

Speaking to the Press Trust of India after the finals of the Rio Gymnastics event, Dipa said,

‘For me, this is my first Olympics, But I don’t need to be disappointed, I will give my best in Tokyo 2020.’

In July 2018, Dipa became the first Indian gymnast to win a gold medal at a global event. She achieved this at the FIG Artistic Gymnastics World Challenge Cup held at Mersin, Turkey. Dipa Karmakar was awarded the Padmashri, the fourth highest civilian honour in India. For her performance in the Rio Olympics in 2016, she was awarded the Rajiv Gandhi Khel Ratna in August 2016.

Dipa's journey to the top has definitely not been a smooth one. Imagine a girl with flat feet becoming a gymnast! It is unheard of. In 2017 she was plagued with injuries and had to drop out of a lot of competitions. But she stuck to it with guts and courage. Since 2017, Dipa is being supported by the GoSports foundation under the Rahul Dravid Athletes Mentorship Programme.

Dipa has made it to the very top because of sheer dint of determination and courage and the fire to fight against all odds. She is an inspiration to all the women in our country which is by and large a patriarchal society where most parents do not allow girl children to single-mindedly pursue sports.

She is a role model for the young girls of India who want to try out the unconventional and the near impossible. I hope you enjoyed reading about Dipa Karmakar, the girl from Tripura. For the letter E, I will come up with the story of yet another inspiring sports person.

***E is for Chris (E)vert the women's tennis
great of the seventies***



Image Courtesy: [Wikimedia.org](#)

By the time I reached my late twenties, I had stopped taking interest in tennis. It was during my school and college days that I used to watch the finals of the Australian, French, Wimbledon and US Open championships without fail. My favourite stars in the men's circuit were Bjorn Borg, Jimmy Connors, Boris Becker and Stefan Edberg.

I was a fan of several tennis stars in the ladies' circuit too. I loved Chris Evert's skilful play, Martina Navratilova's power and Steffi Graf's booming serves. I was also a fan of the Argentinian player Gabriela Sabatini. There was another player by the name of Carling Bassett who was the favourite of all of us students at IIT. She was a Canadian and

not a very accomplished star, but she was gorgeous to look at and that was enough to make us students swoon.

The lady whose story I am going to present for the letter E is that of Christine Marie Evert who was also known as Chris Evert Lloyd for a brief period of two years. She was born on December 21, 1954, to Colette and Jimmy Evert. Her family was a devout Catholic family and she did her schooling from the St Thomas Aquinas High School in Ft. Lauderdale. Her father Jimmy Evert was a professional tennis coach. When she was five years old Evert began taking tennis lessons from her father Jimmy. Chris Evert had a sister by the name Jeanne and a brother called John. Chris and Jeanne became professional tennis players while John played tennis at the university level.

In 1969 Evert became the No 1 ranked under-14 player in the US. Evert then won the national-16 and under championship and played an eight-player clay court tournament in which she defeated the World No 1, Margaret Court in the semi-final. This led to her selection for the Wightman Cup. She made her Grand slam Debut in the 1971 US open and during the course of the tournament, she defeated Billie Jean King, Virginia Wade and Betty Stove who were all top-seeded players.

Evert was the runner-up in the 1973 French Open and Wimbledon Championships. In 1974 Evert had a record 55 consecutive match winning streak and she won both the French Open and Wimbledon that year. In 1975 Evert won her second French Open. For the next five consecutive years, Evert was the World No 1 player. Evert was World No 1 for 260 weeks overall. In the year 1976, she won both Wimbledon and the US open. This was the only time she had won both in the same year.

Until February 2013, she held the record of being the oldest woman to be ranked WTA number 1 at the age of 30 years and 11 months. Just like Bjorn Borg about whom I wrote earlier, Evert always maintained a calm, collected and steady demeanour on court. Not one to get rattled

by tense moments on court, she could pull back from positions when she was very close to defeat and would eventually go on to win the match. She dominated women's tennis for a long time.

She won two more US Open titles in 1977 and 1978. But in the latter half of the seventies, her domination of the game was challenged by a swash-buckling Czech whose name was Martina Navratilova. The two of them were doubles partners and very good friends off-court. But their on-court rivalry was fierce and one of the most noted in women's tennis history. In the early stages of their rivalry, Evert got the better of Martina but by the early eighties, Martina upgraded her game and achieved total domination.

Evert won her last Grand Slam title in the Australian Open of 1988 at the age of thirty-three when she defeated Navratilova in the semi-final and then went on to win the final. Of the thirty-four times, Evert reached a Grand Slam final, she won eighteen. Of these seven were at the French Open, six at the US Open, three at Wimbledon and two at the Australian Open. In addition, Evert also won three Grand slam Doubles titles. Evert faced Martina Navratilova in fourteen Grand slam titles of which she could win only ten. Effectively it was Navratilova who put an end to Evert's domination in women's tennis.

Earlier in 1974 Evert and Jimmy Connors won the women's and men's Wimbledon Championships respectively and danced away in puppy love at the championship ball. This romance caught the public's imagination and Evert got engaged to Connors. She was nineteen at that time. A marriage was planned later but the romance did not last, and the marriage was called off. Evert's first marriage was to a British tennis player called John Lloyd which lasted for two years. During the time she was married to Lloyd, she changed her name to Chris Evert Lloyd.

Evert later married Olympic skier Andy Mill with whom she has three sons be name Alexander, Nicholas and Colton. In 2008 she married

her third husband an Australian golfer Greg Corman, but this also ended in divorce in 2009. Evert has several accolades to her name. She was voted Associated Press Female Athlete of the Year on four occasions. She was the first female athlete to be elected the Sports Illustrated magazine's 'Sportswoman of the Year' in 1976. She was inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame in the year 1995. She was also named as the fourth of the forty greatest players of the tennis era by the TENNIS magazine.

Nowadays Evert contributes to tennis magazines and runs the Evert Tennis Academy with her brother John. She is also into the tennis apparels business. I hope you enjoyed reading about this athlete who scaled the heights of the tennis world. Though many of you may not have heard of her, she was an extremely popular favourite thirty-five years back. For the letter F, I will bring you the story of yet another sportsperson and this time I promise you it will be a riveting story.

F is for Bobby (F)ischer the twisted genius of chess



Image Courtesy: [Wikimedia.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bobby_Fischer_1963.jpg)

I started this book by bringing you the story of the brilliant Indian chess grandmaster Viswanathan Anand for the letter A. For the letter F, I will bring you the story of yet another genius who played the game of chess and who was as controversial as he was brilliant. The old-timers among you might have guessed who I am referring to. It is none other than Robert James Fischer popularly known as Bobby Fischer.

Fischer was born in Illinois on March 9, 1943. Though his birth certificate lists his father as Hans-Gerhardt Fischer a German Biophysicist there is some belief that his biological father was Paul Nemenyi who was a Hungarian mathematician and physicist of Jewish origin. Compelling evidence of this was published in The Philadelphia

Inquirer in an investigative report in 2002. His mother was Regina Fischer who was of Jewish origin.

Fischer had a sibling by the name Joan Fischer. Bobby and his sister bought a chess board at a candy store when Fischer was six and using the instruction booklet provided along with the board, they played against each other. Soon Joan lost interest and since Bobby's mother Regina was busy with work, Fischer was left to play with himself. After some time, the family shifted to Brooklyn and Regina found that Bobby was getting excessively obsessed with chess and this greatly worried her.

She tried to place an ad in a newspaper asking if there were other children of Bobby's age who could play chess with him, but the papers rejected her ad. But one newspaper 'The Brooklyn Eagle' forwarded her enquiry to Herman Helms who was the "Dean of American Chess". This led to Bobby getting an opportunity to play against Master Max Pavey, the former Scottish champion. Though Bobby lost to Pavey, he held him for fifteen minutes and one of the onlookers of the game Carmine Nigro, who was also an instructor decided to teach Bobby chess.

In Fischer's own words, though Nigro was not a brilliant player, he was a good teacher. This was one of the turning points of his life that led Bobby Fischer to take up chess in right earnest. Fischer then attended the Hawthorne Chess club based in chess master Jack W Collins home. Collins took pleasure in teaching young children chess.

Bobby really developed strong skills in chess by playing many blitz games with Collins and several other experts. In 1956 Bobby Fischer was rated 1726 in the national rating list of the United States Chess Federation, which was 900 points below the top-rated Samuel Reshevsky. His rating increased rapidly that year. In July 1956 Bobby Fischer won the US Junior Chess Championship at the tender age of thirteen. He was the youngest to win this championship.

In November of the same year, he tied for the second spot with William Lombardy, Nicholas Rossolimo and Arthur Feuerstein in the Eastern States Open Championship in Washington DC. In 1957 Fischer played a two-game match against former world champion Max Euwe at New York losing 1/2 - 1 1/2. In the USCF national rating of 1957, Fischer was rated 2231, over 500 points higher than his rating in 1956.

Fischer was invited to play in the 1957-58 US Open Championship by the USCF. The tournament boasted of several luminaries like six-time champion Samuel Rehshevsky, defending champion Arthur Bisguier and William Lombardy. Fischer scored eight wins in a row and five draws and became the youngest ever US Champion. This was against the predictions of most chess experts.

Bobby then went to the Russia where the Soviet Union invited him to Moscow. As soon as he landed in Moscow, Fischer demanded that he be allowed to play speed chess with the Soviet masters. He played the Soviet grandmasters Evgeni Vasuiko and Alexander Nikitin winning every game. The Soviet grandmaster Vladimir Alatortsev also lost. Fischer was full of arrogant self-confidence at the age of fifteen.

Fischer then wanted to play against the reigning world champion Mikhail Botvinnik but was told that this was impossible. Finally, Tigran Petrosian was summoned to the club on an unofficial basis and he played speed chess with Fischer and Tigran won most of the games played. When Fischer found that he would not be playing any official games in the Soviet Union in that visit, he got enraged and publicly said 'I am fed up of these Russian pigs'.

This enraged the Soviets who had thought of Fischer as their honoured guest. Fischer used to dress atrociously till the time he was fifteen but later he took to dressing smartly. By 1966-67 Fischer had played in eight US national championships and had won all of them. Fischer represented the United States at first board on four chess Olympiads

winning two silver and two Bronze medals. In 1970 and 1971 Fischer dominated chess world totally.

He was way ahead of his contemporaries. In March and April of the year in the USSR vs The Rest of the World championship, Fischer was simply swashbuckling. In July 1972, Fischer's rating was 2785 points, and this put him on the cover of the Life magazine. It was in the year 1972 that Fischer finally became the world champion. The reigning champion was Boris Spassky of the Soviet Union. The championship was played as the best of 24 matches with wins counting as 1 point and draws counting as 1/2 a point and would end when one of the players reached 12 1/2 points.

The matches were scheduled to be played in the Laugardalsholl arena in Reykjavik. The players were expected to play three games every week. This championship was marked by Fischer's extraordinary demands on things like what kind of chess board to be used and several other issues on which he refused to compromise. This championship raised a lot of interest among chess-playing nations all over the globe. The matches finally began after a lot of fanfare. The first two games were won by Boris Spassky. After the losses in the first two games, Fischer nearly left Iceland but was stopped by his second William Lombardy.

In the third game, Spassky agreed to Fischer's demand of playing the third game in a back room of the stage without any cameras. The third game proved to be the turning point and Fischer won it. This was his first win against Spassky. The fourth game was again played in the hall as per Spassky's request, but Fischer insisted that there should be no cameras which the authorities acquiesced to. This game ended in a draw.

Game 5 was won by Fischer and now the two players were level at 2 1/2 - 2 1/2. It is believed that at this point Fischer gave Lombardy a hint that he had some surprises in store for Game 6. Fischer won this

game and it is believed to be a masterpiece of chess play and Spassky joined the audience in applauding Fischer. Fischer was stunned by this show of appreciation and called Spassky a true sportsman.

Game 7 was a draw. Game 8 went to Fischer. Game 9 was again a draw. Game 10 again went to Fischer. Game 11 went to Spassky. Game 12 was again a draw. Game 13 was a win for Fischer even though Spassky was in a fantastic position. For a long time after the game had ended Spassky could not believe he had lost and could not understand what had gone wrong. He had been in such a strong position.

The former world champion Mikhail Botvinnik called this game the highest creative achievement of Bobby Fischer. Game 14 was played after a postponement but eventually ended in a draw. Games 15, 16, 17, 18, 19 and 20 were again drawn. And Game 21 turned out to be the last game of the title. Fischer played brilliantly and Spassky resigned by phone. The final score was $12 \frac{1}{2} - 8 \frac{1}{2}$ in Fischer's favour and he had emerged as the eleventh world champion. In all Fischer won seven games and there were eleven draws.

The crushing manner in which Fischer defeated Spassky made him an instant celebrity and he was offered several product endorsements which he declined. A movie titled Pawn Sacrifice was made in 2014 based on this championship match. The role of Bobby Fischer was played by Toby Macguire. The movie was directed by Edward Zwick and written by Steven Knight. Boris Spassky's role was played by Live Schreiber and Peter Saarsgard played William Lombardy.

Fischer was slated to defend his title against Anatoly Karpov in 1975 but Fischer laid down certain conditions. These were that the matches should continue till one player wins ten games without counting draws. His other conditions were that there should be no limit to the number of games played and in case of a 9-9 score the defending

champion would retain the title and the prize money would be split equally.

FIDE agreed to the ten-game condition but rejected the other two. Fischer would not relent and finally had to forfeit his title. After that Fischer faded into obscurity. He did not play a single game for nearly twenty years. He associated himself with an apocalyptic cult named "Worldwide Church of God" briefly. In 1981 he was arrested by a patrol policeman who claimed that Fischer resembled a man who had robbed a bank.

Fischer claimed he was imprisoned and tortured for several days and claimed there was a conspiracy against him. Fischer again played a match with Boris Spassky in 1992 which was termed the "Revenge Match of the 20th Century". Fischer won the match with ten wins, five losses and fifteen draws. Fischer rejected any attempts to label him as a Jew. Fischer exhibited his anti-Semitism by making numerous statements.

Fischer blamed his mother for not being present for him as a mother and her admiration for the Soviet Union. Some authors believe that this led to his deep resentment of the Soviet Union. The 1992 match against Spassky took place in Yugoslavia when the United Nations had placed a commercial embargo on that country. Because of this, Fischer became a fugitive after playing this match. He took residence in Budapest in Hungary and was in a relationship with a young Hungarian chess master Zita Rajcsanyi.

From 2000 to 2002 Fischer lived in the Philippines. He got involved with a young twenty-two-year-old woman named Marilyn Young who gave birth to a daughter Jinky Young. Marilyn claimed that Fischer was her father. When he was interviewed on Radio about the September 11 attacks Fischer controversially said, 'I applaud the act. Look nobody gets...that the US and Israel have been slaughtering the Palestinians for years...'.

His other controversial statements were 'The horrible behaviour that the US is committing all over the world ... This just shows you, that what goes around, comes around even for the United States'. He also expressed a wish that the US would be taken over by a military coup, all the synagogues destroyed, and all the Jews murdered.

Fischer was then arrested in Japan. Trying to avoid deportation to the US, Fischer requested the Icelandic government for full citizenship which was finally granted after overcoming some hurdles. He lived in Reykjavik, Iceland as a recluse. Fischer died on January 17, 2008, at the age of sixty-four from renal failure and is buried at the cemetery of the Laugardaelir church.

Many people believe that Bobby Fischer was not a psychologically normal human being. He was never formally diagnosed but based on his extreme views and opinions, many psychiatrists feel he might have suffered from Schizophrenia. But all said and done he was a genius at the game of chess. In the words of grandmaster Peter Biyiasas who played several games against Fischer:

'He was too good. There was no use in playing him. It wasn't interesting. I was getting beaten, and it wasn't clear to me why. It wasn't like I made this mistake or that mistake. It was like I was being gradually outplayed, from the start. He wasn't taking any time to think. The most depressing thing about it is that I wasn't even getting out of the middle game to an endgame. I don't ever remember an endgame. He honestly believes there is no one for him to play, no one worthy of him. I played him, and I can attest to that.'

G is for (G)undappa Viswanath's artistry vs Sunil (G)avaskar's mastery in batsmanship



For the letter G, I am planning to bring you an article which is somewhat different from the usual stories of sportspersons that I have been presenting in the previous chapters. Instead of bringing you the story of one particular sportsperson, in this article, I will compare two renowned batsmen of the seventies and eighties who held the Indian cricket team's batting together in those days. The two batsmen are none other than Gundappa Viswanath and Sunil Gavaskar. Incidentally, the two are in-laws and Viswanath is married to Gavaskar's sister.

During my school days, I used to wait for the school bus with other children in the mornings in New Delhi. Most often, cricket used to be the topic of discussion among us. And in these discussions, we always used to compare the batting skills of Viswanath and Gavaskar, the two greats of those days. I remember that most of the other children were of the opinion that Gavaskar was far superior to Viswanath as a batsman.

I used to be the sole exception who spoke up for Viswanath. As it often happens with children, the arguments used to turn into shouting matches and being the only person supporting Viswanath, I was grossly outnumbered. This usually led to me being shouted down by the other children. But for all that, my opinion has not changed to this day. I left school thirty-six years back but even today I consider Gundappa Viswanath far superior to Sunil Gavaskar.

I will present my arguments for this assertion in this article. First of all, let us consider the cricketing statistics of these two batsmen.

Gundappa Viswanath made 91 appearances for India scoring 6080 runs with an average of 41.93. He scored 14 centuries and 35 fifties with a highest score of 222. He has played 25 ODIs and has scored 439 runs with a batting average of 19.95. He has only scored two fifties in his ODI career. Now let us look at Gavaskar's record. Sunil Gavaskar has played 125 matches and scored 10,122 runs with a batting average of 51.12. He has scored 34 centuries and 45 fifties. His top score is 236. He has played 108 ODIs and scored 3,092 runs at an average of 35.13. He has scored 1 century and 27 fifties with a top score of 103.

Neither of them played T20 games. Most people, after reading the above statistics, would straight away ask me why I am writing this article as there appears barely any evidence to support my claim that Viswanath was the better batsman. To such people who go by statistics, I would like to inform you that using statistical records to

compare sportspersons in general and cricketers, especially batsmen, is extremely unreliable.

Now let me come to the reason I consider Viswanath the superior batsman of the two. In this respect, I would like to take you to the 1974-75 five-match series between West Indies and India. I was a young boy when this series was played, but even at that young age, cricket was my all-consuming passion. All the matches of this series were screened in Chennai's Safire theatre as a two-hour show after the series was over. My mother bought tickets for the show and I had the good fortune to see both Gavaskar and Viswanath in true form.

This series followed an earlier series played in England which was a complete washout for the Indian team. India started as underdogs. The West Indian side was captained by Clive Lloyd and had batsmen of the calibre of Gordon Greenidge, Vivian Richards, and Alwyn Kallicharan. Their fast bowling attack centred around the super-fast Andy Roberts, Vanburn Holder, Bernard Julien and Keith Boyce. They had a brilliant wicketkeeper in Derrick Murray. West Indies won the first test match and both Gavaskar and Viswanath performed poorly.

