

Pakistan drop 'keeper-captain

Sarfraz Ahmed sacked as T20 & Test skipper, to continue to lead in ODIs; Babar Azam, Azhar Ali handed reins

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BABAR AZAM has replaced Sarfraz Ahmed as Pakistan's Twenty20 captain until next year's T20 World Cup in Australia, and Azhar Ali has been appointed Test captain for the 2019-20 season.

The change in captaincy comes after Pakistan was beaten 3-0 by Sri Lanka last week in a Twenty20 series in Lahore.

In the T20 series, Sarfraz had scores of 24, 26 and 17 against a second-string Sri Lanka as Pakistan failed to chase in all three matches. "His (Sarfraz) loss in form and confidence is visible and in the best interest of the team it has been decided to leave him out and provide him the opportunity to reflect and regroup himself and try to reclaim his form away from international cricket," Pakistan Cricket Board chairman Ehsan Mani said in a statement on Friday.

Pakistan is due to leave for Australia next week to play three Twenty20s and two Test matches and the PCB said the squads for both series will be announced on Monday.

Babar was the vice-captain during the T20 series against Sri Lanka and is presently leading Central Punjab in the National T20 Cup, where he scored a 59-ball 102 against Sindh. Babar previously led Pakistan in the Under-19 World Cup in 2012. However, he has no experience leading the national team in big time international cricket.

But the world's top-ranked Twenty20 batsman said he was ready for the challenge.

"To be named captain of the No.1-ranked side in the world is the biggest thing that has happened to my career to date," Babar said. "I am ready for this challenge and also willing to learn more in the process. I feel it has been a natural progression for me and I am delighted that the PCB has put faith in my capabilities."

Pakistan, ranked No.7 in Test cricket, had an unimpressive record since Sarfraz took over from now-head coach and chief selector Misbah-ul-Haq three years ago. Pakistan won only four Test matches and lost eight during that period. "These are exciting times in Pakistan cricket with a new team management," Azhar said. "As a captain, I feel comfortable that there will be number of knowledgeable people in the hut who I can rely on for advice and guidance."

The 34-year-old Azhar has played 73 Test matches and scored 5,669 runs with 15 centuries. The PCB also said it will name the ODI captain at a later date because Pakistan's next international assignment is against the Netherlands in July.

Azhar felt it was the greatest honour he ever had and he hopes to make the best of it.

"There could be no greater honour. This is an opportunity for me to leave a legacy. The amount of cricket I have played for Pakistan, the next four-five years are very important for me both as a player and a captain," he said.

With the Test Championship coming, it's time they rapped the knuckles and came up with a solid performance.

"The Test Championship is coming up, and that's like a World Cup for Test cricket. Right now, we are No.7 in the rankings, so we have a fair distance to travel. The teams we'll play in the Test Championship will almost all be higher ranked than us. So there are many challenges, but it's also a great opportunity to play fearless, exciting cricket and get the desired results," he said.

He also thanked the outgoing Sarfraz: "Secondly, I'd like to thank Sarfraz. The way he's led Pakistan, and the services he's provided Pakistan with, are excellent. I spoke to him after today's announcement and my full support lies with Sarfraz."

Though the PCB conveyed him the decision on Thursday, he said the media had prepared him for the eventuality. "I was only spoken to yesterday but the media had sort of prepared me over the last few days. I had spoken to senior cricketers and the elders in my household, and sought their advice. It wasn't a difficult decision, therefore, and I took this great opportunity."



The change in captaincy comes after Pakistan was beaten 3-0 by Sri Lanka last week in a Twenty20 series in Lahore. *File*

It's much better to take that pressure off him, just let him regroup: PCB chief

SHAMIK CHAKRABARTY
RANCHI, OCTOBER 18

ON FRIDAY, the Pakistan cricket hierarchy sacked Sarfraz Ahmed as their Test and T20 captain. The decision came ahead of their tour of Australia, starting next month. Talking to *The Indian Express*, Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) chairman Ehsan Mani said the decision was taken to help Sarfraz regroup and regain his form. *Excerpts:*

Is it a case that Sarfraz has failed to meet fitness standards?

His form is struggling. There's a lot of pressure on him. He voluntarily stepped down as captain (of his team, Sindh) in our (national) T20 tournament.

It's much better to take that pressure off him, just let him regroup and, hopefully, he will come back very strongly. So it's just to make sure he gets back in the right frame of

mind and not under pressure for a tough tour coming ahead.

So the decision to drop Sarfraz is basically on form?

It's only on form, nothing else.

Is this the end of the road for him, or you expect him to bounce back?

I hope not. We would very much like to see him come back. He is a very, very good player.

Why do you think Sarfraz's form has gone awry of late?

Look, it happens. It's a sport. Some very great players over the years have had their struggles sometimes. So we have to give him every opportunity. He plays domestic matches here and then comes back strongly, I hope.

Did the pressure of the World Cup and the media trolls following a failed cam-

paign force the PCB's hand?

No, no. Media doesn't bother me. It's purely for the interest of the team and Sarfraz's best interests.

