

You freshen your mind up, you become hungry again and realise how important cricket is to you."

SHANE WARNE  
ON WARNER AND SMITH

## Cut to the chase: How the last three overs played out in Nagpur

"HINDSIGHT IS a beautiful thing... you think if this partnership goes longer or you take a risk earlier (what would have happened), all that sort of stuff. You never know what's going to happen" - Marcus Stoinis on the morning after the night of discontent. The Nagpur ODI came down to a curious decision by Stoinis. With the equation reading 21 from 18 balls, he chose to bat out Jasprit Bumrah's last over. Just one run came off the last ball. We know what happened next. It wasn't a bad decision as he knew India had to go to either Kedar Jadhav or Vijay Shankar for the final over and it's interesting to see what goes through the minds of batsmen under pressure and how it plays out in the decisions they take. In some sense, Stoinis almost played the game out in his head, like MS Dhoni used to do in his heyday, and the world is a rosy place in one's own head. Reality can turn out differently sometimes. This was one such event. **SRIRAM VEERA** deconstructs.

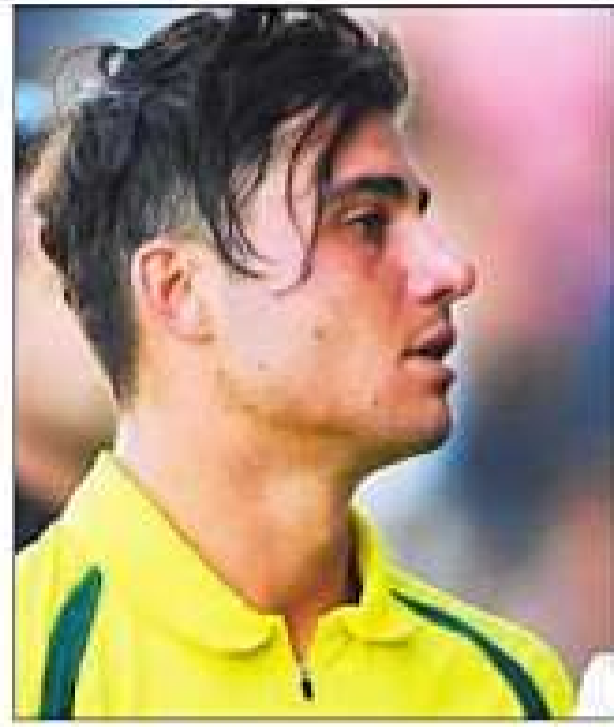
### WHAT KOHLI THOUGHT

Virat Kohli, who has not only tamed his ego while batting in Tests against quality

bowlers, he is also the most tamed captain in the world when it comes to limited-overs cricket. He has no problem - or knows he can't have one - in consulting Dhoni or Rohit Sharma, the two cool and wise heads in the team, when it comes to taking tough calls. The awareness that outsourcing to better tactical minds works is a good trait to have. There is no parallel in world cricket where a captain, a top player himself, takes the backstage so much that sometimes he isn't even there in some of the decision-making. Especially for a man who is perceived to make it all about himself, Kohli might be self-absorbed, but he is also a man obsessed about winning and has learnt to take a backseat for his own good. If one is a Kohli fan, one can also argue that it takes a man without much insecurity to allow the other to take the limelight.

### WHAT WAS DECIDED

Kohli wandered across to have a quick chat with Sharma and Dhoni about who should bowl the 48th over. Should he bowl out Bumrah or give Vijay Shankar or Kedar



In the end, Kohli's decision to give the last over to Shankar stood vindicated while Stoinis's ploy to play out an entire Bumrah over backfired. **PTI**



Deciding to not go on all-out attack is one thing but to choose all-out block quite different. After all, he had Nathan Lyon on the other side, not a mug with the bat. He can be expected to push for singles. Lyon didn't have to slog at Bumrah as the asking rate wasn't that high. He can push and prod, surely? If they had even five runs or so off that over, it would have racked up the pressure on not just Shankar but even Shami who bowled the penultimate over. On air, Matthew Hayden sighed. He couldn't understand Stoinis' tactics of defending out. He talked about how it could backfire later and how hard Stoinis was making things for himself.

