



FIFA World Cup 2026

Italy legend Buffon looks back at 2006 triumph with "touch of bitterness" after hat-trick of qualification misses

ROME, JULY 9: Italy's FIFA World Cup-winning legend Gianluigi Buffon reflected on the country's last FIFA World Cup win 20 years on this day, saying that the milestone will be celebrated with "gratitude but with a touch of bitterness", given the national men's side's failure to qualify for three FIFA World Cups on a trot.

On this day in 2006, Italy overcame France 5-3 on penalties after a 1-1 draw in regulation time. The win marked Italy's fourth World Cup win.

However, in the next two editions, Italy fared badly, registering group stage exits in 2010 and 2014. In the 2010 edition hosted by South Africa, heading as defending champions, Italy failed to win even a single match.

Italy failed to qualify for the 2018 and 2022 editions. A qualification in 2026 looked on the cards for Italy as during the FIFA World Cup Qualifiers final earlier this year, they suffered a heartbreaking exit from the World Cup qualification race after losing to Bosnia and Herzegovina in a tense penalty shootout (4-1),



marking their third consecutive failure to reach the global tournament. To put things in perspective, 2026 is also the year when Italy made its debut in the ICC T20 World Cup, leaving a strong impression on cricket fans with a 10-wicket win over Nepal and a strong showing against 2022 champions England, where they fell 24 runs short of England's 203-run target.

Taking to X, Buffon posted, "There are days that don't belong just to those who lived them. They belong to an entire nation.

July 9, 2006, is one of those days. Twenty years later, that memory still holds the same power: the embrace of an extraordinary group, the joy of millions of Italians, the pride of having worn that jersey and of having written a page of history together. Today, we celebrate that milestone with gratitude, but also with a touch of bitterness."

Buffon said that the win would have been nice to recall while Italy was "once again a protagonist on the world's most important soccer stage". But keeping the love for the badge alive

years after his retirement, he said, "that the love for the azzurro never changes and never fades."

"It is a bond that transcends time, victories, disappointments, and fresh starts. Thanks to my teammates, to the staff, to all the Italians who dreamed with us. That night will forever remain one of the most beautiful pages in our history. And it will continue to remind us what it means to represent Italy. Yesterday, today, and with even more passion and determination in the future," he signed off. (ANI)

Sooryavanshi, Abhishek's 6-hitting ability great, but needs to be controlled: BCCI

MUMBAI, JULY 09: The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) is closely observing India's performances in the ongoing T20I series against England, with the opening pair of Abhishek Sharma and 15-year-old prodigy Vaibhav Sooryavanshi and their six-hitting ability under the scanner, as per a source from the board.

India, which entered a new era during the tour to the UK, with middle-order batter Shreyas Iyer taking over the captaincy from the T20 World Cup-winning skipper Suryakumar Yadav. However, currently 2-0 down in the five-match series after a shock 2-0 loss to Ireland in T20Is preceding the England tour, Team India is still searching for their first win under Iyer, let alone a series win. The best India can do during the ongoing T20I series is to level it 2-2, with the first match ending in a washout.

A BCCI source has acknowledged that the "six-hitting ability of Abhishek and Sooryavanshi is great but needs to be controlled".

Sooryavanshi, who became India's youngest inter-



national cricketer ever at the age of 15 years and 99 days in the second T20I, surpassing Sachin Tendulkar's long-standing record made back in 1989, has had a forgettable start to his career, managing scores of 14, 13 and 15.

Notably, Sooryavanshi earned his maiden national call-up following a sensational IPL 2026 campaign with Rajasthan Royals, where he amassed 776 runs at a staggering strike rate of 237.30, including a century and five fifties. His explosive season saw him finish as the tournament's leading run-scorer while smashing a record 72 sixes.

The youngster also swept multiple post-season IPL honours, including the Orange Cap, Most Valuable Player, Emerging Player, Super Striker and Super Sixes awards.

So far in his IPL career, Sooryavanshi has scored 1,028 runs in 23 matches and innings at an average of 44.69 and a strike rate of 228.95, with two centuries and six fifties and a best score of 103. He has smashed 96 sixes.

