

Lanka 2009, Lanka '19: Test cricket finally returns to Pakistan

PTI/AP
RAWALPINDI, DECEMBER 10

THE RETURN of Test cricket to Pakistani soil is an emotional occasion, captain Azhar Ali said on Tuesday but that will not come in the way of his team's efforts to make amends for a disastrous tour of Australia.

Pakistani players will play Test cricket at home after a gap of 10 years when they take on Sri Lanka in a two-Test series starting here on Wednesday. A 2009 terrorist attack on the Sri Lankan team had led to a freeze on cricket in Pakistan, which has been playing its home matches on neutral venues.

"All the players are very emotional about this Test series. It is great to be back to our home grounds and I just hope that Test cricket returns regularly to Pakistan now," Azhar told a media conference.

Azhar also conceded that the series is a make-or-break situation for his team it has not been playing well in Test cricket for some time now. Pakistan lost 0-2 to Australia

"It is unacceptable the way we lost in Australia. The last two series in South Africa and Australia have been tough for us. We know how important this series is. We need to turn to reverse our results and get back on the winning track as there is a lot of pride in Pakistan cricket and we need to win back the confidence of the fans," he said.

Asked if the presence of former Pakistan coach Mickey Arthur in the Sri Lankan camp would make a big difference to the series as he had worked with the Pakistan team for three years, Azhar said the South African's experience would be good for the visiting side.

"Obviously he knows a lot about us as he had worked with us for three years. But in modern-day cricket I think nowadays everyone is updated about other teams. We had a plan for David Warner in Australia. It didn't work. So we are ready to take up any of the challenges he (Arthur) will throw at us," he said.

The under-pressure Pakistan skipper also made it clear that Sri Lanka would be a tough side to beat even in home conditions.

"Sri Lanka has always been a tough team because they play disciplined cricket. We also have to play disciplined cricket in every department. Test cricket demands disciplined cricket. You can't win a Test in one session but you can lose a Test in one session. So one has to be disciplined to beat Sri Lanka at home or away," he said.

"We have to rely on our bowling attack. Yasir Shah didn't do well in Australia but he has won us many matches and I think he will return to his old self in this series. We have confidence in our attack and we are backing them," he added.

About his own poor form, Azhar conceded that every captain has a playing role in the team and if he performs well, it sends out the right message to other players.

"I am aware of the situation and I am trying to get back into form. In terms of playing, I am happy it is just that I have been unable to transfer my innings into big scores and I am working on that," he said.

"If, after 10 years of top cricket I can't handle the pressure then I shouldn't be playing for Pakistan. I just focus now on how I can

best play a role and help the team win. I want to contribute to our team winning matches," he added.

There is a forecast of rain here on the second and third days of the match.

Azhar said one can't say for certain how much time is required to rebuild the team.

"We have never kept patience and we don't give the rebuilding process time. I think these players have a lot of potential and they will soon come out of their comfort zone once they play under different conditions. We have to keep patience instead of calling for changes," he asserted.

No more neutral venues: Mani

PAKISTAN WILL no longer look for neutral venues to stage home international cricket matches. "The onus will be on the other teams to tell us why they can't play in Pakistan," Pakistan Cricket Board chairman Ehsan Mani said on Tuesday. "Our default position will remain that Pakistan is safe. We play cricket in Pakistan (and if) you want to play against Pakistan you have to come to Pakistan."

The PCB organized almost all of its home matches in the United Arab Emirates. In the last four years, the PCB staged short limited-overs tours against the likes of Zimbabwe, the West Indies, Sri Lanka and a World XI to show the cricket world it could host tours safely.

Sri Lanka agreed to play two Test matches in Pakistan only after it visited Karachi and Lahore three months ago and played an incident-free series of one-day internationals and Twenty20s.

"It's only logical that cricket comes home," Mani said. "People have a perception of Pakistan which is very, very different to the reality of what is happening on the ground in Pakistan today. The concerns that people had about Pakistan, certainly for the last year or two, were not what the ground reality is."

Top cricketing officials from Australia, England, Ireland, and the international players' association have visited Pakistan in the last six months. "When they see the ground reality, it's a different attitude," Mani said. "In fact, it was very nicely put by the chief executive of Cricket Ireland. He said, 'I have to think of a reason why we shouldn't be coming to Pakistan'."

Mani said he's had discussions with officials from Cricket Australia and England and Wales Cricket Board and he hoped that both countries will tour Pakistan in the next three years. "I am absolutely confident that in 2021 we'll have England and in 2022 we'll have Australia," he said. "We're not due to play New Zealand now till about 2023-24, but our default position is that Pakistan will play all its home matches in Pakistan."

Despite the impending return of Test cricket, Mani conceded there might not be a capacity crowd for the Test, in stark contrast to the packed stadiums in Lahore in October when Sri Lanka whitewashed Pakistan 3-0 in the T20 series. "Look, Test cricket had been losing (crowd) support in the subcontinent, in fact around the world apart from England and Australia," he said. "People prefer to go and watch the white-ball cricket (T20s and ODIs) but it doesn't mean that people don't follow test cricket."



