

India begins overwhelming favourite

Saha replaces Pant in the playing XI; South Africa expected to put up a brave fight

SA IN INDIA

S. DINAKAR
VISAKHAPATNAM

Familiarity can lead to complacency. And adversity can lift sides in unfamiliar settings.

Cricket is a funny game and surprises are not uncommon. Yet, India, competitive abroad and ruthless at home, should start the three-Test series against South Africa as the overwhelming favourite.

And the dusty cream coloured track at the ACA-VDCA Stadium should suit the top-ranked Test side in the world as the first Test gets underway here on Wednesday.

For a South African side, rebuilding, the Freedom series presents a wonderful opportunity to display togetherness and fight. Proteas needs heroes to emerge.

Rain forecast

Tuesday was bright here, but spells of rain have been forecast during the Test. Damp conditions and a cloud cover could provide a lifeline to the South Africans with their world class pacemen, led by Kagiso Rabada.

If the conditions remain hot and dry, and cracks develop on the surface, apart from spin, reverse swing could dent line-ups.

The host has made some important choices. Wriddhiman Saha, who last figured in a Test at Cape Town in 2018 before being derailed by injuries, is back in the eleven.

Despite questions being raised about Rishabh Pant's choice of strokes, Saha's skilful and superior glove work would have swung the argument in his favour.

On subcontinental pitches with turn and uneven bounce that deteriorate further, standing up to spinners is the hardest job for a 'keeper and Saha appears the right man for the job.

R. Ashwin and Ravindra



Swing 'em: Vernon Philander will look to make the ball talk in the Test series against India. ■K.R. DEEPAK

Tribute to the Mahatma!

S. DINAKAR
VISAKHAPATNAM

It's fitting that the India-South Africa Freedom series is beginning here on October 2, the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi.

There is a common bond that runs through Gandhi, India and South Africa. Indeed, South Africa is an important stop in the inspirational man's tale.

Gandhi spent as many as 21 years of his life in South Africa and it was racial discrimination there, during the dark days of the apartheid era, that convinced him to fight against oppressive, colonial regimes and was the catalyst for his freedom struggle in India.

Talking about the influence of Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi in his life while

growing up, South African fielding legend Jonty Rhodes said, "Both Mandela and Gandhi were great messengers of peace who taught us important values of equality, kindness and humanity which have a place in cricket too."

The Indian and the South African teams will be paying their tribute to Gandhi when they start the series on such a momentous day.

Skipper Faf du Plessis is as feisty as they come while wicketkeeper-batsman Quinton de Kock drips with ability. Temba Bavuma is a developing middle-order batsman.

Allrounder Philander

South Africa could play Vernon Philander, who combines seam movement with control, as an all-rounder at No. 7 and pick a second spinner to support the world class left-armer Keshav Maharaj. The explosive Rabada could be partnered by the mercurial Lungi Ngidi or the even quicker Anrich Nortje.

Pace has to combine with accuracy. As du Plessis put it, speed alone would be a waste in India.

The teams: India (final XI): Virat Kohli (Capt.), Rohit Sharma, Mayank Agarwal, Cheteshwar Pujara, Ajinkya Rahane, Hanuma Vihari, Wriddhiman Saha (wk), R. Jadeja, R. Ashwin, Ishant Sharma and Mohammed Shami.

South Africa (from): Faf du Plessis (Capt.), Aiden Markram, Dean Elgar, Theunis de Bruyn, Temba Bavuma, Quinton de Kock (wk), Vernon Philander, Keshav Maharaj, Kagiso Rabada, Lungi Ngidi, Dale Piedt, Anrich Nortje and Senuram Muthusamy.

Match starts at 9.30 a.m.

Rohit up for the challenge: Kohli

S. DINAKAR
VISAKHAPATNAM

Virat Kohli's visage sported a glow and a smile that comes with success. The relentless run-maker with class and timing is also India's most successful Test captain.

After leading India to a crushing Test series triumph over the West Indians in the Caribbean, Kohli is eyeing a victory over the South Africans at home. And with every win adding to India's tally in the World Test Championship, the Indian skipper is excited.

