

The burdens of being Rohit Sharma

At times in the India captain's career, it looked like his immense potential might go unfulfilled. He has put those doubts to rest - or has he?

"The gravest harm comes to gifted people when the prevalent misunderstanding hoisted upon them is that giftedness is an unmitigated advantage," writes Celi Trépanier, an American educator who decided to become an advocate for gifted kids after tiring of how schools misunderstood them. She often speaks about the shame gifted children feel when they fail to meet unrealistic expectations. "Not the underdog, yet the underdog," she says of them.Many of us have been guilty of shaming gifted kids in school. I know I have been. It is an instinctive coping mechanism during our first experience of a social setting that is also competitive. We make the gifted kids feel anything good they do is par for the course for their abilities, and imply that they are wasting their talents whenever they don't "measure up".Rohit Sharma was once a victim of a world that, to borrow Trépanier's expression, crushes tall poppies. To the extent that he began to believe not all the lofty expectations imposed on him were in good faith. They probably weren't.Rohit railed against the narrative imposed on him. He wondered if people realised how difficult it was for a boy to travel on crowded local trains from Borivali to downtown Mumbai with a kit bag as big as him. He hated the idea that people thought he was somehow privileged. He, a son of a caretaker of a warehouse, who lived an hour's train ride from the cricket grounds in the south of the city. Most of all, he hated the idea that his batting was god-given and not hard-earned. That he owed the world something for being the chosen one.At one point, Rohit took that power to bring him down away from people: he was born with another gift, an automatic defence mechanism. If he ever feels like a victim, he will do well to remember those lacking this other gift are bullied much more by the world.I have asked Rohit's friends and team-mates how he reacted to the burden of being called a prodigy. It has always elicited a smirk, followed by a variation of "You and I both know how he is." If I tell them I don't, the phrase used to describe him often is "chilled out". He is basically a happy person, at peace with himself. By extension, he values his happiness enough to fight for it.

Large, like his ODI scores: fans install a giant cutout of Rohit on the eve of his 36th birthdayLarge, like his ODI scores: fans install a giant cutout of Rohit on the eve of his 36th birthday © Mumbai IndiansTo maintain his peace Rohit did what in today's social-media parlance would be called muting the word "talent". If people went past that firewall, his reaction, figuratively, would be to tap his forehead with his hand and then flick it towards the person addressing him, and question their credentials - because if he was such a batting talent, what was he doing playing as a bowler till his Under-17 days? "Go ask my coach Dinesh Lad, only an injury turned me into a batter," he has said in interviews in the past.CKM Dhananjai, Rohit's friend and data analyst with Mumbai Indians and formerly India, calls this ability an "invisible fence". With a shrug or a joke or a sharp retort, Rohit has had the ability to keep outside that invisible fence anything that threatens his happiness.It wasn't always so.Early in 2011, quite a few reporters knew 14 of the 15 members of India's World Cup squad well before the final formality of a meeting. Rohit was one of the 14. The final spot was down to a tussle between R Ashwin, Piyush Chawla and Pragyan Ojha. It turned out the team management had been preparing Ashwin for a specific role for a while, so he was in, but they also wanted a wristspinner. To accommodate Chawla, Rohit had to be left out.Already a T20 World Cup and IPL champion, Rohit was looking forward to being part of what he thought was a team who were favourites to win the biggest prize in cricket. He was left shattered. His Test debut had already been derailed months earlier when he and Wriddhiman Saha went for the same rocketball thrown up at the end of a warm-up game. Rohit stepped on Saha's foot and twisted his own.The not-so-subtle body-shaming that followed in the media made it worse. "On some sports channel there was a picture of Rohit with an arrow pointing towards his stomach," says Abhishek Nayar, one of Rohit's best friends among his team-mates. "Missing out hurt him a lot."

