

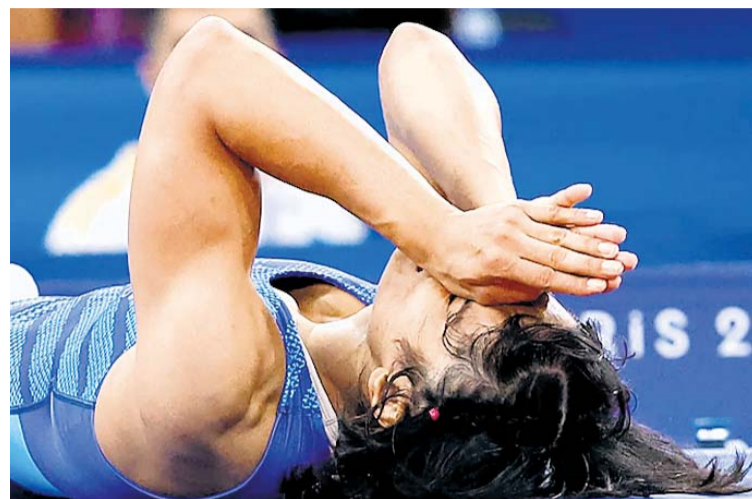
## International Cat Day

International Cat Day is a full 24-hours of recognition and veneration for one of humanity's oldest and most beloved pets, the cat! If they would lower themselves to have a conversation with a mere human, any cat would probably say that every day should be a day for celebrating cats all over the world. But this is one particular day that the humans have set aside each year for that purpose. It's time for International Cat Day! Pamper your furry feline friends.

## #OLYMPICS

### Oh! No! Phogat!

She had three events back-to-back and a weigh-in the next morning for the finals

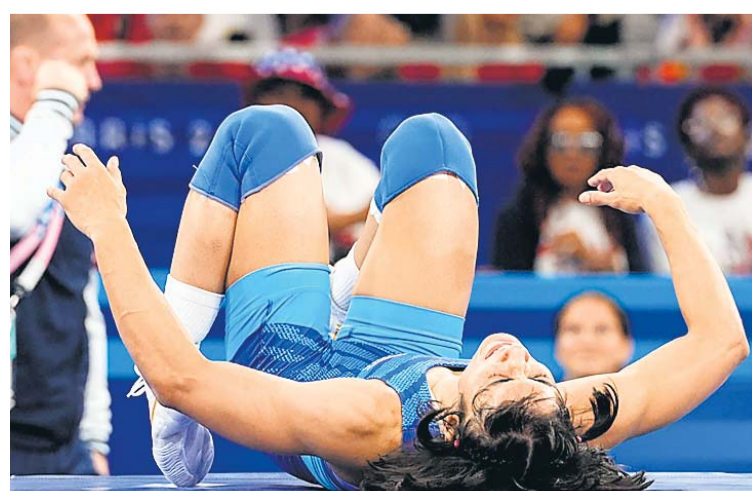


**Divij Sharma**  
Arbit  
Correspondent

Whose fault is it? Why did it happen? Is it not true that organizers of the Olympics are being rather 'stringent' with us Indians? After all, it is all about 100 kg and 50 kg and, as was expected, easily qualified in the lower category. Now, let us get into some management technicalities on how these events happen. Normally, weighing for the participating sports persons happens with three doctors and other technical staff (referee, officials etc.) present. The doctors not only confirm the weight of the participant but also check for abnormalities, injuries (external/ internal), sight etc. and the officials ratify the findings. Doctors also take blood, urine and stool samples to check for medicinal usage and, of course, drugs. All this happens in the nude. Normally, these tests are done in the morning of the scheduled event which is in the evening.

Now the participants, who take part in the lower weight category, normally two days before the event, stop one meal and the day before the event, avoid any food altogether, stop salt and in extreme cases, even water. They wear heavy clothes etc. to sweat excessively, to lose 100 to 500 gms. After all, it was only about the morning weighing. Post the weighing, the participants make a beeline to the mess and satiate themselves. This is a well-established practice and hence, everyone in tandem regularly tries to enter the event in the lower category. What happened in the Phogat matter is a crazy mix of misfortunes, this is my assessment.