In no rush

The team management has been taking decisions ahead of the Test. Kohli confirmed, "Rohit [Sharma] is going to start for us. We're in no rush. He'll be given space to find his own game and come into his own.

"He's up for the challenge

and we are sure, he will, sooner than later, find his game at the top. Once he is in his zone, he can do great things for the team."

The skipper said wicketkeeper Wriddhiman Saha would be a part of the eleven. "Saha is fit and fine to go. His keeping credentials are there for everyone to see." According to me, he's the best keeper in the world, so in these conditions, with what he's done in the past, he starts for us."

Kohli said both R. Ashwin and Ravindra Jadeja would play the Test here. "Jaddu, we felt, was in a better zone, as far as him performing overseas and what he's done in the past season for the team, so yeah, from that point of view he started in West Indies.

"But look, wherever the conditions provide us to go ahead with two spinners,

obviously Ash is going to be a threat, and in home conditions, with his batting credentials, and the way he bowls as well, he's always going to be starting with Jadeja, so that was a no-brainer for us."

South African captain Faf du Plessis was pleased about his team playing its first World Test Championship series.

"It's very exciting for all of us, it's something fresh, something new. We've been playing a lot of Test cricket but this is the first of its kind and we haven't had Test cricket since February or March, or the beginning of the year. It has been a gap of Test cricket for us. And we are coming to India."

If the pitch offered turn then left-armer Keshav Maharaj, "as good as any in the world", would trouble the Indians, he said.

Battlelines drawn

SOURCE: ESPNCRINFO


A winning start to the Test series against South Africa will take India closer to eclipsing Australia's record of 10 straight home series victories. The Proteas, on the other hand, will be aiming to open their World Test Championship campaign on a positive note

OVERALL RECORD	INDIA WON	SA WON	DRAWN
36	11	15	10

IN INDIA	8	5	3
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India had beaten South Africa 3-0 in the four-match series in 2015, the last time the Proteas had toured

TOP INDIAN BATSMEN AGAINST SOUTH AFRICA


	Player	M	Inn	Runs	HS	Average	100s	50s
	Sachin Tendulkar	25	45	1,741	169	42.46	7	5
	Virender Sehwag	15	26	1,306	319	50.23	5	2
	Rahul Dravid	21	40	1,252	148	33.83	2	5

TOP SOUTH AFRICAN BATSMEN AGAINST INDIA

Player	M	Inn	Runs	HS	Average	100s	50s
Jacques Kallis	18	31	1,734	201*	69.36	7	5
Hashim Amla	21	37	1,528	253*	43.65	5	7
AB de Villiers	20	35	1,334	217*	39.23	3	6




TOP INDIAN BOWLERS AGAINST SOUTH AFRICA

	Player	M	Inn	Wkt	BBI	Average	SR	SWI
	Anil Kumble	21	40	84	6/53	31.79	81.3	3
	Javagal Srinath	13	25	64	6/21	24.48	51.7	4
	Harbhajan Singh	11	19	60	7/87	28.4	59.4	4

TOP SOUTH AFRICAN BOWLERS AGAINST INDIA

Player	M	Inn	Wkt	BBI	Average	SR	SWI
Dale Steyn	14	23	65	7/51	21.53	41.8	5
Morne Morkel	17	31	58	5/20	26.41	53.7	1
Allan Donald	11	20	57	7/84	17.31	43.7	3



Rohit's new gig the last throw of the dice



BETWEEN WICKETS

SURESH MENON

Other things remaining equal, if the choice for a Test place is between two players of unproven record at the batting position available, the younger man usually gets the job. Shubman Gill is 20, and Rohit Sharma 32, so it should be a no-brainer. Yet, the senior man, who has played 27 Tests and averages over 85 in nine Tests at home, will be given one more chance to seal a place at the top of the order.

Selectors, fans, teammates, former players, and television commentators are all willing Rohit on to succeed; few players in Indian cricket have had such cheerleaders.