In the recent tri-nation series in Sri Lanka, featuring SL A and Afghanistan A, Sooryavanshi made 211 runs in five innings at an average of 42.20, with a strike

rate of almost 201, with the best score of 94, his solitary fifty coming in the final. He also smacked the fastest List A cricket fifty in 11 balls against Sri Lanka A.

On the other hand, Abhishek has fared way better, but has had his share of failures. In the Ireland series, he managed scores of 49 and 0 in two matches. So far in the England tour, he has managed scores of 59, 43, 10 and 16 and has been one of India's better batters this tour. But the match-winning impact in his batting has not been seen so far.

Coming to the fourth T20I, India won the toss and elected to bat first.

Teams:
England (Playing XI): Philip Salt, Jos Buttler (w), Harry Brook (c), Jacob Bethell, Tom Banton, Sam Curran, Will Jacks, Rehan Ahmed, Jofra Archer, Adil Rashid, Josh Tongue

India (Playing XI): Abhishek Sharma, Vaibhav Sooryavanshi, Ishan Kishan (w), Shreyas Iyer (c), Tilak Varma, Shivam Dube, Washington Sundar, Axar Patel, Prince Yadav, Arshdeep Singh, Prasadh Krishna. (ANI)

SAI and Safdarjung Sports Injury Centre sign MoU to strengthen sports science and athlete care

NEW DELHI, JULY 9:

The Sports Authority of India (SAI), under the Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports (MYAS), and the Safdarjung Sports Injury Centre (SIC), under the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare (MoHFW), signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Wednesday to strengthen collaboration in sports science, sports medicine, athlete rehabilitation, research, innovation, education and capacity building.

The MoU aims to create an integrated framework by combining the expertise, infrastructure and scientific capabilities of both institutions to provide comprehensive support for Indian athletes and support staff.

The collaboration will promote evidence-based sports science and medical practices, facilitate multidisciplinary research, strengthen athlete injury prevention and rehabilitation, and enhance performance optimisation through scientific interventions.

The MoU was signed in the presence of Hari Ranjan Rao, Secretary (Sports), Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports, and Punya Salila Srivastava, Secretary, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare.

On behalf of SAI, the MoU was signed by Brig. (Dr.) Bibhu Kalyan Nayak, Executive Director, Sports Science Division (Erstwhile NCCSR) and (Dr.) Deepak Joshi, Director, Safdarjung Sports Injury Centre, signed on behalf of the SIC.

Speaking on the occasion, Rao said, "The future of



high-performance sport depends upon the seamless integration of sports science and sports medicine".

He further noted that this MoU establishes a strong institutional framework that will promote collaborative research, scientific innovation, athlete monitoring and rehabilitation, ultimately contributing towards building a world-class support ecosystem for Indian athletes. Adding to it, Salila said, "Sports medicine and sports science have become indispensable components of athlete health and performance. This partnership reflects the shared commitment of both Ministries to integrate medical excellence with sports science expertise for developing robust systems of injury prevention, clinical care, rehabilitation and scientific research that will benefit athletes across the country."

Brig. Nayak further said, "The partnership will facilitate multidisciplinary research, standardised clinical and sports science protocols, knowledge exchange and advanced athlete support services."

He added that by combining the strengths of both institutions, we will be able to develop sustainable scientific solutions that will directly translate into improved athlete performance and long-term athlete health. Dr. Joshi also contributed and said, "This partnership will further strengthen research, education, rehabilitation and evidence-based sports medicine for the benefit of athletes across the country."

The MoU marks an important milestone in institutional collaboration between two of India's premier organisations in sports science and sports

medicine.

The collaboration is aligned with the Government of India's vision of building a scientifically enabled, athlete-centric and globally competitive sporting ecosystem.

It also complements flagship initiatives such as Khelo India and the Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS), while supporting the country's long-term aspiration under Viksit Bharat@2047 to establish India as a leading sporting nation.

By promoting research, innovation, capacity building and evidence-based athlete care, the partnership is expected to strengthen India's high-performance system and enhance the nation's preparedness for future international competitions, including the Olympic and Paralympic Games.