Vinesh Phogat normally participates in 53 Kg category, due to her recent injury and



# Khota Sikka... Ziddi Woman...

## Disqualified But Still The Greatest

On the day of her selection trials for Olympic and Asian slots, Vinesh spoke to the researchers from the Sports and Rights Alliance (SRA), an athlete's rights organisation, about the protests. Her words in the SRA's recently released report on "Sexual Abuse in the Indian Wrestling Federation" are plain, lucid, searing, "Indian society normalises abuse and harassment. They will only take it seriously when the assault is gruesome. But it is like how we fight a wrestling bout. Whether we lost by one point or by ten, we lose. Whether the assault is big or small, it is an assault. An act against our will."



A league of her own.

**Anjali Sharma**  
Senior Journalist & Wildlife Enthusiast

The Phogat are six sisters from Haryana, India, all of whom are wrestlers. In order of their birth, they are Geeta, Babita, Priyanka, Ritu, Vinesh, and Sangeeta. This is not the first time they have made history, we all know. This time again, history is in the process of being written, in favour of India. France is the venue, we hold our breaths for the final push. Meanwhile, Seine and the French streets hold their breaths, too.

A long, slow walk from Champs de Mars Arena, the Olympic wrestling venue, will lead to a group of female statues in the heart of the Jardin du Luxembourg, Paris's most popular park. They are called the 'Reines de France et Femme illustres' (the 'Queens of France and famous women') and feature saints, regents and warriors. There's Anne of Austria, Margaret of Anjou and Louise of Savoy. Joan of Arc was there too, before they moved her into the Louvre.

Now, they should really make room for Vinesh of India.



Security personnel in a scuffle with Vinesh and Sangeeta.

Tuesday, Vinesh appeared a wraith-like version of a younger self, a bob replacing her braids. When she first appeared on TV, there was something almost luminescent about her, walking calmly in small steps up to the ring, as her opponents bounded, strutted, trotted.

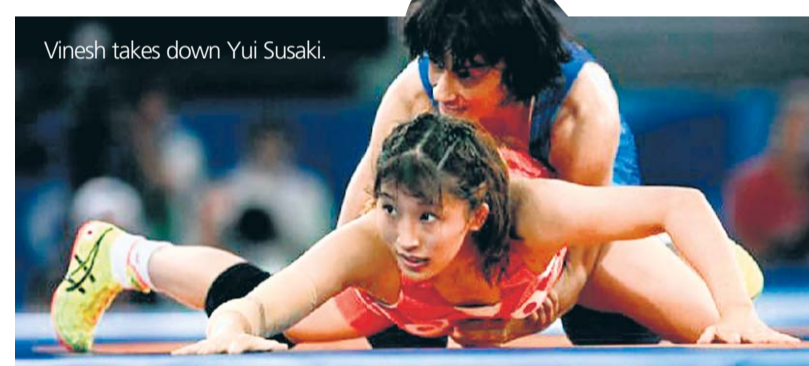
A central figure in the wrestlers' protests against the alleged venality and violence of federation boss, Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, Vinesh, the athlete, transported herself from the ring out into public life over the last year. During the many nights and days spent on the pavements of Delhi in the heat and cold, Vinesh has found herself growing, strengthening. With every abuse she faced, every tear she shed or act of brutality she felt from the establishment and their police, she shed fear, restraint, deference and doubt. When they went low, she went high.

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Vinesh's husband, Somveer Rathi, described her to Al Jazeera, "She is ziddi (stubborn) and doesn't get scared. Once she decides something... she does it...giving up doesn't cross her mind."

Through the first half of 2023, the protests occupied her time and her attention. Through the second half, she was recovering from surgery on the same troublesome ACL. But Vinesh wanted to be in Paris and, in the narrowest window of time available to her, found her way through.

In her first bout, Vinesh was up against a Japanese legend Yui Susaki, who, the commentators said, was already "setting her goals for Brisbane 2032." Vinesh was to



Vinesh takes down Yui Susaki.

pull off the biggest upset in Paris yet, her performance across three bouts today born of high-quality skill and tactical nous. Of defence and attack, timing and speed, quickness of mind and stoutness of heart. Her defensive masterclass against Susaki surprised everyone who had followed Vinesh's career; her high-speed takedown in the last 12-seconds of the four bout, stunning the world and shredding the form book.

Wrestling has one of the shortest, sharpest programmes at an Olympics, started and finished inside 36 hours. Wrestlers fight their first two bouts within 90 minutes, take a break for the third bout and if they make it through the rounds, have a night's sleep before starting again the next day.

Every second Vinesh stayed on the mat in Paris on her feet, gave face in place, unyielding, unflinching, was a demonstration of defiance. Her body in motion, in victory was an 'eat my dust' message to the man, who had called her a *khota sikka* (counterfeit coin) after Tokyo, and to those who continue to suspect and blame victims in defence of perpetrators.

