

# Gritty India holds Asian champ Qatar

Outstanding goalkeeping by Gurpreet Sandhu thwarts the host; the contest ends goalless

## WC QUALIFIER

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
DOHA

A gritty India survived a wave of attacks from Qatar to hold the reigning Asian champion to a goalless draw and steal an unexpected point from its away match of the FIFA World Cup qualifiers here on Tuesday.

Despite playing without talismanic captain Sunil Chhetri – laid low by fever – India denied Qatar, which won the Asian Cup in January, despite the home side having more than a dozen shots on target.

India goalkeeper Gurpreet Singh Sandhu, who also wore the captain's armband, was the star as he single-handedly baulked Qatar in the Group E match.

India, which had suffered a heartbreaking 2-1 loss to Oman in its opening match on September 5 at Guwahati, now has one point from two matches while Qatar has four after its 6-0 win over Afghanistan in its first match here.

India next plays Bangladesh on October 15 in Kolkata.

## Meagre shots

Qatar, ranked 62nd in the world, had more than two dozen shots out of which at least a dozen were on target. India, 103rd in the FIFA rank-



**Heroic performance:** With Qatar unleashing over a dozen shots on target, 'keeper Gurpreet Sandhu had a busy night, one which he handled with aplomb. • SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

ings, on the other hand, had just two shots on the opposition goal in the entire match.

In the first half, India expectedly sat deep and defended its citadel.

The home side had at least half a dozen on-target shots and seven corners in the first half while India did not have any.

Gurpreet was a busy man

as he was called into action several times but he remained firm.

## Fingertip save

Qatar captain Hassan Al-Haydos had two shots early into the match but Gurpreet was up to the task, including the brilliant finger-tip save in the 20th minute.

A mispass from Mandar

Rao Desai in the 14th minute just outside the penalty box fell for Abdul Aziz Hatem, but his curling strike flew just above the crossbar.

A free header off Boualem Khoukhi in the 26th minute was also off the target as India escaped unscathed in the first half.

**The result:** Qatar 0 drew with India 0.

## Match stats

Qatar		India
5	Fouls	8
30	Tackles	36
15	Corners	1
7	Offsides	2
27	Shots	2
0	Goalkeeper saves	11
68	Possession	32

## TEAM SELECTION

AMOL KARHADKAR  
MUMBAI

India may have justified its top ranking by returning from the West Indies with optimum points in its maiden assignment of the World Test Championship.

However, as the national selection panel sits down on Thursday to select the squad for the home Test series versus South Africa, M.S.K. Prasad & Co. will be in a dilemma on how to resolve the opening combination conundrum.

Despite Virat Kohli's men having triumphed in its last three Test series in the last 12 months – a rare series win in Australia sandwiched between home and away victories versus West Indies – opening combination has been far from being stable during this period.

## Five batsmen tried out

Ever since the selectors and the team management decided to look beyond Shikhar Dhawan after the series in England exactly a year ago, the Indian team has tried out five batsmen as openers.

What's worse is none of the four opening combinations has worked. The first-wicket stand averaged 28.07 in the 14 innings over the last 12 months.

## Starting trouble



	Inn	Runs	HS	Avg.
K.L. Rahul	12	195	44	17.72
Mayank Agarwal	7	275	77	39.28
Prithvi Shaw	3	237	134	118.50
M. Vijay	4	49	20	12.25
Hanuma Vihari	2	21	13	10.50

STATS FROM OCTOBER 2018

Once the selectors moved on from the combination of Dhawan and M. Vijay, K.L. Rahul was supposed to step into the role of the senior opener. However, let alone leading the charge, the Karnataka batsman has struggled to even maintain his place in the team. His State-mate Mayank Agarwal, who debuted in Australia, has looked the most assured willow-wielder at the top of the order.

With Rahul running out of time, Dhawan and Vijay not in contention and Prithvi Shaw serving doping suspension, it would be interesting to see if the national selectors decide to blood in a specialist opener for the South Africa Test series, set to begin in Visakhapatnam on Oct. 2.

Priyank Panchal and Abhimanyu Easwaran have been knocking on the doors

of the selectors for more than two seasons now. While Panchal, the Gujarat captain, has the experience and a mature head on his shoulders, Bengal's Abhimanyu has been in sensational form for India-A and in the Duleep Trophy.

However, if the selectors, in consultation with the team-management, decide to present Rohit Sharma the role of the Test opener, then both Panchal and Abhimanyu's wait for the India jersey will be prolonged. Considering Rohit's exceptional run in the World Cup – he scored a record five hundreds as an opener – a section of the selectors and the team-management feel Rohit should be asked to open in Tests as well.

It would be interesting to see if the Mumbaier gets a new lifeline for his topsy-turvy Test career.

# This is All India Radio... now tune in to live commentary

BCCI announces a two-year rights arrangement

VIJAY LOKAPALLY  
NEW DELHI

Cricket fans will once again be regaled by radio commentary following an arrangement between the BCCI and the All India Radio (AIR).