Rohit Sharma's press-conference gemsYuvraj Singh, who probably related with Rohit the most among the young India players of the time, comforted him, and Nayar provided the harsh remedy:Nayar first met Rohit when they shared a room at the Moin-ud-Dowlah Gold Cup, a prestigious pre-season tournament played in Hyderabad. In their initial years they competed for a spot in the Mumbai side, on occasion replacing each other.As a player Nayar was the opposite of Rohit: a crabby left-hand batter and a gentle right-arm medium-pacer who somehow managed to score enough ugly runs and lure enough mistakes from batters to average 46 with the bat and 31 with the ball in first-class cricket. This nuggety cricketer with weird Rocky-inspired training methods, who used to work his pants off, struck a chord with a young Rohit. Nayar feels he respected the hustle.Paul Valthaty, another prodigy of that era, who had to deal with a serious injury early in his career; used to train with Nayar. Valthaty remembers the "open" conversation after the World Cup selection during which Nayar told Rohit what he needed to do to get fit and make the most of his potential. Nayar has gone on to train and mentor a few cricketers; Rohit was the first. "Once he commits, he commits fully," Nayar says."Abhishek was not going to touch his game," Valthaty says. "Just his fitness."Rohit has always been the opposite of the "khadoos" Mumbai cricketer. A khadoos cricketer is supposed to be ruthless and clever on the field, and tight with his knowledge and money off it - a Grinch basically. Rohit was generous with friends, played cricket that was more attractive than functional, and didn't hide his luxury car and motorbike, or his love for high-speed rides, during an interview as far back as 2009. He had had a tough childhood and was unapologetic about spending his money.

Salad days: Abhishek Nayar (second from left) and Rohit Sharma fly kites with two Mumbai team-mates after a January 2009 Ranji Trophy gameSalad days: Abhishek Nayar (second from left) and Rohit Sharma fly kites with two Mumbai team-mates after a January 2009 Ranji Trophy game Santosh Harhare / © Hindustan Times/Getty ImagesEarly in his career he bought himself a big flat in the same building as Yuvraj in the posh Mumbai suburb of Bandra, where a lot of Bollywood stars live. In the lead-up to the 2011 World Cup, Nayar and Valthaty practically moved in there with him. The trio had decided this was going to be the year they would take their game to the next level in the IPL."It was crazy. It was good times," Nayar says about that month or so before they went to their respective IPL team camps. "Morning to evening we stayed together."We used to train together, two different sorts of training. We used to practise skills, we kind of ate right. Made each other protein shakes."Imagine the amount of positivity, dreams and hopes in that one house.Rohit had a cook, Vicky, who is still with him. Nayar would instruct Vicky on what to cook, although he admits they were not as precise with their diets then as they later went on to be.Rohit was called Nagya, because before he got himself a cell phone, he used to spend a lot of time at the public phone booth outside Nagya General Stores near his parents' house in Borivali. When his friends needed to contact Rohit, they called Nagya General Stores. Nayar was Anna, who would later go on to be called Yeda Anna. Anna is "big brother" in some south Indian languages, and yeda is "crazy", a nod to his training style. Valthaty's nickname has been withheld here because it involves juvenile humour.

Rohit at a batting boot camp in 2007. In those early days, when he was frequently the subject of public criticism and derision, he found peace of mind in wanting to be a player whose bedrock would be hard workRohit at a batting boot camp in 2007. In those early



days, when he was frequently the subject of public criticism and derision, he found peace of mind in wanting to be a player whose bedrock would be hard work © AFPNagya hated early mornings. Anna loved them. "I used to torture him by waking him up early," Nayar says. Their training in the morning would be like in the Rocky movies. Cycling up a secluded hill in Powai, where Anna lived. Pushing cars up slopes. Filling buckets with heavy slush and carrying them. Chopping wood. Slamming tyres. Running with masks on to simulate the rarefied air at higher altitudes. Pilates.Breakfast, rest, and then cricket training at Bandra Kurla Complex. And then, because they were preparing for the IPL, a late-night gym session at Leena Mogre Fitness in Juhu, which used to be open 24 hours.There was method to Anna's yeda ways. He had always been interested in the training side of sport, and he knew biomechanics fairly well. He knew athletes found it exciting to get out of their comfort zone and do something they had never done before. He knew Nagya didn't necessarily enjoy the gym that much, so they had to be smart with how many times they went there.Nayar remembers Rohit had a four-pack later that year. Valthaty broke out as a star that year, scoring a century for Kings XI Punjab.Who are we really - practically and in terms of psychology? Are we the attributes we were born with, the genes we didn't get to choose for ourselves? Are we the conditioning - which, again, we rarely get to choose - that we imbibe till our adolescence? Are we the work we put in, which produces different results for different people depending on attributes they are born with, or privileges they enjoy by virtue of their birth, or just dumb old luck?