Azhar Ali as the Test captain, isn't it going backwards? Babar Azam is the T20 captain. Don't you think he would have been a better choice in the long form as well?

Azhar is very experienced. He has got a very good record in Australia. He has got a very good Test record. He is doing very well in our domestic tournaments. He is the most experienced player in the side and a world-class player. His batting average is very high (43.27). He has over 5,000 (5,669) runs in Tests. He has got 15 hundreds, a couple of them in Australia. He is a seriously good player.

Is his appointment Australia tour-specific?

He is a Test cricketer rather than just (a) short-form (player).

Karachiness, lack of form and poor tactics hurt Sarfraz

SANDIP G
NEW DELHI, OCTOBER 18

THE EXPULSION of Sarfraz Ahmed is more than a cosmetic change, and a larger cultural shift for Pakistan cricket, at a time when they're striving to break away from the recent past and construct a new identity. They have a new coach, chief selector—one and the same man—and a new skipper was only expected, as it was imperative. Hence, the appointment of Azhar Ali and Babar Azam should be viewed through multiple prisms.

A question of identity

FOREIGN COACHES and Pakistan cricket—they've seldom been a stickable match. South African Mickey Arthur, who has lugged around with most teams in the world, even more so. His tactical inflexibility and school headmaster-like rigidity didn't quite bode well for Pakistan cricket, which produces its best when unshackled.

Arthur, together with Inzamam-ul-Haq, the chief selector, and Sarfraz Ahmed, formed an awkward trio. Inzamam, terrific a cricketer as he was, was often detached and conventional with his choice. Sarfraz lacked the charisma Pakistan cricket-audience is fixated with.

Pakistan cricket, since its early days, has been obsessed with the charismatic captain narrative, a team formed in the grander qualities and image of its leader.

Pakistan cricket likes to see itself shining in the Lahoriness of its cricket than the Karachiness, which Sarfraz embodied. Sarfraz didn't exude the body of work to command the unadulterated respect of his teammates. While he embodies the more workman-like virtues of Karachi cricket, his own image didn't help.

Like his aversion to gym work, the yawn that launched the collective laughter of the cricket fraternity during the World Cup, his clumsiness behind the stumps and the not-so-nuanced sledging (Andile Phehlukwayo incident) didn't quite strike a chord back home.

It didn't help either that he couldn't co-erce results. Though his record is still impeccable in T20Is—29 wins in 37 games—he couldn't inspire them in Tests. South Africa blanked them 3-0, before New Zealand, surpassed them 2-1 in their UAE fortress.

Azhar Ali is the opposite, Lahore-born, educated and sophisticated, much like Misbah, who were teammates in Sui Gas Limited as well as national teammates. Quite early in Ali's days, Misbah had anointed him as his potential successor, Ali credits him for finetuning his batting, especially against fast bowlers on bouncy tracks. Unlike Arthur, whose coaching style had split verdicts, Misbah is the most revered Pakistani cricketer of this decade.

Ali is 34, but they're grooming Babar Azam

to succeed in the future. Giving him the captaincy in T20Is is a step in that direction. On paper, it looks a recipe for success, though, in Pakistan cricket, the narratives seldom unfurl on a predicted, linear pattern.

A question of form

Sarfraz is often considered an accidental captain. Some reckon he's an accidental wicketkeeper too. It was his razzle-dazzle with the bat that gave him a head start over his contemporaries. But once the returns with the bat diminished, allied with his reluctance to bat any higher than No 5, his place in the team began to be scrutinised.

Around the same time, Mohammad Rizwan, a technically sound 'keeper, began to put more work in his batting and improved to such an extent that since the 2016-17 season, he has averaged 72 in 37 innings. In the same span, Sarfraz's returns digressed. As skipper, he averaged only 25 in Tests, 32 in ODIs and 27 in T20Is. The last one was not a bad number, but the overall listlessness couldn't be masked for long.

Misbah, in his very first press conference, had asserted that he wouldn't be averse to assign leadership duties to domestic veterans, even if they're callow in international cricket (Rizwan has just featured in a single Test, 32 ODIs and 13 T20Is). Significantly, Rizwan had inspired his domestic side Sui Gas to three titles in four years. Keen as a follower of domestic cricket, his achievements wouldn't have escaped the notice of Misbah, also a Sui Gas player.

A question of change

Having won their last, and only, 50-over World Cup in 1992 and their T20 triumph a decade ago, their Test fortunes plummeting, it was time Pakistan team got a makeover. Sarfraz could be construed as a scapegoat for their failures in the latest World Cup, but Pakistan has been quite stuck under his leadership. Soon after a coaching change and system shake-up, it was only anticipated that Pakistan needed a new skipper, one who would bring new ideas and fresh outlook.

Misbah has already laid out his plans, with an emphasis on fitness. Already, he has changed the diet and nutrition plans, one of the reasons for his longevity in international cricket. After he turned 40, he cut out carbs, rotis, biryanis and dinner from diet. He expects a similar level of discipline from his wards, and the pudgy Sarfraz didn't quite fit into the new image that Pakistan cricket aspires to.

