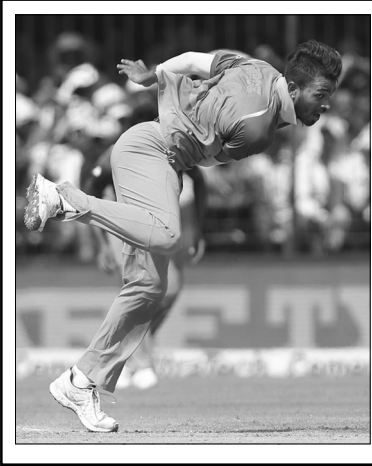


# I have been hitting sixes since childhood: Pandya



**“If you want to think that way, you can, I have no problems. I played well in the IPL before that. Last year's IPL wasn't great for me, so I worked hard, and the form came back. And I used to hit sixes before too, it's just that I am hitting them at a higher level now. I have been hitting sixes since childhood otherwise”**

INDORE, SEP 25 /- He has become the cynosure of all eyes with his six-hitting prowess but Hardik Pandya says it's not a skill he has developed overnight as he has been clearing the ropes easily since childhood. Twice in the ongoing series against Australia, Pandya has seized the momentum for India with his big-hitting abilities. During the first ODI in Chennai, Pandya had taken leg-spinner Adam Zampa to the cleaners while in the series-clinching ODI on Sunday, he came up with big shots against left-arm spinner Ashton Agar at a crucial juncture.

Asked if his budgeting 76-run knock against Pakistan in the Champions Trophy final was the turning point for him, Pandya politely made a statement. "If you want to think that way, you can, I have no problems. I played well in the IPL before that. Last year's IPL wasn't great for me, so I worked hard, and the form came back. And I used to hit sixes before too, it's just that I am hitting them at a higher level now. I have been hitting sixes since childhood otherwise," Pandya told reporters at the post-match press conference.

"So whatever you say, if you say Pakistan changed my game, then so be it I have no problem," he added. Pandya's 78-run knock

came at a time when India had lost four wickets in quick time. Further talking about his ability to hit sixes at will, Pandya said he prefers reading the game before making shot selection. "It's not just about hitting. It's pretty important that I read the game. That time (in Chennai) I thought that Zampa was bowling and I knew that I could hit a six off him anytime I wanted to. That's why I waited till the seventh over and then I got the opportunity to change the momentum and eventually one over changed the momentum in that game," he said. "I tried and it came out pretty well. That's just my thinking. It's about being positive and backing yourself. If I feel like, I go for it. I read the situation and go for it," Pandya said. Pandya, who usually bats at number seven after MS Dhoni, came out to bat at number four at Indore. "It does not make any difference where I bat," Pandya asserted. "Rather than seeing this as a challenge, I see this as an opportunity to do something nice for the team. When I was told I was going to go out to bat next, I was happy. This is the first time I played so many balls, so it was great," he said. "The message was always simple. Play your game, however you play. I can play all kinds of innings. Obviously the plan was to target the spinners and it came out pretty well." With his consistent per-

formance, Pandya is expected to carry the weight of expectations like other star players of the team. However, the all-rounder says he does not think that way. "I don't think that much. I focus only on the things, which I can focus and right now I am just playing my cricket. I just back myself and if you back yourself, you always come out on top. I mean you can't score everyday but yeah, backing yourself is pretty important," he said. He also acknowledged the platform provided by openers Rohit Sharma and Ajinkya Rahane with their 131-run partnership. "The shots which they played were outstanding. Many people have said it in the past and I am again saying it. It's a treat to watch them play and the way they play," Pandya said. Pandya also dismissed suggestions that the team was under pressure while chasing an imposing 294 yesterday after losing four top-order batsmen. "I don't think so. I was sitting on top or below the equation was also at run-a-ball. We knew if we took the game deep, then the boundary balls will also come, since the margin of runs wasn't much," he said. "We bat pretty deep, and it was only a matter of spending more time. We actually knew we could get over the line," Pandya signed off.