In the second test too both Vishy and Gavaskar scored poorly and West Indies won again. By this time the West Indian pace stalwarts were on a rampage and Andy Roberts, in particular, was absolutely unplayable. A lot was expected from Gavaskar. In the second test, Gavaskar was injured by an Andy Roberts delivery and finally in the third test the only batting maestro India was left with was Viswanath.

The third test was played at Eden Gardens in Calcutta (Kolkata) and in this match, Vishy proved his true mettle. He scored a half-century in the first innings and a fighting heroic 139 in the second innings which gave enough of a build-up for the Indian spinners to bowl their heart out. India won this match.

And Vishy's brilliance in that innings of 139 had to be seen to be believed. Andy Roberts was bowling at a ferocious pace and was repeatedly aiming for Vishy's ribcage. Vishy is of a short stature. There was one particular delivery which Vishy defended by raising his bat right up to his chest in a lightning move and the thunderous delivery fell flat harmlessly in front of the batsman. Roberts looked at Vishy in disbelief, shook his head, stared and then smiled.

The West Indians were leading 2-1 when the fourth match was played at the Chepauk stadium in Madras (Chennai). And the Madras pitch was fast, and Roberts was bowling at raging speeds. Batsmen were getting hurt and wickets fell right left and centre. Vishy stood like a rock and scored 97 and remained unbeaten. The second highest score in that innings was 19. This innings was a masterpiece and is mentioned as one of the best innings ever played in the Wisden Almanac.

It was full of classy strokes and was an exhibition of brilliant play against a rampaging Roberts who was bowling like a man possessed. India won that match as Vishy gave the spinners enough runs to bowl against. And the final match was played at Bombay (Mumbai) and it was played for 6 days. Gavaskar was included in this match and did score an 86 in the first innings. It was basically a pitch that aided batting and Vishy scored 95 and Eknath Solkar also chipped in with a century. Eventually, India lost this match and the series 2-3.

Another instance when Vishy truly showed his class was in the match in Madras against Alwyn Kallicharan's West Indian team in the 1978-79 series. The pitch was a fast and grassy one and the pace bowlers were having a field day. Sylvester Clark and Norbert Philip of the West Indies were bowling like madmen. Vishy stood up to them in the final innings and scored 124 runs and India romped home as victors. Gavaskar failed in this test.

Now to my other arguments. Vishy is an artist, who simply played for the joy of playing. To him, the game had to be played in the right spirit. Sportsmanship was extremely important to him. Many great fast bowlers like Andy Roberts, Denis Lillee and several others rate Gavaskar a batsman with limitations. Andy Roberts, in particular, considers Vishy superior to Gavaskar. Of course, Vishy lost form during the later years of his life and had some problems with his eyesight too.

His skills deserted him and eventually, he retired. But mostly old-timers like me who have seen both of them play fast bowlers as well as spinners in their prime, feel Vishy is no less than Gavaskar if not a better batsman. Gavaskar was by no means a poor batsman. He had fantastic powers of concentration and he was India's regular opening batsman for years and years. But Viswanath was an artist. Many of my readers might have heard of Donald Bradman who is considered the best batsman the world has ever seen. He has a batting average of 99.99.

But the great Bradman was a failure in the body-line series of 1932 when Harold Larwood was aiming the ball at the batsman's head at outrageous speeds, with the intention of hurting them. The comparison between Viswanath and Gavaskar is like the comparison between Victor Trumper and Donald Bradman. When it came to the sheer artistry of batting many people consider Trumper superior.

Gavaskar studied the game and developed great skills while it all came naturally to Vishy. If anyone could flick an Andy Roberts delivery moving away from the offstump at lightning speed and despatch it to the boundary line with a twist of the wrists, it had to be Vishy. I guess there are a lot of people who will disagree with me, but I stick to my guns and assert that Vishy is truly better than Gavaskar, just like I did thirty-nine years back with my school friends.

H is for (H)arold Larwood the demolition man of Body Line fame

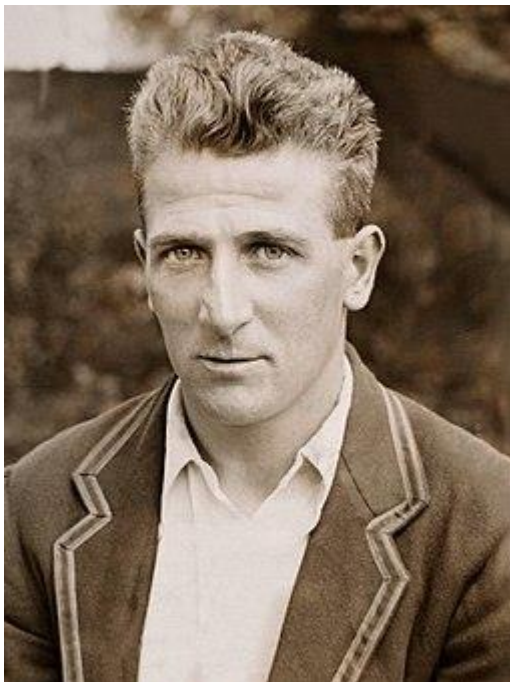


Image Courtesy: [Wikimedia.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Harold_Larwood.jpg)

On reading the title of this article the questions that might have risen in the minds of most people are 'Harold who?' and 'Body what?'. Let me assure my friends from the younger generation that Body Line and Harold Larwood are part of cricketing folklore. And another thing I want my readers to keep in mind while reading this article is that Body Line is an episode in cricket that occurred in an era when batsmen did not use any protective gear other than pads and gloves.

They could not use helmets and chest guards and abdomen guards and the plethora of paraphernalia the batsman of today have access to. And the bowler in question, Harold Larwood was comparable to Shoaib Akhtar of today when it comes to bowling speeds. Only then you would be able to appreciate the true seriousness of Body Line when you read this article.

Even before the entry of pace bowlers like Shoaib Akhtar and Brett Lee into the game of Cricket, there were speedsters who used to terrorise batsmen. In the seventies, the Australians Jeff Thomson and Dennis Lillee used to be an awesome pair of fast bowlers who could demolish brilliant batting line-ups. Then there were the West Indian greats like Joel Garner, Colin Croft, Malcolm Marshall and Michael Holding who used to terrify batsmen all over the world.

Those days batsmen could not use protective gear like helmets, and it used to be a real challenge to face these bowlers of phenomenal pace and bounce. Now we come to Harold Larwood. Larwood was an English fast bowler who became famous in the controversial cricket series played between Australia and England in the years 1932-33. The series was played in Australia and was so controversial and became so famous that there was even a television serial produced based on the story. I was in the second year of my engineering at IIT at the time this series was telecast on Doordarshan.

Every Wednesday we students used to make a beeline to the common room of our hostel to watch the week's episode of the series. Much earlier than the body line series, the Australian cricket team had toured England in the year 1930 and Donald Bradman had scored 974 runs at an average nearly 100. The Australians had won the series 2-1. Bradman was a phenomenon at that time, and he was demolishing bowlers all over the world.

For the 1932-33 series to be played in Australia, Douglas Jardine was appointed the captain of the English side. Jardine and the Australian

crowd had never got on with each other. He had played earlier in Australia and there were numerous instances when he had altercations with the crowd. Consequently, Jardine hated Australians. Jardine realised that if England were to emerge victorious in the series, he would have to devise a means to contain the prodigious Bradman.

With this in mind, a meeting was arranged in London's Piccadilly hotel between Jardine, Nottinghamshire captain Arthur Carr and the two fast bowlers Harold Larwood and Bill Voce. Jardine asked Voce, and Larwood in particular if they could get the ball to pitch on the leg stump and make it rise sharply into the body of the batsman. This kind of bowling is known as Body Line bowling or Fast Leg Theory.

Both the bowlers felt they could manage this. Harold Larwood was an extremely fast and accurate bowler. The Body Line tactic if employed by a bowler of such pace and bounce would amount to nothing but an effort to completely intimidate the batsman or even cause him physical injury. Those days there was no means of measuring a bowler's speed accurately, but it is believed that Harold Larwood was one of the fastest bowlers ever.

Before Jardine came up with this idea, he had studied Bradman's batting technique extensively and he had come to the conclusion that Bradman had a weakness against extreme pace. And this conclusion led Jardine to devise the plan. Those days Britain was a society divided by class divisions. Harold Larwood was a coal miner's son and he worked in a quarry.

And Douglas Jardine belonged to the elite upper class of England's layered society. And it probably never occurred to Larwood to question his captain. If your upper-class captain asked you to do something, those days you just did it. Jardine discussed his tactics with his team and made up his mind to use Fast Leg Theory though it is not clear whether he had told his bowlers to actually try and hurt the Australian batsmen.

There are some reports that he even instructed the players to hate the Australians. In the early matches, the English bowlers did use body line to some extent, but their true intent was not evident. Another thing that was noted was that there were an unusual number of fast bowlers included in the English side. It was only in a game against the Australian XI (not the test 1X) played in Melbourne, Fast Leg Theory was employed fully.

Jardine did not play this match and the English side was led by Bob Wyatt. Wyatt reported to Jardine that Bradman appeared disturbed by the bowling of Larwood, Voce and Bowes. In this match, Bradman could score only 36 and 19 in the two innings he played, and he employed very unusual tactics like ducking and running around the crease. The Australian press criticized the bowlers, particularly Harold Larwood who was the fastest and consequently the most hostile.

The first test match of the series was missed by Bradman because of an ongoing argument with the cricket board, but according to Jardine, Bradman had a nervous breakdown. In this test match, the Englishmen employed body line to the hilt and the Australians lost the match resoundingly by ten wickets. Larwood returned with figures of 10 wickets for 124 runs and was the most successful.

The only Australian batsman who had the guts and fortitude to stand up to Larwood was Stan McCabe who hooked and pulled everything aimed at his body and scored 187 runs in the match. By this time, the Australian press was targeting the English bowlers and even some of the English players were beginning to have serious doubts about the tactics being employed.

In the second test match, Bradman returned and in the first innings, he was out the first ball. But he scored a century in the second and the Australians won the match. After this test match, the Australians began believing things were, after all, going to be okay and body line was

not really a threat. But the point they overlooked was that this test match was played on a slower wicket.

It was in the third test that the controversy reached its peak. England batted through the first day and it was Australia's turn to bat on the second. The third over of the Australian innings was bowled by Larwood. The batsman was Woodfull. The fifth ball of the over narrowly missed Woodfull's head and the sixth ball pitched on the middle stump and hit Woodfull on the chest.

Woodfull hobbled in pain and the English players surrounded him and offered sympathy but Jardine the captain poured oil into the fire by commenting, 'Well bowled, Harold!'. This comment was actually aimed at unnerving Bradman who was padding up and within hearing distance. Woodfull heard this and was stunned. An over later Woodfull again had to play Larwood. And again, the fielders shifted to a field placement necessary for body line bowling.

By now the crowd was in a really angry mood and even a riot could have taken place. Later both the captain and the bowler blamed each other for placing the fielders in body line positions. During this over another Larwood delivery knocked the bat out of Woodfull's hands. Woodfull batted for 89 deliveries in all and he was finally bowled out by Allen for 22.

That evening one of the England managers, Pelham Warner visited the Australian dressing room to offer sympathies to Woodfull. Woodfull told him, 'I don't want to see you, Mr Warner. There are two teams out there. One is trying to play cricket and the other is not. This game is too good to be spoilt. It is time some people got out of it.'

This exchange between Warner and Woodfull was reported in the press and it was considered a monumental folly as a private conversation had been leaked to the press. After the rest day, the Australian Bill Oldfield played a long innings ably supported by Bill

Ponsford and scored 85 runs. It was at this point that Larwood after conceding a four bowled a slower and shorter delivery that hit Oldfield on the temple. Oldfield was trying to hook the ball to the boundary.

This resulted in a hairline fracture. Larwood immediately apologised but Oldfield said it was his own fault. The crowd jeered at Larwood and it looked like a riot was about to break out and several English players were thinking of arming themselves with stumps. Oldfield was assisted back to the dressing room and the game continued. It was at the end of the fourth day, that the Australian board of control sent a cable to Marylebone Cricket Club, cricket's ruling body that selected the English cricket team. The cable read,

Australian Board of Control to MCC, January 18, 1933:

Bodyline bowling assumed such proportions as to menace best interests of game, making protection of body by batsmen the main consideration. Causing intensely bitter feeling between players, as well as injury. In our opinion is unsportsmanlike. Unless stopped at once likely to upset friendly relations between Australia and England.

MCC was very unhappy about the word 'unsportsmanlike' mentioned in the cable and replied,

MCC to Australian Board of Control, January 23, 1933:

We, Marylebone Cricket Club, deplore your cable. We deprecate your opinion that there has been unsportsmanlike play. We have fullest confidence in captain, team and managers, and are convinced they would do nothing to infringe either the Laws of Cricket or the spirit of the game. We have no evidence that our confidence is misplaced. Much as we regret accidents to Woodfull and Oldfield, we understand that in neither case was the bowler to blame. If the Australian Board of Control wish to propose a new law or rule it

shall receive our careful consideration in due course. We hope the situation is not now as serious as your cable would seem to indicate, but if it is such as to jeopardise the good relations between English and Australian cricketers, and you would consider it desirable to cancel remainder of programme, we would consent with great reluctance.

One of the members of the English side was the Nawab of Pataudi and he was deeply chagrined by the unsportsmanlike tactics employed by Jardine and was open about his feelings. Even in the English dressing room, players were arguing with each other and Jardine was shaken by all this. He offered to stop using body line tactics if his players were against it. A meeting of the players in which Jardine did not participate was arranged.

Finally, the English players released a statement fully supporting their captain. The MCC's cable had clearly indicated that the rest of the tour would have to be cancelled if the word 'unsportsmanlike' was not withdrawn from the cable sent by the Australians. The Australian board met and sent another cable saying that they wished to continue the tour and they would prefer to decide on body line bowling later.

To this, the MCC sent a cable insisting that the word 'unsportsmanlike' must be withdrawn if the tour was to continue. The incident became a diplomatic standoff. Finally, the Australian Prime Minister Joseph Lyons had to step in. England threatened to boycott Australian trade. Lyons explained to the Australian board, the consequences Australia would have to face as a nation if the English public boycotted Australian trade and goods.

Finally, the Australian board had to bend and sent a cable saying,

'We do not regard the sportsmanship of your team as being in question'

The third test ended with England winning it. After the third test, among the English bowlers, it was only Harold Larwood who continued using body line but even he used it lesser than before. Voce missed the fourth test. England won the fourth test by eight wickets.

The fifth and final test was again won by England by 8 wickets and Harold Larwood continued to use body line. The series was won by England 4 matches to 1. After the series, when the MCC finally realized what exactly had transpired in Australia and the true seriousness of the matter they made some changes to the laws of Cricket. They brought in a rule that the batsman cannot be attacked directly and if this is detected, the umpires have the responsibility to stop it.

Now let me tell you something about Harold Larwood the man. He was born on 14, November 1904 in the village of Nuncargate, Nottinghamshire to a coal miner. He was the fourth of five sons. He began working in the mines at the age of 14. He performed excellently in club cricket and started playing for Nottinghamshire. He made his test debut in 1926. In all, he played 21 matches and took 78 wickets at 28.35 apiece.

He was reputed to be fearsome. A tall broad-shouldered and powerful man he was both accurate and fast. In 1949, he was elected to the honorary membership of the MCC. In 1950 he emigrated and settled in Australia where unlike 1932 he was accorded a warm welcome. First, he worked in a soft drinks firm, then as a reporter, and finally as a commentator.

A stand is named after him in the Trent Bridge county ground. In 1988, he was appointed a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE). He died in 1995 at the age of 89. A brilliant fast bowler who terrorised batsman and had no compunctions about it. One might question his ethics, but no one can question his talent. He played with a no-holds-

barred attitude and he did not believe in compromises. A tough but honest attitude.

I is for Sir (I)an Botham the ever-green all-rounder from England



Image Courtesy: Wikimedia.org

It is going to be a cricketer again for the letter I. This time I will be comparing two great all-rounders who played cricket when I was in school. The players are from England and India, namely Ian Botham and Kapil Dev. Of course, both were great players in their own right and it really is a difficult job to do a comparative analysis, but I will try to make an impartial assessment.

I will compare the cricketing statistics of the two players first. Botham has played 102 tests and has scored 5,200 runs at an average of 33.52.

He has scored fourteen centuries and 22 fifties with a top score of 208. He has bowled 21,815 balls and taken 383 wickets at 28.40 runs apiece. He has played 116 ODI's and scored 2,113 runs at an average of 23.13. His top score in ODI's is 79 and he has scored 9 fifties. He has not scored any century in ODIs. He has bowled 6,271 balls in ODI's and taken 145 wickets at 28.54 runs apiece.

Let us now examine Kapil Dev's record. Kapil has played 131 tests and scored 5,348 runs at an average of 31.05. He has scored 8 centuries and 27 fifties. When it comes to test match bowling, Kapil has bowled 27,740 balls and taken 434 wickets at 29.64 runs apiece. In ODIs Kapil has played 225 ODIs and scored 3,783 runs at an average of 23.79. He has 1 century and 14 fifties under his belt. He has bowled 11,202 balls and taken 253 wickets at 27.45 apiece.

If we look at the statistics, the two players more or less seem to be equally poised and on par with each other. But statistics are always suspect and never reveal the real truth. If we are to look at other aspects of the cricketing careers of the two players, Kapil Dev captained India successfully for numerous years, whereas Botham's tenure as the captain of the English side was a failure and short lived.

But let us look at the batting and bowling potential of the two players. Botham's performance against India has always been swashbuckling. I remember watching Botham in the 1979 series between England and India. I watched every test match of this series on television. England won the first test match. In the second test, Botham swept through the Indian second innings, but India somehow managed to salvage a draw.

In the third test at Headingley, Botham scored 137 runs, but India was saved by the weather. In the final test at Oval, Botham took 4 wickets in the Indian first innings. India almost won that test when Sunil Gavaskar scored a brilliant 221 on the last day of the match. I still remember the third test match as if I had watched it yesterday. The

match was played at Leeds in England and Ian Botham scored a century in the first innings.

In that innings, Botham played a rather peculiar stroke. The delivery was a slow one, pitched outside the leg stump. In a lightning quick move, Botham exchanged his right-handed hold on the bat to a left-handed one and stroked the ball to the boundary and I remember the commentator exclaiming excitedly, 'Only Ian Botham can get away with that.'

That was the first time I had seen a reverse being by a batsman. Of course, nowadays, we get to see numerous types of unorthodox stroke play in cricket matches. It is often said that Ian Botham never really lived up to his true potential as a cricketer. In this regard, I would like to cite his exploits in the Ashes test series between Australia and England. In this series held in 1981 the third test at Headingley is something which is part of cricketing folklore.

It is still remembered by cricket enthusiasts and Englishmen of the older generation like to discuss this test in pubs over a peg of beer even now. In fact, Chris Old the English bowler who played a significant role in this test opened a Fish and Chips shop in a remote English sea-side village and used to regale his customers with tales of this test match.

