

BRIEFLY

Warne, Ponting in bushfire fundraiser

Melbourne: Former Australian cricketing greats Ricky Ponting and Shane Warne will temporarily come out of retirement to play in a charity Twenty20 match next month as sports organisations and athletes seek ways to raise funds for bushfire relief. Since October, thousands of Australians have faced repeat evacuations as huge and unpredictable fires scorched more than 10.3 million hectares (25.5 million acres), an area roughly the size of South Korea. Current national coach Justin Langer will also play in the game on Feb. 8 along with former captain Michael Clarke and vice captain Adam Gilchrist. Cricket Australia (CA) said in a statement on Sunday, "I'm delighted to confirm the Bushfire Cricket Bash will be Cricket Australia's major fundraising initiative to support Australians impacted by the recent unprecedented bushfire emergency," CA Chief Executive Kevin Roberts said. The match will be played on the same day as a women's T20 between Australia and India in Melbourne and the men's domestic T20 Big Bash final. **REUTERS**

Stoinis slams highest individual score in BBL

Melbourne: Marcus Stoinis on Sunday scored the highest individual score in Big Bash League (BBL) history, a 79-ball 147 for Melbourne Stars. His sustained onslaught powered the Stars to a 44-run victory over Sydney Sixers at the Melbourne Cricket Ground. Stoinis, who was released by Indian Premier League (IPL) franchise Royal Challengers Bangalore ahead of the auction for the 2020 season and was picked up by Delhi Capitals, smashed 13 fours and eight sixes during his blistering innings. He is not part of the Australia squad for the upcoming three-match ODI series in India. Stoinis broke the record held by D'Arcy Short, who made a 69-ball unbeaten 122 two years ago. Stoinis and Hilton Cartwright (59) propelled the Stars to 219 for one in the allotted 20 overs, sharing a 207-run partnership for the opening wicket. In reply, Sydney Sixers were stopped at 175 for seven Stoinis and Hilton Cartwright (59) propelled the Stars to 219 for one in the allotted 20 overs, sharing a 207-run partnership for the opening wicket. In reply, Sydney Sixers scored 175 for seven. **AFP**

Buttler questions use of stump microphones

Port Elizabeth: England wicketkeeper Jos Buttler has apologised for his foul-mouthed verbal volley in the second test against South Africa, but questioned whether television viewers should have access to the audio from stump microphones. Buttler was fined 15 percent of match fee and handed one demerit point after swearing at South Africa all-rounder Vernon Philander. "I fully understand that as role models we have a duty to behave in a certain way. I would like to apologise and understand that is not the way to behave. I take the slap on the wrist," Buttler said on Sunday. "It was the heat of the moment and a bit of red mist. But it is all done and can now be swept under the carpet so we can move on." Asked whether he felt the audio from the stump mics should be available to the public, Buttler said most were against it. "In test cricket there is high emotion at times. There can be things said that don't mean anything, but for the viewers at home it can come across very poorly," he said. "It is a tough one, we understand that it adds to the viewer experience to have stump mics to hear a bit of what goes on. But I think the players like the thinking of what happens on the field, stays on the field, and isn't heard necessarily by everyone at home." **REUTERS**



HALFWAY DOWN THE TRACK

Rohit Sharma, Kuldeep Yadav, Shikhar Dhawan and Shreyas Iyer walk the red carpet at the annual BCCI Awards. *BCCI*

- India spearhead Jasprit Bumrah won the Polly Umrigar award for best international cricketer as well as the Dilip Sardesai award for most Test wickets in the 2018-19 season
- Bumrah, who took 34 wickets in six Tests last year, became the first man from Asia to pick up five-wicket hauls in Australia, England, South Africa and the West Indies.
- Cheteshwar Pujara won the Dilip Sardesai award for most Test runs. Pujara scored 677 runs in 8 matches at an average of 52.07 with three centuries and two half centuries
- Poonam Yadav was adjudged the best women's cricketer. The leg-spinner, world's top ODI wicket-taker (39) for the last two years, also won an Arjuna award last year.

Star-studded dilemma

With both Dhawan and Rahul in good form, who opens with Rohit is a happy conundrum for the think tank

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE

JANUARY 12

THE OTHER night in Pune, after blasting 52 off 36 balls, Shikhar Dhawan likened India's problem of plenty in the opening department to a movie. "Main bhi aa gaya hu picture mein, aj maine bhi achcha kar diya. Toh picture achchi ban rahi hai. Khair ye sirdardi meri nahi hai." (Now I've also entered the frame with my performance in this match but thankfully, that is not my headache). He then threw in a disclaimer: "I like batting with both of them and we are good friends." A happy headache is how India's batting Vikram Rathour addressed the dilemma on Sunday, having three quality openers to choose from - besides Dhawan, Rohit Sharma and KL Rahul. "It's a good dilemma to have. Rohit is an obvious choice, of course. Both of them (Dhawan and Rahul) are playing well. Shikhar has done well in one-dayers and Rahul is in great form. So we'll deal with it when we have to. There are still a couple of days to go. The management will sit down and make the choice," he said at a press conference.

Dhawan and Rahul were terrific in the T20I series against Sri Lanka, as were Sharma and Rahul against the West Indies. So like in the pre-World Cup days, the three familiar faces — and admittedly good friends — are jostling for two spots. One is undroppable, the other two not quite, but have still done enough to stake their claims.