Abhishek Nayar: Abhishek Nayar: "You know how aloof [Rohit] could be sometimes, but seeing how he mingles with all the younger cricketers now [...] he's evolved so much. I'm absolutely proud to see the change" © Associated PressAsk yourself this question long enough and chances are, you might instead steer yourself towards who you want to be. If only for the sake of your peace of mind.In his struggling years, when he was body-shamed and talent-shamed, Rohit found peace of mind in wanting to be a player whose bedrock would be hard work, both physical and mental.That he had extraordinary batting skill was plain and unanimously acknowledged when he made the switch to batting. Rohit likes to laugh at the theory that he has "extra time" to face the ball. Extra time is nothing but an illusion created by a batter who spots the ball extraordinarily early, makes his preparatory movements, and then plays the ball late. Rohit always seemed to have it.Plus, he had the runs. Valthaty - three and a half years older - saw it as soon as he laid eyes on him. "He knew how to get runs very early in his career," Valthaty says. "That is one thing which always excited me, made us rate him very highly. He just knew which bowlers to target, what kind of a pitch it is, what condition the ball is in, what the match situation is."Usually you expect this kind of a maturity from a batter when he hits 25, 26, 27. Even at 19, he had that in him. That's why he was so liked by the coaches, captain, senior players, everyone."In his journey of self-discovery, Rohit chose to ignore the "extra time" but focused on the time he needed to spend on the tactical and hard-work side of cricket. He didn't want to look at himself as someone who was just blessed with a gift. He wanted to make the most of whatever this thing was.

Late but great: Rohit (right) made 177 from No. 6 in his debut Test, in 2013, six years after his international debut, putting on a partnership of 280 with R Ashwin against West IndiesLate but great: Rohit (right) made 177 from No. 6 in his debut Test, in 2013, six years after his international debut, putting on a partnership of 280 with R Ashwin against West Indies © BCCIThat Rohit would often drive at moving balls seemed to back his claim that he was not all that talented. Domestic sides also bowled it there. That he had to unlearn and then relearn his batting after making his international debut is testament to his hard work, which he wishes people saw more often.Dhananjai, who started his career as an analyst with the same Under-19 team that Rohit was a part of, saw this from close quarters. Rohit and he forged a friendship whose foundation is respect for each other; and brutal honesty if Dhananjai spots anything off with Rohit's game.Dhananjai remembers 23-year-old Rohit as a happy-go-lucky person but someone who did question: "Why am I here? What is my purpose?" This was during a time when, after the successful T20 World Cup in 2007, the IPL win two years later; and the CB series in Australia, runs started to dry up. His "second" Test debut was nowhere in sight.In international cricket, teams catch up with you quickly. And youngsters have to move around in the order a bit. Rohit had hit a rough patch before, after the 2011 World Cup, when during a terrible tour of Sri Lanka, he scored 5, 0, 0, 4 and 4 in five ODIs. It is natural to ask at such times: "What am I doing here?"Dhananjai's research says most cricketers blossom in their seventh year in international cricket. It is a period long enough for them to burst onto the scene, get found out, figure their game out, figure themselves out. Judging them before seven years is criminal, according to Dhananjai. This was Rohit's sixth year; and he was probably judged more harshly than others. Not an underdog but still one.