By 1980, Botham had played 25 tests and scored 1336 runs at an average of 40.48. He had also taken 139 wickets at 18.62 runs apiece. He was by far the most influential member of the English cricket team and was consequently appointed the captain. Botham resigned as captain after losing the three-match one day series and two tests against Australia and Mike Brearley became the captain once again. During Botham's tenure as captain, in the 12 tests, England played, they lost 4 and drew 8.

Botham's personal record was also dismal. He had scored 276 runs at an average of 13.14 and his 35 wickets cost him 33.08 apiece. From a swashbuckling all-rounder at the peak of his form, Botham was suddenly reduced to a non-entity. Mike Brearley was appointed captain again. Getting back to the Headingley test match of 1981, the English team assembled for the test match and Kim Hughes the Australian captain won the toss.

He asked his wicketkeeper Rod Marsh and strike bowler, the ferocious Dennis Lillee to examine the wicket and after much deliberation chose to bat. John Dyson scored a century and the Australians played carefully and at the close of play were 203 for 3 wickets. Botham was bowling with a lot of inhibition and the brilliant captain Brearley was observing him.

Brearley told Botham to stop bowling the ball away from the stumps and to bowl at it. After tea Botham suddenly lost all inhibition and took 5 wickets for 35 runs. Australia declared at 401 for 9. In their first innings, England totally messed up. Boycott and Gower were scalped by Lawson and Botham hit 50 of 54 deliveries and was out to a simple catch by Marsh off Lillee. England were bowled out for a mere 174 in their first innings.

Hughes asked England to follow on. The play was stopped due to bad light but before that England lost Gooch. But the Sun soon began shining and play resumed, and the crowd was waiting for just this. Boycott and Willey batted skilfully but soon the English wickets fell like ninepins. And finally, at 135 for 7 Taylor's wicket fell and Botham was joined by Dilley at the crease.

That is when Botham showed his real class as a batsman. At that point in the match, somehow Botham started looking cheerful and in great spirits. He soon went from 39 to 103 with the aid of 14 boundaries. He also hit a six. He really cut loose on the Australian bowlers and hit all sorts of orthodox and unorthodox shots all over the field. Dilley was

finally out for 56 and Botham was joined by Chris Old. It is said that at this point Botham remarked to Old, 'Now, let us have some fun.'

Old and Botham had a partnership of 67 runs after that and finally, Botham was out when his score was 145. The Australian captain Hughes simply ran out of ideas against Botham's merciless assault and failed to be innovative and try new ideas. England's innings ended when they were 129 runs ahead and Australia were set a target of 130 runs to win.

That night in the dressing room Bob Willis told Brearley he would bowl faster and straighter, unlike the first innings. This required that he change the end from which he bowled, and Botham agreed to the change in plan. The next day Willis proceeded to get rid of Chappell and Hughes, the latter off a brilliant catch by Botham. Slowly Botham was recovering his game fully after the fiasco of the year before.

Australia were 58 for 4 at lunch and finally, Border fell to a Chris Old delivery. Marsh tried to hook a beamer and was out and Australia were 75 for 7 down. Willis had taken 6 of the wickets. Then Lillee and Bright starting hitting the ball all over the place and added 35 runs. Finally, Lillee went too far with the hitting and chipped a Willis half-volley to Gatting who was lightning quick and took the catch.

Finally, the Australians were bowled out when Bright was bowled by Willis when the Australians were at 111. Willis had taken 8 for 43. The other two wickets were taken by Chris Old and Ian Botham. This match proved that Botham was a brilliantly talented tempestuous batsman who lacked the skill to govern himself. The reason for Botham's performance in that match is attributed to the psychological handling of Botham by his brilliant captain Mike Brearley.

Coming back to the comparison between Botham and Kapil Dev, unlike Botham, Kapil is very stable psychologically. Botham had numerous run-ins with drugs and women too. He was not a

disciplinarian like Kapil. Kapil always maintained a strict ethical code on and off the cricket field. And this is perhaps the reason why Kapil Dev lasted as the Indian captain for so long and was more successful statistically.

I might be crucified for saying this but having seen both men in action on the cricket field, I rate Botham higher when it comes to sheer talent. But all said and done it is a tough comparison and this is my personal opinion. Now I will give you some personal details about the man Ian Botham.

Botham was born in Heswall, Cheshire to Herbert Leslie Botham and Violet Marie. His mother was a nurse and his father had been in the army for twenty years and had fought in the second world war. Both his parents played cricket. When he was four years old, he came back home with a cricket ball and asked his mother, 'Do you know how to hold a ball when you are going to bowl a Daisy-Cutter?'

Botham is married to Kathryn Waller whom he met in 1974. They have a son Liam who is a professional cricketer and a rugby player. They also have two daughters. The family currently lives in Almeria and Botham now engages himself by playing Golf. Botham is a supporter of Brexit. I hope you enjoyed the story of Ian Botham, one of the finest players of cricket. So, it has been three articles on cricketers continuously now, but I promise I will be presenting someone from a different sport for the next letter.

J is for (J)esse Owens who dented Hitler's Aryan myth



Image Courtesy: [Wikimedia.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jesse_Owens.jpg)

Till now I have brought you stories of sportspersons from Tennis, Chess, Gymnastics, Cricket and Hockey. For the letter J, I will move over to track and field and bring you the story of a very important sportsperson of a bygone era. This athlete is none other than the star of the track and field, of the thirties, Jesse Owens. Owens was the youngest of ten children born to Henry Cleveland Owens and Mary Emma Fitzgerald in Oakville, Alabama on September 12, 1913.

When Jesse was nine his family shifted to Cleveland, Ohio for better opportunities. When his new teacher wanted to know his name for entering it in the roll book, he replied that his name was "J.C", but the teacher mistook his strong southern accent and thought he meant Jesse.

The name stuck and for the rest of his life, he was known as Jesse Owens.

As a young man, Jesse had to sustain his family by taking several jobs like delivering groceries, loading freight cars and so on. His father and brothers worked in a steel mill. Jesse discovered his love for running during his school days and he was encouraged by his school coach Charles Riley to take up athletics as a career.

It was in Fairmont High school that Jesse met his wife who was with him till his death in 1980. Her name was Ruth Solomon and when they met, she was 13 and he was 15. They remained with each other through high school and their first child, a girl was born in 1932. They married in 1935 and Ruth later gave birth to two more daughters.

Owens captured people's attention for the first time when he equalled the world record of 10,3 seconds in a 100-meter dash and jumped 24 feet and 9 1/2 inches in the National High School Championship in 1933. He attended Ohio State University once his father was suitably employed and the family did not have to worry about sustaining itself.

It was in the 1935 Big Ten meet at Ferry Field in Ann Arbor, Michigan that Jesse Owens achieved world fame and became immortal. In this event, in the span of 45 minutes, he set three world records and tied a fourth. He set the world record in long jump with a jump of 26 ft and 8 1/4 inches which lasted for 25 years. He completed the 220-yard sprint in 20.3 seconds. He also completed the 220-yard low hurdles in 22.6 seconds thus becoming the first to breach the 23-second mark.

He also equalled the world record for the 100-yard dash completing it in 10.4 seconds. The 45-minute period during which Owens set these records has been described by many as the 'the greatest 45 minutes ever in sport'. Next came the 1936 Berlin Olympics held in front of the Aryan supremacist, Adolf Hitler. At that time the world was in the

throes of the aggression that would eventually lead to the outbreak of the second world war.

Owens achieved international fame in the Berlin 1936 games by winning 4 Gold medals. He won the medals in the 100 meters, 200 meters, long jump and the 4 X 100 meters relay. It was reported by many that Adolf Hitler did not congratulate Owens. But Owens himself has clarified the haze surrounding this.

This is what Owens had to say,

'Hitler had a certain time to come to the stadium and a certain time to leave. It happened he had to leave before the victory ceremony after the 100 meters [race began at 5:45 p.m]]. But before he left I was on my way to a broadcast and passed near his box. He waved at me and I waved back. I think it was bad taste to criticize the 'man of the hour' in another country.'

There is also another heart-warming story about how a German long jumper Luz Long helped Owens win the Gold in the long jump event in the Berlin Olympics. Owens had fouled his first two jumps. He had only one more attempt and he needed to clear 7.15 meters in it if he were to qualify for the finals to be held later. Owens was sitting looking extremely dejected.

At this point, Luz Long walked up to him and advised him to jump from a point several inches behind the take-off board. The fact was that Luz Long who had been watching Owens realized that he would be able to clear the required 7.15 meters by taking off from a point behind of the take-off board as Owens routinely jumped distances greater than 7.15 meters.

This would enable Owens not only to clear the required 7.15 meters but also to avoid fouls. And finally, Owens was able to qualify by jumping from a point that was 4 inches behind the take-off mark. In

the finals, Owens won the Gold and Luz Long won the silver and they posed for photographs together.

Later Owens said,

'It took a lot of courage for him to befriend me in front of Hitler... You can melt down all the medals and cups I have and they wouldn't be a plating on the twenty-four karat friendship that I felt for Luz Long at that moment'

Owens returned from the 1936 Olympics to the US as a celebrity but at that time there was a lot of racism in the US. He did not get too many endorsements. He later became an instructor for the New York Mets. He then started a dry-cleaning business and then worked as a gas station agent. But finally, he had to file for bankruptcy.

He was also convicted for tax evasion. As part of his rehabilitation, the US government appointed him a goodwill ambassador. He travelled the world and spoke to several companies. One of them is the Ford Motor Company. He retired and at that point he owned racehorses.

Owens was a chain smoker since he was 32 years old. He was afflicted with an aggressive form of lung cancer. He died of the disease at the age of 66 in Tucson, Arizona on March 31, 1980. His family was with him when he died. He was buried in the Oakwoods cemetery in Chicago. The dormitory in which Owens stayed during the Berlin Olympics has been converted into a living museum showcasing his accomplishments.

Among these is a letter from a fan, written during the Berlin Olympics urging him not to shake hands with Hitler. It is said that this letter was found by the Gestapo after the games. The Jesse Owens Award has been instituted in the US and is considered the highest award for a US track and field athlete. ESPN ranked him the sixth greatest North

American athlete of the track field for the 20th century and the highest ranked in his sport.

I hope you enjoyed reading about this marvellous athlete. I will be back with a new sports personality for the letter K.

***K is for Mary (K)om or Magnificent Mary
who could throw many a knockout punch***



Image Courtesy: Wikimedia.org

I am a feminist and an admirer of women who stand shoulder to shoulder with men in our society which has always had a patriarchal mindset. Being an IIT graduate, I am afraid I must admit to a certain kind of hypocrisy when it comes to education. What I am trying to convey is, at a subconscious level, my admiration for women has always tilted towards the upwardly mobile, elite and educated women like Naina Lal Kidwai and Kiran Mazumdar Shah who have made names for themselves in sectors like banking and business.

You know how it is; no matter how hard you try, certain attitudes that have crept into your mind at a subconscious level are really hard to shake off. But off-late, I completely lost this attitude when Indian

women started grabbing the nation's attention with some sterling performances in the sporting arena. I realised that women from small towns and even rural backgrounds were equally capable of being really great achievers.

Today I will bring you the story of Chungneijang Mary Kom Hmangte better known as Mary Kom or Magnificent Mary. Mary Kom was born on 1, March 1983 in Kangathei village, Moirang Lamkhai in Churachandpur district of rural Manipur in Northeastern India.

Kom has a younger sister and a brother. She had very humble beginnings and used to help her parents in doing farm chores. At school, she initially learnt athletics and later boxing. Kom was unable to pass her matriculation exam and later gave her examination from NIOS Imphal and graduated from Churachandpur College.

When Kom was in school she was an allrounder who experimented with volleyball, football and athletics. Inspired by Dingko Singh's success she switched from athletics to boxing in 2000. At the age of fifteen, she left her hometown for the state capital Imphal where she trained under K. Kosana Meitei. In a BBC interview, Meitei later mentioned that she was a young girl with a lot of will power who could pick up the basics of boxing very easily.

Kom then started training under Manipur State Boxing Coach, M Narjit Singh at Khuman Lampak, Imphal. Kom kept her training and interest in boxing a secret from her father but he found out when he happened to see her photograph in a newspaper. Kom's father was worried that taking up boxing would ruin her face and as is customary with Indian fathers he felt this would spoil her chances of getting married. It took three years for him to accept her decision when he realised that Kom truly loved boxing and wanted to pursue it.

Kom met her husband Karung Onkhohler, a footballer in 2000 when her luggage was stolen on her way to Bengaluru by train and thereafter

to Delhi for a sports meet. Kom and Onkholer married in 2005 and have three sons, twins by name Rechungvar and Khupneivar (born in 2007), and Prince born in May 2013. After marriage, Mary quit boxing for a couple of years. But thanks to her husband's support and encouragement she began training again.

In the 2008 Asian Women's Boxing Championship held in India, she won a silver medal. She won four successive gold medals in the AIBA Women's World Boxing Championship held in China. This was followed by a gold in Asian indoor games held at Vietnam. Then followed a string of medals in 2010 and 2011. She won the gold medal in the Asian Women's Boxing Championship held at Kazhakstan.

In the AIBA World Women's Boxing Championship held at Barbados, she went on to win her fifth gold medal. In the Asian Games of 2010, she competed in the 51 Kg class and won the bronze. In the 2010 Commonwealth Games held in Delhi, she along with Sanjay and Harshit Jain had the honour of bearing the Queen's baton in its opening ceremony. Unfortunately, she could not compete in the games as women's boxing was not included in the commonwealth games. In 2011, she won the gold in the 48 kg class in the Asian Women's Cup held in China.

In the Summer Olympic Games of 2012 held in London, women's boxing was included as a sport for the first time in Olympics. Kom's mother accompanied her to London but her coach could not as he did not have the AIBA 3-star certification which was necessary for accreditation. Her passport and all her luggage had been stolen earlier on her way to Bangkok for the selection camp for her first Asian Women's championship.

On 5, August 2012 Mary Kom defeated Karolina Michulczuk of Poland 19-14 in the third ever women's boxing match to be fought at the Olympics. The next day in the quarterfinals, Kom defeated Maroua Rahali of Tunisia 15-6. In the semi-finals, she lost to Nicola Adams of

the UK 6-11. But however, she secured a bronze medal and in recognition, the Manipur government awarded her Rs 50 lakhs and two acres of land.

Kom continued to bring accolades for India after her Olympic bronze. At the Asian Games conducted at Incheon, South Korea in 2014 she won the gold medal by beating Kazakhstan's Zhaina Shekerbekova in the flyweight (51 Kg) finals. On 8 November 2017, she won a fifth gold medal (48 kg) at the ASBC Asian Confederation women's boxing championships held at Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam.

This was the first time someone had won gold for the fifth time in this championship. On 24, November 2018 Mary Kom created a world record by becoming the first woman to win six world championships. She achieved this feat at the 10th AIBA World Women's Boxing Championship held in New Delhi. Kom's autobiography titled *Unbreakable* was co-authored by Dina Serto and published by HarperCollins in 2013.

On 5, September 2014 a movie titled *Mary Kom* was released. The movie was directed by Omung Kumar and Priyanka Chopra played the role of Mary Kom. For her bronze in the London Olympics, she was awarded several cash prizes by the governments of Manipur, Rajasthan, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. The ministry of tribal affairs also came up with a cash award of Rs. 10 Lacs. The title of 'Meethoileima' was conferred on her by the Manipur government.

Kom has not turned professional but even as an Amateur she surpasses several professionals in terms of earnings. She was awarded the Arjuna Award in 2003 and Padmashri in 2006. She is the first amateur athlete to be awarded the Padma Bhushan in 2013. AIBA conferred the title 'Magnificent Mary' on her in 2008. She won the Rajiv Gandhi Khel Ratna Award in 2009. She serves as the brand ambassador for the Super Fight League. She also made an appearance on the last

episode of the Super Fight League's mixed martial arts reality show - SFL Challengers.

Mary Kom's is an inspiring story. A girl born in a rural area in a remote state like Manipur makes it to international fame by dint of hard work, will power and courage to fight against all odds. She is not your usual B-School grad who has a flashy MBA under her belt and enters the corporate world and rises up the ladder through promotions and managerial skills. She is an achiever of a different kind who has proved that what it takes to get to the top can be anything as long as it works for a person.

L is for (L)ionel Messi, a small man but a towering figure in the football field



Till now I have brought you stories of sportspersons from diverse sports like Cricket, Hockey, Gymnastics and Tennis. But I have not yet touched on an extremely popular sport that is played by as many as thirty-six countries in the world. Yes, you guessed right. For letter L the sport is football and the person whose achievements I am going to highlight is none other than the wizard of the football field, Lionel Messi from Argentina.

Lionel Andres Messi Cuccitini is the third of the four children of Jorge Messi and his wife Celia Cuccittini. Jorge was a steel factory manager and his wife Celia worked in the magnet manufacturing workshop. Lionel Messi's date of birth is 24, June 1987. He was born in Rosario in Argentina. His family was very much into football and young Messi developed a keen interest and love for the game at a very young age.

Messi joined the Newell's Old Boys club in Rosario when he was six years old. He played as part of a youth side named 'The Machine of

87' in the club for six years and scored nearly 500 goals. This is what the Newell's coach Adrian Coria has to say about Messi,

'When you saw him you would think: this kid can't play ball. He's a dwarf, he's too fragile, too small. But immediately you'd realise that he was born different, that he was a phenomenon and that he was going to be something impressive.'

When he was ten years old Messi was diagnosed with a growth hormone deficiency that threatened his professional career. The cost of treatment was nearly \$ 1000 a month. Messi's family had relatives in Catalonia, and in September 2000 they arranged for a trial with the Barcelona club. Charly Rexach who was the team director wanted to sign him, but the board of directors of Barcelona were not too keen because at that time European clubs rarely signed foreign players at a very young age. On 14 December, Barcelona finally offered Messi a contract.

Messi's family moved to Barcelona in February 2001, into an apartment near the Barcelona club's stadium, Camp Nou. Initially, Messi faced some problems due to a transfer conflict with Newell's and could not play. He was a foreigner and could only be fielded in friendly matches and the Catalan league. This made it very difficult for young Messi to integrate into the team as he was also a reserved person by nature. His mother, his brothers and little sister, María Sol moved back to Rosario while he stayed in Barcelona with his father.

Messi completed his treatment for growth hormone deficiency when he was fourteen. Messi rose rapidly through the Barcelona club ranks and on 24, June 2005 he signed his first contract as a senior team player. This date incidentally coincided with his eighteenth birthday. By the time he was 19 years old, Messi had established himself as one of the best players in the world. He scored his first hat-trick of goals on 10 March 2007 and was the first player to do so in 12 years,

equalising after each goal by Real Madrid to end the match in a 3–3 draw.

His importance to the club grew and he signed a new contract with increased wages. He was already being compared with his famous fellow countryman Diego Maradona. He reinforced this reputation by scoring a goal very similar to Maradona's goal in the FIFA World cup of 1986 which is commonly known as the 'goal of the century'. Just like Maradona, Messi collected the ball near the right side of the halfway line and got past five defenders, running sixty meters and scored the goal. Messi played in the right wing initially.