SYDNEY SMOG

Day Three of the Sheffield Shield match between New South Wales and Queensland underway even as smoke-haze from bushfires engulfs the SCG. Reuters

■ Queensland skipper Usman Khawaja complained of breathlessness. "When we arrived here this morning, it reminded me of playing in India. I was surprised the bowlers were bowling for that long."

■ Spinner Steve O'Keefe suggested that kids in Sydney should be kept indoors. "For someone like me who smokes 40 a day, it's now smoking 80 cigarettes a day," he said.

■ Local reports spoke of commuters battling smoke and ferry services getting cancelled. At SCG officials and medics kept assessing the Air Quality Index (AQI) but the haze didn't hamper play.

■ While close to 3,000 firefighters struggled to fight bushfires across New South Wales, the AQI reached 11 times higher than the "hazardous" level at the SCG.

Time to knock cover off the ball

India's top batsmen have not embraced power-hitting and this could hurt them when setting a target

SRIRAM VEERA

MUMBAI, DECEMBER 10

IN THE T20 World Cup season, the fretting has already begun: That India don't set targets as well as they chase down. Not that their successful chase in the first T20 game against West Indies was clinical. It took a high-risk approach from Virat Kohli, who likes to bide his time for a while before he starts rolling.

It was a sensational knock from him that got India over the line but his batting approach does tend to jack up the requiring rate and he has to then play out of the skin to pull off a win. Never mind that game as the asking rate was pretty high from the start and it might seem churlish to pick on an awesome knock but we have seen a curious sense of caution from him often over the years, be it in IPL or in international T20s.

More importantly, it's just not him, the Indian T20 batting as a whole has a sense of lethargy about it. Barring KL Rahul, who likes to fire away from the start, the rest tend to almost bat within themselves. And no wonder, it comes to the fore when they bat first without the guiding hand of the target to force them.

Rohit Sharma likes to take a few balls and no harm in it as he is the opener and more often than not tends to make up by the end of Powerplay itself. But when saddled as he was with Shikhar Dhawan, whose T20 batting was a bit of concern as he would seem content to roll along run-a-ball or less, the situation would get a bit tight. Now with Rahul, Sharma has more breathing space to continue with his preferred innings-build-ing approach.

Indians tend to bat without overtly wor-rying about the strike rate. As if they are hell-bent on making the T20 format play out like 50-over game, if you get the idea. They rarely



All-rounder Shivam Dube at No.3 provided India with firepower at the top in the second T20 International at Thiruvananthapuram. PTI

indulge themselves; but like to play along a few overs and see what happens. Does a bowler crack under pressure in the last half of the game?

In franchise cricket, maybe they do, but not always in an international attack. Then the pressure keeps building up, and suddenly they are left staring at a situation of 25-30 runs short. So, it was good in that respect to see Shivam Dube walk out at No.3 in the second game. Not that it worked but it seemed to suggest that the team is thinking to do something about intent.

It's clear that they have to do something. Rishabh Pant is vital and even more so is Hardik Pandya, when he returns. The final assault can be left to those two but the mid-dle order needs to do lot more.

Kohli's case is most interesting. He has the run tally in T20s but he can still give the impression that he hasn't yet cracked the format. Perhaps, its this format that throws up the biggest challenge for him still. A batsman with conventional array of shots – apart from those dazzling swat-flicks of course – and who targets traditional areas is almost forced to extend himself in this format.

But he can come across a bit reluctant. He is one of the best in Tests and has the 50-over game worked out insanely well. In those formats, he can afford to play almost within himself but the T20 puts the sternest test on him.

In IPL, you could still understand it a bit; perhaps it's the presence of AB de Villiers and other hitters around him that sort of pushes

Indians tend to bat without overtly worrying about the strike rate. As if they are hellbent on making the T20 format play out like 50-over game, if you get the idea. They rarely indulge themselves; but like to play along a few overs and see what happens.

him towards that approach. Everything looks hunky dory if he bats for the majority of the overs, then not only does he catch up but makes sure the opponents are punished.

But every now and then, it does throw up pressure on the other batsmen if he gets out after batting for say 25 balls for run-a-ball or less. The other batsmen then have to make up the run-rate and they fall short.

Perhaps, that was one of the reasons Dube was tried out at No.3 to see if he can fire away from the start and then Kohli can get a better idea of a potential target to set when he comes to bat.

The puzzling thing is that the Indian batsmen have the game to amp it up, as Kohli showed in the first and as Sharma has shown in the past, especially in IPL, but perhaps its time to shrug off the internal shackles and let it flow a bit.

Else, the same middle order problem that killed their 50-over world cup dreams can return to haunt them at T20 as well.

Unless they start extending themselves in the games in the next couple of months, they won't quite know how much they can push and extend themselves. It's one thing if you don't have the arsenal but it would be a pity when you have the power game, and shy away from deploying it.



