

India... daylight... rest of the world

With 240 points from first two series, Virat Kohli’s team has taken a massive stride towards World Test Championship final to be played at Lord’s in 2021

SHAMIK CHAKRABARTY
RANCHI, OCTOBER 22

THE MATCH was over in two overs on the fourth day, inside 10 minutes. South Africa resumed at 132/8 and folded for 133 all out, as India won by an innings and 202 runs to secure a 3-0 clean sweep. Shahbaz Nadeem took the last two wickets off consecutive deliveries and would be on a hat-trick in his next Test. In the Indian dressing room, MS Dhoni dropped in to congratulate the team. A 2-0 series win in the West Indies followed by a 3-0 hiding of the Proteas at home... With every series in the World Test Championship being allotted 120 points, India now have 240 in their bag. Their nearest rivals, New Zealand and Sri Lanka, are on 60 points each, while Australia and England have 56 apiece. Four teams — West Indies, South Africa, Pakistan and Bangladesh — are yet to open their account.

Yes, the competition is still at its nascent stage and the final at Lord’s, involving the top two teams, would be played in June 2021. But after just two series, India’s position already appears almost insurmountable.

The World Test Championship’s schedule is bereft of balance. For example, India’s next series in the competition begins next month; two home Tests against Bangladesh. So, by November end, India are likely to add another 120 points to their tally. The gulf in class between the two Test teams makes the upcoming series a virtual no-contest.

India’s first real test may come in February-March next year, when they travel to New Zealand for a two-Test series. Another 120 points would be on offer and theoretically, India can extend their lead even further. Compare this with West Indies... After playing two matches against India at home and losing both, their next assignment in the World Test Championship is in June next year – a three-match series in England. So till then, the Caribbeans stay rooted on nought. The scheduling imbalance can seriously hurt them.

Sri Lanka hosted the Kiwis in August for a two-Test series that ended in a 1-1 stalemate. But they, too, face a lull at least till August 2020. The ICC has released the World Test Championship fixture till August next year and during this period, India are playing four series, England, New Zealand and Australia are playing three each, South Africa, Pakistan and West Indies are featuring in two series each, while Sri Lanka and Bangladesh are playing one apiece.

Australia are hosting Pakistan next month and then New Zealand in December-January. South Africa would host England in January, while England have back-to-back home series against West Indies and Pakistan from June to August next year.

The itinerary for the next season, from September 2020 to March 2021, will balance the books, because under the World Test Championship, each of the nine teams will play three series at home and three away. As for India, the roster includes two marquee series, both during the 2020-21 season – four Tests in Australia and five home Tests against England. But given the headstart they have, Virat Kohli and company will have to choke badly to finish outside the top two. On current form, it appears almost unthinkable.

A lopsided itinerary

A lopsided itinerary, however, cannot take anything away from India’s dominance. Their decimation of the Saffers was as ruthless as it was clinical. Batting, fast bowling, spin and fielding — the team ticked all the boxes.

Little wonder then that Kohli described the team’s performance in this series as perfect. “I think so. We have had good series in the past as well but I would say this is at par with the most balanced performances we have had in the past. As a team, you can’t ask for anything more. Batsmen getting runs, spinners and fast bowlers getting wickets, Saha coming back and ‘keeping the way he does,” the India captain said after the match on Tuesday.

Back-up players stood to be counted. Umesh Yadav came in for the injured Jasprit



SA’s Anrich Nortje reacts while Lungi Ngidi shakes hands with Indian players after their team’s innings-and-202-run loss on the fourth day of the third Test in Ranchi on Tuesday. India won the series 3-0. AP

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Bumrah and bowled with such venom that Kohli rated his partnership with Mohammed Shami as arguably the best for a fast bowling pair in Indian conditions. “If you look at these two guys, their strike rate is probably the best in Indian conditions in history.”

Spare a thought for Nadeem, who was drafted into the squad on match eve, when Kuldeep Yadav suffered a shoulder injury. The left-arm spinner from Jharkhand took to Test cricket like a duck to water. He walked into a team culture that makes the whole greater than the sum of its parts.