The BCCI on Tuesday said, "in an initiative to enhance the coverage of Indian cricket and take it to the nook and corner of the country," it was announcing a two-year radio rights arrangement with AIR. "This initiative will offer millions of listeners across India the opportunity to follow their favourite sport via live radio commentary," the BCCI informed. It will be specially beneficial for the visually-impaired fans.

The audio commentary will commence from the first

game of India's upcoming Paytm T20I series against South Africa in Dharamshala on Sept. 15. In addition to international matches, AIR will also provide coverage for the men's and women's domestic tournaments. The two-year tenure starts on Sept. 10.

## Move welcomed

The move was welcomed by the fraternity of commentators. "It is a wonderful news for us. Radio is a powerful medium and it reaches out to so many remote places. Following the game live from the ground adds to the excitement that a cricket fan experiences even at work," said Sachin Chatte, an English commentator based in Goa.

For Vineet Garg, a veteran

Hindi commentators, it is, "throw-back to those great times when cricket fans remained glued to radio or transistor sets. The commentator was the eyes and ears of the fans who would visualise the game from what they heard. My seniors like Anant Setalvad and Suresh Saraiya were pillars who contributed to popularize the game. Ace cricketers like Vijay Merchant and Lala Amarnath would enrich the commentary box with their wisdom."

The BCCI had had issues with the AIR related to rights and the latter was compelled to have the commentators work from studios.

"We did commentary only when India played overseas," said Chatte.

# 'We strongly believe in Quinton's leadership skills'

While praising du Plessis' contribution, Nkwe insists on infusing fresh blood in T20s

## SA IN INDIA

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
DHARAMSHALA

South Africa's cricket establishment acknowledges Faf du Plessis' contribution both as a player and captain but it's about time it looks at the future with belief in Quinton de Kock's leadership skills, interim director Enoch Nkwe

said on Tuesday.

While du Plessis is still the captain of the Test side, Nkwe gave enough indications that South Africa wants to infuse fresh blood going into next year's World T20 in Australia. "We know where Faf stands as a captain and as a player. He has done great things for SA cricket. But we also need to look at what future looks like and we strongly

believe in Quinton, who is going to be leading the team going forward," Nkwe told reporters.

"We have a good leader and it's an opportunity to start building for the future."

While admitting that India

is a formidable team, Nkwe is confident that this upcoming three-match T20I series, beginning on Sunday, will help them assess the Proteas.

"It's the start of a new chapter and focus will be the coming series against India."

de Kock feels adaptability is the key and believes the track will help batsmen.

"I have been here before but haven't played here. The last time we were here, the wicket did play very well," he said.

## India vs South Africa tour programme

T20Is	Tests
Sept. 15, Dharamshala	Oct. 2 to 6, Visakhapatnam
Sept. 18, Mohali	Oct. 10 to 14, Pune
Sept. 22, Bengaluru	Oct. 19 to 23, Ranchi
All matches start at 7 p.m.	All matches start at 9.30 a.m.
• South Africa will play a warm-up game against Board President's XI at Vizianagaram from Sept. 26 to 28	
• The Proteas are scheduled to revisit India for a three-match ODI series in March 2020	



**Get, set, go:** Interim director Nkwe says it's the start of a new chapter for South Africa. • AP

# Knighthood for Boycott and Strauss



Geoffrey Boycott. • REUTERS



Andrew Strauss. • REUTERS

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
LONDON

England cricket greats Geoffrey Boycott and Andrew Strauss have been given knighthoods by Theresa May in her resignation honours list. Boycott and Strauss both received the honour for their services to sport after outstanding careers for England.

Boycott, 78, amassed 8,114 Test runs at 47.72 in an England career that ran between 1964 and 1982.

Strauss hit 7,037 runs in 100 Tests from 2004 to 2012. Strauss captained England to Ashes triumphs in 2009 and 2010-11, the latter campaign making him the first English skipper to win a Test series on Australian soil since Mike Gatting in 1986-87.

# U Mumba has the measure of Titans

Ahmedabad to host PKL playoffs and final

Y.B. SARANGI  
KOLKATA

U Mumba benefited from its captain Fazel Atrachali's excellent tackles and Arjun Deshwal's fine all-round showing to beat Telugu Titans 41-27 in a re-scheduled match of the ProKabaddi League here on Tuesday.

Mumba's seventh win pushed it up into the top-six on the points tally.

Titans banked on Siddharth Desai and Rakesh Gowda's praiseworthy efforts to lead 13-9 before Mumba, which was all out in the 13th minute, made a strong comeback. Mumba, which gave a close fight due to Rohit Balian's five points in the first

half, also cashed in from Deshwal's contribution. Deshwal, who had opened Mumba's account with a two-point raid, claimed Vishal Bhardwaj and C. Arun to help his side take a 15-13 lead.