A police commando outside the Pindi Stadium where Pakistan will host Sri Lanka in the first of two Test matches from Wednesday. AP

Shooter Ravi Kumar fails dope test

MIHIR VASAVDA

NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 10

DAYS AFTER leading cager Satnam Singh was suspended for failing a dope test, it has emerged that Asian and Commonwealth Games bronze medallist shooter Ravi Kumar is staring at a lengthy ban for testing positive for a prohibited substance earlier this year. The 29-year-old rifle shooter flunked a dope test after returning from the Munich World Cup. He tested positive for a beta-blocker, according to a National Anti-Doping Agency (NADA) official. NADA's disciplinary panel conducted a hearing in Kumar's case last week and a decision is imminent.

Kumar, like Satnam, has tested positive for a drug that falls under the 'specified substance' category of the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA), which means he could escape with a lenient sanction and not the four-year ban imposed otherwise. WADA defines prohibited substances as 'specified' and 'non-specified' to 'recognise that it is possible for a substance to enter an athlete's body inadvertently.'

It is learnt that the anti-doping sleuths collected Kumar's urine sample during the sep-

lection trials at Delhi's Karni Singh Shooting Range in June. After the NADA intimidated its decision, Kumar opted for provisional suspension. Although Kumar, a national team regular, has not been a part of the squad after the Munich World Cup, a National Rifle Association of India (NRAI) official said he continued taking part in selection trials after he received a 'no-objection' from NADA.

"Since it was a specified substance, he was given the exemption to compete domestically but with a rider that even if he finishes in the top three at the trials, he will not be picked for the Indian team," the official said.

During his hearing, Kumar is believed to have defended himself by saying that the drug 'inadvertently' entered his body after he took a medicine for migraine. Blocking agents generally reduce blood pressure, which comes in handy for precision sports like shooting where a steady hand is crucial for an accurate shot.

Kumar has won medals for India at World Cups and Asian Championships, apart from multi-discipline games. He, however, could not book a quota for next year's Tokyo Olympics. Divyansh Panwar and Deepak Kumar have earned two quotas – the maximum a country can earn – for the Games.

Dope scandals very disturbing: Sports Minister

After NADA revealed that more than 150 athletes have failed dope tests in India this year, sports minister Kiren Rijiju said on Tuesday that the scandals are 'very disturbing'. "I am not saying all dope offenders took prohibited substances unintentionally, some take intentionally but there are others who take them without knowing the contents of drugs," Rijiju, who was speaking at a function where actor Suniel Shetty was named NADA's brand ambassador, said. "That's why there is the need to spread awareness about clean sports, about being careful in what you take in as supplements, etc. Besides conducting an aggressive campaign against intentional doping, there is also a need to impart awareness to those who don't have intentions to cheat but were found doping because of lack of knowledge."

Rijiju's remarks assume significance as doping offences this year have doubled compared to 2018. As per NADA, 156 athletes in 19 sports – including Olympic disciplines like athletics, shooting, boxing and weightlifting – have failed dope tests. NADA director general Navin Agarwal said the country's Tokyo-bound athletes will be under constant scrutiny and will be tested multiple times before the Games.

Jwala launches academy, promises to produce players with personalities

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE

NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 10

BADMINTON STAR Jwala Gutta, on Tuesday, launched her centre of excellence. But the centre, she insists, won't merely churn out players. "Personalities," she says. "I want to develop an individual in a way that it reflects who they actually are."

Arguably, it is this trait of hers that led her to being sidelined from the national team. Gutta's remarks against national coach Pullela Gopichand and the constant bickering for close to a decade has led to an unpleasant equation between the two.

Gutta has expressed her unhappiness that the national badminton camps are held at Gopichand's academy in Hyderabad. That Gopichand was also a selector led her to raise the conflict of interest issue.

Now, Gutta has launched her own academy in Hyderabad at a time when she herself is in the selection committee.

"I didn't have a choice," she says.



Jwala Gutta along with Olympic medallists, boxer Vijender Singh and wrestler Sushil Kumar. PTI

"Having an academy would probably also give me some strength. It's like my muscle. I can speak more. I go to selection committee meetings and 90 percent of them are from one place. I am left defending the other 10 percent. I think we needed a second option in our country. It was high

time."

The 'second option', as she calls her centre, is spread over 55 acres and comprises 14 courts.

The space, she says, has been bought on lease using her father's retirement benefits and selling one of their houses. The support promised by the state government seven years ago, of giving her land, was never kept, she claims.

Her long-term plan is to convert this into a Sports Authority of India centre. Whether it is realistically possible remains a question as SAI already supports a centre run by Gopichand in Gachibowli. Gutta says she won't coach the trainees herself, but will don the role of a mentor.

"I have already approached (SM) Arif sir. He will look over the academy overall. We will appoint two foreign coaches. I will need at least 10 coaches for 14 courts, so I am looking for Indian coaches. But I'll be mentoring. I know who's capable of coaching and who is the real coach (laughs). Coaching is very pious and frankly, it's a lot of hard work," she says.