Kohli isn’t looking into the distant future, the World Test Championship final to be precise. But the skipper knows if his team carries on with the process, the goal will be achieved. “We will always be put under pressure and make mistakes. At the end of the day, we are 11 guys who can be vulnerable. But what is important is that we keep a strong check on wanting to learn from the mistakes. We don’t let anyone slide things under the carpet,” Kohli said.

Coming back to the World Test Championship, its point system is flawed — 120 points for each series means 60 points per win in a two-Test series, while only 24 points for a win in a five-match series. Four and five-Test series are played between heavyweights but the ICC mandarins failed to put things in perspective. Only recently, Kohli had said points for an away Test win should have been doubled. Maybe, the game’s governing body will fix the ‘bugs’ in the next cycle. For the moment, India already have the Lord’s final in sight, cricket’s glorious uncertainties notwithstanding.

SCORECARD >> India vs South Africa

3rd Test | Ranchi | Toss: India

INDIA 497/9 D IN 116.3 OV
S AFRICA 162 IN 56.2 OV
S AFRICA (F/O) 133 IN 48 OV
(OVERNIGHT) 132/8 IN 46 OV

T de Bruyn c Saha b Nadeem 30
(49b, 4x4, 1x6)

A Nortje not out 5 (16b, 1x4)

L Ngidi c&B Nadeem 0 (1b)

■ Extras: (b 5, lb 1) 6

■ Fall of wickets: 1-5 (Quinton de Kock, 1.1 ov), 2-10 (Zubayr Hamza, 2.3 ov), 3-18 (Faf du Plessis, 6.6 ov), 4-22 (Temba Bavuma, 8.3 ov), 4-26* (Dean Elgar, retired not out), 5-36 (Heinrich Klaasen, 16.1 ov), 6-67 (George Linde, 28.3 ov), 7-98 (Dane Piedt, 37.4 ov), 8-121 (Kagiso Rabada, 42.5 ov), 9-133 (Theunis de Bruyn, 47.5 ov), 10-133 (Lungi Ngidi, 47.6 ov)

■ Bowling:
M Shami 10-6-10-3
U Yadav 9-1-35-2
R Jadeja 13-5-36-1
S Nadeem 6-0-18-2
R Ashwin 10-3-28-1

■ Result: India won the match by an innings and 202 runs.

Can Kohli & Co. sustain Test championship lead?

SANDIP G
OCTOBER 22

TEAM INDIA have siezed early advantage in the World Test Championship, sweeping the first two series. *The Indian Express* breaks down what implications these results will have on the tournament.

What does the series win mean for India in the World Test Championship?

Five wins in as many games mean that India are the runaway table-toppers in the World Test Championship. After just five games, they’ve 240 points, opening up a massive lead of 180 points over New Zealand and Sri Lanka, who are tied on 60 points each. India have played more games than any other team — even so, the points that they have accumulated is a powerful reiteration of their dominance over the last three years, the period in which they have established themselves firmly at the top of the Test rankings table, too. Also, among the teams that have played at least one match in the Test championship, India is the only one that is still unbeaten.

But can India sustain its lead for a longer duration?

Given the form that they are in, India can be expected to maintain their lead, and be the odds-on favourite to be in the final of the 2021 World Test Championship. Another 120 points will be up for grabs when Bangladesh tour India for a whistle-stop two-Test series. (Not to take Bangladesh lightly, though.)

After that series, India will play two Tests

in New Zealand in February next year — which would be their first serious test. But having won series in Australia, losing close rubbers to England (closer than the 4-1 scoreline indicates in reality) and South Africa, India are no longer poor travellers.

With their bowling arsenal envenomed by the return of Jasprit Bumrah, India’s winning streak would be hard to arrest, irrespective of where they are playing. An attestation lies in the manner in which they have snuffed out their adversaries in the last five games. The margin of victories have been as follows: 318 runs, 257 runs, 203 runs, innings and 137 runs, and innings and 202 runs.

So what makes the current Indian side such an irresistible force on the field?