Dhananjai and Rohit during a tour: Dhananjai and Rohit during a tour: "He was able to coach himself out of anything," the analyst says of his friend. "That is a trait I have seen only in the greatest of players" © CKM DhananjaiDhananjai says Rohit taught himself batting during this period. "We used to watch what the best do in the business," he says. "Like, in terms of backlift, in terms of stance, everything. Let us try to benchmark that. We got into this whole discussion on benchmarking, and asked what the best are doing and why they are able to do that."Then he initiated an unlearning process. 'Am I breaking a stone to break a stone? Or am I breaking a stone to build a building?' The purpose behind breaking a stone is important. When he began asking the question, Rohit started to build his craftsmanship. I'm going to learn, but I'm going to unlearn first. Then I'm going

to learn in such a way that I basically kind of go and unleash the potential that people talk about."He kind of coached himself into finding his batting approach. He completely transformed the way he used to set up. That started to trigger many things. That gave him the stability; that gave him the consistency, but it was very uncomfortable. It was all thanks to his cognitive ability to kind of visualise and pick up things and work on his own game."One significant benchmark that Rohit identified was that the best batters' hands remained close to their body, whereas he himself had scored all his runs with a looser game: his hands followed the movement of the ball, the head followed, and then he fell over. There were coaches to facilitate, but the effort to identify the flaws and address them came from Rohit himself.It takes courage to leave behind the game that has earned you plaudits and an international career. It is uncomfortable not just mentally but physically too. You have to fight muscle memory and the conditioning of instinct over years.Exactly in Rohit's seventh year, the India team management asked him to open the innings in ODIs. They had wanted to do so previously but couldn't find the opportunity because of other, more established, options in the line-up. This dodgy starter had always been on MS Dhoni's mind as an opener, but there had been no opening.

Next gen: young guns Rohit and Suresh Raina chat with coach Gary Kirsten in 2008Next gen: young guns Rohit and Suresh Raina chat with coach Gary Kirsten in 2008 © AFPWhen Rohit did get a long run in the Champions Trophy of 2013, he showed he had become much tighter, concentrating extra hard on the first 20 balls he faced before letting instinct take over. After he grabbed that opportunity, he never looked back, setting a template for ODI batting that future greats will look to emulate.The burdens of being talented continued to weigh Rohit down in Tests for much longer. When he scored runs - like he did on debut, from 82 for 4 - he made them look so easy, it didn't satisfy those looking for difficult runs. A long run was not possible because Dhoni, and then Virat Kohli, decided India needed a seam-bowling allrounder in the side to be competitive overseas. Whenever Rohit was played, it had to be at the expense of Cheteshwar Pujara or Ajinkya Rahane in the five-batter line-up, which further infuriated observers.To question the number of chances Rohit got is hindsight, but clearly the team's leadership saw a much higher ceiling on the upside of him coming off than on Pujara coming off. Those close to Rohit felt that the series in South Africa in 2017-18 was his one last red-hot go at it.It didn't work out. Just when everybody - perhaps even Rohit - was ready to make peace with it, the team management threw another lifeline at him, asking him to open, and to do it at home.He proceeded to play three career-defining knocks in 2021: a masterclass in batting on treacherous spin tracks, in Chennai; and physically and mentally exhausting monuments of patience and discipline at Lord's and The Oval.Once he got a taste for it, he was desperate for more. His body, though, had started to co-operate less.

With his wife, Ritika, in 2018. Rohit's friend Abhishek Nayar credits part of his captaincy success, and his cricket success at large, to his relationship with his wifeWith his wife, Ritika, in 2018. Rohit's friend Abhishek Nayar credits part of his captaincy success, and his cricket success at large, to his relationship with his wife Ragul Krishnan / © Hindustan Times/Getty ImagesA calf injury ruled him out of the 2019-20 tour of New Zealand. His hamstring played up when the IPL finally took place during the pandemic in 2020. The India team management wanted him to pull out of the IPL because they wanted him for the Tests in Australia that were to follow, but Rohit played parts of both, trying to maximise the delayed onset of his prime.Once he figured a method out to play in Tests, they have been his best format. He has arguably been India's best Test batter, along with Rishabh Pant, since the start of that Australia tour in late 2020. And yet he has been able to play just 20 of the 30 Tests India have played over this period - despite being captain for a major part of that span."I think that he exactly knew what was happening with his body," Dhananjai says of the period from 2019 onwards, which included five centuries at the World Cup. "He exactly knew what was happening with this game. And he was able to coach himself out of anything. That is a trait I have seen only in the greatest of players. Sachin Tendulkar or Rahul

