

11 sports stories that made 2019 memorable for Pakistan



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Sports is a near lock to supply more than its share of memorable events each year. The beat almost always has plenty for those who crave. The outgoing year 2019 was no different, as plenty happened in Pakistani sports that will never be forgotten.

Here are the events from the world of Pakistani sports that helped shape 2019:

- 1- BABAR AZAM VS DALE STEYN:** Older and slower, but the Dale Steyn of early 2019 still carried the fearsome reputation that made the likes of Mohammad Hafeez retire from Tests ahead of the South Africa tour. Azam, still just a pup to that point, was supposed to show respect to the veteran bulldog. He didn't. In the three-match Test series that began in 2018 but ended in 2019, Azam punished Steyn as no man ever had in a long time, showing no fear against arguably the greatest bowler of his generation. The two had several other encounters over the three Tests but Azam always came out on top and never lost his wicket to the Proteas master. This was a clear sign that the boy from Lahore would soon become a man.
- 2- Anita Karim gets first pro win:** In February, Pakistan's first female mixed martial arts fighter, Anita Karim, got the first professional win of her career. The 23-year-old, nicknamed The Arms Collector, scored a unanimous decision win over Indonesia's Gita Subarsono in Singapore as part of the One Warrior Series season 4.
- 3- Quetta Gladiators finally get over the line:** After two heartbreaks, Quetta Gladiators — everyone's second team —

finally got themselves over the line in 2019, capturing their first Pakistan Super League title in March. The most consistent side in the league became the first-time winners under the leadership of the then national captain Sarfaraz Ahmed, beating Peshawar Zalmi in the final.

4- World Cup: In May, Pakistan headed into World Cup 2019 high on hopes but low on form, confidence — and maybe even sleep. They blew hot and cold, going from a side thrashed by the West Indies to a side thrashing the eventual champions.

PAKISTAN'S WORLD CUP IN REVIEW: What went wrong, what went horribly wrong: The team was supposed to emulate Imran Khan's "cornered tigers", and it did for the most part, starting poorly, losing to India before suddenly finding their feet when it all seemed lost. Unfortunately, the class of 2019 did not have the luck of 1992. They eventually went out of the tournament on a dismal run-rate in what was the most underwhelming of anti-climaxes.

5- PCB takes the axe to everything: During summer 2019, the Pakistan Cricket Board changed everything and everyone. Out went the domestic cricket structure, head coach Mickey Arthur, captain Sarfaraz Ahmed as well as some key PCB officials, including long-serving chief operating officer Subhan Ahmed.

6- Young pace battery emerges: The year 2019 saw a change of guard in the fast bowling department for Pakistan, with Mohammad Amir and Wahab Riaz taking partial retirements. Filling the void were young options, the most prominent of which was Shaheen Shah Afridi, who became a regular in every format. Following him was Naseem Shah, and while Mohammad Hasnain and Musa Khan did not make

their mark, they did enter the fray in 2019.

7- Sana Mir equals world record: In November, all-rounder Sana Mir equaled Anisa Mohammed's world record of most ODI wickets for spin bowlers in women's cricket. Although currently on a break from cricket, Mir can be relied to make a comeback in 2020 and go past the 151-wicket mark that would make the record just her own.

8- Mohammad Asif wins world championship: In November, Pakistan's number one cueist, Mohammad Asif, won the IBSF World Snooker Championship for the second time in his career. Asif, the 2012 champion, repeated the feat by defeating Jeffrey Roda of Philippines 8-5 in the final. He remained unbeaten throughout the tournament.

9- Aleem Dar breaks world record: In December, Aleem Dar broke Steve Bucknor's world record for standing in most Test matches. The Jhang-born achieved the feat by standing in the first Test between Australia and England — his 129th Test, which put him one ahead of the West Indies great's 128.

10- Inam Butt wins more gold: In December, wrestling ace Inam Butt defeated Sumit Kumar to win gold in the 92kg category at the 13th South Asian Games in Nepal. Coupled with the gold he won at the World Beach Games in Qatar earlier, Butt had another excellent medal-rich calendar year.

11- Pakistan's Test famine gets over: A decade of anguish and pain ended in December when the PCB managed to bring Sri Lanka to Pakistan for a two-Test series. The Rawalpindi and National stadiums saw five-day international cricket for the first time since 2009. Pakistan triumphed 1-0 in the series but, most importantly, laid the groundwork and sales pitch to convince other cricket nations to visit these shores with confidence.