Seldom has India’s bowling stock been so lethal or prosperous. There’s quality and depth, experience and expertise, hunger and craft. There is a bowler for every condition, and bowlers who are able to transcend conditions. India’s spinners no longer need rank turners to reap wickets, the seamers can purchase wickets even in unfriendly conditions.

Also, now that Rohit Sharma has begun his Test opening career on a resounding note, India’s batting looks well-rounded. Although not as lofty as the fab four of Virender Sehwag, Rahul Dravid, Sachin Tendulkar, and VVS Laxman, India have one of the most daunting batting line-ups in the world. It is also a line-up that bats deep. Someone like Ravi Ashwin, with four Test hundreds to his names, comes in to bat at No 8.

India were never fortunate to have such an alignment of factors that make a great team.

Kohli bats for five dedicated centres for Test in India

SHAMIK CHAKRABARTY
NEW DELHI, OCTOBER 22

INDIA SHOULD stick to having five traditional Test centres, while the rotation of venues can take place for ODIs and T20s, said Indian captain Virat Kohli after winning the third Test at Ranchi on Tuesday. “We have been discussing this for a long time now. And in my opinion, we should have five Test centres. Period,” he said.

“I agree that, you know, state associations, rotation and giving games and all that. That’s fine for T20 and one-day cricket. But Test cricket, teams coming to India should know we are going to play at these five centres. These are the pitches we are going to expect. These are the kind of people... they going to come to watch. Crowds.... So that becomes a challenge already when you are leaving the shores,” Kohli said.

“Because we go to any place, we know we would be having four Test matches at these venues. This is what the pitches going to offer. It’s going to be a full stadium. The crowd’s behind the team... Look, if you want to keep Test cricket alive and exciting, I totally agree with the fact that we need five Tests centres at max.”

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VIRAT KOHLI

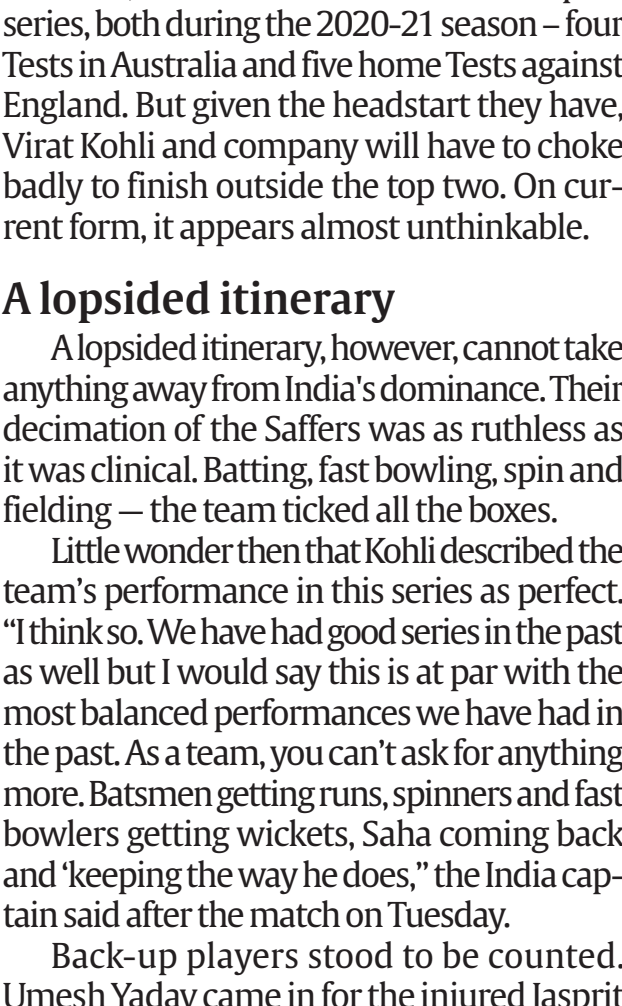
On Tuesday, India completed a 3-0 clean sweep of South Africa, winning by an innings and 202 runs. However, the turnout at the Jharkhand State Cricket Association (JSCA) Stadium barely crossed a few hundred. According to a JSCA official, there were only 2,000 takers for priced tickets of the match. The two teams played before virtually empty stands in the previous Test at Pune as well. Visakhapatnam, the venue for the first Test of the series, was no different.