### THE 49TH OVER

As good as he has become, the end-overs Shami isn't a complete package yet. He bowls short of length or tries for yorkers, but without the control as his last ball in that over would prove - Lyon slashed an inside-edge four off a yorker-turned-full toss. Under pressure, the batsmen should be able to predict what's going to come from Shami: a back-of-length delivery on the stumps and if the pitch has bounce, a bouncer. If there is a lesser batsman on strike, he would try a yorker.

### STOINIS MISCALCULATION

Stoinis isn't Dhoni of old and the impact of defending out an over when in full flow had an impact on his strokeplay. To switch suddenly from attack to defence and then back to attack is not easy.

"He [Stoinis] played it beautifully, the way he just counted down the balls, chose the bowlers. To have 11 off the last over against probably their fifth bowler is a pretty good position from where we were. He set it up beautifully - just wasn't his day... that last over," Pat Cummins would say at the end of it.

Of course, Stoinis had batted really but changing his approach for the 48th over played haywire with his rhythm. Normally, he would have gone for an on-the-up straight hit to a length delivery on middle stump. But it was the pressure that made him leave across the line.

### SHANKAR HOLDS HIS NERVE

What if Stoinis had nailed that ball for a six? Would his decision of playing out Bumrah be justified? If it were not the fact that India had to go to their weakest bowler for the final over, Stoinis wouldn't have done what he did. Sometimes, the weak link doesn't always sink the team.

### BRIEFLY

#### Bairstow fires England to narrow win in 1st T20I

**Gros Islet:** Gros Islet: Jonny Bairstow's half century helped England beat West Indies by four wickets in St Lucia on Tuesday in the opening Twenty20 international of their three-match series.

West Indies made 160 for eight in their innings with Nicholas Pooran top scoring with 58, his best score in the format, while seamer Tom Curran picked up 4-36 for the tourists. Bairstow's 68 from 40 balls set England on their way to a relatively comfortable win with seven balls to spare, aided by some poor bowling and fielding from West Indies, who dropped four catches.

England, who lost the three-match test series 2-1 in the Caribbean and drew a five-match ODI series 2-2, will look to wrap up a series win in St Kitts and Nevis on Friday.

**BRIEF SCORES:** England 161 for 6 (Bairstow 68, Cottrell 3-29) beat West Indies 160 for 8 (Pooran 58, Curran 4-36) by four wickets.

#### ICC bans former Zimbabwe cricket director for 10 years

**Dubai:** Former Zimbabwe Cricket director Enock Ikope has been banned for 10 years by the International Cricket Council for breaching three counts of ICC's anti-corruption code, the governing body said.

Ikope was provisionally suspended last year after being charged under ICC's Article 2.4.6 and Article 2.4.7, which includes offences such as refusing to cooperate, delaying and obstruction of an investigation into possible corruption by the Anti-Corruption Unit (ACU).

He was the second official from the Harare Metropolitan Cricket Association to be penalised by the ICC after Rajan Nayer was banned from all cricket activities for 20 years for offering Zimbabwe captain Graeme Cremer \$30,000 to fix a match.

The ICC said Ikope was banned by the ICC anti-corruption tribunal for five years in respect of each breach. The first two of the five-year periods.

REUTERS

## MS Dhoni... the untold stories

The former India skipper through the eyes of those who have seen him from close quarters in his hometown

SHAMIK CHAKRABARTY  
RANCHI, MARCH 6

MS DHONI has retooled his game in such an effective manner that he's still made himself relevant. But he cannot keep raging against the dying light, and keep playing forever. The third ODI between India and Australia in Ranchi on Friday could well be his hometown swansong. Ahead of the match, here's an attempt to unravel Dhoni through the eyes of those who saw him from close quarters.

### The polite 'refusal'

The south pavilion of the JSCA International Stadium here has been named after Ranchi's most famous son. The 'M.S. Dhoni Pavilion' looks resplendent under lights. The north pavilion, by the way, has been named after former state association president and the current BCCI acting secretary Amitabh Choudhary.