Quick Read

England dismiss South African top three

CAPE TOWN: England dismissed South Africa's first three batsmen after deciding to bowl on the first morning of the first Test at SuperSport Park on Thursday. South Africa were 79 for three at lunch, with James Anderson, Sam Curran and Stuart Broad taking a wicket apiece. Although England captain Joe Root said he wanted to take advantage of "live grass" on the pitch, having opted for an all-seam bowling attack, the first two wickets owed more to loose strokes than the conditions. Anderson, who became the first specialist bowler to appear in 150 Tests, took a wicket with his first ball, a loosener down the leg side which Dean Elgar glanced to wicketkeeper Jos Buttler. Aiden Markram hit four boundaries in an innings of 20 before flicking a ball from the left-armed Sam Curran to Jonny Bairstow at midwicket. Hamza, playing in his third Test, looked good in making 39 before being squared up by Broad and edging a catch to Ben Stokes at second slip. All-rounder Stokes was in the England team even though his father, Ged, remained in a Johannesburg hospital with a serious illness. According to a team spokesman, there was no change to Ged Stokes' condition, which was described as "stable" on Wednesday. Three England players were ruled out because of illness - Threlle Pope, Chris Woakes and Jack Leach. All three remained "in quarantine" at the team hotel, according to the England spokesman. The South African team included two new caps in batsman Rassie van der Dussen and batting all-rounder Dwaine Pretorius. England captain Joe Root said the decision to pick five seam bowlers had been made because of the conditions and not because of Leach's illness. England wore black armbands in memory of former captain Bob Willis. —AFP



Noor, Amina, Shaista, Tehseena advance to final round

RAWALPINDI: Noor, Amina Roshni, Shaista and Tehseena reached in final round of Women Singles of Pakistan Open Tennis Bowling Championship at Leisure City Bowling Club, Jinnah Park, Rawalpindi on Thursday. Secretary General, Pakistan Tenpin Bowling Federation, Ijaz-ur-Rehman inaugurated the week-long tournament. Noor got first position with 305 points, Amina Roshni secured second position with 276 points, while Shaista and Tehseena obtained third and fourth positions with 247 and 231 points respectively. The final round will be played on December 31. Players from all over the country are participating in the Championship wherein contests are taking place in 11 different categories events including Singles (Professional), Doubles, Team, Amateur, Deaf, Ladies, U-12, Media, Inter-school, Intercollege and Inter university. All semifinals competitions will be played on December 30. After the finals, prize distribution ceremony will be held. As many as 20 players will be selected during the Championship for training camp. The selected players will participate in the international events after training two months training. The championship is being played under the supervision of Pakistan Tenpin Bowling Federation. —APP



Chess player 'won't play for Iran' due to ban on Israeli players

DUBAI: Iran's top rated chess champion has decided not to play for his country, Iranian news agencies reported in an apparent reaction to Tehran's informal ban on competing against Israeli players. Alireza Firouzja, the world's second-highest rated junior player, would be the second Iranian sports figure in recent months to try to renounce his citizenship over pressures on Iranian athletes to forego matches with Israeli competitors. In October, Iran was banned indefinitely from international judo by the sport's world body until it could guarantee that its athletes would be allowed to face Israelis. The move came after an Iranian judoka said he was pressured to drop out of bouts to avoid facing an Israeli athlete. "Firouzja has made his decision and has told us that he wants to change his nationality," the president of Iran's Chess Federation, Mehrdad Pahlavanzadeh, told the semi-official news agency Tasnim. "Firouzja is currently living in France ... and may want to play under the French or U.S. flag," Pahlavanzadeh told the news agency ISNA. Firouzja wanted to take part in an upcoming world championship in Russia even though Iran had decided not to attend, Pahlavanzadeh said, without referring to Israel. Firouzja could not be reached for comment. In April, Iranian media reported that Firouzja had refused to play against an Israeli player in a tournament in Germany. Iranian political and sports officials have openly called on the country's athletes not to compete against Israelis as a sign of opposition to Iran's arch-enemy and solidarity with the Palestinians. —AFP

Bangladesh insist on neutral venue for Pakistan Tests

DHAKA: Bangladesh are ready to play T20 Internationals in Pakistan next month but the Test series must take place in a neutral venue, the chief executive of the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB), Nizamuddin Chowdhury, said. Test cricket returned to Pakistan after a decade with a two-Test series against Sri Lanka earlier this month. Rawalpindi and Karachi hosted Pakistan's first Tests on home soil since a militant attack on Sri Lanka's team bus in Lahore in 2009. Enthused by the smooth staging of the series, Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) has announced its team would no more play their 'home' matches abroad as has

been the practice with Test teams shunning the country citing safety concerns. PCB's assertion notwithstanding, Bangladesh remain wary of touring Pakistan for a lengthy period, Chowdhury told the Daily Star newspaper. "We stand firm on our ground. We only want to play T20s in Pakistan," the BCB CEO was quoted as saying. "The stakeholders related to the series do not want us to play longer-version cricket in Pakistan," Nizamuddin said. Bangladesh are expected to play three T20 Internationals in Lahore before a two-Test series against Pakistan who completed a 1-0 series victory against Sri Lanka on Monday. "Actually, we