David had this ability to heal themselves or coach themselves out of a situation. They did not seek, they did not go out. They know their game, they know their body, they know their reflexes."Rohit's friends in cricket are surprised at how well he took to captaincy. Nayar remembers him as a shy and introverted person.Adam Gilchrist saw things differently, and had him elevated to vice-captaincy when he was the captain. It's another matter that Deccan Chargers didn't retain Rohit.A Mumbai Indians team-mate remembers Rohit as a bit of a recluse who didn't sit too long in meetings nor offer too much advice on the field when he was not captain. But in 2013, when Ricky Ponting decided to step down as captain because he was occupying a precious overseas slot when not in form, Rohit took over like he was used to the role.

What comes after Sachin and Dravid? Rohit and Virat Kohli, seen here taking a bike ride in the stadium during an Asia Cup ODI in Dambulla in 2010What comes after Sachin and Dravid? Rohit and Virat Kohli, seen here taking a bike ride in the stadium during an Asia Cup ODI

in Dambulla in 2010 © AFPThe Mumbai Indians team-mate remembers he was "astute" and had a "different set of ideas". His first move was to get Mitchell Johnson back to partner Lasith Malinga, and since then, having two world-class fast bowlers has been a non-negotiable for Mumbai Indians. His next project was to oversee the progress of Jasprit Bumrah as he turned into one such fast bowler, freeing up an overseas-player slot.Because Rohit had restructured his own game based on visual evidence, his captaincy was evidence-based too. He stole a march on other teams by liberally using data to inform his instincts.Dhananjai, an ally and enabler as analyst at Mumbai Indians, says isolated moments of genius don't make a great argument for the quality of a captain because for every such move that works, there are many that don't, but he brings up a few nonetheless. In his first final as captain, defending a small total, Rohit had a backward short leg for Suresh Raina and got him out first ball. In the final in 2017, defending a smaller total, 129, he had the deep cover almost at point in the last over because Steven Smith tends to drive squarer. The fielder hardly had to move to take the match-winning catch. When Andre Russell was at the peak of his powers, in 2019, Rohit got Malinga to bowl around the wicket and into his body, getting him out for a golden duck, a strategy other teams adopted as well.All these field placements look great when they come off but they usually are planned in advance, on the back of video analysis. It can be argued that any captain can pull them off as long as he collaborates with the plans laid out by the coaches and analysts. In Rohit's case, though, he takes the lead and helps foster an environment where everyone is motivated to contribute. That field placement for Smith, for example, was Parthiv Patel's idea, but here was a captain encouraging people to speak and willing to listen to them. Rohit can spend hours in the planning meetings, which not many captains are known for.And Malinga to Russell speaks of an impressive facet of his captaincy: it is not possible for us to imagine how difficult it is to convince an international cricketer to do something new, let alone a champion veteran who has done it all.