Last year, the Jharkhand State Cricket Association (JSCA) had unanimously approved the christening, which came into effect 15 days ago. "We proposed that Mahi should inaugurate the pavilion named after him. He simply told me, 'If I have to open it, then my feeling is that I'm not part of the stadium or the JSCA. Hum jab iske part hai, toh hum kaise open kar sakte hai' (when I'm a part of it, how can I open it?)" I'm thankful that Jharkhand has a cricket stadium which carries my name," JSCA secretary Debashis Chakraborty said on Wednesday.

The state association decided to do away with the opening ceremony, notwithstanding the fact that the third ODI would be the first match at the venue after the 'name-giving'.

### The hard taskmaster

The JSCA secretary narrated another story. The Jharkhand Ranji team had a three-month pre-season camp last term. Dhoni, whenever he was in Ranchi, used to drop in at 6.30 am.

"He personally monitored the players' yo-yo tests. Mahi took the register book and monitored the whole process for close to four-and-a-half hours. Those who weren't up to the mark, he gave them 15 days to get better, fitness-wise," Chakraborty recounted.

Did the JSCA request him to play Ranji Trophy? "In his case, it's the other way round. When he intends to play domestic cricket, he approaches us with the request,



MS Dhoni arrives to a rousing reception in his hometown Ranchi, where India play Australia on Friday. **PTI**

if he can fit in," the JSCA secretary had a hearty laugh.

### The selfie expert

Another state association member spoke about how once Dhoni had corrected the selfie camera position of a young boy, who had gingerly stepped into the JSCA gym to take a selfie with the icon. "Selfie bhi lena nahi aata. Aise lete hai selfie... (You don't know to take selfie. Is this the way to take selfie?)" Dhoni had given the kid a first-hand demo and a mini berating,

### We don't need no show-offs

Chanchal Dattagupta, a former first-class cricketer and the JSCA academy head, once asked Dhoni how he kept his cool, when, for example, a fielder dropped a catch, with the batting team in the middle of a game-changing partnership? Pat came the reply: "Who is the worst sufferer, when someone drops a catch? The fielder himself... If I hit out at him, he might lose confidence, jeopardising the next opportunity that would come his way. Whatever I say, I prefer to keep in the confinement of the dressing room. Spectators know

that he who goes out to toss is the captain of the side. No further show-off is required..."

### Dhoni, the curator

Rules prohibit curators to come on record. But ask any groundsman about Dhoni, and there would be an outpouring of love and reverence. A senior member of the ground staff told this paper how Dhoni advised the state association to have nine more pitches at the practice oval, bringing in soil from Maharashtra and Odisha.

He insisted on having green pitches, where

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DEBASHIS CHAKRABORTY  
JSCA SECRETARY

the academy kids would train. "After this match, we will start working on having those nine more pitches at the ground and the practice oval with different types of soils," the JSCA secretary informed.

### Ranchi or Karachi?

According to Chakraborty, during the early phase of Dhoni's career, many overseas fans used to confuse Ranchi with Karachi, something that made the wicketkeeper-batsman a little upset. "Now, nobody gets confused. Dhoni has put Ranchi on the world cricket map," Chakraborty oozed pride.

### Fairway and sharp shooting

Former off-spinner V Venkatram had Dhoni under his charge when he was the Jharkhand Ranji coach. He told a golfing tale. "When I was the coach, after practice we used to (occasionally) go for golf. I used to play golf a little bit. Mahi didn't have any previous experience. But the first shot he hit, the ball landed on the fairway. It was down to his hand-eye coordination and the power of observation. I once accompanied him to Fort William (in Kolkata) and got amazed at his shooting skills. Please ask him, how did he master such shooting accuracy? He is indeed godsend."

### Epilogue

In Ranchi, it hasn't sunk in yet that Friday's match could well be Dhoni's last bow in his hometown. Although he remains an integral part of India's World Cup set-up, who knows what would happen after it. Dhoni's hitting abilities are on the wane and given that he has a mind of his own, a surprise departure ala the 2014 Test series in Australia can't be ruled out.

The locals here, however, are seemingly not too concerned about the future. They are stuck in the present. It would be a full house on Friday, and to paraphrase Ravi Shastri, fans want to enjoy while it lasts.

