

Rishabh Pant faces a serious reality check in white-ball cricket

The wicketkeeper-batsman has not done enough to justify the think-tank's faith

SA IN INDIA

RAKESH RAO
MOHALI

The rained-off opener in the three-match T20 series at Dharamshala means India and South Africa have one opportunity less to test their new recruits.

Besides the lesser-known names waiting in both the dugouts to come good this week at Mohali and Bengaluru, one man eager to change the current narrative is Rishabh Pant.

Rebuked by coach Ravi Shastri for his "rash stroke selection" in crunch situations, the 21-year-old wicketkeeper-batsman is facing some serious reality check in white ball cricket.

Pant realises that depending on the result of the shot he attempts, opinions get reinforced.

One among the few playing all three formats, Pant is yet to firm up his place. Since Pant made an impression during the IPL before

making it to the Indian team, he is considered most suited for the 20-over game.

Story of inconsistency

However, going beyond reputation, Pant's statistics in the shortest format tell a story of inconsistency. In 17 innings, Pant has 10 single-digit scores.

Pant's highest of 65 not out at Providence, in his previous outing in the Ca-

ibbean, came after a dismal sequence of 3, 1 (against Australia), 0 and 4 (against the West Indies).

Clearly, Pant has not done enough to justify the faith of the team's think-tank. When playing a match-winning role, any stroke-maker looks good.

Pant is no different. But sometimes, when he gets it wrong and departs in trying to slog the first ball he faces,

criticism is equally quick to follow.

Shastri not pleased

No wonder, Shastri expressed his displeasure recently by pointing out Pant's first-ball dismissal in the ODI at Trinidad last month, to illustrate the point.

Indeed, Pant's inconsistency was not missed by the team even in the euphoria that follows his rare, ram-paging knocks.

Much like Virender Sehwag at the start of his international career around two decades ago, Pant, too, has delighted and disappointed his fans in almost equal measure.

Many experts feel, given the youngster's mind-set and free-stroking approach to the challenges of modern-day cricket, no serious corrections are needed.

When the going is good, Pant becomes the best advertisement of batsmanship in white ball cricket. But his inconsistency has the po-

tential to seriously hurt the team. For the record, Pant has an average of 44.35 in Tests, 22.90 in ODIs and just 21.57 in T20s.

The sustained faith of the National selectors on Pant, in all three formats, seems to have almost slammed the door on the future of the more experienced duo of Wriddhiman Saha in Tests and Dinesh Karthik in ODIs.

Time needed

No one questions Saha's superior 'keeping skills and Karthik's steady head in crunch situations.

Pant surely needs time to mature and that seems to be the reason behind the selectors' persistence.

Even in T20 or ODIs, many feel Pant stands to gain much from the calming presence of M.S. Dhoni, if available.

For now, the youngster is all by himself. Before it's too late, he has to find ways of contributing more to the team, and not playing to the galleries.



Talented, but... Rishabh Pant needs to put his head down and make sure to put a price on his wicket. • AKHILESH KUMAR

CSA, Amul join forces

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
NEW DELHI

India dairy giant Amul was on Monday roped in by Cricket South Africa (CSA) as its new partner for the ongoing three-match T20I series against Virat Kohli's men.

Amul, ranked 73rd globally, will feature on the back of the T20 shirt of the South African team during the

remaining two games.

"Amul is very proud to be associated as the Asian partner to the Standard Bank Proteas for the forthcoming T20 matches," Dr. R.S. Sodhi, Managing Director, Amul, said.

"CSA is excited about our new partnership with Amul," said CSA Chief Executive Thabang Moroe.

BCCI accepts Karthik's apology



Dinesh Karthik. • FILE PHOTO

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
NEW DELHI

The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) on Monday accepted India wicketkeeper-batsman Dinesh Karthik's unconditional apology for violating a clause of his central contract by watching a Caribbean Premier League match from a participating team's dressing room.

Karthik tendered an "unconditional apology" for violating BCCI's central contract clause by watching a Caribbean Premier League game from the Shah Rukh Khan co-owned Trinbago Knight Riders' dressing room.

"The BCCI has accepted Dinesh Karthik's apology and the matter is now a closed chapter," a Board official said.

FIR filed against two for 'match-fixing' attempt

ACU chief says action taken after a leading women's cricketer alerted the unit

SHAYAN ACHARYA
MUMBAI

The Anti-Corruption Unit (ACU) of the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) has registered a First Information Report (FIR) against two individuals - Rakesh Bafna and Jitendra Kothari - at the Ashok Nagar Police Station in Bengaluru for an alleged attempt of match-fixing and cheating.

According to the FIR, Bafna had approached one of the prominent members of India's National women's team (name withheld on request) earlier this year, offering her a huge amount of money if she joined hands with them.