As a natural timer of the ball with the instinct to attack, he brings to the game a touch and an attitude few possess, and some of the support is understandable. If he could match his one-day record (8000-plus runs at 48, three double centuries in 27 centuries overall), Indian cricket would certainly gain. If the experiment fails, then Rohit goes back to the cut and thrust of one-day and T20 cricket, to finish as a footnote in Indian Test history, a long-surviving disappointment and might-have-been. It is a gamble India are willing to take, the impact of possible success overcoming the price of failure.

No secrets

Over the next three years India tour New Zealand, Australia, England and South Africa. Rohit averages 26 in 18 Tests abroad with a highest score of 79 in 33 innings. As opener he will be severely tested with two kinds of bowling that aren't popular in white ball cricket – the swinging delivery and the short one bowled into the ribs. There are no secrets – or helpful field and bowling restrictions – in Test cricket.

This partially answers the question fans often ask: How can a player who dominates white ball cricket be so ordinary in the red ball version? Technique isn't everything, of course. Sourav Ganguly who initially struggled with some of the same issues, changed his

game around and showed how a big heart and sheer self-confidence can sometimes overcome technical shortcomings.

Rohit Sharma is not the first middle-order batsman who has been asked to open, nor will he be the last. The selectors are probably hoping that the move will be as successful as the one initiated by skipper Ganguly when he asked Virender Sehwag to open five matches after he began his career, like Rohit, with a century on debut at No. 6. Sehwag went on to rewrite the book on opening Test batting. India will settle for far less with Rohit – consistency and good starts with his partner so the middle order can come into its own.

Ganguly understood the value of having Sehwag in the side but didn't know where to fit him in. The middle order read Dravid-Tendulkar-Laxman-Ganguly. At this stage of his career, Rohit Sharma gets a new gig not because the middle order is as strong, but as a way of salvaging a career in red ball cricket that appears unfulfilled, incomplete, and deeply unsatisfactory for a batsman who has charmed his way through so many short innings.

He will be up against Kagiso Rabada, one of only two bowlers in the game with over 100 wickets whose strike rate is in the 30s. Rabada spearheads an attack which also has Vernon Philander and Ngidi Lungi, and if over the next three Tests Rohit scores the runs that inspires self-belief for the tougher battles ahead, one part of the gamble



The clincher: Rohit Sharma's record in the shorter game and the gut feeling that with experience he might be less inclined to throw it away have swung things in his favour. ■K.R. DEEPAK

would have succeeded.

Already Priyank Panchal has given the selectors a reminder with a century against South Africa-A while Abhimanyu Easwaran, younger by five years, has shown himself to be an organised batsman with an appetite for big scores. K.L. Rahul isn't out of it yet, merely out of form. Prithvi Shaw's drugs ban ends in November soon after he turns 20 and he comes into reckoning again.

Costly philosophy

There is much to be said for selecting a young player when he is in form and getting runs consistently. It has happened before that a promising youngster who is kept waiting is finally chosen during a season when he is struggling, and finishes with a career that is needlessly brief. "He is young, his turn will come," is an Indian philosophy that has cost us in the past.

Cricket selection works on the principle that the younger player deserves a chance to succeed while the older one must be given a chance to fail. Rohit Sharma's record in the shorter game and the gut feeling that with experience he might be less inclined to throw it away as he has in the past has earned him a final call. Attractive batsmanship backed by all-round support is a formula for persistence, although the likes of Karun Nair, for one, might believe he could have done with similar support. But it doesn't come to everybody, not even someone who has a triple century in Tests.

Shafali, spinners seal series win for India

After the opener powers the side to 140, Poonam and Radha take over

SA-WOMEN IN INDIA

P.K. AJITH KUMAR
SURAT

There was cricket, finally. The women's T20I series, badly affected by persistent rain over the last few days, resumed on Tuesday. And India clinched it in style.

The 51-run victory in the fourth match at the Lalbhai Contractor Stadium, in front of another big crowd, gave the host an unassailable 2-0 lead, with the last game to be played on October 4 (the second and third games were washed out). It was truly a dominant show by the Women in Blue against a South African side that failed to give a fight in either innings.

The match was reduced to 17-overs-a-side after the game began an hour late because of a wet outfield. A lot went right for India, the host's win fashioned by 15-year-old opener Shafali Verma and the Yadav spin duo of Poonam and Radha, who took five wickets between them.