World Padel League brings its biggest season to Mumbai's Dome, SVP Stadium

MUMBAI, JULY 9: Fueling the wave of padel's remarkable growth in India, the World Padel League (WPL) is set to return with its biggest edition to the iconic Dome, SVP Stadium, Mumbai, from August 12-16, 2026.<

Licensed and managed by Iconik Sports and Events Ltd., the league enters a new phase of growth with a larger venue, six franchise teams and an elite international player line-up, reaffirming its position as India's leading franchise-based professional padel league, according to a press release by WPL.

Season 4 will feature 36 of the world's leading padel players representing five countries, including Spain, Argentina, and Brazil, competing across six franchises in the league's fast-paced team format. The franchises include Vedanta Leopards, owned by Vedanta Group; Khan Tigers, owned by Sohail Khan Entertainment; Panorama Panthers, owned by Panorama Studios; Aussie Mavericks Jaguars, owned by Amit Sahni, Kewal Kalra and Pankaj Singha; Game Changers Lions, owned by Game Changers FZCO; and VB Realty Cheetahs, owned by Vashu Bhagnani.

Building on the success of its previous three editions, the World Padel League has played a significant role in bringing world-class padel to Indian audiences through its unique franchise-based format. As the sport gathers pace across the country, the league con-



tinues to provide a platform for elite international competition while helping build greater awareness, accessibility, and excitement around padel in India.

Speaking ahead of Season 4, Mahesh Bhupathi, Co-Founder, World Padel League, said, "Every season of the World Padel League has reinforced padel's growing momentum in India. What began as a bold vision has grown into a league that brings together the world's best players, leading brands, passionate fans and a rapidly expanding sporting community."

India is fast becoming one of padel's most exciting growth stories globally, and it's gratifying to see WPL

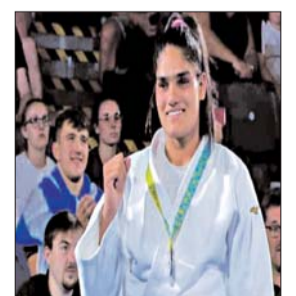
helping shape that journey. "The current edition of the league comes at a time when padel is witnessing unprecedented momentum across the country. According to the India Padel Report 2026 by Hudle and CAA Portas, India's padel market is projected to grow from US\$25-30 million to US\$250-300 million by 2036, while the player base surged from just 500-1,000 players in 2022 to nearly 100,000 in 2025.

As India's padel ecosystem continues to expand, the World Padel League remains committed to accelerating the sport's growth by bringing global stars to Indian shores, inspiring greater participation and

strengthening the country's position on the international padel map. With a bigger venue, an elite international field and the continued backing of leading corporate and entertainment brands, Season 4 is poised to be the league's biggest and most impactful edition yet.

The complete player roster, fixtures and tournament schedule will be announced in the coming weeks, adding to the excitement ahead of the league's return to Mumbai. Tickets are now live on BookMyShow. Fans can witness all the action live from August 12-16, 2026, at the Dome, SVP Stadium, Mumbai. (ANI)

Tulika Maan eyes CWG gold to add to Birmingham silver



GLASGOW, JULY 09: Commonwealth Games silver medallist judoka Tulika Maan, who made a first-round exit at the Paris Olympics, is determined to put that disappointment be-

hind and upgrade the colour of her medal in the upcoming CWG in Glasgow.

Maan's Olympic campaign ended in heartbreaking fashion after she lost her opening women's +78kg bout to Cuban great Idaly Ortiz in just 28 seconds in Paris Olympics two years back.

"Paris was like a black day for me," Maan told PTI on the sidelines of the Indian contingent's kit unveiling and send-off ceremony here. "Making a comeback

from there was very difficult because I knew the pressure was there. But it's okay. Because of my family, I am ready for the 2026 Commonwealth Games."

The Delhi judoka had claimed silver in the +78kg category at the 2022 Commonwealth Games in Birmingham after going down in a hard-fought final to Scotland's Sarah Adlington.

Asked if she was looking to improve on that result, Maan made her intentions clear. "Yes, for sure. It's not that

I have to, I want to change it," she said. "Hopefully, I will win the gold. It will be a blessing for me because I will finally get the moment that I wanted in Birmingham."

Maan is set for another potential clash with Adlington in Glasgow, this time on the Scots' home turf, but the Indian is confident of not repeating the mistakes she made in the 2022 final. "Last time as well, it was her home ground, but the mistakes were mine. I won't repeat them again.