When the buzzer signalled Vinesh's semifinal win and entry into the 50 kg Olympic final, her Hungarian coach, Woller Akos, began to cry. Wrung out at the end of her wrestling day, having battled past so much more than tears, Vinesh walked out of the hall with Akos and she was smiling. It was a smile of conviction. You don't pick a



Vinesh Phogat fell ill after her disqualification.

## #OLYMPICS

She stood on the cusp of ultimate glory in the Paris Olympic Games 2024, but has now been disqualified from the competition entirely. Vinesh, who was competing in the 50 kg freestyle wrestling category, is out of the competition, having been weighed over the limit for her event. Vinesh usually competes in the 53 kg category but brought her weight down to 50 kg for the Paris Olympics. On Day 2 of her weigh-in, however, Vinesh was found weighing over the desired limit, though by a small margin of about 100 grams. Vinesh reportedly tried to do all she could to come under the desired weight, be it skipping meals, or running. She didn't sleep the entire night, hoping to fall under the weight category. The Indian officials also asked the Olympic committee for more time but the efforts went in vain.

drives Olympic athletes to succeed. But Vinesh was an unstoppable force driven by a superior power. She was fuelled not by the desire for mere sporting success, she was fighting for a larger cause. For her own reputation, for that of her fellow wrestlers, who took on the system with her, for all athletes who had faced similar situations.

Even so, her achievements on Tuesday were remarkable. In the space of seven hours, she beat the reigning Olympic and world champion, a two-time European Games medalist and a Pan-American Games champion to go where no Indian woman wrestler has gone before, the Olympic final, and an assured medal. Only she was disqualified at the end of it.

As incredible as those wins was how she did it. She had three care-

fully charted out strategies for her three opponents, beginning with the stunning win over Yui Susaki, unbeatens in her international career, via a defensive masterclass. Vinesh went into the bout looking at it as a final. She would have a shot at the bronze even if she lost to Susaki via the repechage system, but Vinesh was there for the gold.

As she walked to the mat, she looked well. There were no sunken eyes as is the case with most wrestlers who endure gruelling weight cuts the day before a competition. It was evident that Vinesh had managed her weight well, she was leaving nothing to chance.

Susaki has one of the strongest grips in her division. She practices speed skating and bouldering to strengthen her grip. But even that was not enough to get a move on Vinesh. Susaki went for a takedown on Vinesh's right leg, the same one that was operated on last year, but Vinesh was prepared. She was in the zone, saw it coming and lunged forward with her left leg to generate momentum and shift her weight to counter the takedown. It was a superb display of defence, not what you usually expect to see from a traditionally all-out attack Vinesh. Susaki had never been kept quiet for so long.

Even Sakshi Malik, the only other Indian woman wrestler to win an Olympic medal, was pleasantly surprised to see Vinesh's defensive nous. "This was not her normal style. Vinesh is usually an attacking wrestler," Sakshi told

ESPN after the bout. "But Susaki is a very smart and experienced opponent so Vinesh switched it up today. She was very smart in how she fought against Susaki. She did not make any fake attacks, lest she commits a mistake and gives Susaki an opening. That was an exceptional strategy."

With 19 seconds left, Vinesh switched gears and got on the aggressive. Susaki, frantically, darted around the mat. As she backtracked and was off-balance, Vinesh saw the moment. Twelve seconds left. She knocked Susaki onto the mat and locked her in a back hold to complete the takedown. Vinesh maintained the grapple to run down the clock and scripts one of the biggest upsets in Olympic wrestling history.

The most striking aspect was not the takedown in the final 12 seconds, but the manner in which Vinesh defended against Susaki for the previous five minutes and 48 seconds. Susaki is not someone you can shut down like that. She hadn't conceded a single point at the Tokyo Olympics to win gold.

It was all part of Vinesh's masterplan. She used it up perfectly to explode in the final few seconds. At the end, Susaki's stunned face, the picture of disbelief, was in perfect contrast to the ecstasy on Vinesh's face.

Was it risky? It, sure, was. But if anyone could pull it off, it was Vinesh. "Vinesh knew what she was doing. She was the one to beat Yuki Irie at the 2018 Asian Games to become the first Indian woman wrestler to win a gold medal at the Asian Games. She showed Indian wrestlers that it was possible," says Anita Sheoran, a Commonwealth Games gold medalist and the lone woman to contest last December, for the president post of India's Wrestling Federation.