### ALL ENGLAND BADMINTON

## Sindhu runs out of her get-out-of-jail card, stumbles in the first round

SHIVANI NAIK  
MARCH 6

A THRIVING life on the edge could be coming to an end for PV Sindhu after her 21-16, 20-22, 21-18 first-round loss against Sung Ji Hyun at the All England. Saving eight match points - including three while pushing the match into a decider - Sindhu followed a pattern that she's comfortably settled into: leaving it till late, in the firm knowledge that she can swim back from the brink even after the water reaches the throat.

She even showed how it was done, clawing back in the second set with five straight points to go from 17-20 to 22-20 in what was her most coherent display of the match. But while the sixth seed once again launched a fight back at 12-19 to reach upto 18-20, Sindhu had tempted fate far too much to prevail against the Korean with a solid game.

It could be the jolt that pushes the 23-year-old Indian to rethink her game, or start think-

ing about how she wins in the first place, because fewer falls can be as precipitous as first day loss at the All England.

That too just three months and one tournament after she picked the circuit's biggest prize at the World Tour Finals. A listless, clueless Sindhu at the start of the game or error-prone in patches isn't entirely a new sight. It's just that on either side of the Olympics silver, and through the journey of the twin World Championship finals, Sindhu has snuck in similar matches, coming back from the brink, giving her booming game sudden direction to blow away opponents in the closing stages and move onto medal-winning matters.

Sindhu started the Asiaid with a similar heart-stopper against little-known Vietnamese Thi Trang Vu in a three-setter with jitters over line-calls and she's survived Cheung Ngan Yi at the Worlds two years ago early on - two jailbreaks that reinforced her belief that she could come back from the dead as a matter of routine. Except, Sung Ji Hyun, a Top 5 shuttler same time last year, would not be



Sindhu lost to Sung Ji 16-21 22-20 18-21, despite saving eight match points.

bluffed. Playing a robustly safe game peppered with deceptive drops, the rally player stuck to attacking Sindhu's backhand as the Indian couldn't summon the last two points to tilt this result the other way.

Sindhu had two periods of clarity - where pushed to the wall she came out throwing her fearless punches, not necessarily of big smashes, but getting Sung to move around cleverly with her court placement.

This was the 5-point surge to grab the second set and a similar five point-spew to catch up in the third from 13-20 to 18-20. Everything else was a blur of shots that she found no rhythm over yet persisted with, and a give-away body language of slumping shoulders that were sinking everytime her tosses sailed too long or smashes caught the net.

An error on service soon after 9-all in the third seemed to have broken her back. Sindhu allowed six points to go past without showing urgency at 12-19, and then when she finally brought in her SOS-game, strangely devoid of any pressure or fear, Sung only needed to avoid

mistakes of Set 2, keep her head and erase Sindhu's resisting past.

Sung would later talk about how extensive video analysis had helped her crack Sindhu's game. "I've played her many times and known her for some time. My win came from my good (body) condition. I'd read her game from videos, where I could see her habits, and that helped today," she said.

What has always helped Sindhu at the end of these fightbacks is her ability to cause meltdowns in opponents from the sheer pressure of the rear-guard assault. Sung though remained a cool cat. "In the third set, when I reached 20 points, I should've played more aggressively. I waited for Sindhu to make mistakes which I regret. But finally pulled it off," she added. "Last season I had many injuries. This year I've been trying to pull up (my fitness) so that reflected in my performance," she would add.

Injury-enforced breaks have a brighter side: players step off the treadmill of constant training-competing and give themselves an

emotional break, which a fit-as-fiddle Sindhu hasn't managed to afford herself. Perhaps the only player on the circuit to jump from one tournament to the next, play high-intensity finals, deal with the losses, return to training next morning, the Indian is oblivious to how consistency's flip-side is mental fatigue.

She's in a peculiar situation where she might be physically fit enough to run a marathon, but on the court she can lapse into looking clueless.

She rued giving away the big leads at the start. "By the time I covered it, there were too many points for me to cover," she said. "Just my bad luck or just not my day because my mid-court smashes kept going to the net. I was attacking all the time, and she was just somehow taking it," she lamented, adding, "overall she played well."

She would end with her refrain - nothing lacking in her training, but she needed to come back stronger and take this as a challenge. Maybe she needs a pause from the catching-up and moving-on routine as well.