have no other option here. We can play the T20s but if we are to play tests then it should be in a neutral venue," Nizamuddin added. PCB chairman Ehsan Mani has hinted raising the matter with the governing International Cricket Council should Bangladesh refuse to play the Tests in Pakistan. "No one should be under any misapprehension as to where Pakistan's home Tests will take place," Mani told reporters on Monday. "All of Pakistan's matches, against Bangladesh or anyone else, will take place in Pakistan." "I still hope the BCB will reflect on the matter and accept there is no reason for them not to visit Pakistan." —Reuters

China slaps spending curbs on clubs amid finance squeeze

HONG KONG: Chinese football authorities have announced major curbs on spending by clubs ahead of the 2020 season that include a cap on foreign and domestic players' salaries as they seek to stave off financial ruin. Overseas recruits to the Chinese Super League in the upcoming winter transfer window will be limited to earning 3 million euro (US\$3.3 million) after tax, the first time a salary cap has been implemented in the Chinese Super League in more than a decade. Additionally, a ceiling of 10 million yuan (US\$1.4 million) has been placed on Chinese players' salaries. Clubs will also not be permitted to spend more than 1.1 billion yuan on their operations throughout the upcoming campaign, with salaries not to exceed 60 per cent of that amount. "Our clubs had too much money burned and our professional football has not been run in a sustainable way," Chinese Football Association chairman Chen Xu Yuan said, according to state news agency Xinhua. "If we don't take timely action, I fear it will collapse." The new rules were confirmed after a meeting of the Chinese Football Association on Wednesday and do not extend to bonuses that can be paid, which could give clubs some flexibility to pursue star signings. —Reuters



MELBOURNE: Australia's batsman Steve Smith avoids a bouncer from New Zealand bowler Neil Wagner on the first day of the second cricket Test match at the MCG.

Smith eyes century as Australia seize control against New Zealand

MELBOURNE: Master batsman Steve Smith ground out an unbeaten 77 Thursday as he zeroed in on yet another century, putting Australia in the driving seat after the opening day of the second Test against New Zealand. In the Black Caps' first Boxing Day Test at the Melbourne Cricket Ground since 1987, skipper Kane Williamson won the toss and opted to bowl, and it looked to be a good decision with Joe Burns out first ball and David Warner just before lunch. But first Marnus Labuschagne, the world's leading run-scorer for 2019, and then Smith smacked half centuries to seize back control and leave them on 257 for four, frustrating the disciplined New Zealand bowlers. Along with the fidgety Smith, Travis Head was not out 25, desperate for runs after a lean spell. Labuschagne made 63 with Colin de Grandhomme taking 2-48. The signs are ominous for New Zealand with superstar Smith scoring centuries in his past four Tests in Melbourne, and a fifth

looking likely. "The way they bowled and placed their field, I had to be patient," said Smith. "It's not the kind of wicket you could go after them. I think we did pretty well today." "The plan will obviously be to score as many as we can (on Friday)," he added. "But after getting sent it, I think you'd take 257 for four at the end of the day. One more good partnership would be nice and sort of set the game up for us." The visitors need to win to square the three-match series after crashing in the opening day-night clash in Perth by 296 runs. It was a bold decision by Williamson to bowl on a pitch that has traditionally been docile and favoured the batsmen. And it appeared to pay dividends in a sizzling opening over from Trent Boult, back after missing two Tests with a rib injury. After three testing balls to Warner, his fourth clattered into Burns' middle stump, with the opener out for a golden duck to huge roars from the large New Zealand contingent in the 80,000-strong crowd. Boult was sorely missed by the Black

Caps in Perth and along with Tim Southee found early swing and zip with the ball. "Obviously we would have liked a few more wickets on our tally," said Boult. "I think the overhands (cloudy conditions) and the way the pitch played in the first hour or two, it's annoying not to have them a couple more down." "On the positive, they haven't got too far ahead of the game. Hopefully we get a couple (of wickets) early tomorrow." Boos and cheers After Burns fell, Labuschagne and Warner dug in to wrestle back the initiative before a Neil Wagner delivery saw Warner caught at slip for 41, with Southee taking an outstanding one-handed catch. The in-form Labuschagne looked set for another big score after plundering his fifth consecutive 50, having converted three of his previous four into centuries. But it wasn't to be and he was out in bizarre fashion, with a rising de Grandhomme ball ricocheting off his elbow and onto the stumps as he attempted to