Five-for: Rohit poses with the IPL trophies he has won with Mumbai IndiansFive-for: Rohit poses with the IPL trophies he has won with Mumbai Indians © Mumbai IndiansIn fact, Rohit has the remarkable ability of working with the greats and still maintaining his individuality. The three coaches he has worked the most with are Ricky Ponting, Mahela Jayawardene and Rahul Dravid. It takes great interpersonal and management skill to work with such imposing figures and to be able to take to the field plans that are his own but derive heavily from the information provided by these coaches and their staff.For someone who once came across as a recluse, Rohit has the rare ability to strike up a conversation with anyone. "He can say anything to anybody," a Mumbai Indians team-mate says. "That's because he is a warm personality. Everybody liked him when he took over captaincy, be it Sachin, Harbhajan or Pollard."Another observer in the India dressing room says: "There are big egos in a competitive team but Rohit is able to tell people stuff directly without offending them. And he has earned that respect. He has spent time earning that respect. At the same time he is good at maintaining that distance you need once you move from team-mate to captain."Nayar believes Rohit can get away with saying things because he is a genuine person. There is no malice to what he says and does. An underrated, droll sense of humour helps."I'll be lying if I said I thought he was captaincy material," Nayar says. "He really surprised me. More so when I see him now, how he's evolved. It's an outstanding story because Rohit Sharma as a captain was always something that I questioned because of his temperament. You know how aloof he could be sometimes, but seeing how he mingles with all the younger cricketers now, and his relationships with the senior cricketers now, he's evolved so much. I'm absolutely proud to see the change."

A mould of his own: Rohit's captaincy style has been distinct from that of Dhoni and Kohli before himA mould of his own: Rohit's captaincy style has been distinct from that of Dhoni and Kohli before him © Getty ImagesA theory about Kohli's captaincy was that he used insecurity as fuel for his players. That he believed if they were never comfortable, they would always be on their toes and give their best. Has Rohit taken that edge away from this team? Absolutely not, says a player."These conversations are not just about making you feel good," he says. "Sometimes he tells people to their face: 'You're not being picked because you're not good enough.' Or 'You're not as good as the other guy. These are the skills you need to get better at. You might feel differently, but the numbers are telling us something very different.' There's no question of people getting mollycoddled."When Rohit and Dravid took over, the coach initiated a conversation about the need for India to bat differently in limited-overs cricket. It was a cat that had not been belled for years. Rohit not only bought into the new approach, he became the highest priest of the philosophy. How could he ask, say, Kohli to bat differently if he himself was going to keep putting the same price on his wicket as he had done?The commitment to this style of cricket showed in the Indian team even as recently as the washed-out Asia Cup match against Pakistan at the start of September; when they counterattacked at the fall of every wicket. The change came about because there was data saying rebuilding doesn't pay much of a dividend in the final analysis, and because the captain bought into it and led the change from the front.There is a flip side to this captaincy style. A cricketing friend of Rohit fears it is going to burn him out quickly. The emotional energy spent on the team might potentially leave him with too little energy for his own batting.Four years ago, just before the World Cup, Rohit and Shikhar Dhawan spoke about how a World Cup match is just another cricket match. That the trophy is just a trophy but with "World Cup" written on it. You wonder if he feels the same about the upcoming World Cup, knowing it could be his last. Perhaps he is so invested in it because he knows it is his last!It has been a career that could easily frustrate. For a batter with such a gift for timing, things have hardly happened at the right time for Rohit. He was supposed to be a Virat Kohli before Virat Kohli even happened. He injured himself minutes before his Test debut, and then lost form in the crucial months before selection for the World Cup. When he finally figured out his Test game, his body started showing signs of wear. When he got the captaincy, India, already a team in transition, had to deal with some of the most rotten luck with injuries.Throughout his career, Rohit has managed to stay away from these thoughts. He must be aware now that in India you can do the best to prepare, you can create the best dressing room, you can overcome any odds, but at the end of the day, the results matter. Especially when the decision-makers have not exactly been subtle about how winning an ICC trophy has become an issue of personal prestige for them.Even if Rohit manages to keep all this outside the invisible fence, you wonder if he ruminates at all. If he questions whether he has made the most of it. If he is frustrated that his body gave up on him during the best years of his craftsmanship.He will probably just tap his forehead with his hand, then flick it towards you and say, "Abhi kya bataoonga?" [What can I say now?] as he did to a journalist who asked him for advice for Pakistan's batters. Hopefully he says the same to himself if these thoughts ever crop up.Sidharth Monga is an assistant editor at ESPNcricinfo