## England selectors ponder Ashes top-order conundrum

LONDON, SEP 25 /- England's selectors name their squad on Wednesday for the Ashes series with the team in a surprising state of flux despite recent home series wins over South Africa and West Indies. England experienced a mixture of crushing victories and heavy losses this summer, eventually winning out because they bat so deep and, in Ben Stokes and Moeen Ali, have two of their best over-all-rounders. But the top order seldom convinced with only opener Alastair Cook and captain Joe Root certain to play in the first Test against Australia in Brisbane starting on November 23. Surrey's Mark Stoneman is Cook's most likely opening partner after playing in three Tests against West Indies but much of the discussion will revolve around which batsmen deserve another chance to prove themselves in Australia. The days when England could ink in proven performers like Jonathan Trott, Ian Bell and Kevin Pietersen in the middle order have long gone. England coach Trevor Bayliss has said the squad is likely to include only players who have featured in the

past 18 months, opening the way for a recall for Hampshire's James Vince as England seek to fill their problem number three slot. Vince is a natural shot-maker but did not feature this season after notching 212 runs at an average of 19 in his seven Tests last year. Like Essex's Tom Westley and Yorkshire's Gary Ballance, who both batted at three this summer, Vince's technique was questioned with concerns over his tendency to fence loosely at balls out of side of stump.

With David Malan just doing enough to keep his place after averaging 28.82 in his five matches batting at number five, Ballance and Vince could both travel, with Keaton Jennings, Lancashire's Haseeb Hameed, who broke his finger this month, and one-day specialist Alex Hales likely to miss out. All three could feature for England's second-string Lions squad, who will be in Australia this winter and supply ready-made replacements in the event of injury. England's middle order is settled, with Stokes, keeper Jonny Bairstow and Moeen regularly taking turns to bat England out of trou-

ble against South Africa and West Indies. Stuart Broad and James Anderson, who recently took his 500th Test wicket, will again spearhead the attack although neither is naturally suited to the extra pace and bounce of Australian pitches. That could open the way for Mark Wood if he can stay fit, with Liam Plunkett, Craig Overton and Jake Ball all meriting discussion for a place alongside Chris Woakes. Toby Roland-Jones, a surprising success this summer, will almost certainly miss out after injuring his back while his Middlesex teammate Steve Finn is an outsider, particularly after his struggles in Australia on England's last tour in 2013.

Leg-spinner Mason Crane numbers great Australian Shane Warne among his admirers and, having gained experience of Australian conditions with New South Wales, is likely to claim the second spinner spot behind Moeen. Surrey's Ben Foakes is the favourite to travel as back-up keeper to Bairstow, bringing up the possibility of England picking Stokes, Woakes and Foakes in the same team.

## Iraq match showed our boys temperament, says coach

KATHMANDU, SEP 25 /- Having finished the Asian Football Cup U-16 Qualifiers 2018 campaign on a positive note Bibiano Fernandes, head coach India U-16 national team, hailed the team and said the match against defending champions Iraq displayed the boys' temperament. "Drawing against defending champions Iraq shows our boys' prowess and their temperament while contesting at the bigger stages, I would like to thank AIFF for arranging the exposure trips to Egypt and Qatar, which have helped us immensely gauging our abilities and planning our strategies for the next matches," Bibiano said on the way back home from Nepal.

The U-16 team who are now unbeaten in 12 matches (including practice matches and official matches) are in a favourable position to qualify for the AFC U-16 Championship 2018 by finishing one of the five best second-placed teams across the continent. They will know their position only on September 28 when they play against the other U-16 Qualifiers across other venues in Asia finish. India finished their unbeaten campaign with 5 points from 3 matches, having drawn against hosts Nepal and defending champions Iraq and beating Palestine 3-0. He also praised the AIFF highly for the youth development programme started a decade back, terming it as a brilliant

initiative. "While congratulating the boys, we must not forget the AIFF's inputs to achieve this feat. As I'm being informed, finishing AFC U-16 Qualifiers unbeaten hasn't been very common to us but we've done it this time," Fernandes said. "It rightly reflects how we're improving and I must say that we're actually reaping the benefits of the years of rigorous youth development programme which is nothing but a brilliant initiative, to say the least. I really feel proud of my boys and they all have a bright future ahead. I foresee most of them playing for the India senior team in the near future," he added.