However, Farhad Milaghardan conducted a successful raid with a bonus point to level the scores just before the break. Mumba applied pressure as Titans got all out within a minute of resumption. Fazel's solid tackling and its raiders' successful forays enabled Mumba to establish a seven-point lead at 25-18.

Titans rode on the Gowda's all-round performance to narrow the margin, but Mumba was boosted by Fa-

zel, who not only garnered five tackle points in the second half but also guided his team brilliantly to seize momentum at the right time.

Deshwal inflated his personal score to 10 while extending Mumba's lead. Titans, which experienced two more all outs, could never really recover.

EKA Arena at Ahmedabad will host the two eliminators, semifinals and the grand finale from Oct. 14 to 19.

**The result:** U Mumba 41 (Arjun Deshwal 10, Rohit Balian 7, Fazel Atrachali 6, Sandeep Narwal 4) bt Telugu Titans 27 (Rakesh Gowda 7, Siddharth Desai 4, Farhad Milaghardan 4, Vishal Bhardwaj 4).



**Inspiring:** Fazel Atrachali, right, led from the front for U Mumba on Tuesday. • RAJEEV BHATT

# When romance and results unite, it is special



## BETWEEN WICKETS

SURESH MENON

Forget the back story, cynical sports editors would repeat in the old days, judge a team purely by its performance on the field. Were the players good enough to score runs, good enough to take wickets and hold catches? Did they score at least one run more than their opponents at the end of the match? That's all that matters. Don't romanticise origin stories. If someone had to walk barefoot to school and began by throwing stones at distant objects, that is interesting but not crucial to a team's success.

Yet, sports without romance is incomplete. In fact, sport is romance. Scores and results are important, of course, but they aren't everything. Often the struggle, and the sheer improbability of a group playing together is the more interesting aspect of the competition. And when romance meets performance, the joy is complete. Afghanistan's elevation to the highest reaches of cricket is perhaps the most romantic story in contemporary sport.

## No real tradition

They imbued the game in refugee camps while their country was at war. They have no real tradition in the game like the other members of the Commonwealth. A quarter century ago they had fewer than 30 people who played cricket.

Their players have been shot, their first national hero, Mohammad Nabi, was on a cricket tour when his father was kidnapped back home. Nabi, 34,

has spent half his life in refugee camps. He announced his retirement from Test cricket before the start of his country's third Test which they won this week in Bangladesh. A gifted off spin bowler and a hard-hitting batsman, Nabi, a gentle, articulate man, is unique in other ways too. He is the only player to hit the first ball he faced in both innings on his First Class debut for six.

## Wonderful gesture

As Rashid Khan picked up his eleventh wicket of the match to bring Afghanistan victory – their second in three Tests to match the early record of Australia – he took off in the manner of the modern bowler, running across the field. Then he collected himself, and found he was closer to the dressing room than his teammates. At this moment, Rashid, 20, the youngest Test captain ever, chose to wait till senior man Nabi caught up, and gestured for him to lead the team in. It was a wonderful gesture, a tribute to both men and testimony to how much more Afghanistan had learnt about the game beyond batting and bowling.

Rashid Khan is already their best-known player, their richest, and easily their finest bowler. In three Tests he already has 20 wickets, five-plus in his last three innings. Afghanistan lost their debut match against India, but beat Ireland and the more experienced Bangladesh. But the format of the new World Test championship, where only nine of 12 teams earn points, means they might not play as much Test cricket as they deserve to.

## Test hero Rahmat

Rashid apart, the team's Test hero is Rahmat Shah, who made his country's first century, after having made 98 and 76 in the earlier win against Ireland. He is 26. Afghanistan players graduate from the Under-19 levels to the A team,

like their counterparts in other countries. "The game is becoming increasingly structured," wrote Tim Wigmore in *Second XI: Cricket in Its Outposts*, adding, "There are 80 grounds in Afghanistan, and more than 50 turf wickets."

All this sounds perfectly normal till you realise just what it means for a country to have achieved it despite having been at war since 1979 when the Soviets moved in. Hillary Clinton put it in perspective when she said, "If we are searching for a model of how to meet tough international challenges with skill, dedication and teamwork, we need only to look to the Afghan national cricket team."

It is possible that Afghanistan has emerged as everybody's second favourite team after their own.

## On-field performance

So much for the romance. What of the performance on the field of play? In ODI, they have played 123, won 59 and lost 60; in T20 it is 49 won versus 22 lost in 71 matches. There is something about white ball cricket that seems to suit their approach which favours risk-taking over safety-first, and lays greater store by the unorthodox. That they made the switch to Test cricket without too much trouble is merely one more astounding fact about a team that deals in astounding facts.

The early wins mean Afghanistan ask to be judged on their game rather than on history and the past. At some point in the evolution of teams in sport, the focus shifts from what was considered improbable to what is seen as possible. This usually takes time.

Afghanistan, despite their poor showing in this year's World Cup, have earned the right to be treated as an international team without condescension. And that has been their greatest achievement in a decade of international cricket.