The year 2012 proved to be a record-breaking one for Messi. On 7 March, he achieved a record that was unprecedented in the history of the Champions League by scoring five goals in the last 16-round match against Bayer Leverkusen. This achievement made him the top scorer with 14 goals, tying Jose Altafini's record in the 1962–63 season. He also became the second player after Gerd Muller to be top scorer in four campaigns.

Playing for Barcelona, Messi also scored twice in their 3–0 semi-final victory over Bayern Munich. His second goal came just after three minutes of his first. He scored the second goal by chipping the ball over the goalkeeper Manuel Neuer after dribbling it past Jerome Boateng and making him drop to the ground. This goal went viral and became the year's most tweeted sporting moment. It was also named the best goal of the season by UEFA.

On 6 June, Barcelona defeated Juventus 3–1 in Berlin to win their second treble, becoming the first team in history to do so. For his efforts during the season, he received the UEFA Best Player in Europe award for a second time. A couple of weeks later, on 20 March, Messi became the top goal scorer in Barcelona's history at the age of 24 overtaking the 57-year record of Cesar Rodriguez's 232 goals. Throughout 2013 Messi struggled with injuries. The 2014 FIFA world

cup was slated to be played in Brazil and there was a lot of doubt about Messi's form as he had finished an injury-ridden season with Barcelona in 2013-2014.

But before the world cup, his form returned, and he came up with some stellar performances. He was picked as captain of Argentina. In the first match of the world cup, Messi led Argentina to a 2–1 victory over Bosnia and Herzegovina. This was followed by a win over Iran, securing Argentina's qualification for the knockout phase. Messi assisted in a goal in extra time to ensure a 1–0 win against Switzerland in the round of 16. This was followed by a 1-0 victory in the quarter-final against Belgium, and Argentina was in the semi-final of the World Cup for the first time since 1990.

Argentina defeated the Netherlands 4–2 in a penalty shootout to reach the finals against Germany. The final match of the 2015 world cup was labelled as Messi vs Germany, the world's best player versus the world's best side. Messi had started the play that led to a goal in the first half hour but unfortunately, it was ruled offside. Throughout the match, Messi proceeded to miss opportunities to open the scoring, in particular at the start of the second half when his breakaway effort went wide off the far post.

Finally, in the 113th minute Mario Gotze of Germany scored, in the last minute of extra time by a free kick that Messi sent over the net. To Argentina's dismay, Germany had won the match 1–0 and had claimed the World Cup. But Messi had his moment of glory when he was awarded the Golden Ball as the best player of the tournament. However, his selection drew criticism as he had not scored goals in the knockout rounds. FIFA President Sepp Blatter expressed his surprise, and Diego Maradona suggested that Messi had undeservedly been chosen for marketing purposes.

The world cup was followed by the third final of Messi's international career in the 2015 Copa America, held in Chile. Argentina entered the

tournament as title contenders due to their second-place achievement at the World Cup. In their first match against Paraguay, Argentina was two goals ahead at half-time, but the match ultimately ended in a 2–2 draw. Messi had scored from a penalty kick, which was his only goal in the entire tournament.

In the year 2016 Messi sustained a back injury. And Argentina once again lost in the Copa America final and Messi announced his retirement. Following this announcement by Messi, Argentinians began a campaign urging him to change his mind. He was greeted by fans with signs that read, 'Don't go, Leo' when the team landed in Buenos Aires. President Mauricio Macri of Argentina stated,

'We are lucky, it is one of life's pleasures, it is a gift from God to have the best player in the world in a footballing country like ours... Lionel Messi is the greatest thing we have in Argentina and we must take care of him.'

A statue of Lionel Messi was unveiled in the capital by the Mayor of Buenos Aires Horacio Rodríguez Larreta to convince him to reconsider retirement. Messi finally came back from retirement on 12th August of that year. But in the 2018 World Cup Messi did not perform too well and even prior to the cup there had been speculation that this would probably be his final world cup.

He did not participate in too many games in 2018 but in March 2019 he was again called to the national squad for the friendlies. I would like to say a few words about Messi's playing style. Messi is not very tall and consequently he has a lower centre of gravity than taller players. This enables him to be more agile and change direction more quickly and evade opposing tackles. Because of this, he has been dubbed La Pulga Atomica or 'The Atomic Flea'.

Messi has a strong upper body, which, combined with his low centre of gravity and resulting balance, aids him in withstanding physical

challenges from opponents. He does not dive much which is rare in football. His strong legs allow him to accelerate in short bursts and his quick feet enable him to dribble the ball at great speed. His former Barcelona manager Pep Guardiola once stated,

'Messi is the only player that runs faster with the ball than he does without it.'

As regards Messi's personal life he has been in a relationship with Antonella Rocuzzo since 2008 when he was twenty years old. Rocuzzo and Messi have known each other since the time Messi was five years old. Rocuzzo is the cousin of his best friend since childhood, Lucas Scaglia, who is also a football player. Messi first confirmed his romance with Rocuzzo in an interview in January 2009, before going public a month later during a carnival in Sitges. Messi and Rocuzzo have three sons, Thiago (born on 2012), Mateo (born on 2015) and Ciro (born on 2018).

Messi has been involved in philanthropic activities throughout his career. The reason for this is the stark memory of his own illness as a child which almost ruined his professional career. Consequently, he frequently contributes time and finances to the UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund). In 2013 Messi was investigated for tax evasion. In 2016 Messi and his father were found guilty of tax fraud and were given a suspended sentence of twenty-one months and were ordered to pay Euro 1.7 million and Euro 1.4 Million

Messi is Argentina's pride and rated as one of the greatest footballers the world has ever seen. I hope you enjoyed reading about Lionel Messi. For the letter Mm I will bring you yet another sporting great.

***M is for Cassius (M)arcellus Clay Jr. aka
(M)uhammed Ali the greatest puncher of
them all***



Image Courtesy: Wikimedia.org

For the letter M, I am bringing you the story of a sportsperson from the sport of Boxing. This boxer is none other than Cassius Marcellus Clay Jr. aka Muhammed Ali. Clay was born on January 17, 1942, in Louisville, Kentucky. He was named after his father, Cassius Marcellus Clay Sr. Ali had five siblings, a sister and four brothers. His father was a billboard painter, his mother Odessa O'Grady Clay, was

a domestic helper. Ali attended Central High School in Louisville. Ali had problems in reading and writing as he was Dyslexic.

Ali grew up in the US during times of severe racial segregation. Odessa once recalled that Ali was denied a drink of water at a store because of his colour. That really affected Ali a lot. Another event that affected Ali seriously was the 1955 murder of Emmett Till, which led to Ali taking out his frustration by vandalizing a local rail yard.

At the age of 12, Ali's bicycle was stolen, and he was fuming over the theft. Louisville police officer and boxing coach Joe E Martin found him in a state of fury and Ali told him, 'When I find the fellow I am going to whup him' to which Martin replied, 'In that case, you had better learn boxing first'. Initially, Ali was not inclined to take up Martin's offer, but he happened to witness amateur boxers in a television show called 'Tomorrow's Champions' and this piqued his interest in boxing.

He then began training with Fred Stoner whom he gives credit for really training him by moulding his style and stamina. Ali made his boxing debut in 1954 against local amateur Ronnie O Keefe. He then proceeded to win six Kentucky Golden Glove titles, two national Golden Glove titles, an Amateur Athletic Union national title and the Light Heavyweight Gold medal in the 1960 Summer Olympics held in Rome.

Ali debuted professionally on October 29, 1960, when he won a six-round bout over Tunney Hunsaker. By the end of 1963, Ali had amassed a record of 19–0 with 15 wins by knockout. During this period Ali defeated several renowned boxers including Tony Esperti, Jim Robinson, Donnie Fleeman, Alonzo Johnson, George Logan, Willi Besmanoff, LaMar Clark, Doug Jones and Henry Cooper.

He also beat his former trainer Archie Moore in a match held in 1963. Ali's fight with Doug Jones held on March 13, 1963, was his toughest

one during this stretch. Ali and Jones were the number two and number three heavyweight contenders, and the fight was held at Jones' home turf at New York's Madison Square Garden. This fight was later named "Fight of the Year" by The Ring magazine.

Ali often belittled his opponents vocally and bragged about his abilities. He called Jones "an ugly little man" and Cooper a "bum". This kind of provocative behaviour in the ring was inspired by professional wrestler 'Gorgeous George' Wagner. Ali stated in an interview in 1969 with the Associated Press' Hubert Mizel that he had earlier met Gorgeous George in Las Vegas and the wrestler inspired him to use this kind of language when he did interviews.

Earlier Moore had demanded that Ali perform menial chores like washing dishes and sweeping when Ali had trained with him. Ali refused and this led to his leaving Moore's training camp in 1960. Ali then hired Angelo Dundee to be his trainer. Ali also tried to secure the services of his long-time idol Sugar Ray Robinson to be his manager but was rebuffed.

In 1963, Ali had become the top contender for challenging Sonny Liston's world championship title. The fight between the two was set for February 25, 1964, in Miami Beach. Though he was an underdog, Ali taunted Liston during the pre-fight build-up. Some of his statements were of a very nasty tenor. He called Liston 'the big ugly bear', stating that 'Liston even smells like a bear'. He also claimed, 'After I beat him, I'm going to donate him to the zoo'.

When the opening bell for the first fight rang, Liston rushed at Ali, looking for a quick knockout. But due to his superior speed and agility Ali managed to dodge Liston, making the champion miss. Ali then opened up his attack and hit Liston repeatedly with jabs. Liston fared slightly better in the second round. By the end of round four, when Ali was returning to his corner, he began experiencing blinding pain in his

eyes and asked, Angelo Dundee, his trainer to cut off his gloves. Dundee refused.

Ali managed to survive the fifth round till the sweat from his own body and his tears managed to remove the irritation in his eyes. Liston was hit repeatedly in the sixth round by Ali. Liston failed to answer the bell for the seventh round, and Clay was declared the winner. Liston stated that he had quit because of an injured shoulder. When the match ended, a victorious Ali pointed to the ringside press and shouted: "Eat your words! I am the greatest! I shook up the world. I'm the prettiest thing that ever lived."

At 22, Ali had become the youngest boxer to claim the world heavyweight title from a reigning champion. At that time, Floyd Patterson still remained the youngest to win the heavyweight championship at 21. Both the records were subsequently broken by Mike Tyson in 1986 when he defeated Trevor Berbick to win the heavyweight title at age 20.

After his fight with Liston, Cassius Clay first changed his name to Cassius X and then became Muhammad Ali after converting to Islam and affiliating with the Nation of Islam. A rematch was held between Ali and Liston in May 1965 in Lewiston, Maine. During the first round, Liston was knocked down by a blow from Ali which was called a "phantom punch." as Liston could not see it coming. Liston was knocked down, but the referee did not begin the count immediately as Ali refused to retreat to a neutral corner.

After 20 seconds Liston rose, and the fight continued momentarily. But after a few seconds, the referee stopped the match and declared Ali the winner when he was informed by the timekeepers that Liston had been down for a count of ten. Many people argued that the match was thrown by Liston as his life had been threatened by the Nation of Islam. Other reasons touted for Liston throwing the game are that he had bet against himself and losing purposely would have enabled him

to pay off his debts. There is still some doubt if that blow by Ali was a genuine knockout punch.

In 1965, Ali defended his title against Floyd Patterson who appeared injured during the match. After this victory Ali, founded his own promotion company Main Bout which handled Ali's boxing promotions and pay-per-view closed-circuit television broadcasts. The stockholders were members of the Nation of Islam and several others, including Bob Arum. On March 29, 1966, Ali and WBA heavyweight champion Ernie Terrel agreed to fight a bout in Chicago.

The WBA (World Boxing Association), had stripped Ali of his title after he joined the Nation of Islam. In February Ali was reclassified by the Louisville draft board as 1-A from 1-Y, the reason being his refusal to serve in the Vietnam war. It was at this point in time that Ali famously commented,

'I ain't got nothing against no Viet Cong; no Viet Cong never called me nigger.'

This created a huge outcry and the Illinois Athletic Commission cited technicalities and refused to sanction the fight between Terrell and Ali.

Ali then travelled to Canada and Europe and won several championship bouts against many renowned boxers. On February 6, 1967, Ali fought against Ernie Terrell in Houston. Terrell had remained unbeaten in five years and had emerged victorious against many of the boxers Ali had beaten. Terrell was a very big and strong man with a three-inch reach advantage over Ali. During the build-up to the match, Terrell repeatedly referred to Ali as Clay much to his annoyance.

In a pre-fight interview, Ali did his best to humiliate Terrell. He made statements like, "I want to torture him," and "A clean knockout is too good for him". The match between Ali and Terrell proved to be a close contest till the sixth round but in the seventh Ali almost knocked

Terrell out. Ali then proceeded to taunt Terrell in the eighth round hitting him repeatedly and shouting, 'What's my name, Uncle Tom ... what's my name?' Critics described this bout as 'one of the ugliest boxing fights'. Tex Maule wrote: 'It was a wonderful demonstration of boxing skill and a barbarous display of cruelty'. Ali denied that he had been cruel.

Ali then defended his title against Zora Folley. After this, he was stripped of his title as he refused to be drafted into army service. His boxing license was suspended by the state of New York. He was convicted of draft evasion and sentenced to five years in prison and a \$10,000 fine. He paid the money and remained free while the verdict was being appealed. After repeated appeals, his conviction was overturned in 1971. The main reason for this was the fact that by then there was growing opposition to the Vietnam war in the US as people were beginning to tire of it.

During the time he was in exile due to his licence being suspended, Ali spoke up against the Vietnam war openly and appealed for peace. Ali then fought what came to be dubbed as 'The fight of the century'. His opponent was Joe Frazier who was also an undefeated fighter. This fight was held at Garden on March 8, 1971. John Condon called it 'the greatest event I've ever worked on in my life'. The bout was broadcast to 35 foreign countries.

The fight lived up to its expectations. Frazier was crouching and bobbing and getting hit by Ali's jabs, but he was landing a lot of body-blows on Ali and constantly scoring. Ali was taking a lot of punishment from Frazier. In the 11th round, Frazier landed a left hook on Ali which made Ali wobble. But Ali was not knocked out and Frazier failed to press his advantage. But again, in the 12th round, Frazier knocked Ali out with a vicious left jab which the referee said was the hardest hit he had ever seen a man take. Ali lost by unanimous decision. This was his first professional defeat.

Ali's jaw was broken by Ken Norton in 1973 and Ali received the second loss of his career. Ali was considering retirement for some time, but he won a second bout against Norton which gave him a rematch against Frazier. In a very controversial match in which Frazier's supporters complained bitterly, Ali was declared the winner by unanimous decision. The victory over Frazier led to the bout against World Heavyweight Champion George Foreman which was held in Zaire on October 30, 1974.

This match was termed the "Rumble in the jungle". Foreman was considered one of the hardest punchers of the game. In this match, Ali used a very unconventional technique in boxing which was later dubbed 'Rope-A-Dope'. In the second and further rounds, Ali kept backing off to the ropes inviting Foreman to hit him. This was very much against conventional boxing wisdom. In anger, Foreman kept trying to throw punches at Ali which Ali deflected and this resulted in tiring out Foreman.

After Foreman was totally tired, Ali moved in and started throwing punches. In the eighth round, Ali managed to knock out Foreman and unbelievably Ali had regained the title by knockout. Foreman later commented, "I thought Ali was just one more knockout victim until, about the seventh round, I hit him hard to the jaw and he held me and whispered in my ear: "That all you got, George? I realized that this ain't what I thought it was."

Ali participated in an exhibition bout in Tokyo against Japanese wrestler and martial artist Antonio Inoki. Ali managed to land just two jabs while Inoki's kicks caused two blood clots. This resulted in an infection that almost made it necessary to amputate Ali's legs in order to save his life. Eventually, no amputation was needed. The match was not scripted and was declared a draw. This was declared Ali's least memorable fight. After this Ali finally retired.

Regarding his personal life, Ali married four times and had seven daughters and two sons. His first wife was cocktail waitress Sonji Roy and this marriage was childless. It ended in a divorce, as Ali could not tolerate the fact that Sonji would not follow the strictures laid down for women by Islam. He then married Belinda Boyd with whom he had four children. She converted to Islam and also affiliated to the Nation of Islam. She also changed her name to Khalilah Ali. While still being married to Khalilah Ali, Ali had an extra-marital affair with a girl named Wanda Bolton who was just 16 years old.

She changed her name to Aishah Ali, and they got married as per an Islamic Ceremony which was not legally recognized. He fathered a child Khalilah with Alishah. Later in 1985, Aishah sued him for Palimony and Ali agreed to a settlement of \$200,000 in a trust for Khalilah. Ali had an extra-marital relationship with Patricia Harvell and had a daughter Miya with her. By the end of 1977, his marriage with Patricia was over and he married Porche. He had two daughters with Porche. He then married Yolanda Williams in 1986 and they adopted a son by name Assas Amin.

Ali was initially refused by the Nation of Islam due to his boxing career but by 1964 when he had beaten Liston, they became more receptive and accepted him. They also publicized his membership through a radio address. They gave him the name Muhammed Ali. When Ali found that only a few journalists were ready to accept his name he said,

"Cassius Clay is my slave name"

Not one to fear the white establishment, Ali also said,

"I am America. I am the part you won't recognize. But get used to me. Black, confident, cocky; my name, not yours; my religion, not yours; my goals, my own; get used to me."

Ali had gone on a Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca in 1972, which inspired him a lot. He met people of different colours from all over the world. This gave him a totally different sense of spirituality and a very different outlook on life. In 1977, he said that, after he retired, he would dedicate the rest of his life to getting 'ready to meet God' by helping people, charitable causes, uniting people and helping to make peace. He went on another Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca in 1988.

In 1984 Ali was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. Ali was a philanthropist and was also known for being humanitarian. On January 19, 1981, Ali stopped a suicidal man from jumping off a ninth-floor ledge in Los Angeles. This event made national headlines. In 1984, Ali announced his support for the re-election of United States President Ronald Reagan.

Ali's total prize money was nearly \$60 million (inflation-adjusted \$311.6 million). Ali was broke by 1978 and in 2006 Ali sold his name and image for \$50 million. Ali was hospitalised in Scottsdale with a respiratory illness on June 2, 2016. His condition worsened gradually, and he died the next day at the age of 74 from septic shock. Ali was mourned globally and was paid rich tributes by politicians like Barack Obama, Bill Clinton, Hillary Clinton. Donald Trump and several others. I hope you enjoyed reading about this world champion boxer. I will be back with the story of yet another sportsperson for the letter N.

N is for Saina (N)ehwal the girl from Haryana who is among the best in Badminton



Image Courtesy: Wikimedia.org

Till now I have brought you the stories of sportspersons from Hockey, Cricket, Football and several other fields of endeavour. But I have not yet written on any sportsperson from the sport of Badminton and India has produced several stars in this sport. For the letter N, I have chosen none other than the youth icon of India, Saina Nehwal who has brought many accolades to the country.

Saina Nehwal is the second daughter of Dr Harvir Singh Nehwal and Usha Rani Nehwal. She was born in Hisar, Haryana and has an elder sister named Chandranshu Nehwal. Saina's father has a PhD in agricultural science and worked at the Chaudhry Charan Singh

Agricultural University at Hisar, Haryana. Saina finished her initial years of schooling at Campus School CCS Hau Hisar. Her father was transferred to Hyderabad and she finished her 12th grade from St. Ann's College for Women at Mehdipatnam.