The incident happened in February, ahead of the limited-overs series against England - which was part of International Cricket Council (ICC)'s World Championship.

"Today, we have got an FIR registered against two people in Bengaluru. The FIR pertains to an approach that was made to one of the women cricketers of the team. She reported the approach to us and even re-

corded the conversation she had with one of the accused over the telephone," BCCI ACU chief Ajit Singh told *Sportstar*.

Modus operandi

Kothari - who claimed to be a sports manager - got in touch with the cricketer last year through Instagram, offering her managerial services. After a few weeks, he couriered a copy of a contract, but the player could not sign it since she was touring with the Indian team. However, the cricketer decided to not sign the contract later.

In February this year, Kothari again contacted the player and put her through to Bafna - claiming he had a business offer for her. At that time, the player was at the National Cricket Academy in Bengaluru, undergoing recovery sessions.

"Kothari was trying to sell himself as the manager of various women cricketers. It was he who introduced Bafna to the player. He approached her to fix matches and play according to the script," Ajit said. It has been

learnt that Bafna offered the player ₹1 lakh per match during the India-England series. Bafna - who hails from Odisha - also requested the player if the ODI captain of the team could also be roped in for the 'plan'.

"Initially the call was made via WhatsApp and Bafna said that endorsement would be for a noted Indian clothing brand. But soon, he directly approached her to fix matches. The player told him that there was a bad connection and he could call her on her regular number," Ajit said.

Recorded conversation

On realising that things were fishy, the cricketer recorded the conversation and reported the matter to BCCI's ACU.

Since the incident happened before an ICC event, the ICC anti-corruption unit got into business. After investigation, it observed that "Bafna took advantage of Kothari's ineptitude and the player had rightly made a report of the approach. Bafna was warned for his action and reported to the BCCI and ICC."

CONTROVERSY

Allegations of fixing surface in TNPL

TNCA has constituted a panel to look into the charges

S. DINAKAR
CHENNAI

There are serious questions being asked about the Tamil Nadu Premier League. And they travel to the heart of the competition itself.

Is the league clean? Or, are some cricketers dirty? Have there been any instances of match or spot-fixing in this Twenty20 competition last season?

Right now there is an investigation by the BCCI's Anti-Corruption Unit (ACU) to probe into the allegations. Apparently, the ACU has some evidence on a few players and coaches but it remains to be seen if that would be enough to nail them.

LS in panel

The TNCA, stung by the allegations, has constituted a panel to look into the charges. The committee includes former cricketers such as L. Sivaramakrishnan.

And P.S. Raman, chairman, TNPL governing council, said the tournament had zero tolerance towards corruption in the game.

Right from the first year of the TNPL, in 2016, there have been reports of attempts by some bookies to infiltrate the league. Now, the issue has developed into

a full-blown crisis for the TNPL.

Allegations, in particular, have been made against a First Class batsman with a penchant for attacking cricket, a top-order southpaw with loads of experience, and a coach who was a fine left-hander in his time. A couple of lesser-known coaches, one without any First Class experience, are also under a cloud.

At this moment, these are nothing more than allegations. The ACU needs to meticulously collect evidence, if there are any, and build a

case against them. It is also possible that these men are innocent and victims of circumstances. Time will tell.

A franchise, with a questionable ownership pattern and rather dubious selection of its XI for the various games, is under the microscope too. The side has fallen into bad days after a rousing beginning.

Security issues

While the security at the TNPL venues during the games is tight - there are four ACU officers present - many are of the view that the

■ The issue has developed into a full-blown crisis for the TNPL

■ Some cricketers have been approached through WhatsApp messages

■ There is also an urgent need for the TNCA to increase the fee to the players

access to the players in the low key hotels in the districts is rather easy.

It is here that some dubious deals, potentially, could be done. There is thus a need for tight security at the hotels. Right now, they are porous.

Some cricketers have been approached through WhatsApp messages. And many of them have been reported by the cricketers to the ACU.

There is also an urgent need for the TNCA to increase the fee to the cricketers in the TNPL. Right now, an international cricketer receives only ₹5 lakh for the entire tournament and the others get less.

And the TNCA has to find a better revenue-sharing model for the TNPL so that the franchises do not lose money and resort to desperate measures.

No international player involved: ACU chief

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
NEW DELHI

The BCCI's ACU chief Ajit Singh has ruled out the possibility of any international player being a suspect.

"Some players have reported that they received WhatsApp messages from certain unknown people.

"We are trying to find

out who those people are. We have recorded the statements of the players and will try to track the senders of the messages," he told reporters here.

"There is no international player... any player who has got the message, he is supposed to report it to us, it's part of his obligation," he added.