## FC Pune City appoints Ranko Popovic as new head coach

PUNE, SEP 25 /- Indian Super League (ISL) side FC Pune City on Monday roped in Ranko Popovic as their new head coach for the 2017-18 season. Popovic began his managerial career in 2001 with Atlatl de Toluca, FC Arnfels followed by a stint with another Austrian club FC Pachern from 2004-2006.

Popovic had took the reins of Sanfrecce Hiroshima in the J1 league for a year before going back to his homeland, coaching the club in the Japanese league. He also coached in the Serbian SuperLiga until 2009. Popovic returned to Japan managing Oita Trinita, FC Machida Zelvia, FC Tokyo eventually climbing the progress ladder to manage Cerezo Osaka, one of the strongest teams in Japanese league football. It was during his managerial stint when the club signed Uruguayan star Diego Forlan. During his time in Japan, he promoted several young players who went on to receive debut call-ups for the national team. In 2015, he went to Spain to coach Segunda Division club Real Zaragoza where he led the team to finals of the Copa del Rey. A season later, he joined Thai Premier League Champions Buriram United, FC where he won the Thai League Cup and Mekong Cup Championship. Commenting on the appointment, CEO of FC Pune City, Gaurav Hodwel said, "In Ranko, we have a manager with distinguished coaching career spanning 15 years. His successful stints in different leagues vastly differing in cultural environment and football ecosystem, especially in Asia, makes him very relevant for a club like ours. Ranko is multi-lingual and believes strongly in developing youth players."

## New Zealand axe Neesham, Broom for India tour

WELLINGTON, Sep 25 /- New Zealand on Monday dropped all-rounder Jimmy Neesham and batsman Neil Broom from the one-day squad to tour India next month. Coach Mike Hesson named a core group of nine players for the tour, with a further six to be selected from the New Zealand A side currently in India. Neesham and Broom both missed out after failing to fire at the ICC Champions Trophy in June. Hesson said Broom had been effective batting at three or four but it was an area in which New Zealand already had a lot of depth.

"We'd like to see Neil develop his game further to show he has the skills to bat at five," he said. Neesham has scored only one half century in 11 one-day internationals this year and his 10 ODI outings with the ball over the same period yielded only four wickets.

"Jimmy needs go back and really dominate domestic cricket with both bat and ball," Hesson said. "We know Jimmy is a talented player, but we've spoken with him around improving the consistency in all areas of his game." New Zealand play the first of three one-dayers against India in Mumbai on October 22. The nine players named by Hesson were: Kane Williamson (capt), Trent Boult, Colin de Grandhomme, Martin Gupthill, Tom Latham, Adam Milne, Mitchell Santner, Tim Southee, Ross Taylor.

## Ashton Agar ruled out of India series with fractured finger

NEW DELHI, SEP 25 /- Another big blow awaits the touring Australian side as spin-all-rounder Ashton Agar will be missing out on the remainder of the ODI series against India owing to a finger injury he incurred during the third match in Indore on Sunday.

Team Australia is in a midst of an unexpected, or rather unbelievable, whirlwind of endless defeats on foreign soil. 12 ODI games have they played as part of away series, but have failed to scalp a victory in none. A record, rather an unwanted one which even skipper Steve Smith laments on. Heading into the limited-over series against India, the players were dubbed as 'underdogs' for the first time ever. And did they stand up to that tag. They suffered a 26-run defeat in the first ODI in Chennai in a rain-truncated encounter, then came a 50-run defeat in Kolkata, finally crumbling down a five-wicket loss at Holkar Stadium on Sunday. Not only have they lost their chances of a comeback in the series, but also are on the brink of a ODI whitewash. And then comes the news of Ashton Agar. During the third ODI match in Indore, the left-arm spinner injured his lit-

tle finger on the other hand whilst trying to stop a boundary. He walked out of the field, got it strapped and returned for his second spell and thereby finished off with his quota of 10 overs.

But only on Monday, things became a little clear that the 23-year-old will be missing out on the last two ODI matches and head back home for recovery. But what seriously adds up to his concern is that he is in doubt of the remainder of the summer.