Saina's parents had played Badminton for a number of years. Her mother Usha Rani was a state level Badminton player in Haryana. When she was in Hyderabad, initially Saina found it difficult to socialize and she took up Badminton at the age of eight to express herself. Another reason for Saina taking up Badminton was to fulfil her mother's dream of becoming a national level Badminton player. Her sister Chandranshu played Volleyball.

Saina's father had been a Badminton player in his university and he wisely invested his provident fund to provide Badminton training for Saina. Saina's journey to glory started in the year 2006 when she became the under-19 national champion. She also won the prestigious Asian Satellite Badminton Tournament (India Chapter) twice, thereby creating history. She became the first Indian woman and the youngest player from Asia to win a 4-star tournament - the Philippines Open. She was sixteen years old at that time.

She was also the runner-up in the 2006 BWF World Junior Championships when she fought hard but lost against the top-seeded Chinese Wang Yihan. She was the first Indian woman to reach the quarterfinals of the Olympic games in 2008 when she upset world No 5 and 4th seed Wang Chen of Hong Kong. She lost to Maria Kristin Yuliant in a close finish in the quarterfinals. Nehwal was named "The Most Promising Player" in 2008 by the Badminton World Federation. In June 2009 she won the BWF Super Series title, thereby becoming the first Indian to do so. She beat the Chinese Wang Lin in the final 12-21, 21-18, 21-9.

After the victory, Nehwal said, 'I had been longing to win a super series tournament since my quarterfinal appearance at the Olympics'.

She reached the quarterfinals of the World Championship losing to second seed Wang Lin in the quarterfinals. In 2010 she reached the semi-finals of the All England Super Series before she lost to Tine Rasmussen. She then reached the semi-finals of the Yonex Sunrise Badminton Asia Championships.

At this point, her coach Gopichand told her not to allow pressure to build on her due to home crowd support. She won the 2010 India Open Grand Prix Gold. She beat Wong Mew Choo of Malaysia in the finals thereby winning a prize amount of \$8,280. Saina won the second Super Series title of her career by defeating qualifier Tai Tsu-Ying of Chinese Taipei in the finals of the Singapore Open. She won prize money amounting to \$15,000 but this victory came in the absence of all the top 5 seeds and this took the sheen off from the victory.

On 24, June 2010 Nehwal reached a ranking of world No 3 in the women's singles Badminton world rankings. She defended the Indonesia Open title successfully. She again won the top prize of \$18,750 for winning this BWF Super Series tournament. On 15, July 2010, Nehwal with 64,791.26 points was placed at a career-high ranking of world No 2, only behind the Chinese Wang Yihan.

Her world ranking subsequently dropped to No 3 after she lost in the quarterfinals to the 4th ranked Chinese Wang Shixian in straight sets. This was followed by her glorious performance in the 2010 Commonwealth Games held in New Delhi when she won the Gold medal. She beat Wong Mew Choo of Malaysia 19-21, 23-21, 21-13. After the match she said:

'When I was a match-point down, it was like a shock. It was a big match and winning it means a lot to me. Even many years from now, those present here will always remember how Saina won the gold. It is a proud feeling'

On 27, January 2011 she crashed out of the Korea Open Super Series Premier in the second round. This was followed by further disappointment when she was defeated by Eriko Hirose of Japan at 2011 All England Super Series Premier. After two exits at an early stage, she then went on to beat Ji Hyun Sun of South Korea 21-13, 21-14 to win the Swiss Open Grand Prix Gold Badminton title on 20 March 2011.

Following this, she lost to Cheng Shao-Chieh of Chinese Taipei in the second round of the Singapore Open Super Series. This was followed by another loss in the finals of the Indonesia Open Super Series Premier where she lost to her nemesis Wang Yihan of China. In the year 2012, she successfully defended her Swiss Open title. In 2012 she again won the Indonesia Open Super Series title by defeating world No 3 Li Xuerui of China 13-21, 22-20, 21-19. This was the third time she had won the Indonesia Open.

On 4, August 2012, Saina Nehwal did India proud by winning the bronze medal at the London Olympics when China's Wang Xin had to retire from the match owing to injury. On 21, October 2012, she won the Denmark Open Super Series after defeating Juliane Schenk of Germany in the finals. There is a healthy rivalry between the other Indian badminton star PV Sindhu and Saina Nehwal.

On 26 January 2014 Nehwal defeated PV Sindhu 21-14, 21-17 to win the India Open Grand Prix Gold tournament. Nehwal won the 2014 Australian Super Series by defeating Spain's Carolina Marin 21-18, 21-11. Nehwal became the first Indian woman to win the China Open Super Series Premier by beating Japan's Akane Yamaguchi. She defended her India Open title in 2015 by defeating Carolina Marin again.

Nehwal won her first women's singles title at the India Open BWF Super Series by beating Ratchanok Intanon of Thailand. This resulted in her being the World number 1 when the BWF rankings were

released on April 2. She became the first Indian women's player to be ranked World No 1 in Badminton. In early 2016 Saina was troubled by injury problems but she eventually recovered.

In 2016 she reached the semi-finals of both the India Open and Malaysia Open. In the Badminton Asia Championships, she defeated Wang Shixian in the quarterfinals but had to settle for bronze when she lost to Wang Yihan in the semi-finals. She won the 2016 Australian Super Series when she defeated Sun Yu of China. On her way to the final, she had also defeated Wang Yihan. Saina made her third appearance in the Olympics but crashed out in the second round.

In 2017, Newal was plagued by injury. However, she won the bronze medal in the World Badminton Championship and a record-breaking seventh consecutive quarterfinal. In the 82nd National Badminton Championship, she once again beat PV Sindhu in the final. In the 2018 Asian Games, Nehwal created history by becoming the first Indian woman to win an Asian Badminton medal for India. She won a bronze medal when she went down fighting to Tai Tzu Ying in the semi-final.

She started 2019 by ending her run in the semi-finals at the Malaysian masters in January. She won the first BWF Super 500 title, the Indonesian Masters. She went on to win the National Championship for the 4th time again by defeating top-seeded PV Sindhu 21-18, 21-15.

Saina Nehwal has several accolades under her belt. Here is a list.

- ***Most Promising Player of the Year (2008) award by Badminton World Federation***
- ***Arjuna Award (2009)***
- ***Padma Shri (2010)***
- ***Rajiv Gandhi Khel Ratna (2009–2010)***
- ***Padma Bhushan (2016)***

For her Bronze medal in the 2012 London Olympics, she was awarded cash prizes by the state governments of Haryana, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and the Badminton Association of India. She has been conferred with honorary doctorate degrees by the Mangalayatan University and the SRM Institute of Science and Technology. She is one of the athletes supported by the Olympic Gold Quest. She endorses several brands like Commune Builder, Edelweiss Group, Emami, Godrej No Marks, Iodex, Star Sports and Top Ramen Noodles.

As regards her personal life, she is married to fellow badminton player, Parupalli Kashyap. Nehwal released her autobiography: "Playing to Win: My Life on And Off Court" in 2012. As of 2018 a biopic on Saina Nehwal titled Saina is being made. It is directed by Amol Gupte. The lead role was earlier slated to be played by Shraddha Kapoor, but later Shraddha Kapoor was replaced by Parineeti Chopra. I hope you enjoyed reading about this outstanding sportswoman. For the letter O I will come up with the story of yet another famous sports personality.

O is for Naomi (O)saka, the young and upcoming tennis maestro from Japan



Image Courtesy: [Wikimedia.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Naomi_Osaka_2018.jpg)

Most of the sportspersons I have been writing about till now have been established personalities in their respective fields of endeavour. Some of them belong to a bygone era and many of my readers have not even

heard about these people. The letter O presented a bit of a challenge until I hit upon a person whose name had made the rounds quite recently as the tennis player who ended the reign of the all-conquering Serena Williams in the women's tennis circuit. This is none other than the young Naomi Osaka from Japan who beat Serena Williams in the US Open in 2018 to become the first Japanese player to win a grand slam title.

Naomi Osaka was born on 16, October 1997 in Chuo-ku, Osaka in Japan to Tamaki Osaka and Leonard Francois. Her father is from Haiti and her mother is from Hokkaido, Japan. Her elder sister Mari is also a professional tennis player. At the age of three, Osaka and her family moved from Japan to Long Island, New York. Though Osaka's father had never played tennis himself, he was keen to teach his daughters Mari and Osaka tennis when he watched the exploits of the Williams sisters in the world of tennis.

He tried to emulate Richard Williams the father of Serena and Venus in order to train his daughters Osaka and Mari. This is what François had to say about his training plan for his daughters which he had borrowed from Richard Williams, 'The blueprint was already there. I just had to follow it'. Once the family settled properly in the United States, he began coaching Naomi and Mari.

Tamaki and Leonard decided that though they lived in the US their two daughters would represent Japan in tennis. This is what they have to say about this decision,

'We made the decision that Naomi would represent Japan at an early age. She was born in Osaka and was brought up in a household of Japanese and Haitian culture. Quite simply, Naomi and her sister Mari have always felt Japanese so that was our only rationale. It was never a financially motivated decision nor were we ever swayed either way by any national federation.'

Osaka played in only a few junior tournaments at any age level. Instead, she played in the ITF Women's Circuit. She played her first qualifying match on October 2011 on her 14th birthday. She made her professional debut in doubles on March 2011 with her sister Mari. At the ITF \$10K event in Amelia Island, she lost to her sister Mari in the semi-finals. In four attempts at the ITF level, Osaka finished as runner-up on all four occasions. She reached the finals of the \$25K level twice, one of which was held on June 2013 in El Paso, Texas. The other was held on March 2014 in Irapuato, Mexico and on the way to the finals she defeated her sister.

Shortly before her 16th birthday, on September 2013, Osaka turned professional. The following year she qualified for the first WTA main draw at the 2014 Stanford Classic. She upset world No. 19 Samantha Stosur when, after saving a match point in the second set tiebreak, she came back from a 5–3 deficit to win the match. Osaka also won a match as a wild card entrant at the Japan Women's Open. All these wins helped her move into the top 250 of the WTA rankings before the season ended.

Though she did not win another WTA main draw singles match she continued to climb up the rankings. She reached the ITF final at the \$75K Kangaroo Cup in Japan. She followed this with another ITF final in the \$50K Surbiton Trophy played in the United Kingdom. Because of these results, Osaka was ranked high enough to enter the qualifying rounds of the two Grand Slam singles events, Wimbledon and the US Open. But she was unable to qualify for either of them. After reaching a semi-final of a 75K event in Japan, she finished the year ranked 144.

In 2016 Osaka qualified for the French Open and made it to the third round. Shortly after the French Open she suffered an injury and did not play in Wimbledon. But she returned in August and played the US Open and reached the third round. In the process, she defeated world no 30 CoCo Vandeweghe but finally lost to world no 9 Madison

Keys. Though Osaka had improved steadily throughout 2016 her performances were not so good in 2017.

In 2017 her best result was at the Canadian Open when she reached the round of sixteen as a qualifier. Along the way, she upset world no 16 Anastasija Sevastova before retiring hurt against world no 1 Karolina Pliskova. In the Wimbledon and US Open that year, she made it to the third round. She lost to Venus Williams in Wimbledon. Following her dismal performance and lack of improvement that year, she hired Sascha Bajin to be her coach.

At the Australian Open in 2018, she entered the fourth round eventually losing to world no 1 Simona Halep. She was now in the top 50. At the Indian Wells that year she won very convincingly, dropping only one set in the entire tournament. She defeated both Simona Halep and Karolina Pliskova who were in the top five. She followed the Indian Wells by reaching the first round of the French Open and Wimbledon.

She then won her second major title of the year which was the US Open. She beat Madison Keys in the semi-finals and avenged her 2016 US open defeat and advanced to the finals where she was pitted against Serena Williams. The match proved to be extremely controversial. This match was marred by an on-court dispute between Serena Williams and the umpire. Williams received a game penalty and Osaka was booed by the crowd not only during the match but also during the award ceremony.

Osaka later said about the incident that it was 'a little bit bittersweet' and 'it wasn't necessarily the happiest memory'. Nevertheless, Osaka won the finals and became the first Japanese Grand slam Singles Champion. Osaka then had a streak of wins and she reached the finals of the China Open. With this, she rose to a ranking of World No 4 matching the record of Kimiko Date and Kei Nishikori for the highest ranking ever held by a Japanese player in history. She finished the year

as the WTA tour leader in prize money. She had earned almost \$6.4 million.

In 2019, she made it to the finals of the Australian Open despite coming close to a defeat in the third round. In the final, she was pitted against Petra Kvitova. In that match Kvitova saved three championship points before she broke Osaka's serve in back to back games to win the second set. But nevertheless, Osaka won the third set and the championship. Osaka is the first woman to win consecutive Grand Slam singles titles since Serena Williams in 2015. She is also the first to follow a Grand Slam singles title with another one immediately since Jennifer Capriati in 2001.

She is the first Asian player to be ranked world No. 1. Despite this impressive record, she parted ways with her coach Sascha Bajin in 2019. Naomi Osaka has represented Japan in the Fed Cup and the Hopman Cup. Osaka is basically a baseline player. What characterises her game is the aggression and the raw power she has. She has a very powerful serve and a forehand. Her serves have been clocked at 125 miles per hour making her one of the fastest servers ever seen in WTA history. She can play long rallies which stand her in good stead. She has spoken about her improvement over the years as a tennis pro. Here is what she says,

'I think my biggest improvement is mental. My game is more consistent, there are not so many unforced errors. I'm not sure how many I hit today, but sometimes last year I was hitting a lot!'

She says about her stint with Sascha Bajin as her coach,

'Since I was working with him — and I tend to be a bit negative on myself — I feel like I've gotten a little bit more optimistic ... I fight myself a lot, so he's sort of been, like, the peacemaker.'

Osaka has a shy and reserved personality. This has become evident in public events at times. For example, she began her 2018 Indian Wells Open Victory speech with 'Um, hello ... I'm Naom ... oh never mind' and later said, 'This is probably going to be the worst acceptance speech of all time'. She nearly forgot to thank her opponent Daria Kasatkina as well as one of her sponsors Yonex.

Osaka's sporting equipment like rackets are supplied by the Japanese sporting equipment manufacturer Yonex. She plays with a Yonex Ezone 98 racket. Adidas sponsored her apparel till 2019 after which she switched over to Nike. She is represented by the IMG management company. She is also the brand ambassador for the Japanese automobile manufacturer Nissan and the Japanese electronics manufacturer Citizen Watch.

She also endorses several other Japanese companies like noodle maker Nissin foods, cosmetics producer Shiseido. the broadcasting station Wowow and the airline All Nippon Airways. I hope you enjoyed reading about this up and coming Japanese tennis player who has very quickly risen to world No 1 challenging the domination of Serena Williams. For the letter P, I will be back with another sporting personality.

P is for none other than (P)V. Sindhu the youth icon who made India proud at the Olympics



Image Courtesy: Wikimedia.org

I have already written about Saina Nehwal, the Olympic bronze medallist from India. As everyone is aware India has produced another swashbuckling star in the sport of Badminton. This is none other than

Pusarla Venkata Sindhu or PV Sindhu. And for the letter P, I present to you the inspiring story of this young champion. Sindhu was born on 5, July 1995 in Hyderabad. Her father is PV Ramana who was a member of the Indian Volleyball team that won the Bronze medal in the 1986 Seoul Olympics. Her mother P. Vijaya was also a national level volleyball player.

Though both her parents were Volleyball players, Sindhu drew inspiration from the success of Pullela Gopichand and chose Badminton. She started playing Badminton at the age of eight. She learned the basics of the game from Mehboob Ali. Later she joined Gopichand's Badminton Academy. After joining Gopichand's academy Sindhu won several titles. Her first wins include the 5th Servo All India ranking championship in the doubles category in the under-10 years' circuit.

Later she won the singles title in the Ambuja Cement All India ranking. In the under-13 years' category, Sindhu won the singles title among the sub-juniors which was held at Pondicherry. She also won the Krishna Khaitan All India Tournament doubles title and the Sub-Junior Nationals. In the under-14 category, she won the team gold medal at the 51st National State Games in India.

Coming to the international circuit, she lost to Germany's Juliane Schenk in the Indonesia Open on 14, June 2012. But on 7, July 2012 she won the Asian Youths Under 19 Championship beating Japanese player Nazomi Okuhara 18-21, 21-17, 22-20. She beat London 2012 Olympics Gold Medallist Li Xuerui in the Li Ning China Masters Super Series tournament to enter the semi-finals but then lost to the 4th seeded Jiang Yanjiao of China. Her exploits in the China Open led people to expect a lot from her in the Japan Open but she bowed out in the 2nd round losing to Korea Bae Yeon Ju.

She then participated in the 77th Senior National Badminton Championships at Srinagar but was defeated in the finals by Sayali

Gokhale. Actually, Sindhu had injured her knee in the China Open and she had been carrying on with it. She then skipped the World Junior Championships in order to avoid aggravating her injury. She then participated in the Syed Modi India Grand Prix Gold event and reached the finals without dropping a single set but lost in the finals to the Indonesian Linda Weni Fanetri. Her ranking at this stage was 15.

In the year 2013, She won the Malaysian Open which was her first Grand Prix Gold Title. In the final, she beat the Singaporean Gu Juan. In the BWF World Championships of 2013, Sindhu defeated the defending champion Wang Yihan of China to enter the quarterfinals. The 18-year-old Sindhu then proceeded to win 21-18, 23-21 in 54 minutes to set up a final with Chinese Wing Shixian. She beat Wing Shixian 21-18, 21-17 to become India's first medallist in the women's circuit at the world championships.

She also won the Macau Open Grand Prix Gold title defeating Canada's Michelle Li 21-15, 21-12 in 37 minutes. Sindhu was awarded the Arjuna Award by the Government of India in 2013. Sindhu lost to Canadian Michelle Li in the semi-final of the 2014 Commonwealth Games. She later created history by winning two back-to-back medals in the BWF World Badminton Championships after she had won the Bronze medal in the 2014 BWF World Championships in Denmark.

In the year 2015 Sindhu defended her Macau Open title and this was the third successive Macau Open win for her. The year 2016 was a historic year for PV Sindhu and India. In January of that year, Sindhu won the Malaysia Masters Grand Prix Gold women's singles by beating Kirsty Gilmour in the final. She had won this tournament in 2013 also. In August 2016, Rio Summer Olympics, Sindhu reached the semi-final of the women's singles event defeating Wang Yihan of China.

She then defeated Japan's Nozomi Okuhara in the women's singles semi-finals. She lost to Spain's Carolina Marin thus winning the Silver Medal in the Rio Olympics and becoming the youngest and first female individual to bag an Olympic Silver medal representing India. This was the second instance of a podium finish at the Olympics by any Indian badminton player. Later she avenged her defeat to Carolina Marin by defeating her in the India Open Super Series to clinch the title.

