

## Cummins backs Paine, says captaincy calls are 'ridiculous'

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AUSTRALIAN PACER Pat Cummins on Tuesday called suggestions of him captaining the Test side "ridiculous" and instead backed skipper Tim Paine to lead the side for a long time. The 25-year-old was Australia's top performer with both the ball and the bat in the Boxing Day Test in Melbourne. He was the top-scorer in the second innings (63) and also picked up nine wickets in the match.

"I think it's pretty ridiculous at the moment," Cummins was quoted as saying by Cricket Australia's official website [cricket.com.au](http://cricket.com.au).

Wicketkeeper Tim Paine was handed the job to lead Australia in the Test format after former captain Steve Smith and his deputy David Warner were banned for a year owing to their involvement in the infamous ball-tampering incident in March last year. "We've obviously got 'Painey' (Test skipper Tim Paine) at the moment who is doing a brilliant job and I think it's his for a long time now," Cummins said.

After facing defeat in the Boxing Day Test in Melbourne and trailing 1-2 in the four match series against India, Shane Warne had heaped praise on Cummins and predicted him to be the future captain.

Cummins, who has been Australia's best fast bowler in the first three Tests against India with 14 wickets at an average of 20.07, gained five slots to reach a career-best third position in the rankings.

He has also gained 13 slots to reach 91st place among batsmen with some useful runs down the order. "Thoughts out of Melbourne. The Boxing Day test should be a D/N match next year. Pat Cummins is the all-rounder Australia are looking for & is a future Australia Captain. Also, it's not just the batting that needs serious attention, the bowling stats for 2018 aren't good," Warne had tweeted.

However, the all-rounder isn't too interested in the job and is concentrating on his efforts on the field. "I feel like I'm too busy in the game bowling and when I'm batting, putting all my effort into that. And when I'm not doing it I'm usually off with the fairies trying to recover. So, I don't think I would make a very good captain at the moment," he said.

Cummins had earlier missed the ODI series in England and the two Tests against Pakistan in the UAE owing to injuries. He backed fellow pacer Josh Hazlewood, who is also the co-vice captain, for the job.

"I think someone like Josh Hazlewood at the moment has an enhanced role as vice-captain, he's always thinking about the game when he's out there fielding," Cummins said. "When he's batting in the sheds he is always watching and thinking things through. Maybe it's different personalities, but I see no reason why a bowler can't be a captain."

### 7 Australian players hit the nets

Seven Australian players, including skipper Tim Paine, hit the SCG nets on the first day of the new year in their bid to get battle ready ahead of the must-win fourth and final Test against India starting January 3.

"Seven members of the 14-man squad - Tim Paine, Nathan Lyon, Usman Khawaja, Aaron Finch, Marcus Harris, Peter Handscomb and Marnus Labuschagne - trained under brilliant Sydney sunshine in the morning as the nation steadily rose after seeing in 2019," Cricket Australia's official website posted.

During the optional session, leg-spinner Labuschagne, who is tipped to play in SCG was seen bowling to Queensland teammate Khawaja. Opener Aaron Finch, who has scored only a single half-century in three Test matches, might be axed from the playing XI and as per reports, did not bat in the nets.

The other batsmen faced the New South Wales bowlers Trent Copeland and Mickey Edwards. As per the CA website, "An unchanged line-up is still a possibility, with Finch shifting down to the middle order where he calls home at first-class level, and those ahead of him moving up one spot."

# An end, and a beginning

SCG Test, starting Thursday, could finally cement India's legacy, and signal Australia's lowest point



EXPRESS IN AUSTRALIA

SANDIP G  
SYDNEY, JANUARY 1

WITH ITS grand central harbour and the wild celebrations of a year just departed, Sydney has the feel of a city of departures and farewells for touring cricket teams.

Often the last stop of a dead rubber, the city has historically denoted a painful journey's end. So rather than feeling regaled by the dazzling fireworks on New Year's Eve or marveling at the magnificent beaches, they latch themselves in hotel rooms, brooding over their failures and future.

But for the Indians, the vicinity of a historic milestone would make them soak in the grandeur around them, when everything will sound sweeter and look grander. A few of the younger players went out to the harbour to watch the streaming flames inking the sky in plumes of pink and purple. Some others visited the iconic Opera House, reflecting their joyous mood. Not that the year gone by was one of sheer rejoicing — there were moments of regret and despair — but the New Year has cracked with a lustrous hope. They could be forever remembered as the first Indians to win a series in Australia, and firsts are always special.

There's a sense of momentousness about the moment, on how it could be the biggest match of their lives, their defining legacy. It's a multi-layered narrative. Retaining the Border-Gavaskar Trophy, as if it's not creditable enough, is only a subtext, which Kohli mentioned during the presentation ceremony in Melbourne. To him, sweet as the MCG win, it would mean nothing, if they don't win the series, which could be Kohli's first outside Asia and the Americas.

