

Kohli, unburdened

MCG win has left the Indian skipper in a lighter mood as he portrays a sagely, philosophical demeanour



Virat Kohli poses for a selfie with a fan after a practice session in Sydney on Wednesday. India lead the four-match Test series 2-1. AP

EXPRESS IN AUSTRALIA

SANDIP G
SYDNEY, JANUARY 2

VIRAT KOHLI is often a man in hurry. He bounds out to the crease as if charged up for a gladiatorial combat. Between overs, he sprints like he's a matador tussling and trailing a wild bull. Even when he's dismissed, he doesn't fuss around, but strides back to the dressing room. He seemed like a man who feared the raging time — he hardly stopped for fans in Perth, or Melbourne before the Test began.

But here he was, during the net session at the Sydney Cricket Ground, calm and patient like a man unbothered about time, interacting with fans, signing autographs and posing for selfies, as if he's at peace with himself and the world around him. And not the agitated, passionate, revolting man he sometimes is.

It's like the MCG victory has unburdened him, quelled a flaring fire within him and injected a sense of equanimity, without showing the slightest burden of a man shouldering a billion hopes. It began with a spontaneous moment of charity when he donated a pair of pads to a girl in the stands at the MCG. And it continued in Sydney.

A couple of hours later, he walked into

the press conference, a bright grin on his face, in an engaging disposition. In more tumultuous times in the series, Kohli had confronted media with the grave face of a man who's about to be persecuted by a bunch of conniving lawyers.

But here he was, his gaze firm and focused, the fingers still, mood ranging from emotional to philosophical. He can be articulate, but it's the pragmatist in him that often talks.

Not that it was an entirely different avatar of Kohli that spoke — he did slip in his pet words like "intent" and phrases like "controlling the uncontrollable" and kept on emphasising the "need to stay in the present".

But seldom has he betrayed emotions, especially during the lengthy overseas spell, like when he described his return to the SCG, where he officially took over the reins from MS Dhoni four Australian summers ago, and where now twinkles the brightest accomplishment yet of his captaincy career.

"It would definitely be a big series win not just for me but for the whole team purely because of the fact that this is the place where we started our transition, to be honest, in this particular venue when MS gave up captaincy and we had a totally young side staring at six or seven (ranking) in the world and we come back here as the No.1 side in the world and we want to take that legacy forward," he said.

Before he took the next question, Kohli briefly paused, as if his mind still dwelt on the Sydney of 2014.

A touch of nostalgia, perhaps. A touch of disbelief too. He was just 26 then, not yet conquered the world with his willow, and utterly untested as a leader of men. And now he's a batting beast, a machine perhaps, or even extra-terrestrial, and on verge

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VIRAT KOHLI,
INDIA CAPTAIN

of stamping his captaincy insignia.

In slightly harder times, he would have hardly whipped up nostalgia.

Back to reality and some philosophy. So an Australian journalist, keeping with the New Year mood, queries him about resolutions, if any. Kohli turned serious and expounded on the meaninglessness of such rituals: "I think every day can be a New Year's Eve, if you want to be. There are opportunities to look forward to every day, so I personally don't look at these things as something very special and now you have to start working on something. If you want to do something special, every day is an opportunity. For me, it's being able to contribute for the team, being able to stay at the top of my game physically and mentally, and just help the team in any way possible."

Then came Kohli, the friend, to understand his colleagues. In the past, he had conceded a feeling that he wants the entire team to be moulded in his cast —the same steaming aggression and derring-do. That

he doesn't understand his colleagues differ, in perception and outlook.

But here he talked about how obsession is subjective.

"With me, it might be seen a lot more but I can guarantee everyone is obsessed about winning in very difficult conditions. If you see after the last wicket fell in the last game, everyone's emotions came out, even the quietest guys, I saw Pujara in the replay after and Ajinkya, I have never seen them so excited," he said.

In so generous a mood was he that he explained his cross-format success mantra: diet, sleep pattern and an obsessive fitness regimen. Not that no one knew it, but Kohli tended to dead-bat such questions. While detailing it, he stumbled on how he perceives his game.

"I believe in backing my technical ability to score in all formats. I am not someone who aims to be the biggest six hitter, as such. I'm happy to knock the ball around in the shorter formats and get runs. 'Wow, what was that shot!' I'm not bothered by that."