In 2018, she made it to the top 4 in the prestigious All England Open. She lost to world No 3 Akane Yamaguchi in the semi-final. This incidentally is Sindhu's best performance at the All England Open. Sindhu then competed in the 2018 Commonwealth Games held in Gold Coast and won a gold in the mixed team event and a silver medal in the women's singles event. In the 2018 World Championships, Sindhu won her second consecutive silver medal totalling four silver medals in all.

She clinched the silver medal in the 2018 Asian games by defeating the world no 1 Tai Tsu-Ying in Jakarta thus becoming the first Indian to finish second on the podium in the Asian games. She created history in December 2018 by becoming the first Indian to win the season-ending BWF World Tour Finals tournament held in China.

In the Premier Badminton League auctions of 2018 Sindhu was bought by Hyderabad Hunters and was made the skipper of the team. The team reached the semi-finals where they lost to Mumbai Rockets. In the Indonesian Open 2019, Sindhu lost in the quarterfinals to Carolina Marin. She lost in the first round in the All England Open 2019 and this tournament has been the stumbling block in Sindhu's career.

Sindhu was awarded the Padma Shri which is the fourth highest civilian award in India in March 2015. She received the Rajiv Gandhi Khel Ratna Award on 29, August 2016. I hope you enjoyed reading about PV Sindhu who is a youth icon and a star for all Indians,

especially the young women of India. She is an inspiration to many a young girl who wants to make a name for herself. I will present the life story of yet another youngster for the letter Q.

Q is for (Q)uninton De Kock an up and coming wicketkeeper-batsman from South Africa



Image Courtesy: Wikimedia.org

To be honest, it proved to be extremely difficult for me to come up with the name of a sportsperson that began with the letter Q. When I searched on the net, I did find several names but most of these people were not well-known personalities with great accomplishments. That

is when I hit upon the name of the familiar Quinton De Kock. For those of you who may not be in the know, Quinton De Kock is a South African cricketer who also plays in the Indian Premier League. He is regarded as one of the best wicketkeeper-batsmen in the world comparable to the Australian great Adam Gilchrist.

De Kock was born on 17, December 1992 and did his schooling in King Edward VII School in Johannesburg. He was first spotted as a schoolboy talent and used to play for the affiliate club Old Eds. At the age of 16, De Kock debuted for Gauteng's senior team in the 2009-10 season. His first major accomplishment was scoring 95 runs off 131 balls in South Africa's first match against Bangladesh in the 2012 ICC Under-19 Cricket World Cup. This match ended in a resounding win for South Africa.

In the same tournament, De Kock proceeded to score 126 runs off 106 balls in the second match against Namibia and the match was again won by South Africa. In the quarterfinal match, De Kock shined as a wicketkeeper when he recorded five dismissals with three of them being stumpings and the other two catches. De Kock scored 284 runs with the bat in the tournament and was ranked as the 4th highest run-scorer.

In the South African domestic season of 2013, De Kock played several very good knocks for his team Highveld Lions which resulted in the team becoming the Dallya champions. One of his memorable innings in this tournament came on 18th February 2013 when he hit the highest ever T20 score of 126 in South Africa. This superb inning came against Cape Cobras.

The IPL franchise Sunrisers Hyderabad bought De Kock for \$20,000 in the 2013 player's auction, but he failed to impress. In the 2014 season of IPL, he signed up with Delhi Daredevils for Rs. 3.5 crore as an exchange player. This led to his becoming the highest bid foreign wicketkeeper in the auction. He played for Delhi Daredevils till the

2017 season when he was bought by Royal Challengers Bangalore in the 2018 auction for Rs 2.8 Crore.

In the 2019 season, Mumbai Indians purchased him from Royal Challengers Bangalore, and he is currently playing for MI. In his international career, he represented South Africa in T20s for the first time on 21, December 2012 against New Zealand. South Africa defeated New Zealand in this match and De Kock impressed with an unbeaten 28 off 23 balls while chasing.

He made his debut in the South African ODI side on 19, January 2013 against New Zealand in Boland Park Stadium, Paarl, South Africa. He was promoted to the opening batting spot with Graeme Smith from his second match onwards. On November 13, 2013, in a match against Pakistan in Abu Dhabi, UAE he scored a match-winning 112 off 135 balls on a wicket that was difficult to bat on to reach his maiden ODI century. The ODI series was won by South Africa 4-1. South Africa also won the T20 series 2-0 and De Kock scored 48 not out in the first match of the T20 series.

De Kock then scored 135 against India on his home ground Johannesburg. His innings helped South Africa beat India by 141 runs. De Kock won the 'Man of the Match' award. He followed this with another century against India in Durban. He scored 106 runs in a record-breaking opening stand of 194 runs with teammate Hashim Amla. He was the 'Man of the Match' in this ODI too.

In the 3rd ODI, he again scored a century and became the fifth person to achieve the feat of scoring three consecutive centuries in 3 ODIs. He was also the highest run-getter in a three-match bilateral ODI series. In this series, he also bagged the 'Man of the Series' award. De Kock made his test debut for South Africa on February 2014 against Australia at St George's Oval in Port Elizabeth. He scored just 7 and 34 in the two innings in this match. De Kock was dropped from the test side.

He was again recalled for the home test series vs England for the second test and took the wicket keeper's gloves from AB de Villiers. He was injured in this test and was replaced by Dane Vilas for the third test. But he was however selected for the fourth and final test and scored his first test century by hitting 129 not out in the first innings when he came in to bat at number 7.

De Kock reached a milestone as the fastest player to reach 10 ODI centuries in his 55th ODI. As regards his personal life, Quinton De Kock is married to his girlfriend Sasha Hurly. He married her on September 2016. Well, I hope you enjoyed reading about Quinton De Kock who is my choice for the letter Q. Many people might argue that this player does not have a right to be in this list and I have included him only because his name begins with a Q.

That is a debatable point, but he is an up and coming cricketer with loads of cricket still left in him and who knows what he may accomplish in the coming years. His track record is definitely very promising.

R is for Cristiano (R)onaldo the football genius from Portugal



Image Courtesy: [Wikimedia.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cristiano_Ronaldo_2014.jpg)

For the letter 'R,' I had to choose between two renowned sportspersons, one from tennis and the other from football. These were (R)oger Federer the unbeatable champion from the tennis court who has broken many records and Cristiano (R)onaldo who is an equally gigantic personality from the sport of football.

But with all apologies to Federer fans, I have chosen Cristiano Ronaldo for the 'R' post, even though, like many people, I too am a great fan of Federer. The reason for choosing Ronaldo over Federer is

that my daughter who is now about to step into the 8th grade wanted me to write on Ronaldo and she also told me that a number of her classmates loved Ronaldo. Consequently, this article is dedicated to my daughter and all her school mates who are Ronaldo fans.

Cristiano Ronaldo dos Santos Aveiro was born in Sao Pedro, Funchal, on the island of Madeira, Portugal. He grew up in Santo Antonio, Funchal. He is the youngest of the four children of Maria Dolores dos Santos Aveiro who was a cook and Jose Dinis Aveiro. Jose was a municipal gardener and a part-time kit man. The name "Ronaldo" was chosen after then-U.S. president Ronald Reagan. Ronaldo grew up in a very poor home and had to share a room with all his siblings.

When Ronaldo was just a kid, he played for the amateur team Andorinha from 1992 to 1995 where his father was the kit man. Later he spent two years with Nacional. At the age of 12, Ronaldo went on a three-day trial with Sporting CP, who signed him for £1,500. He then moved from Madeira to Alcochete, near Lisbon, and joined Sporting's other youth players at the club's football academy.

By the time he was 14, Ronaldo was convinced of his football skills and believed he had the ability to play semi-professionally. He agreed with his mother to stop his schooling in order to focus entirely on football. He had once been expelled after throwing a chair at a teacher, who he said had "disrespected" him. One year after this incident, he was diagnosed with a racing heart, which could have forced him to give up playing football.

Ronaldo underwent laser heart surgery to cauterise multiple cardiac pathways into one to alter his resting heart rate. He was discharged from the hospital after the procedure and resumed training just a few days later. Ronaldo stands at 6 foot 1 and was originally a right-winger and later played as a forward. His ability to make openings in

opponents defences by using deft sleights of feet leave teams stunned. He is an aggressive and formidable opponent on the field.

He had a very successful season in Sporting CP and this brought him to the attention of football clubs all over Europe. In 2003, he signed up with Manchester United. He was a great success and he came to be regarded as one of the best forwards in the game. In the 2007-08 season, he scored 42 league and cup goals for Manchester United and earned the Golden Shoe award as Europe's leading scorer. In May 2008 Ronaldo helped Manchester United to the Champions League title.

He was also awarded the FIFA World Player of the Year for his fantastic performance in the 2007-08 season. He led Manchester United to the Champions League 2019 final, but they lost to FC Barcelona eventually. Ronaldo was then sold to Spain's Real Madrid for a record eighty million pounds transfer fee. Playing for Real Madrid he continued scoring and in the 2010-11 season, he scored the maximum number of 40 goals. This was the maximum in La Liga history till the time it was broken by Lionel Messi in the subsequent 2011-12 season.

In the 2011–12 season he helped his team Real Madrid in capturing a La Liga championship. In this league season, Ronaldo scored a personal-best of 46 goals. In the year 2013 Ronaldo earned his second player of the year award by scoring a total of 66 goals in 56 matches with Real Madrid and the Portuguese national team to earn his second world player of the year award.

In 2014 he scored 52 goals in 43 appearances and led Real Madrid to a Champions League title, which resulted in Ronaldo capturing another Player of the Year award which had by then been renamed Ballon d'Or award. In 2014–15 he scored 48 goals to lead La Liga in scoring. He scored the 324th goal of his career as a member of Real

Madrid in October 2015 to become the club's all-time leading goal scorer.

In 2015-16 he scored 35 La Liga goals helping Real Madrid win its record 11th Champions League title. Later, in December 2016 he won a fourth career Ballon d'Or for this accomplishment. Ronaldo continued to score prodigiously and in 2016-17 he scored 42 goals for Real Madrid across all competitions thereby leading his team to La Liga and Champions League titles. For this, he won a fifth career Ballon d'Or award.

He led Real Madrid to a third straight Champions League title in 2017–18 when he scored 44 goals in 44 games. He signed a four-year contract worth Euro 112 million in July 2018 with the Italian powerhouse Juventus. He ended his Real Madrid career with 311 goals in 292 matches.

As far as playing for Portugal is concerned, after moving through the youth and under-21 ranks steadily, Ronaldo made his first appearance for Portugal's national team against Kazakhstan in August 2003. In the 2006 FIFA, World Cup Ronaldo played a key role in helping Portugal secure the fourth place and he was appointed as the full-time captain of the Portuguese national team in 2008.

By dint of his stellar performance, Portugal reached the semi-finals of the European Championship played in 2012. His team was eliminated by rival Spain in a match that was decided by a penalty kick shoot-out. In the 2014 World Cup Ronaldo's game in the tournament was not too good, and the entire Portugal side struggled during a group-stage elimination. In the year 2016, he helped Portugal win the European Championship, which was the country's first major international tournament title, although Ronaldo played very few matches.

In the 2018 World Cup, Ronaldo's game was terrific, and he scored four goals in four games and Portugal advanced to the knockout round.

But sadly, Portugal lost its first match Uruguay. Ronaldo is rated as one of the fastest footballers both with the ball and without it. He has the capacity to play on both the right and left sides as well as the centre of the pitch. He has great strength and jumping ability and since he is very tall at 1.85 m, he has an advantage in aerial challenges. He is noted for his flair in dribbling the ball.

Ronaldo is indeed a very colourful personality on the field and his methods of celebrating a goal are noteworthy. Usually, he celebrates by a high jump where he turns midway and he lands in a spread-eagle fashion. In one particular celebration, he squatted and stared directly into a camera on the side-lines of the pitch with his hand on his chin. This gained widespread coverage in the media.

Ronaldo has often been compared to Messi. Ronaldo and Messi are regarded as the two best players of their generation. There is a lot of argument among football lovers as to who is the better player among the two. Ronaldo endorses a number of products including sportswear, football boots, soft drinks, clothing, computer video games and so on. Since November 2012 Ronaldo plays wearing Nike Mercurial Vapor personalized CR7 shoes.

Ronaldo was featured on the cover of the EA Sport' FIFA video game FIFA 18. He also appeared in the cover of Pro Evolution Soccer in 2008, 2012 and 2013. Forbes has twice ranked Ronaldo the first on its list of the world's highest paid footballers. In the year 2013-14 his combined income was \$73 million and in 2014-15 it was \$79 million. Ronaldo lost his father Jose to an alcoholism-related liver condition in 2005.

He was just 20 then. Ronaldo does not drink and received damages from Daily Mirror over an article reporting to have found him drinking heavily in a nightclub. His mother Dolores survived breast cancer. Ronaldo has four children. The first one is Cristiano Jr born on 17,

June 2010 in the US. He did not reveal the identity of the mother as per her wishes. In January 2015 he stated that his five-year relationship with Russian model, Irina Shayk had ended.

He then had twins Eva (a girl) and Mateo (a boy) born on 8, June 2017 via surrogacy in the US. Currently, he is in a relationship with Spanish model Georgina Rodriguez with whom he has a daughter Alana Martina born 12, November 2017. Ronaldo has made several philanthropic contributions. He visited Aceh in Indonesia to raise funds for rehabilitation.

In support of the victims of the 2010 Madeira flood, Ronaldo pledged to play in a charity match in Madeira between Primeira Liga club Porto and players from Madeiran-based clubs Marítimo and Nacion. Ronaldo was charged with fraudulently evading taxes worth Euro 15 million in July 2017. He was given a two-year suspended sentence and fined Euro 18.8 million which was later reduced to Euro 16.8 million after a deal with Spanish authorities.

Ronaldo was investigated by the British Crown Prince Service after two women brought forward a 2005 rape allegation. After Scotland Yard announced there was not enough evidence to prosecute the two women withdrew the allegation. It was also alleged that Ronaldo had paid the woman money in a non-disclosure settlement.

Here is a list of Ronaldo's Awards

- ***FIFA Ballon d'Or/Ballon d'Or: 2008, 2013, 2014, 2016, 2017***
- ***FIFA World Player of the Year: 2008***
- ***FIFPro World Player of the Year: 2008***
- ***The Best FIFA Men's Player: 2016, 2017***
- ***UEFA Best Player in Europe Award: 2014, 2016, 2017***
- ***UEFA Club Footballer of the Year: 2007–08***
- ***UEFA Club Forward of the Year: 2007–08***

- *World Soccer Player of the Year: 2008, 2013, 2014, 2016, 2017*
- *FIFPro Special Young Player of the Year: 2003–04, 2004–05*
- *PFA Portuguese Player of the Year: 2016, 2017*
- *Onze d'Or: 2008, 2016–17*
- *Bravo Award: 2004*
- *European Golden Shoe: 2007–08, 2010–11, 2013–14, 2014–15*
- *FIFA Puskás Award: 2009*
- *FIFA FIFPro World XI: 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018*
- *UEFA Team of the Year: 2004, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018*
- *UEFA Champions League Squad of the Season: 2013–14, 2014–15, 2015–16, 2016–17, 2017–18*
- *UEFA European Championship Team of the Tournament: 2004, 2012, 2016*
- *UEFA European Championship Silver Boot: 2016*
- *UEFA Euro All Time XI*
- *UEFA Ultimate Team of the Year (published 2017)*
- *FIFA World Cup Dream Team: 2018*
- *FIFA Club World Cup Golden Ball: 2016*
- *FIFA Club World Cup Silver Ball: 2008, 2014*
- *PFA Young Player of the Year: 2006–07*
- *PFA Players' Player of the Year: 2006–07, 2007–08*
- *PFA Fans' Player of the Year: 2006–07, 2007–08*
- *Premier League Player of the Season: 2006–07, 2007–08*
- *FWA Footballer of the Year: 2006–07, 2007–08*
- *PFA Premier League Team of the Year: 2005–06, 2006–07, 2007–08, 2008–09*
- *Premier League Golden Boot: 2007–08*
- *Premier League Player of the Month: November 2006, December 2006, January 2008, March 2008*
- *La Liga Best Player: 2013–14*

- *La Liga Best Forward: 2013–14*
- *La Liga Fans' Five Star Player: 2014–15*
- *La Liga Most Valuable Player: 2012–13*
- *La Liga Best Goal: 2013–14*
- *La Liga Team of the Season: 2013–14, 2014–15, 2015–16*
- *UEFA La Liga Team of The Season: 2015–16, 2016–17*
- *La Liga Player of the Month: November 2013, May 2015, May 2017*
- *BBC Overseas Sports Personality of the Year: 2014*
- *IFFHS World's Best Top Division Goal Scorer: 2014, 2015*
- *IFFHS World's Best Top Goal Scorer: 2013, 2014, 2016, 2017*
- *IFFHS Men's World Team: 2017, 2018*
- *Globe Soccer Awards Player of the Year: 2011, 2014, 2016, 2017, 2018*

***S is for (S)hoaib Akhtar the Rawalpindi
Express who sent shivers down batsmen's
spine***



Image Courtesy: Wikimedia.org

For the letter S, I had numerous choices. In fact, starting from Serena Williams and Maria Sharapova to Sunil Gavaskar and Sachin Tendulkar I was spoilt for choice. But I was looking for someone who was extremely colourful on and off the field and at the same time controversial. Then, I thought to myself, 'Why not Shoaib Akhtar the bowler who has bowled the fastest delivery ever recorded?' So, for letter S, it is going to be Shoaib Akhtar the lethal quickie from Pakistan whom most batsmen are terrified of.

Shoaib Akhtar was born in a small town in Morgah near Rawalpindi in Pakistan. His family belonged to the economically underprivileged Gujar community. His father Mohammed Akhtar was a night watchman at a petrol station and his mother was Hameeda Awan. She had married Mohammed when she was still in her teens. Shoaib Akhtar is the fourth of Mohammed and Hamida's five children. Shoaib's brothers are Shahid, Tahir and Obaid and his younger sister's name is Shumaila. Shoaib Akhtar married Rubab Khan on 25, June 2014.

Shoaib was a good student and was admitted to the Asghar Mall college. He disrupted his studies for Cricket and after some initial struggle, he began his List A career in the 1993/1994 season and his first-class career in 1994/1995. His excellent play in the List A and first-class matches caught the eye of Majid Khan, who was the chief executive of the Pakistan Cricket Board at that time. Shoaib went to England as a member of the Pakistan A team and his performance was excellent.

He was rewarded his maiden Test cap against the West Indies in 1997. Akhtar debuted in the 2nd test of the series on his home ground Rawalpindi. His performance was rather modest. He was again included in all three tests played during Pakistan's tour of South Africa in 1998. The Australians visited Pakistan in 1998 and in the second test played at Peshawar, Akhtar was the spearhead of a depleted Pakistani attack. Mark Taylor scored 334 not out in the Australian first

innings in this test. At that point in time after 8 tests and 16 innings, Akhtar had only 18 wickets to his name.

Akhtar started performing impressively only in the year 1999 during the pre-world cup series in India. He performed outstandingly in the bowling department in a match at Sharjah and later in the 1999 Cricket World Cup. He played against Australia in 2002 and achieved a lot of success. His performance in the 2003 Cricket World Cup was poor and he was dropped from the Pakistan squad.