'My goal is to perform well in every match'

I'm not the sort to feel bad about losing my spot in the team, says Saha



On the ball: Wriddhiman Saha is just focused on doing well for India-A. • G.P. SAMPATH KUMAR

ASHWIN ACHAL
MYSURU

Wriddhiman Saha had to bide his time when M.S. Dhoni was shining bright. It was only in 2014 when the latter retired from Test cricket did the door open for Saha to make his name as India's first-choice wicketkeeper.

Saha flourished on the big stage, until a hamstring injury ruled him out of the second Test in South Africa in January 2018. A few more injuries followed, forcing him out of action for more than a year.

While Saha watched from the sidelines, Rishabh Pant established himself as an exciting wicketkeeper-batsman.

Remains positive

The setback could have broken most sportspersons, but Saha remained positive. "When I was sitting out, I didn't feel sorry for myself or carry any negative thoughts.

"The physio told me that if I was 20, I would have recovered in quick time. But I was 33, so it would naturally take a longer time for me to recover. I kept that in mind, and I just tried to enjoy my training," Saha said.

"Some of my friends and family were upset that I was forced out when I was play-

ing well, but I'm not the sort to feel bad about losing my spot in the team. Right from my childhood, I've carried a positive outlook," he added.

Huge step

The Bengal cricketer took a huge step towards resurrecting his international career a couple of months ago, when he was named as one of two 'keepers in the Test squad for the West Indies tour, alongside Pant.

Saha didn't get a game in the Caribbean, but that didn't stop him from helping out his teammates.

"Fielding coach R. Sridhar and I gave some tips to Pant. He knows what to do, but we gave him a few suggestions to help him out," said Saha, the captain of India-A in the second 'Test' against South Africa-A here.

Pant's poor shot selection on the tour, however, came in for criticism from coach Ravi Shastri and some former players.

"My goal is to perform well in every match I play, so that if the opportunity comes to play for the Indian team, I will be ready. But for now, I'm focused on doing well for India-A here in Mysuru. I don't think too far ahead," Saha said.

South Africa-A looks to bounce back

Karun Nair has been brought into the India-A squad

SA-A IN INDIA

ASHWIN ACHAL
MYSURU

South Africa-A will look to put on an improved show against India-A in the second and final 'Test' here, after the poor seven-wicket loss suffered in the first outing.

Though the visiting team is packed with quality players - Aiden Markram, Zubayr Hamza, Dane Piedt and Lungi Ngidi, to name a few - the performance was not up to the mark.

The home side, meanwhile, has three players - Wriddhiman Saha, Shubman Gill and Kuldeep Yadav - who are part of the senior Test squad to take on South Africa.

The trio will look to put up big numbers in their push to seal spots in the playing XI in the Tests.

Saha to lead

While Gill made a crucial 90 in the first 'Test' at Thiruvananthapuram, Saha and Kuldeep did not feature in the match.

Saha replaces Gill as captain for this fixture. Karnataka batsman Karun Nair, who was in good touch in the Duleep Trophy, has been brought in.

Pacer Umesh Yadav has



That's the way: Umesh Yadav gives tips to Mohammed Siraj at a practice session in Mysuru on Monday. • G.P. SAMPATH KUMAR

also been included, and will share the fast bowling duties with Mohammed Siraj and Avesh Khan.

The teams (from):

India-A: Wriddhiman Saha (Capt.), Priyank Panchal, Abhinav Easwaran, Shubman Gill, Anmolpreet Singh, Karun Nair, K. Gowtham, Jalaj Saxena, Kuldeep Yadav, Shahbaz Na-

deem, Vijay Shankar, Shivam Dube, Umesh Yadav, Mohammed Siraj and Avesh Khan.

South Africa-A: Aiden Markram (Capt.), Theunis de Bruyn, Zubayr Hamza, Lungi Ngidi, George Linde, Pieter Malan, Eddie Moore, Senuran Muthusamy, Marco Jansen, Dane Piedt, Wiaan Mulder, Heinrich Klaasen, Lutho Sipamla and Khaya Zondo.

Ganguly skirts Kohli vs Smith debate



Sourav Ganguly. • PTI

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
KOLKATA

Former India captain Sourav Ganguly on Monday preferred not to get into the debate of who is a better batsman: Virat Kohli or Steve Smith?

"These are questions not to be answered. How does it matter? It's about performance. Virat is the best in the world at the moment. So that's what makes us happy," said Ganguly on the sidelines of an event.

On Smith, Ganguly said, "His record speaks for itself. 26 Test hundreds is a phenomenal record."

About the ongoing India-South Africa series, Ganguly said India would be hard to beat at home.

Asked about his ambition of coaching India some day, Ganguly said it would be better to wait for the present coach, Ravi Shastri, to finish his stint.