"It was so smart. Vinesh knew how she plays, no one has ever taken a point from Susaki at the Olympics. She is like current, like *bijli*. She never stops, doesn't let anyone touch her and attacks so quickly I don't think any Indian wrestler fights so intelligently."

Vinesh went about the fight with absolute poise. She held back and defended with her life for large parts and attacked ferociously, when even the tiniest of cracks appeared in the

Cuban's defense. Vinesh, India's only woman wrestler to fight at three Olympics, evaded everything that Guzman threw at her. She went after Vinesh's right leg repeatedly, but Vinesh simply wriggled out of the attempts. She let Guzman do the bulk of the attacking in the opening period, and was content to hold back. It was all part of the play. At the break, coach, Woller Akos, said something to the tune of "creep low and attack the legs" and that was the brief that Vinesh needed.

She went for a half-hearted attempt, 20 seconds in, but pulled herself back. The timing wasn't right. When she went again 17 seconds later, it was perfect. She grabbed onto Guzman's right leg for a takedown and a 30-second struggle later, she rolled her over for two more. Vinesh led 5-0, and that was it.

Speaking to this reporter in November 2023, Vinesh said, "The only thing I have told Bajrang and Sakshi is that I will still fight. I will look him (Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh) in the eye and *medal leke aungi matir, tu dehi* (bring back a medal and show it to him). They both have Olympic medals, I don't. I have a reason to fight. If I train well, I can win a medal. No one can stop me."

On Tuesday, Bajrang Punia, her fellow wrestler and comrade in the trenches through the past 18 months, echoed those words to ESPN. "She told me 'I am fighting for the future generation of wrestlers. Not for myself, my career



Vinesh suffered an injury in the 2016 Rio Olympics.

is done and this is my last Olympics. I want to fight for the young women wrestlers, who will come, and fight for them so that they can wrestle safely. That's why I was in Jantar Mantar, and that's why I am here."

On August 6, 2024 she came, she saw, she conquered. Vinesh returned to the mat around an hour later to face Ukraine's Oksana Livach in the quarterfinal. This time, a display of attacking wrestling followed.

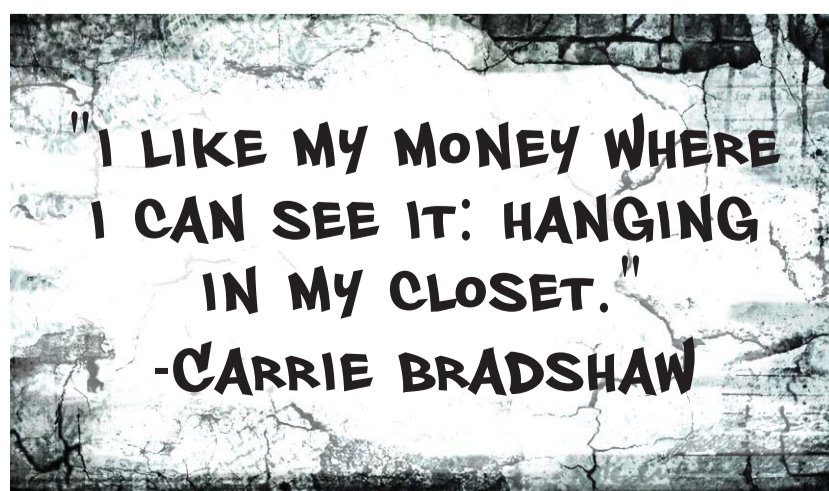
Vinesh was back to her usual attacking self and dominated the bout. She bagged a takedown early on and bossed the bout for most parts. She even had a couple of chances to roll Livach over and wrap up the win, *vintage Vinesh* was back on display.

And Vinesh was clever in how she handled the contest. Leading 5-3 with 48 seconds to go, she conceded a point via a step out. It was always going to go against her, but she asked coach Woller Akos to challenge it. Vinesh lost the challenge and conceded another point. Was it risky? Absolutely. But again, it was all part of the play. It gave her 30 seconds to regroup and when the bout resumed, Vinesh collected another takedown to wrap up the contest.

It was a completely different strategy from the first bout, but it was what was needed. For Vinesh to be smart, switch up her plans, and do what it took to inch closer to that elusive medal.

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## THE WALL



## BABY BLUES



By Rick Kirkman & Jerry Scott

## ZITS



By Jerry Scott & Jim Borgman