The pursuit has been long and tedious, one that began exactly a year ago in drought-ridden Cape Town, where he outlined his ambitions of world conquest. A year and several journeys later, his dreams remain as unfulfilled as it has been elusive. There've been close affairs, like in South Africa and England, where they showed redoubtable fight and skills, but never quite the degree of cutting edge or excellence to pocket the series, vindicated by the fact that they never came to the last match of a series with the rubber alive. But the Australia series has been different, where they demonstrated substantial wherewithal to fight back from the Perth defeat, from where they could have easily unravelled.

Sydney could be where Kohli's men stamp their legacy, where they'd uninhibitedly de-



Indian players meet Australia Prime Minister Scott Morrison at his official residence, the Kirribilli House, in Sydney on New Year's Day. Twitter/PTI

clare themselves as the world's best team, not by virtue of accumulating points, but by the dint of winning a series away from home, which has been a difficult proposition this decade. Take the case of India and Australia themselves, since the latter's series win in 2004 in India, the trophy has always remained with the home team. Or for that matter, the Ashes in the last eight years.

There's also a now-or-never corollary, for Australia is at their weakest since the Packer era. In three months, their outlawed cricketers would return, there are suggestions of overhaul and system cleansing, and they could re-emerge like they always have. Besides, it's the prime of several Indian cricketers. It was the same feeling when Sourav Ganguly's men came to Sydney with the series level 1-1.

Australia were missing their two main bowlers, Glenn McGrath and Shane Warne, the Invincibles were ageing - the greatest of them played his farewell match - and most of them were not around when the Indians visited them four years later. Ganguly's batting luminaries were at their peak, their lead spinner Anil Kumble cracked the overseas bowling code and there was resounding belief that it could be his tryst-with-destiny moment.

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### Baggage of regret and reproach

Instead, they flew out of Sydney with a baggage of regret and reproach. Even now, they look back at that with an profuse shade of what-if. If only India had declared earlier, if only Parthiv Patel clung onto a catch or stumping, if only Steve Bucknor wasn't harsh. Even 14 years later, we discuss and debate the match. And those were the days when even a draw in Australia was considered honourable.

Less so, in this milieu when India aren't the hopeless travellers of the past. The odd Test win that masks over series defeats no longer muses the audience. India has ridden over that phase. None more revealing a number as

Kohli's eight wins outside Asia in his career: two came in this series, and four this year. Sachin Tendulkar, for all his matches played and achievements recorded, won only nine. Rahul Dravid and VVS Laxman lead the list for India with 13. And Kohli has more miles left in his career to surpass them. It catalogues how India has, over the years, supplemented its financial and administrative sway with cricketing coexistence.

An away series win, irrespective of how dented the Australians are, would bestow them the aura like no other Indian team in the past. For the reason that India has never won a series in Australia, from the time Lala Amarnath's motley crew, two months after the nation was born, embarked at Fremantle Port to Kohli's men at the edge of history.

Conversely, since the time Don Bradman and his Invincibles hosted a rag-tag Indian side, no other Australian skipper has been at the precipice of losing a Test series at home. Such a result is harsh on Tim Paine, having to steer Australia through the choppiest waters they have ever waded. There are other concerns ratcheting up, like the scrutiny on bowlers not procuring reverse swing as much as they had in the past - with rabid under-tones that the Cape Town sandpaper scrubbing was not a case in isolation - or the

drought of quality batsmen from what once was a fountain of stroke-makers.

So as much historic as this Test could be for Kohli, Sydney could be the last port of redemption for Paine. The outrage and recrimination if they concede the series will be merciless. History would judge him remorselessly, as they did Kim Hughes. Not that he hasn't tried hard enough, but with the men at his disposal, he can do little but pray for luck to align. It's hard to think of a weaker Australian batting line-up this century, Justin Langer admitted as much. "Try being a selector at the moment. We've got to be careful not to reward poor performances, but it's not as if the guys are absolutely banging the door down. Most of our batters knocking on the door are averaging in the 30s (in the Sheffield Shield)." That only Usman Khawaja has scored a hundred since the Cape Town Test is a damning revelation of Australia's batting crisis.

Compounding their woes, their famed bowling quartet has shone only sporadically. Pat Cummins and Nathan Lyon have been exceptions, but Josh Hazlewood and Mitchell Starc have been woefully out of their range. But on the bowlers's shoulders rest the best prospects of salvaging the series. And for once, Sydney could denote the end of a painful journey for the hosts rather than the visitors.

## MR & MRS PAINE CAN GO FOR A MOVIE...

While the competition has been intense on field, India and Australia have indulged in some good-humoured banter, although without crossing the line, as is evident with the Paine-Pant episode...