Lowlight

There were several highlights in the Indian innings, such as the fearlessness showed by Shafali, the brief spell of ferocious hitting by skipper Harmanpreet Kaur and the sweet timing of Jemimah Rodrigues. But, it was the lowlight that decided the course of the match: the fielding of the visitors.

It was as if they had forgotten how to catch, after being denied play and practice for so long, perhaps. For most of the innings, there seemed to be a contest going on among them: who will drop the next catch?

That was after the South African captain Sune Luus decided to field first. She would not have anticipated her side would soon be dropping catches aplenty.



Laying the base: Shafali set it up with a 33-ball 46 while opening the innings. ■VIJAY SONEJI

ping catches aplenty.

On a night like this and in front of a crowd like this, and at the time of the Navaratri festival, the Indian women were not going to say no to all those gifts. Especially Shafali, the girl who just loves to whack the ball.

She had been dropped in the second over while on five, by Lara Goodall at mid-on off Ayabonga Khaka, and then by Laura Wolvaardt, who 'helped' the ball

slay over deep mid-wicket for six.

The teenager from Haryana hit another six and five fours in her 33-ball 46.

She was looking good enough for what would have been a remarkable fifty when she played Sekhukhune on to her bat and then pad before being bowled.

She had put on 52 for the first wicket with Smriti Mandhana, someone the South Africans seemed des-

perately wanted to strike form; the left-hander was dropped four times during her 19-ball stay.

Jemimah, however, ensured that the contest would also be remembered for the right reasons, as she played some lovely strokes and added 40 for the fourth wicket with Deepti Sharma.

That association, and some brisk batting by Deepti at the death, gave it a total it could defend easily.

SCOREBOARD

INDIA Shafali Verma b Sekhukhune 46 (33b, 5x4, 2x6), Smriti Mandhana c du Preez b de Klerk 13 (19b, 2x4), Jemimah Rodrigues b Khaka 33 (22b, 5x4), Harmanpreet Kaur c Sekhukhune b de Klerk 16 (9b, 2x4, 1x6), Deepti Sharma (not out) 20 (16b, 2x4), Pooja Vastrakar (not out) 5 (4b); Extras (b-1, nb-1, w-5): 7; Total (for four wkts. in 17 overs): 140.	SOUTH AFRICA BOWLING Ismail 4-0-22-0, Khaka 4-0-33-1, Sekhukhune 2-0-22-1, Luus 2-0-16-0, de Klerk 3-0-24-2, Mlaba 2-0-22-0.	3 (7b); Extras (b-1, w-6): 7; Total (for seven wkts. in 17 overs): 89.
FALL OF WICKETS 1-52 (Smriti, 6.6 overs), 2-65 (Shafali, 8.3), 3-89 (Harmanpreet, 10.5), 4-129 (Jemimah, 15.5).	SOUTH AFRICA Lizelle Lee run out 9 (11b, 2x4), Tazmin Brits b Deepti 20 (23b, 2x4), Laura Wolvaardt c Jemimah b Radha 23 (24b, 4x4), Nadine de Klerk c Shafali b Poonam 9 (11b, 1x4), Miguel du Preez c Veda b Poonam 0 (1b), Sune Luus st. Taniya b Poonam 5 (8b), Lara Goodall (not out) 8 (12b, 1x4), Shabnim Ismail c Deepti b Radha 5 (5b, 1x4), Ayabonga Khaka (not out)	FALL OF WICKETS 1-10 (Lee, 1.5 ov), 2-49 (Wolvaardt, 7.6), 3-65 (de Klerk, 10.4), 4-65 (du Preez, 10.5), 5-72 (Luus, 12.5), 6-74 (Brits, 13.3), 7-85 (Ismail, 14.5).
		INDIA BOWLING Deepti 4-0-19-1, Shikha 3-0-21-0, Pooja 2-0-5-0, Harmanpreet 2-0-14-0, Poonam 3-0-13-3, Radha 3-0-16-2.
		Toss: South Africa.
		Player-of-the-match: Poonam.
		India won by 51 runs and leads five-match series 2-0.