Till the 1980s, the BCCI had six designated Test centres in India — Mumbai, Kolkata, Delhi, Chennai, Bangalore and Kanpur. Later Mohali was added to the list in the 1990s. Over the past 10-15 years, a proliferation of Tests venues on the pretext of rotation — read BCCI’s vote bank politics — took the game’s oldest form to almost every nook and cranny, while the traditional Test venues missed out.

Mumbai (Wankhede), the home of Indian cricket, hasn’t hosted a Test match since 2016. Imagine Lord’s and the Oval in England, or the MCG and the SCG in Australia not playing host to a Test match for three years. It wouldn’t happen.

Traditional Test centres, where fans of a certain vintage have grown up cherishing the long-form, can still draw decent crowd over five days. For example, even on a dull day at Kolkata’s Eden Gardens, at least 20,000 spectators walk through the turnstiles. Numbers rise considerably for marquee series, when India are playing against England or Australia.

With Kohli, refreshingly, addressing the issue, the ball is now in the BCCI’s court.



14.76 and Umesh Yadav at 12.18 lead the averages for bowlers in this series. In contrast, off-spinner R Ashwin, who finished as the highest wicket-taker with 15 scalps, averages 25.26, which is at par with his overall career average. Left-arm spinner Ravindra Jadeja didn’t quite look the force that he is at home usually, taking 13 wickets at 30.69. These numbers further underline the fast bowlers’ dominance, who have hitherto been relegated to the role of the supporting cast on Indian pitches.

The pacers’ skill set played a part, no doubt, but it also helped that the tracks at all three venues — Visakhapatnam, Pune and Ranchi — were fair enough to keep them interested. While there was turn on offer, as is traditionally the case in India, they weren’t slow and menacing sand-pits that one generally witnesses in this neck of the woods. Consequently, the Indian pacers extracted reverse swing, used the short ball to good effect, and were, overall, more attacking than their South African counterparts.

In a wider context, it also displays the metamorphosis of this unit that rarely relies on external factors to exert its dominance. Instead, India rely on their immensely talented bowling unit to get 20 wickets, which



Pacers Shami and Yadav surprised South Africa with their ferocious bowling.

inherently aligns with Shastri’s mantra — take the pitch out of the equation.

“Our aim is to take pitches out of the equation,” Shastri told Star Sports. “You have to take 20 wickets, whether it’s Johannesburg, Mumbai, Delhi, Auckland or even Melbourne. So the task is to take 20 wickets. How do you

do that? For that, you need fast bowlers, spinners, a complete bowling unit.”

It certainly helps that the Indian bowlers have enough runs behind them when they take the field. Shastri’s batsmen, with a blend of caution and aggression, stacked up run mountains in the series. “Once you take 20

wickets, with the batsmen we have, if that clicks, it’s like a Ferrari. The batting line-up we have, with Rohit Sharma, Virat Kohli, Ajinkya Rahane, Cheteshwar Pujara and Mayank Agarwal, if they start scoring, and then you have the five bowlers who can take 20 wickets,” Shastri explained.

What would have pleased Shastri even more is the seamless transition of Rohit as a Test opener and the resurgence of Rahane. A lot was on the line for them. Many believed this would be a ‘make-or-break’ series for Rohit. He accepted the challenge with glee, slamming back-to-back centuries in the first Test at Vizag and then following it up with a double ton in Ranchi.

Rahane silenced his critics with a sublime century in Ranchi. “Rahane’s scene was that he had to rediscover himself and he did that. Sharma’s scenario was slightly different. As an opener, your mindset has to be different... you don’t know how the pitch will behave. On the first day in Ranchi, it was a difficult pitch but he endured. First two hours he faced everything; he had to leave the balls, was beaten, was struck on the pad but his thinking was he needed to survive those two hours, maybe the wicket will be good to bat on after lunch. And that’s exactly what happened,” Shastri elaborated.