

2022 IN REARVIEW

A CATHARTIC MIND-BENDER

Like football, the world of cricket buzzed no less. Sri Lanka rode against all odds and emotions to clinch the Asia Cup, and England were karmically rewarded with a T20 World Cup glory, having been the top trend-setters across all formats for a while now.

KHALID HOSSAIN

Utterly unforgettable was the delivery of sports in 2022, a year jam-packed with major events – a few of which were postponed since 2020 by the Coronavirus pandemic.

The political chaos in Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and elsewhere, in tandem with the Russia-Ukraine conflict hogging the larger portion of the spotlight, had left the suffering nations' athletes in distraught. Russian athletes saw unfortunate bans as a consequence, and some hosting venues had to be shifted at the eleventh hour.

The year began on the best possible note for Bangladesh men's cricket team – who pulled off a historic overseas Test victory against World Test Championship holders New Zealand – but not so much for tennis megastar Novak Djokovic as he was barred from participating in the Australian Open due to his

unvaccinated status. Djokovic was later denied entry to the US Open but the Serb remained more than content with another Wimbledon trophy in his cabinet, his 21st overall Grand Slam title.

Stories of heroics churned out aplenty, and from geniuses who had little left to prove. While the return of Rafael Nadal from injury was sensationally met with the first two of the four Grand Slams of the year, taking the Spaniard's tally to an all-time highest, 22, the icing on the cake provided the epic crescendo with Lionel Messi leading Argentina from the front to finally bag the elusive World Cup title at his illustrious career's twilight.

Sandwiched between the aforementioned feats, Nadal's much younger compatriot Carlos Alcaraz announced his arrival with a bang, as a possible heir to the throne, as the 19-year-old grabbed his first Grand Slam title in the US Open and ended

the year as the top-ranked player.

And heroic was how a tragedy was prevented when the artistic swimmer Anita Alvarez's life was literally saved by her coach Andrea Fuentes, who plunged to the rescue as soon as it was feared that the American swimmer had gone unconscious at the bottom of the pool following her solo event at the World Aquatics Championships in Budapest.

On the low, tennis' all-time greats in Roger Federer and Serena Williams called it quits, both at age of 41, while several iconic names of the game passed away: from highly revered tennis coach Nick Bollettieri, credited for the rise of Andre Agassi, Maria Sharapova – to American basketball legend Bill Russell to Charanjit Singh – India's captain of the Tokyo Olympics gold medal-winning hockey team in 1964.

But perhaps the world was shocked the most once the news of the Aussie game-changer Shane Warne's



untimely demise broke out, wedged between the deaths of his compatriots Rodney Marsh and Andrew Symonds. The cricket world suffered further loss in esteemed umpires Asad Rauf, Jeremy Lloyds and Rudi Koertzen – the latter known for his “slow finger of death” gesture as he signalled a batter out.

A couple of more global sporting events took place this year in the form of Commonwealth Games in Birmingham, where Australia topped the medals tally among 72 participating nations, and Winter Olympics in Beijing, where Norway ruled the roost among 91. Both events' organisers met the serious challenge of maintaining bio-bubble for athletes, and everyone else involved, but passed the test with flying colours.

One of the outstanding developments in 2022 got tied to the dissipation of gender disparity. Women's sports, in general, received greater investment and viewership than ever before, alongside the implementation of equal-pay policy – as evidenced by the historic move taken by the US Soccer and Indian Cricket Council concerning their national teams.

The perception landscape towards women in sports happens to be transforming in leaps and bounds, locally and beyond.

Cases in point: the Bangladesh women's football team received an unprecedented grand reception upon arrival from Nepal following their maiden SAFF Championship triumph. Meanwhile, a world-record crowd of 91,648 showed up at the

Birmingham in the fourth innings against India, and scored 500 runs against Pakistan well within a single day and whitewashed the hosts 3-0, and yet had operated their “Bazball” methodology with utmost ease. Pakistan, however, would be glad to look back at a year when international cricket returned to their soil.

India, though, had underachieved in the limited-over formats as they capped the year with an away-series loss versus Bangladesh. Excluding their men's team, success arrived elsewhere as their women clinched the Asia Cup trophy hosted in Sylhet, while their Under-19 boys stood as world champions. Indian fans, and fans in general, can also rejoice

at seeing depression not overwhelming ace performers like Virat Kohli and Ben Stokes.

Overall in sports, India had several historic achievements to fondly remember the year by: Neeraj Chopra's silver at the World Athletics Championships, female boxer Nikhat Zareen's gold at the World

Boxing Championship, their men's badminton team's Thomas Cup triumph. Moreover, India hosted the Chess Olympiad for the first time where the Uzbek men and Ukrainian women were a cut above the rest.

Breaking of long-held records and, to varying extent, controversies surrounding hosts were a recurring theme this year. Max Verstappen smashed several Formula One records throughout the 2022 season for Red Bull, while LIV Golf got underway mid-year, forcing the US tours to suspend those who took part in the controversial Saudi-backed platform.

Ultimately, the thematic culmination moulded into its final sublime form as Messi tumbled all sorts of age-old records in Qatar, while the first African and Arab nation with the

Camp Nou in Barcelona when the hosts took on VfL Wolfsburg in a Women's Champions League clash.

Speaking of the Madrid side, their men's team overcame one hurdle after another in dramatic fashion to conquer Europe for a record 14th time. The chief architect behind the Spanish giants' success was Karim Benzema, who became only the second player excluding Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo to win the Ballon d'Or since 2008.

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The Test cricket arena witnessed their sheer exhibits, most notably: the way England chased 378 in

World Cup hosting rights thwarted a barrage of criticism and managed to successfully arrange a football World Cup, one for the ages.

It appears 2022 would be looked back at history as the year sporting catharsis had erupted a la supervolcano.