Then came an admission: That he missed Ravichandran Ashwin, has to alter plans when he's not playing. He generally puts on a brave front when asked about the indispensability of his personnel.

Though soon came the contradiction: That Hanuma Vihari hasn't made the team miss Ashwin much and that he had looked like "picking up a wicket whenever he comes to bowl."

In a way it sums up the duality of Kohli. Albeit a magnetic duality. He wrapped up the interaction with a bit of philosophy too: "It's inhuman or impossible to keep going on without niggles and I think it's fine to have a few niggles here and there."

TV GUIDE

AUSTRALIA VS INDIA — 4TH TEST, DAY 1

Live on Sony Six / Ten 3 — 5 am onwards

Will he, won't he: Confusion surrounds Ashwin's fitness

REUTERS&PTI
SYDNEY, JANUARY 2

INDIA REVERSED an earlier decision about the availability of Ravichandran Ashwin for the fourth and final test against Australia and named the off-spinner in their 13-man match squad on Wednesday.

With a 2-1 lead, India need only draw the test at the Sydney Cricket Ground to secure their first series triumph in Australia and something of a standoff on team-namings appeared to develop on the eve of the match. India skipper Virat Kohli's press conference was prefaced by an announcement from a team spokesman that Ashwin was not 100 percent fit and would not be considered for selection.



The status of Ashwin's injury caused confusion with the team management naming him in the 13-man squad for the SCG Test minutes after Virat Kohli said he "has not recovered on time". PTI

Australia's Tim Paine followed and said the hosts were waiting to finalise their team — one of their considerations being whether the Indians played two spinners at a ground that traditionally offers something for the slow bowlers.

Half an hour later, the India team sent out a message saying Ashwin was in the squad and a decision on whether he played would not be made until the first morning of the match on Thursday.

KL Rahul, dropped after the Perth defeat, was recalled to the squad and looks set to open with Hanuma Vihari dropping down the order to bat at number six in place of Rohit Sharma, who has returned home to be at the birth of his first child.

Ishant Sharma, one of the disciplined pace trio that have done so much to put India in such a strong position, was left out because of what the team said was "rib cage discomfort". Umesh Yadav will offer a third pace option but given his laboured performance when India played four quicks in Perth, his inclusion might be seen as a strong indication that the tourists will go for a twin spin threat.

Ashwin took six for 149 as India won the series opener in Adelaide but was forced to sit out the second test defeat in Perth and the win in Melbourne because of a side strain. He underwent fitness tests on Tuesday and Wednesday and Paine said he had been surprised to hear that he was not available for the match.

Kohli spoke at length about his disappointment that Ashwin was not fit for such an important match.

"It's quite unfortunate that he's had two niggles that are quite similar on the last couple of away tours," he said. "He's very important in test cricket, he's a vital part of this team and we want him to be 100 percent fit so he can contribute."

Australian skipper Tim Paine said his

Parmar joins Farhat to fix India's injury woes

Mumbai: The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) has approved in-principle the Indian team management's request for an extra physiotherapist in Australia, amidst the spate of injuries on this tour.

The *Indian Express* learns that Yogesh Parmar joined the team during the MCG Test to help his incumbent Patrick Farhat. "There is heavy workload on Farhat and he is finding it tough to handle so many injury concerns single-handedly.

The team management had requested for a physio, and the board agreed to send Parmar, who will help Farhat," a BCCI source informed.

Opener Prithvi Shaw was the first to bow out after twisting his ankle during a

tour game ahead of the first Test in Adelaide. Then there was Ravindra Jadeja's shoulder stiffness that grabbed considerable attention. Ravichandran Ashwin was the next to join the list, after his groin injury flared up following India's win in Adelaide. Despite showing improvement, he was not ready for the subsequent two Tests in Perth and Melbourne respectively.

Ahead of the series finale in Sydney, Ashwin's injury status caused confusion with the team management naming him in the 13-man squad just minutes after India captain Virat Kohli said he "has not recovered on time."