Following the conclusion of the match he went for x-rays, which have confirmed a fracture of the finger. Team doctor Richard Saw said in a statement. "He will return home to Australia and consult a specialist with a possibility of surgery." So far Agar's absence, Adam Zampa has the opportunity to make a return back to the squad. After a thorough thrashing by Hardik Pandya in the

first ODI in Chennai, the young leggie was asked to warm the bench ahead of the Eden Gardens battle. Team Australia will now be playing for pride as they will take on the hosts in Bengaluru for the fourth ODI and then in Nagpur for the final match.



## Cristiano Ronaldo's slow start sparks Ballon d'Or race

MADRID, SEP 25 /- Two games without a goal is run of the mill for most footballers but for Cristiano Ronaldo it constitutes a drought. Ronaldo will be looking to forget his early season struggles as Real Madrid aim to lay down a marker in their quest for a third consecutive Champions League at Borussia Dortmund on Tuesday. The Portuguese remains the strongest favourite to match Lieke Martens' record of five Ballon d'Or wins for his starring role in guiding Madrid to a first La Liga and Champions League double in 59 years. However, Messi's sensational form for Barcelona and the attention garnered by Neymar's 222 million-euro

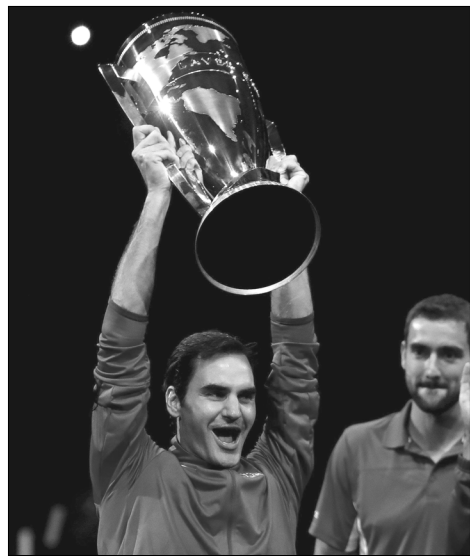


(\$265 million) world record move to Paris Saint-Germain last month has starved Ronaldo of attention he craves. All three were named as the finalists for FIFA's Men's Player Award for 2017 last week. It is Ronaldo, though, who has so far failed to hit his stratospherically high standards this season as Real have fallen seven points behind Barca in the La Liga title race. A five-game suspension for pushing a referee after being sent-off in the first leg of the Spanish Super Cup has been the principle cause. However, Ronaldo described the ban as "persecution" on the part of the Spanish federation. But the punishment didn't end with the ban as a rusty Ronaldo misfired badly as Real's run of scoring in 73 straight games was ended by a shock 1-0 defeat to Real Betis last midweek. Ronaldo also fired a blank as Madrid edged past bottom of the table Alaves on Saturday despite having 18 shots across his last two games.

Cristiano is like he always is. When he doesn't score you ask me about him, but he's calm," insisted Real boss Zinedine Zidane. He wanted to score which is normal, but it's a long season and he always ends up making the difference. "It would take something extraordinary to deny Ronaldo the Ballon d'Or after scoring 10 times from the Champions League quarter-finals on against a clause of opposition such as Bayern Munich, Atletico Madrid and Juventus. Yet, Messi's reaction to Neymar's decision to forge pastures new at PSG has been a telling demonstration of who is really the irreplaceable figure at the Camp Nou. Messi has helped guide Barca to six wins from six in La Liga and a 3-0 thumping of Juventus in the Champions League scoring 12 goals in nine appearances in all competitions. Indeed, at club level Messi now has 43 goals in 2017 to Ronaldo's 29. Neymar's numbers are far more modest despite five goals in six games for PSG as he has

adapted well to his new surroundings and new stature as the world's most expensive player.

One of the Brazilian's motives for leaving the lure of Messi and Barcelona behind was reportedly his desire to win the Ballon d'Or. But at 25 his time is more likely to come in future years if Messi (20) and Ronaldo (2) begin to wane. Neymar will need to live up to the hype of his record price tag not just in Ligue 1 but in the Champions League level to be crowned the world's best and the visit of Bayern Munich to the Parc des Princes on Wednesday is his greatest opportunity to make an impact before January's award ceremonies.



Members of team Europe celebrate after winning the tournament during Laver Cup - 3rd Day - Prague, Czech Republic