Shoaib Akhtar is known to have bowled the fastest delivery ever recorded in the history of cricket at 161.3 km/h (100.23 mph). He bowled this delivery against England on 22 February 2003 in a World Cup match at Newlands, Cape Town, South Africa. Even though this is the fastest ever recorded delivery, there are many old-timers who consider Australia's Jeff Thomson to be the fastest ever bowler.

According to Rodney Marsh who used to keep wickets for Jeff Thomson, there were times when he suspected the speeds of Thomson's deliveries to have reached up to 170 km/h. These were just not recorded as they were bowled in the seventies. And another thing is nowadays the speed of the delivery is recorded as soon as the ball leaves the bowler's hand, but the earlier known mechanisms recorded it when the ball reaches the batsman's end.

Akhtar was again called back for the 2004 test match series against New Zealand and then the series against India. Pakistan lost the test series against India. During the series with India, there was a controversy when Akhtar left the field citing an injury which caused captain Inzamam-Ul-Haq to suspect his commitment to the team. His relationship with his captain and coach Bob Woolmer soured.

Finally, all suspicions about the injury were dispelled when a panel set up by the Pakistan Cricket Board gave him a clean chit. In 2005, Akhtar shone in a home series against England and regained his

reputation as a great fast bowler. He made a series of impressive bowling performances and used slower deliveries so effectively that they proved unplayable for the English batsmen.

In this series, he emerged as the highest wicket-taker with seventeen wickets. Prior to this performance, he had been criticized from all corners about his attitude and commitment. The English captain Michael Vaughn also acknowledged Akhtar's performance and remarked: "I thought he (Shoaib) was a big difference between the two teams". In 2006, Akhtar was handed out a two-year ban along with Mohammed Asif who was banned for a year after both were found guilty of using the banned anabolic steroid nandrolone, by a three-man drug tribunal set up by the Pakistan Cricket Board.

Both the players were pulled out of Pakistan's squad for the Champions Trophy on October 16, the day before their opening game. Akhtar was indicted on for four counts of indiscipline, including hitting his teammate Mohammed Asif with a bat during the earlier tour of South Africa.

Akhtar made his return from the ban on 15, June 2010 taking 3 wickets for 28 runs against SriLanka in the first match of the Asia Cup. Subsequently, he played in T20s against England. In the meanwhile, Mohammed Asif and Mohammed Amir, Pakistan's strike bowlers were suspended by ICC for spot-fixing. Akhtar continued to bowl well in ODIs.

Though he bowled well, Pakistani coach Waqar Younis felt that the team should not depend overly on Akhtar as he was 35 by that time and was troubled by frequent injuries. Akhtar was selected in the 15-man squad for the 2011 World Cup. During the world cup, he announced that he would retire from international cricket at the end of the world cup.

In September 2011, he released his autobiography "Controversially Yours" in which he famously stated "Sachin Tendulkar Mujh Se Darta Tha". This was denounced by his own countryman and legendary fast bowler Wasim Akram who had bowled to Sachin Tendulkar in numerous matches. Akhtar also played for the IPL team Kolkata Knight Riders. Akhtar's career is one that has seen numerous injuries and controversies. He often struggled with wrist and back injuries.

He was caught ball tampering in a triangular series held in Sri Lanka which led to a ban. He was sent back from Australia in 2005 with a hamstring injury. There were also rumours of attitudinal problems and indiscipline. In February 2006 he was forced to undergo surgery because of a knee injury. He was also accused of slapping Pakistan coach Bob Woolmer following a fight over the music to be played in the team bus during the ICC Champions Trophy.

Despite all this, he has earned a name as one of the greatest fast bowlers who ever bowled the cricket ball. Coming to statistics, he has played 46 test matches, scored 577 runs with an average of 10.07 and a top score of 47. He has bowled 8,143 balls and taken 178 wickets at an average of 25.69. He has taken 5 wickets in an innings 12 times and he has taken 10 wickets in a match twice. His best bowling figures are 6/11.

In ODIs he has played 163 matches and scored 394 runs at an average of 8.95 with a highest of 43. He has bowled 7,764 balls and taken 247 wickets at an average of 24.97. He has taken 5 wickets in an innings 4 times and his best bowling figures are 6/16. In T20's he has played 15 matches and scored 21 runs at an average of 7. He has bowled 318 balls and taken 19 wickets at an average of 22.73. His best figures in T20's are 3/38.

Many people including Imran Khan believe that if it were not for fitness problems, lack of discipline, and a tendency to be controversial, Shoaib Akhtar would have been one of the greatest fast bowlers the

world has ever seen. But unfortunately, his errant nature led him astray and he is remembered mainly for the fastest ball ever bowled in cricketing history. A great player who went wayward. I hope you enjoyed reading about Shoaib Akhtar. For the letter T, I have something very interesting up my sleeve.

*T is for a few lesser known facts about the
master blaster Sachin (T)endulkar*



I don't think there would be too many people who are not familiar with the name of Sachin Ramesh Tendulkar. I have decided that for the letter T, I will write about Sachin Tendulkar. But unlike other essays, I decided that I will give a slight twist to the nature of this article. The reason is that if I were to give you an exhaustive list of Sachin's achievements in his career as a cricketer, the records he has broken, to say nothing of his technical expertise as a batsman, this article will end

up becoming interminably long. What I am saying is that a single article is not enough to bring out the true greatness of Sachin's life.

Keeping this in mind, in this article, I have decided to just list out some little facts about Tendulkar which most people are not likely to be aware of. Some of these facts may make you smile while others may make you raise your eyebrows, and some might even make you gasp in astonishment. But I assure you, you will find all these titbits of information about the master-blaster extremely interesting. I am listing below a set of thirty facts about Sachin that I have compiled from the internet. So here we go.

- 1. Tendulkar is the first cricketer to be nominated to the Rajya Sabha. He was nominated on an Indian National Congress ticket.*
- 2. As a young man, Sachin wanted to be a fast bowler and he approached the MRF pace foundation but the coach at MRF, Dennis Lillee advised Sachin to concentrate on batting instead.*
- 3. At the age of 14, Sachin once acted as a ball boy in a match between India and New Zealand at the Wankhede stadium in Mumbai.*
- 4. The first car that Sachin purchased was a Maruti-800.*
- 5. Sachin is sometimes irritated by the fact that he cannot walk freely on the streets of Mumbai, which is the price he has had to pay for the name and fame he has earned. He is known to sometimes take a drive around Mumbai late in the night after most of the city has gone to sleep.*
- 6. You may not be able to believe it when you look at Sachin now, but at school, he was a big bully. Sounds impossible, doesn't it?*
- 7. Sachin once mentioned in an interview that he loves 'Vada-Pao'.*

8. *There is one thing I have in common with Sachin Tendulkar. He is a huge fan of John McEnroe the tennis genius of the seventies. Like Sachin, I too am a fan of McEnroe. In fact, as a boy, Sachin loved McEnroe so much that he imitated McEnroe by growing his hair long and tying a band around it just like McEnroe. Well, I did not go that far, though now that I come to think of it, it would not have been such a bad idea.*

9. *Most people are fans of Rahul Dev Burman these days. But few people from this generation have heard of Sachin Dev Burman who was Rahul's father and who is also one of my all-time favourites. Who can forget the lilting number 'Khilte Hain Gul Yahan' from the movie Sharmilee which oozes melody? Are you are wondering why I am speaking so much about SD Burman? The reason is Sachin Tendulkar was named after Sachin Dev Burman by his father who was a huge fan of SD Burman.*

10. *Sachin's nickname for Sourav Ganguly is 'Babu Moshai' while Sourav calls him 'Chhota Babu'.*

11. *The nanny who took care of Sachin has been universally known as 'Sanchchu Bai'.*

12. *Sachin once made his mother look for a 'frog Bhaji' recipe!*

13. *As a child, Sachin was very naughty, and he used to go fishing for tadpoles and guppy fishes in the stream that ran through the compound of Sahitya Sahawas at Bandra East.*

14. *Sachin is the only cricketer to be awarded Rajiv Gandhi Khel Ratna, Padma Shri and Arjuna Award by the Indian Government.*

15. *In 1995, Sachin went to watch the movie Roja in disguise. He donned a beard and dark glasses and went to the theatre.*

Unfortunately, the beard fell off and people recognised him, and you can imagine what must have ensued.

16. Sachin's first brand endorsement was the health drink Boost. He was seen with Kapil Dev in the Boost ads of the nineties.

17. Sachin uses a very heavy bat that weighs 1.51 Kg. The only person who used a heavier bat is South Africa's Lance Klusener.

18. In his debut test against Pakistan Sachin batted with pads gifted to him by Sunil Gavaskar.

19. Sachin is a fan of Kishore Kumar and the rock group Dire Straits.

20. In 2002, when Sachin equalled Sir Don Bradman's record of 29 centuries, Michael Schumacher presented him a Ferrari on behalf of the carmaker Fiat. Sachin later sold this Ferrari in 2011 to a Surat Builder, Jayesh Desai.

21. The first advertisement in which Sachin featured was for Band-Aid.

22. During his junior days, Sachin used to sleep with his Cricket gear.

23. Sachin's coach Ramakant Achrekar used to award a one-rupee coin to any bowler who could dismiss Sachin during coaching. But if Sachin managed to bat through a session without getting out, the coin would belong to Sachin. The thirteen coins he won this way are among Sachin's favourite possessions today.

24. Sachin took as many as 79 ODI matches to score his first ODI century.

25. Sachin was conferred the Bharat Ratna on 4, February 2016, thereby becoming the youngest recipient of the award.

26. Sachin was awarded a bottle of champagne as the man of the match prize for his maiden ODI ton. Since he was underage, he declined to drink the champagne. Sachin kept that bottle intact and opened it on his daughter's first birthday.

27. Sachin is ambidextrous, meaning he can work with both hands. He bowls and bats with his right hand but writes and eats with his left hand.

28. In his long career of 24 years, Sachin has been out stumped only once in a test match. This happened in a match played in Bengaluru against England. The bowler was Ashley Giles.

29. Sachin met his wife Anjali who is a paediatrician when he was just 17 years old. She is six years his senior.

30. Sachin Tendulkar once played as a substitute fielder for Pakistan during a one-day practice match against India at the Brabourne Stadium in 1988.

I hope these interesting facts about Sachin Tendulkar held you spellbound. I will be back with another sportsperson for the letter U.

***U is for Robin (U)thappa a great cricketer
who did not live up to his true potential***



Image Courtesy: Wikimedia.org

For the letter U, I initially thought of writing about the star of the track and field Usain Bolt, but later decided to write about on our own desi IPL cricket star Robin Uthappa. Many people might consider it rather ridiculous to choose someone like Uthappa over an international star like Usain Bolt, but I definitely had some extremely convincing reasons. You see, I was one of those people who had watched the ICC Twenty20 World Cup played in the year 2007 in South Africa.

I watched almost all the matches on television and I still remember how, in a couple of crucial matches, Uthappa charged forward and repeatedly hit short pitched rising deliveries for sixers all around the field. I expected great things from him but somehow this batsman with such phenomenal talent has been relegated to playing in the IPL alone and has not risen to his true potential.

And for this reason alone, I have chosen to bring you Uthappa's story over someone as formidable and famous as Usain Bolt. So here goes. Robin Venu Uthappa was born in Kodagu in Karnataka. His date of birth is 11, November 1985. His mother Roselyn is a Malayali and his father Venu Uthappa who was a former Hockey umpire is a Hindu. He married his girlfriend Sheetal Gautham on March 2016.

Robin Uthappa in addition to being a dazzling batsman, is also a wicket keeper. Uthappa debuted in ODI's in the final match of the English team's tour of India in April 2006. He opened the innings and made an impressive 86 runs before he was run out. This was the highest score for an Indian debutant in an ODI. Uthappa has been nicknamed 'The Walking Assassin' because of his tendency to charge forward and hit the bowler powerfully for sixers. In the third ODI in the series against the West Indies in January 2017, he scored a quick and impressive 70.

In the 2007 ICC Twenty20 World Cup India was placed in group D. In the match against Pakistan held on 14th September, Uthappa scored an impressive 50 off 39 deliveries. This match was won by India by virtue of a bowl-out. In the semi-final against Australia, he again scored 34 off 28 balls which proved crucial.

In the NatWest ODI Series of 2007–2008, he scored 47 runs off 33 balls in the sixth ODI to take India to a brilliant victory, keeping Indian hopes alive in the 7-match series. In this particular match, he came in at no 7 instead of his usual opening position. When he came in India were 5 down for 234 after 40.2 overs and still needing 83 from less than 10 overs. Dhoni got out in the 47th over with the Indian score at 294. Uthappa, however, batted calmly and took India to the target with just two balls to spare.

In IPL Uthappa played for the Mumbai Indians team in 2008 and was reasonably successful. In January 2009 he was swapped with Zaheer Khan and moved to Royal Challengers Bangalore. He did not perform

too well in 2009. In 2010 he scored a 21 ball 50 against King's XI Punjab which was the second fastest 50 in IPL. This set up a handsome victory for RCB. He scored a couple of match-winning innings against Chennai Super Kings and Kolkata Knight Riders to set up victories for RCB in the 2010 season.

He ended the 2010 season with 374 runs from 14 innings with an average of 31.16. He also hit the maximum number of sixers in 2010 which was a whopping 27. In 2011 he was bought by Pune Warriors for a huge sum of INR 9.4 crores. Though Pune Warriors did not perform too well, Uthappa remained the top scorer with 405 runs from 16 innings. Again in 2012, he scored 434 runs in the season.

From 2014 to 2019 he has been playing for Kolkata Knight Riders and he has been uniformly performing well. In 2014 he won the Orange Cap, which is given for scoring most runs in the season. Uthappa scored 660 runs thereby creating a T20 record of scoring more than 40 runs in 8 consecutive games. This record was previously held by Mathew Hayden.

Coming to statistics Robin Uthappa has never played a test match. He has played 46 ODI's and scored 934 runs at an average of 25.94. He has kept wickets in very few ODI's and has 15 catches to his credit. As far as Twenty20's are concerned he has played 13 T20 internationals and scored 249 runs at a batting average of 24.9. These statistics do not include the T20's he has played in the IPL.

The thing to marvel about is that Robin Uthappa who has been rated as a terrific batsman by none other than Barry Richards who was once considered the best batsman in the world, has been unable to harness his true potential and shine as a great cricketer when playing for his country. Many people might feel I am overestimating him, but I really do feel that Robin Uthappa is one of those who could have really shined with the right kind of guidance.

*V is for Srinivasaraghavan
(V)enkatraghavan the off-spinner from the
famed spin-quartet of India*



Cricket is a game that almost holds a status akin to religion in India. And India is a country that has not been known for producing world-class fast bowlers. A question that is raised very often is how come a country as populous as ours is unable to produce a genuine quickie, whereas a country like Pakistan which is much smaller in size and population keeps producing world-class fast bowlers.

But the one department of bowling in which we have been producing great bowlers consistently is spin. In the seventies, Indian bowling was dominated by the spin quartet of Bedi, Prasanna, Chandrasekhar and Venkatraghavan. Later we produced some great spinners like Harbhajan Singh and now we have Ravichandran Ashwin who is a brilliant spinner.

For the letter V, I will be presenting you the story of Srinivasaraghavan Venkatraghavan a renowned off-spinner from the seventies. Later he also captained the Indian side. Venkatraghavan or Venkat as he was

better known, was born on 21, April 1945. He belongs to the state of Tamil Nadu. He came into the test scene at the age of 20 when he was selected to play against New Zealand.

He took 12 wickets in the test played at Delhi in that series and made a name for himself as a world-class off-spinner. In the 1970-71 series when India toured West Indies, he was appointed vice-captain. The series was won by India and that 'India Rubber Year' remained the year of Venkat's greatest achievements. In that year alone he took 35 wickets in eight Tests, besides being the vice-captain of the victorious Indian side.

This was followed by 13 wickets in the three tests against England. He had to constantly compete with EAS Prasanna for the off-spinner's slot in the Indian team which meant he was frequently in and out of the side. But despite this, he kept improving as a bowler all through his career. As the years went by, he became a very accurate and penetrative bowler.

He was the captain of the Indian team in the world cup competitions of 1975 and 1979. Unfortunately, in both the tournaments India performed pretty dismally. He was also the captain of the Indian team for the 1979 tour of England. He then lost his place in the team but made a come-back in 1983 when he was picked for the tour of West Indies. Finally, in 1985 he retired from first-class cricket after becoming the second highest wicket-taker in the Ranji Trophy with 530 wickets.

After retirement, he contributed to the game as an administrator and a manager of the Indian side. Later he turned successfully to umpiring and went on to become one of the most respected umpires of the game. He officiated as an umpire in 73 tests and 52 One Day Internationals and retired in March 2004.

Many people might be surprised by my inclusion of Venkat in this series, but I really felt that I ought to include at least one bowler from the glorious spin quartet of the sixties and seventies who were the mainstay of Indian bowling once upon a time.

W is for Bob (W)oolmer the player cum coach whose death is still a big mystery



Image Courtesy: Wikimedia.org

I have regaled you with the stories of a lot of sportspersons in this book. But the one thing we have to remember is that in any sport, the coach for the team or the sportsperson has a big role to play in their success or failure. For the letter W, I will bring you the story of the renowned cricket cum coach Bob Woolmer who was also a member

of the English cricket team before taking up coaching full-time. His death was also extremely controversial and there is still some suspicion of foul play. To this day some people firmly believe that his death was not natural, and he was murdered.

Robert Andrew Woolmer was born in the Georgina McRobert Memorial Hospital which is right across the road from the Green Park Stadium in Kanpur, India. His date of birth is 14, May 1948. His father, Clarence Woolmer was also a cricketer who represented United Provinces (now Uttar Pradesh) in the Ranji Trophy. Woolmer first attended Yardley Court in Tonbridge and later The Skinner's School in Tunbridge Wells.

He played for the Kent second XI initially as an offspinner, but his captain and coach Colin Page converted him into a medium pacer. Initially, Woolmer played county cricket for Kent and in 1975 he graduated to test cricket as an all-rounder. He took a hat-trick for the MCC against the touring Australian side as a medium fast bowler. But he was then dropped only to reappear later in the final match of that series. In this match, he scored 149 runs which at that time the slowest recorded test century for the English team against Australia.

In 1977, he scored two more centuries against Australia. In fact, all his test centuries came against Australia. He was a regular member of the English ODI team from 1972 to 1976 but his career suffered later because he joined Kerry Packer's World Series break-away group. He did play some test matches for England in the early eighties, but his form had suffered by then and he was not the same player as before. He participated in the rebel tours of South Africa in 1982 and that put an end to his international career.

Woolmer had already obtained his qualifications as a coach in 1968. After retiring in 1984, Woolmer emigrated to South Africa and coached school children in Hockey and Cricket. He also became involved with the Avendale Cricket Club in Athlone, Cape Town.