DEVENDRA PANDEY

RINGING IN THE CHANGES

Paine feels the pain of misfiring Aussie batting line-up

SANDIP G
SYDNEY, JANUARY 2

FOR A fleeting moment, Tim Paine felt flattered when asked whether he would give himself a promotion up the beleaguered Australian batting order. It's the batsman in him that lit up, for such a proposal is a clear appraisal of his batting form. But he soon wore the pragmatic garb of captaincy back, with a chuckle: "I certainly haven't been setting the world on fire." The scathing self-assessment was followed by a succinct defence of his underwhelming batsmen: "I need to cash in on my starts as well so I'm no different to the other guys in our top six, and I've just got to play my role."

In the barest of sense, it was true. In his last six innings, he has gone past 20 five times, but never beyond 41. It's the constant plight of a No. 7, unless he's gifted with the stroke-making genius of an Adam Gilchrist, he ends up farming the lower order and fails to convert the starts, settling eventually for scores in the 30s and 40s. Paine clearly is no Gilchrist, closer to Brad Haddin without the snarling machismo. His first-class numbers aren't suggestive of someone with exceptional batting potential either — he averages a shade under 30, with just one first-class hundred in 189 outings.

But it's the circumstances that have warranted such a suggestion, or rather the calamitous form of his specialist batsmen. It's not a superior streak of runs that could see him promoted, but rather the over-



Incumbent opener Aaron Finch (left) is likely to face the axe in Sydney, which could potentially open the doors for Peter Handscomb's return. AP

whelming ordinariness of his batsmen. Among them, Paine is the fourth highest run-getter, with only eight runs differentiating him and Marcus Harris, who sits second in the table. Besides, he has fared considerably better than Usman Khawaja, Peter Handscomb and Aaron Finch. The last of them, in fact, has scored fewer runs than Nathan Lyon, Pat Cummins and Mitchell Starc.

In a sense, Finch embodies all that's flawed with Australian batting — a converted opener tied in knots against the new ball, confused and contriving to get out in different fashions. In Adelaide, he attempted an expansive cover drive straight up; in Melbourne, he tried a late cut. What's stranger is that there's someone more adept at opening than him, Khawaja, who averages 113 in four matches. If that's not reason

NUMBER PLATE

4 Number of centuries by Australian batsmen in 2018, their lowest since 1996. Of these four tons, three came in the Sydney Test against England, from Usman Khawaja, Shaun Marsh and Mitchell Marsh.

enough, he has looked the most comfortable among their top five in the last two Tests. It's not a case of Khawaja being reluctant either. "Usman's opening record in Test cricket is very good and he's been on record saying he's not too fussed where he bats, whether it's Nos. 1 or 3, so his record's great, if that's the way we go, Usman will go out and give his all," admitted Paine.

But a solitary change alone wouldn't gloss over their batting vulnerabilities. If Khawaja moves up, Paine has to find an alternative No 3. Shaun Marsh, with his moodiness, isn't the solution. Neither is the recalled Handscomb or Travis Head, who, despite heading the Aussie run-scoring chart, hasn't exuded any confidence.

A radical option then, a whisper that's gathering heft, is to install all-rounder Marnus Labuschagne straightaway at No. 3. A first-class average of 33.17 doesn't breed confidence, but in his second Test, against Pakistan, he did impress with a 43 amidst floundering partners.

Anyway, he will be in the side as a leg-spinning all-rounder, and Paine raved about him. "Lots of chat, lots of energy, he doesn't shut up, Marnus, but I think at the end of a long series his energy has been great, to have him around the group the last few days. His leg spin's improved out of sight, and you're almost leaning towards him at Test level now as a bit of an all-round option, which is a really good package for us," he said.

Paine's pains don't end there — the middle order comprising Shaun Marsh, Handscomb and Head looks equally pregnable. Handscomb's footwork had been a mess; Head's been lucky and Marsh, as he always has been, could bust or blossom without any tangible indication. The solution, if any, looks short-fix than futuristic, especially with The Ashes winking at them down the year.

A similar batting line-up could be ruthlessly exposed in England. And Paine doesn't have immediate answers, apart from trying to juggle with the limited resources at his disposal. "There's always going to be a little bit of a balancing act. A lot of people who are critical of selection processes won't like that, but they're just the plain facts. That's what it is, we want to pick the best team. You always got to have a little bit of an eye to the future and what's coming up at the same time," he said. But the more he has tried to untie the knots, the more knotty it has turned out to be. But then Paine has a one-stop solution for it: "Bringing back the world-class players back into the team." It's this hope that's the opium of his captaincy. It also explains the direness of the situation.