**ON TUESDAY**, Tim Paine's wife Bonnie put up a picture on her Instagram account which had Rishabh Pant holding the Australia captain's son during an event at the Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison's residence.

**BONNIE**, WHO herself posed in the picture, captioned it "Best Babysitter" with a smiling Pant by her side. The reference came after Paine and Pant had a go at each other during the Melbourne Test match and the stump microphone

recorded their enjoyable sledging.

**WHILE THE** Indian keeper was batting, Paine referred to his omission from the ODI side. "Big MS (Dhoni) is back in the one-day squad too, we might get him (Pant) down to the (Hobart) Hurricanes... we need a batter. Fancy that, Painsy? Extend your little Aussie holiday. Beautiful town Hobart too, I'll get you a nice apartment on the waterfront. (I'll) have him over for dinner. Can you babysit? I'll take the wife

to the movies one night and you'll look after the kids," the Australian captain was heard saying on the stump mic.

**ON THE** very next day, Pant was heard speaking to Mayank Agarwal when Paine came to the crease. "We got a special guest today. Have you ever heard of a temporary captain, ever, Mayank?" Pant said. However, the picture of Pant with Paine's family is an indicator that the series has so far been played in good spirits.

**(I'll) have him (Pant) over for dinner. Can you babysit? I'll take the wife to the movies one night and you'll look after the kids..."**

TIM PAINE

**We got a special guest today. Have you ever heard of a temporary captain, ever, Mayank (Agarwal)?"**

RISHABH PANT



## Bumrah is a nightmare to face but Pujara's runs made vital difference: Hodge

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FORMER AUSTRALIA cricketer Brad Hodge called Jasprit Bumrah "a nightmare to face" in an enormous compliment but picked Cheteshwar Pujara's runs at number three as the vital difference between the two sides.

The final Test starts here on January 3, with India leading the four-match series 2-1. "Pujara has been the difference between the two sides. Both bowling units have looked strong. Barring the first session in Perth (where Australia scored 112-0), and Mayank Agarwal in Melbourne, all four openers have struggled," Hodge told PTI. "So, the number three position where Pujara has dominated, has been of importance. Not only has he not lost his wicket cheaply, but he has also taken time out of the game."

India regained the lead with a 137-run win in the third Test Melbourne, with Pujara

scoring a hundred in the first innings. "He also negated Nathan Lyon who bowled extremely well in Adelaide and Perth. So Pujara's importance cannot be ignored. He was left out of the first Test in England, and came back into contention. "He has not been playing T20 cricket, and instead went to play for Yorkshire. He does the hard work and is getting rewards."

The former Kings XI Punjab coach was full of praise for the Indian pace-attack, in particular Bumrah. "Bumrah is a nightmare to face. If you ask any batsman, he is one of the most dangerous bowlers to face. He is quick, very accurate and moves the ball both ways, which is what you want from a Test match bowler.

"His economy and strike-rates in Test cricket are already comparing to those for Kapil Dev, who is legendary in Indian cricket. So to be in that category within 12 months is amazing. The Indian attack has looked strong ever since they have arrived here.

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BRAD HODGE

They have performed and backed up their captain well. Bumrah and Ishant Sharma, in particular, have looked in shape."

Hodge said that the Australian batsmen have let themselves down with a lack of Test cricket temperament and application. Even so, he added that the selectors have no option but to stick with the same combination.

"From a batting point of view, this has been a disappointing series. The averages are well down. They simply haven't been good enough. The technique, temperament and aptitude to play Test cricket has been missing. The problem is they won a Test ten days ago (in Perth). So you expect a lot from this batting line-up, but when they cannot score 200 runs (in the first innings), then that's a serious issue. We have high expectations, a rich history, and we had some serious players in the past (David Warner and Steve Smith). But we are also up against a very good team."

Talking about potential changes for the Sydney Test, Hodge said Finch has to continue to open.

"The selectors made errors with Finch opening. I am strong in my belief that he should have batted at number 4-5 - where he has batted for Surrey, Victoria. He hasn't done well at the top, and it has exposed the middle order. But he has to (open in Sydney

again). You have to give faith to this group. You have picked this group to try and win the series against India and you have to back them. Make a judgment call after the series. It will be tough on this group if you make changes now. Give them at least until these four Tests and then you can ask questions later on after the series. You cannot make changes now," he added.

India are now on the cusp of history, with a win at the SCG assuring them of a first-ever Test series triumph on Australian soil. Hodge believes India can do it.

"Australia only won a week ago (in Perth) and now seem in trouble. They look a defeated unit. We just have to see better results from them. We have not had a century from an Australian batsman in three Tests, which is unheard of in a home series. The wickets are good, and there is no reason why we shouldn't see that. Tim Paine is leading well and doing his job, but the Australian batting unit isn't doing theirs," Hodge signed off.



Cheteshwar Pujara has scored two centuries so far in this series. AP