Those days South Africa practised apartheid and Woolmer preferred to join a 'coloured' club rather than a 'white' one. He helped the Avendale cricket club to grow and flourish and proved to be an inspiration to them. Due to his efforts, there is still an annual programme for a talented Avendale cricketer to spend a summer at Lord Wandsworth College in Hampshire.

He came back to England in 1987 and coached the Kent second XI. In 1991 he began coaching the Warwickshire County Cricket Club. The side won the Natwest Trophy in 1993, followed by three out of four trophies contested the next year. He continued his success as a coach and led Warwickshire to Natwest and County Championship victories in 1995. He followed this by taking up the post of the South African National Coach.

Woolmer is believed by most people to be the only man who has witnessed both the West Indian Brian Lara's innings of 501 not out against the county Durham in 1994 and the Pakistani batsman Hanif Mohammad's 499 in Karachi in 1958. Woolmer was an extremely innovative coach. He popularised the reverse sweep among batsmen and it is believed that he was one of the first coaches to use computer-aided techniques for coaching.

It was discovered that the South African captain Hansie Cronje frequently communicated with Woolmer during matches for assistance in decision making. This became a point of controversy in the cricket world and finally led to a ban by the ICC on coaches communicating with members of the team during matches.

Under Woolmer, the South African team initially performed rather poorly losing all six ODI matches in their first series against Pakistan. However, in the next 5 years, South Africa won 10 out of the 15 series they played and won around 73% of the ODI matches played by them.

In the 1999 ICC World Cup, South Africa faced Australia in the final match of the Super Six round. Australia needed a definite win to qualify for the semi-finals. South Africa, on the other hand, had already qualified. Australia had a better recent record in must-win matches against South Africa. The South Africans were believed to be less adept at handling high-pressure situations by the media. In this match, the South African player Herschelle Gibbs dropped the Australian captain Steve Waugh while prematurely celebrating a catch and Waugh went on to score an unbeaten century and taking Australia to victory helping them to qualify.

South Africa again played Australia in the semi-finals of the tournament. This match ended in a tie and the South Africans were eliminated. When the scores were level, South African batsman Lance Klusener and Allan Donald had a mix up in the middle of the pitch while attempting to take a run, and Donald dropped his bat and was run out. This resulted in South Africa being eliminated from the finals, because of their inferior performance in the earlier matches. And the result of all this was Bob Woolmer resigned as coach of the South African team.

Bob Woolmer also spoke up for the removal of lifting the life ban on South African captain Hansie Cronje for match-fixing. He even gave a BBC interview on his views on Cronje. In 2004 he took up the mantle of the coach for the Pakistani Cricket team. Under Woolmer, the Pakistani team toured India in 2005. Inzamam Ul Haq was the captain and the team held its own drawing the test match series 1-1 and winning the ODI series handsomely with a 4-1 victory. This was again followed by a 2-0 win for Pakistan in a series against SriLanka.

Woolmer was quite often at the centre of controversies. Former International Cricket Council match referee Barry Jarman alleged that during the 1997 one-day tournament involving South Africa, Zimbabwe and India, one of the balls used in the match and confiscated after just 16 overs showed evidence of tampering by

Woolmer's team. Woolmer denied advocating ball-tampering at any point in the match. He also mentioned that he had contacted the match officials from that game and they also could not recall any such incident.

In August 2006, just before Pakistan's Twenty20 international match against England, Woolmer had to defend his reputation when it was claimed that Pakistani players lifted the seam off the ball when he was in charge of the team. Woolmer also stated that he firmly believed that Cricket's rules should be modified to allow ball tampering.

Woolmer's death is a big unsolved mystery. On 18th March 2007, Woolmer was found dead in his room in the Jamaica Pegasus Hotel at Kingston, Jamaica. This was the day that Pakistan was knocked out of the 2007 ICC world cup. I remember the day clearly myself. Imran Khan was hell-bent on suggesting that Bob Woolmer was unable to take the shock of his team Pakistan's elimination from the world cup and had died of a heart attack due to this. And even our own spinners Maninder Singh suggested the same on television.

On 22 March, the Jamaican police launched an investigation based on the report of a pathologist Ere Seshiah that Woolmer had actually died due to asphyxia brought about by manual strangulation. The investigation was led by deputy police commissioner Mark Shields. On 12, June 2007, the commissioner of the Jamaica Constabulary force Lucius Thomas announced that Woolmer had died a natural death and not due to asphyxiation. It was reported that three independent pathologists employed by the police had examined Woolmer and concluded that the earlier report of manual strangulation was incorrect and that the toxicology reports found no evidence of poisoning. Pathologists from the UK also carried out tests. There were contradictions in the reports submitted by the Caribbeans and the pathologists from the UK.

Reports also suggested that Woolmer was suffering from several health problems including Diabetes and an enlarged spleen. On 6, November coroner Patrick Murphy asked for further tests to be conducted following the discrepancies in the forensic and toxicology reports submitted by the two sets of pathologists. After hearing the evidence for 26 days the jury returned an open verdict refusing to rule out the theory of manual strangulation put forth by Ere Seshiah.

Former South African cricketer Clive Rice still believes that Woolmer might have been murdered by organised gangs. Similarly, former Australian captain, Ian Chappell believes that it is more likely that Woolmer was murdered as he was about to reveal some secrets which had been troubling him and about which he had a lot of misgivings. And as far as Imran Khan's theory that Woolmer died of a heart attack brought about by the disappointment of having to watch Pakistan's elimination from the tournament, it is out and out poppycock. A coach feels so disheartened by his team's game that he has a heart attack! Only Pakistanis can think of a cock and bull story like that.

Even if it was a murder, the problem for the Jamaican police could have been that charging someone could have resulted in an international incident. It is very difficult to bring home a crime to the perpetrator when many countries are involved and there is a risk of a diplomatic standoff. I personally believe that Bob Woolmer did not die a simple natural death. I hope you enjoyed reading about this player and coach today. Next is the letter X.

***X is for the professional Spanish footballer
(X)avier Hernandez Creus***



Image Courtesy: [Wikimedia.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Xavi_Hernandez_Creus.jpg)

The letter X is indeed a tough call. I had to search quite a bit on the internet before I zeroed in on two sportspersons who had names starting with the letter X. One was the former Australian cricketer Xavier Doherty and the other was the Spanish professional footballer Xavier Hernandez Creus better known by the name Xavi. At first, I thought of writing an article on the cricketer but later I reflected that I have been writing on too many cricketers.

I finally decided I will write about a footballer for the letter X. Many people may not have heard his name, but Xavi is quite a popular footballer though not in the same league as Messi or Ronaldo. Xavi was born in Terrassa, Barcelona, Catalonia. His date of birth is 25, January 1980. At the age of 11, Xavi joined FC Barcelona's La Masia youth system. His father, Joaquim, was a former player for Sabadell in the first division.

Xavi played for Barcelona from 1998 to 2015. Xavi progressed through the ranks and scored his first goal on 18, August 1998 in the Super Cup final against Mallorca. He debuted in La Liga against Valencia on 3, October 1998 in a 3–1 victory for Barcelona. He initially featured for both the reserve and senior teams. His sustained impressive performances resulted in his becoming a key member of Louis van Gaal's title-winning team, finishing the 1998-99 season with 26 matches played. In 1999 he was named the La Liga Breakthrough Player of the Year. Xavi became Barcelona's principal playmaker after Pep Guardiola was injured in the 1999–2000 season.

Xavi was named the vice-captain of Barcelona in 2004-05. He helped Barcelona win La Liga. In the year 2005, he was named the La Liga Spanish player of the year. In the 2005-06 season, Xavi injured his knee and was out of circulation for 4 months, but he returned later, and he again won La Liga and the Supercopa de Espana. Xavi was named Player of the Tournament at Euro 2008. After this, Xavi spoke to Bayern Munich about a transfer, but Barcelona coach Pep Guardiola convinced him that he was important for Barcelona and stopped him.

Xavi was one of the architects of Barcelona's win in the 2009 Champions League final 2–0 victory against Manchester United. He assisted in the second goal by crossing to Messi for his header. Before the match, Manchester United coach Sir Alex Ferguson had praised the central midfield combination of Xavi and Andres Iniesta. He said,

'I don't think Xavi and Iniesta have ever given the ball away in their lives. They get you on that carousel and they can leave you dizzy'

Consequently, Xavi was voted 'UEFA Champions League best midfielder' for his contribution to Barcelona's victorious Champions League campaign.

In the year 2010, Xavi was one of the finalists for the FIFA Ballon d'Or award. He finished third in the vote behind Lionel Messi and Andres Iniesta. He also defeated Messi to win the Player of the Year award from World Soccer magazine. Xavi made his 549th appearance for Barcelona in all competitions, on 2 January 2011 in a league match against Levante, and matched the record held by Migueli. He later became the player with the most appearances for Barcelona of all time. In the 2011 UEFA Champions League Final at Wembley Stadium in London, Xavi performed exceptionally, and Barcelona defeated Manchester United in the showpiece for the second time in three seasons.

On 16, January 2014 Xavi made his 700th appearance for Barcelona for the first team against Getafe in the Copa del Rey. Finally, in 6, June 2015 Xavi made his last appearance for Barcelona when he came on as a 78th-minute substitute for Andres Iniesta during the Champions League final. The club won its fifth European Cup, beating Juventus at Berlin's Olympiastadion.

On 21st May 2015, Xavi joined the Qatari club Al Sadd SC on a three-year contract. He made his debut for Al Saad on 13, September 2015 when he assisted in the first goal in a 4–0 win over Mesaimeer. He scored his first goal for the club in a match against Umm Salal which was drawn 2–2 draw. Al Sadd ended the league campaign in the third position putting the club in a place for the next season's AFC Champions League. During the season Xavi scored three goals. But unfortunately, Xavi missed a spot kick in the penalties and Al Sadd

were knocked out of the Champions League in the qualifying rounds by Al Jazira.

Xavi won his first trophy with Al Sadd in the Qatar Cup final on 29 April 2017. On 10 November 2017, Xavi said that he would retire when his contract with Al Sadd expired at the end of the 2017–18 season and that he planned to pursue a coaching career. However, he postponed these decisions and signed a two-year contract extension with Al Saad in 2018. Coming to his international career, Xavi has played for Spain at the 2000 Olympics, 2002 World Cup, Euro 2004, 2006 World Cup, Euro 2008, 2009 Confederations Cup, 2010 World Cup, Euro 2012, 2013 Confederations Cup and the 2014 World Cup.

In the 2010 World Cup which Spain won, Xavi provided the maximum number of accurate passes, a mind-boggling 599 passes with a success rate of 91%. He also crossed the ball inside the 18-yard box more than any other player in the tournament. In the final he made 57 accurate forward half passes. He also covered 80.20 kilometres throughout the competitions. In the final, he covered a distance of almost 15 kilometres. Subsequently, this is what Duncan White wrote about Xavi in the Telegraph.

'Xavi is the beating heart of this Spanish team, the man dictating the tiki-taka pulse of pass after pass. He may be just 5ft 7in with a curiously hunched gait but no player more influences the way his whole team plays. He doesn't score, doesn't really tackle: he just passes and passes with a precision and wit unmatched by any of his peers.'

Xavi is regarded as the best central midfielders of all-time by some people. He has the ability to find spaces and exploit them as a playmaker. He has a signature move too. When in possession of the ball he makes a 360-degree turn, known as le pelopina and this helps him to avoid the opponent and gives him time and space to think about

his next pass. He is known as 'The Puppet Master' because of his ability to control matches by passing with agility.

The German Sportswear and Equipment Supplier Adidas has a sponsorship deal with Xavi, and he has appeared in commercials along with Lionel Messi. He also features in the EA Sports' FIFA Video Game Series and was the top-passer in FIFA 15 with a 91% rating. Xavi married Nuria Cunillera in July 2013 and they have a daughter Asia born on 3, January 2016. I hope you enjoyed reading about this Spanish footballer.

Y is for (Y)uzvendra Singh Chahal who plays cricket now and used to play chess in the past



Throughout this series, I have been bringing you tales of sportspersons who are talented in one particular field of endeavour. For the letter Y, I am bringing you the story of a budding young sportsman who in addition to being a cricketer, was also a chess player at the national level once upon a time. This is none other than Yuzvendra Singh Chahal who is an ODI and T20I cricket player. He has also represented India in chess.

Chahal was born on 23, July 1990 and plays for Haryana in domestic cricket and Royal Challengers Bangalore in IPL. He is a leg-break bowler. He was first signed up by Kolkata Knight Riders in the year

2008. In the first three seasons of IPL, he appeared only in 18 games for KKR. From 2011-13 he played for Mumbai Indians. He played all the matches of the 2011 Champions League Twenty20 tournament. In the finals of the 2011 IPL season, he took 2 for 9 in 3 overs thereby helping Mumbai Indians defend a modest total of 139 against RCB, consequently helping them lift the trophy.

He was then purchased by RCB for his base price of Rs 10 lakh. He secured the Man of the Match award in the finals against Delhi Daredevils in the IPL 2014 season. In January 2016, he was again bought by RCB in the 2018 IPL auction. As regards his international career, he made his international debut against Zimbabwe at Harare Sports Club on 11, June 2016. In the second match of the series he took 3 wickets for just 25 runs and led the side to victory by 8 wickets.

In this match, he delivered a seam-up delivery at a speed of 109 km/h in his second over. His bowling performance also earned him his first international man of the match award. He made his T20I debut also against Zimbabwe at Harare on 18, June 2016. In the year 2017 Chahal became the first bowler for India to take a 5-wicket haul in T20Is with figures of 6/25 against England.

Chahal is also the first leg spinner to take a 5 wicket as well as a 6-wicket haul in T20Is and holds the record for the best bowling figures for a leg spinner in T20I history. He has taken the maximum number of wickets (23) in T20Is in a year (2017) for any bowler in T20I history. On 18, January, playing against Australia in an ODI, Chahal took 6 for 42 which was his second 5 wicket haul in ODIs. These figures equalled the record set by Ajit Agarkar in 2003-04.

Chahal has played 40 ODIs and scored 34 runs at an average of 11.33 with a top score of 18. He has bowled 2,113 balls in ODIs and taken 71 wickets at 23.83 apiece. He has taken 5 wickets in an innings twice with the best figures of 6 for 42. He has played 29 T20Is and scored 4

runs at an average of 4. He has bowled 681 balls and taken 45 wickets at 19.93 apiece. His best bowling figures in T20Is is 6/25.

In April 2019, he was named in the India squad for the 2019 Cricket World Cup. As a chess player, Chahal represented India at the World Youth Chess Championship. But later he could not find a sponsor and had to give up the game. He is listed in the World Chess Federation's official site. I hope you enjoyed reading about this up and coming player. Hopefully, he has many more years of cricket left in him and will ride the crest in the coming years.

***Z is for (Z)aheer Abbas the Pakistani who
was the nemesis of Indian spinners during
the eighties***



For the final alphabet Z, I am going to bring you the tale of a cricketer who was a simply superlative batsman of the seventies and eighties and was the nemesis of the famed Indian spinners. Most people of this generation would not be aware of this famous Pakistani, but I still remember how he used to hit bowlers all over the field in the eighties and he was simply a treat to watch when in full flow. So, for the letter Z, it is going to be none other than the Pakistani batting maestro Syed Zaheer Abbas Kirmani.

Zaheer Abbas was born on 24, July 1947. He belonged to that rare breed of professional cricketers who wore spectacles. Zaheer made his test match debut in 1969. In his very second Test match, he proved his mettle by scoring 274 runs against England. This is still the fourth-ever highest score by a Pakistani batsman. This was the first of his four Test double-centuries. Younis Khan and Javed Miandad are the only other batsmen from Pakistan who have scored a greater number of double centuries.

The last of Zaheer's double hundreds was an innings of 215 scored against India in 1983. This was the first of three centuries in consecutive Tests, and also his hundredth first-class century. Zaheer Abbas and Geoffrey Boycott are the only two batsmen to have scored their hundredth first-class centuries in a Test match. In 1982/1983, Zaheer Abbas became the first batsman to score three consecutive hundreds in one-day internationals. He was such a skilled and brilliant batsman that he was sometimes referred to as the 'the Asian Bradman', and is regarded as one of the finest batsmen in the history of cricket.

In addition to other epithets, he was also, fondly known as the "Run Machine". He was also very successful in first-class cricket. He was the first Asian batsman to score one hundred first-class centuries. He played county cricket in England and had a long stint with Gloucestershire. He joined Gloucestershire in 1972 and played for the county for thirteen years.

During this time, he scored more than a thousand runs in the majority of the thirteen seasons he played for them. He also made over two thousand runs in a single season on two occasions (1976 and 1981) for the club. During his stint with Gloucestershire, he played 206 first-class games, scoring over 16,000 runs. He averaged 49.79, hitting 49 centuries and 76 fifties.

Zaheer Abbas is the only player to have ever scored a century and double century in a first-class match four times and in all these innings

he was unbeaten. Sunil Gavaskar often says of Zaheer, 'He was the anathema of the Indian spinners during the eighties'. He also once said while commentating, that the Indian players would often say to Zaheer, "Zaheer Ab-bas karo", which translated means "Zaheer, please, stop it now".

Abbas was appointed the captain of the Pakistani team in 1981 and 1984. He retired from international cricket in 1985. He has also officiated as a match referee in one Test match and three ODI matches. He has also worked as the manager of the Pakistani national team. In 2015 he was appointed ICC president. He was the third cricketer after Colin Cowdrey and Clyde Walcott, to be appointed to this post.

Zaheer Abbas scored 346 runs in a 4 match ODI series in 1982 which is the record for the greatest number of runs by any batsman in a 4 match ODI series. Overall Zaheer Abbas played 78 tests and scored 5,062 runs at an average of 44.79 with 12 centuries and 20 fifties. He has also taken 3 wickets. He has played 62 ODIs and scored 2,572 runs at an average of 47.62 with 7 centuries and 13 fifties. An enviable record indeed.

With that, we come to the end of this series on sportspersons. I hope you enjoyed reading about the sporting greats and their tales. I would like to add a note here. This series was intended to bring out sportspersons of all hues. Consequently, there are some names included that are unorthodox. These unorthodox choices were of those sportspersons who in my opinion were extremely skilled but did not shine to their true potential for several reasons. I hope I have done justice to this series and have highlighted people who are of interest.

Other Books by Sitharaam Jayakumar

Eighty Hours To Save Karen

The Krishnapur Kidnappings

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Meet the Author



Sitharaam Jayakumar is an Information Technology professional who has been working in the IT field for the past twenty-seven years. He graduated from the Indian Institute of Technology, Varanasi (formerly Institute of Technology, BHU) in 1988 with a B-Tech in Metallurgical Engineering. He joined the IT profession in 1991. He is a passionate reader of books on both fiction and non-fiction. He takes a keen interest in sports, especially cricket and tennis. In addition, he is also interested in politics and music. He started writing when a close friend who was deeply impressed by his versatile language urged him to do so. He loves to write about anything that catches his fancy in everyday life. His repertoire includes articles on social issues, crime, women's empowerment, fiction and several other topics. He has penned two eBooks in the suspense thriller genre titled 'Eighty Hours To Save

Karen’ and ‘The Krishnapur Kidnappings’. These are available on Amazon. This is his first non-fiction book. He is also a published poet.

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