A question of future

Sarfraz's form hasn't been laudable in 50-over cricket, so if he doesn't bounce back with a string of big scores, his last slice of international cricket too might evaporate. Meanwhile, he needs to file timely reminders to the selectors so that if Rizwan struggles, he could chart his way back. It doesn't help that he's 32.



Sarfraz had led Pakistan to 29 wins from 37 T20 Internationals but failed to inspire the team in Test cricket and One-Day Internationals. *File*

[SPORTS BAR]



Bencic inches closer to WTA finals spot

Belinda Bencic is on the verge of claiming the last spot at the season-ending WTA Finals after winning her Kremlin Cup quarterfinal on Friday. Bencic saved two set points in the opening-set tiebreak in beating Kirsten Flipkens 7-6 (8), 6-1. The Swiss player's hope of reaching the tour finals had earlier been given a boost when fellow contender Kiki Bertens was beaten 6-4, 2-6, 6-1 by Kristina Mladenovic. If Bencic beats Mladenovic in the semifinals on Saturday she will secure the eighth and final place ahead of Serena Williams at the Oct. 27-Nov. 3 tournament in Shenzhen, China. Bertens now needs at least one player to withdraw to play in the tour finals.

Before final clash, India held by Britain

The Indian junior men's hockey team and Britain played out an entertaining 3-3 draw in their final round robin match of the 9th Sultan of Johor Cup here on Friday. In a cagey first quarter, India controlled the pace of the game and were at the forefront of most attacks but unable to breach the Britain defence in the final third. They won the first penalty corner of the game in the 11th minute. From the injection the ball fell to Dinachandra Singh whose shot on goal was parried by Oliver Payne. The two teams went into the break locked at 0-0. India picked up pace in the second quarter and slowly started asserting themselves more in the midfield. The first clear opportunity fell to Gursahibjit Singh, released by a superb pass from Sudeep Chirmako..

Junior boxers notch up 21 medals at Asian event

Indian boxers packed quite a heavy punch at the Asian Junior Championships, clinching a bumper tally of 21 medals, including six gold and nine silver, to end with the best medal haul among 26 competing countries in Fujairah, United Arab Emirates. The Indian men's squad fetched two gold, three silver and an equal number of bronze, while the women claimed four gold, six silver and three bronze medals to round off a stupendous performance on Thursday evening.



Sharma shot an even par 71 in the second round of Amundi Open.

Shubhankar hit by double bogeys

India's Shubhankar Sharma suffered two double bogeys on the back nine but also had a hat-trick of birdies as he shot an even par 71 and was one-over 143 for two rounds at the Amundi Open de France on Friday. On Thursday, he was cruising along and doing well before running into a quadruple bogey on Par-4 17th and to end with a card of 72. Though the second round is still in progress, Sharma should make the cut. SSP Chawrasia, who was one-under on first day, was two-over through 12 holes, and is one-over and tied 49th but with six holes to play. Gaganjeet Bhullar, who shot 75 on the first day, pulled out due to a hamstring injury. Overnight rain meant Le Golf National was playing longer than on day one and with increased winds and cold weather also in play, conditions were far tougher. American Kitayama had opened with a 66 and followed that with an arguably more impressive effort, making five birdies and two bogeys for 68 and got to eight under. Nicolas Colsaerts who had 67 in first round was four-under through 13 holes and was with Kitayama at eight-under.

S Korea seeks N Korea axe for WC qualifier

The South Korean soccer association has requested that North Korea be punished for blocking rival fans and media from attending a World Cup qualifier between the countries at an empty stadium in Pyongyang. The Seoul-based KFA says its letter to the Asian Football Confederation argues that the North failed to uphold rules requiring host nations to grant visas and entries for traveling supporters and media without discrimination. The KFA did not share the actual letter with journalists. South Korean Unification Minister Kim Yeon-chul, Seoul's point man on North Korea, told lawmakers on Thursday that the way the North handled the game was "very disappointing" and reflected the standstill in relations.

Thomas leads CJ Cup with 'very easy 63'

Justin Thomas shot a stunning nine-under 63 Friday on Jeju Island to take control of the CJ Cup from home favourite An Byeong-hun as world number one Brooks Koepka's title defence evaporated with a 75. Overnight leader An was reeled in by the relentless Thomas who started four shots behind but finished two in front after setting the South Korea event's 36-hole tournament record on 13-under 131. "That was, I would say, overall one of the better rounds I've played in a while," Thomas declared.



Bulgaria coach quits after racism row

Bulgaria's coach quit Friday over the 6-0 loss to England in a Euro 2020 qualifier which was overshadowed by racist abuse that sparked a storm of protest. Monkey chants and apparent Nazi salutes during Monday's match in Sofia caused indignation in the football world and led to the resignation of Bulgaria's football federation chief. Bulgaria coach Krasimir Balakov, who took over the team in May, said he handed in his resignation during a meeting of the Bulgarian Football Union (BFU) executive committee. "I said that if I am the problem of Bulgarian football, I am handing in my resignation. There is no way back," the former midfielder told reporters after the meeting. "I will keep my fingers crossed for the next manager as the situation is not rosy at all."