A reunion of Sharma and Dhawan looks the most straightforward possibility. After all, they're the fourth-most prolific opening pair in the history of the 50-over game (4,708 runs at 45.26) and arguably the most destructive pair around, each capable of piling on daddy hundreds at breakneck speed. If Sharma was the highest run-getter last year,



Australia fast bowler Kane Richardson, an IPL regular, is no stranger to Indian conditions. *Nirmal Harindran*

Dhawan had chimed in with precious knocks in an injury-ravaged year, such as the stroke-laden 117 against Australia in the World Cup and the whirlwind 143 against the same opposition at Mohali before that. And as recently as the Sri Lanka series, the left-hander demonstrated that he's far from a spent force. A week before that, he had scored a counter-punching 140 on a fast-bowler friendly surface at the Ferozeshah Kotla, and said he's in as "good a batting space as I have ever been."

With hopes of reclaiming Test stripes fading,

Dhawan would channelise all his attention to the limited-over versions. It wouldn't help Rahul's cause that he has struggled against quality seamers in the first 10 overs, and Australia have landed full-strength with Pat Cummins, Josh Hazlewood and Mitchell Starc in tow. It's unlikely that Rahul would be exposed to them.

But the Sharma-Dhawan opening combination would imperil Rahul's spot. It's unlikely that he would be pushed to No 3, where walks in skipper Virat Kohli. He could definitely bat

A reunion of Sharma and Dhawan looks the most straightforward possibility. After all, they're the fourth-most prolific opening pair in the history of the 50-over game (4,708 runs at 45.26) and arguably the most destructive pair around

down the order, and has been open to that suggestion as well, but hasn't quite prospered at No 4 or lower, where his inability to rotate the strike has often stalled him. Moreover, India are quietly auditioning and building a middle order. Rathour admitted as much: "Middle order is not a weakness. A few innings back, we scored 383. We've been scoring runs, our batters have done well. Shreyas (Iyer) is batting really well. (Rishabh) Pant has played a couple of useful innings."

They have more or less zeroed in on Iyer as the future No 4, and to his credit, the Mumbai batsman has responded with solid performances. Against the West Indies, he scored two half-centuries distinct in rendition, demonstrating flexibility of approach the best No. 4s show. The 70 in Chennai on a slow surface and the side reeling was built on patience and vigilance, while the 53 in Vizag was enterprising and thrilling, smoothly shifting gears and smacking 31 runs in one over. Rahul too can modulate the tempo of his knocks, as he has shown several times in the IPL, but displacing Iyer from that spot will be harsh. Making him bat at No 5 will be under-utilising him. Making him bat anywhere other than the top-three is wasting his redoubtable potential.

Rohit, Shami back, Samson dropped from T20 squad

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

JANUARY 12

VICE-CAPTAIN ROHIT Sharma on Sunday returned to India's 16-member T20 squad for the tour of New Zealand as the selectors dropped Kerala batsman Sanju Samson. The five-man selection panel also brought back pacer Mohammed Shami, who like Rohit, was rested for the T20 series against Sri Lanka.

Wicket-keeper batsman Samson had played the third T20 against Sri Lanka in Pune, scoring six runs. There were no major surprises with most of the players picking themselves. The five-match T20 series against New Zealand will begin on January 24 in Auckland. The selection committee under outgoing chairman MSK Prasad kept the ODI and Test squads on hold for the time being. Interestingly, the Test and the ODI squads were not announced and it is believed that Hardik Pandya's latest fitness drama could be the reason. A BCCI release mentioned that Hardik Pandya's rehabilitation process is taking "longer than expected".

Vijay Shankar had replaced Pandya in the India A squad for New Zealand shadow tour.

"Hardik Pandya was boarding the flight to New Zealand for A team without playing a Ranji match. If we go by media reports, his trainer has said that there are workload issues with regards to his bowling. That itself implies that he is not fit. I think the BCCI will instruct Hardik to first play Ranji Trophy for Baroda and prove his fitness," another senior board source said.

T20 SQUAD: Virat Kohli (captain), Rohit Sharma, Lokesh Rahul, Shikhar Dhawan, Shreyas Iyer, Manish Pandey, Rishabh Pant (wicketkeeper), Shivam Dube, Kuldeep Yadav, Yuzvendra Chahal, Washington Sundar, Jasprit Bumrah, Mohammed Shami, Navdeep Saini, Ravindra Jadeja, Shardul Thakur

The idea of deploying Rahul as a wicket-keeper-batsman too was floated, only for Rathour to laugh it off: "We haven't really started thinking on those lines yet. Rahul can keep, that's the skill that he has. So that will depend if the team management feels at any stage we require that," he said. After all, India aren't treading through calamitous times to play him as a wicketkeeper-batsman.

Furthermore, Pant has shouldered more responsibilities in recent times. "He's working hard on his fitness. He's played some useful innings lately. So, lot of work. He's practising hard, so hoping he comes good, becomes more consistent," he said.

So to continue the Dhawan's movie refrain, he has not only entered the fray but knocked Rahul out of it. Like a main actor would a stunt double.

Richardson wants to tame batsmen and pitches

Australia fast bowler Kane Richardson, an IPL regular, is no stranger to Indian conditions. "India in India is always the biggest challenge and after what happened last year they will be ready for it. Confidence is up but the home team is always favourite. We are the under dogs," he said. He termed it as the biggest challenge in white-ball cricket "It's the biggest challenge in white-ball cricket, coming over here and playing against India on the surfaces over here. It's a lot different than Australia. The ground sizes are a lot smaller than Australia, (and) mis-hits can often go for six."

"It's something we have spoken a lot about. I think everyone in the team has played here before, so it's nothing new. Starting today, we will figure out a plan to stop some of those guys. It will be a high-scoring contest I'm sure," and added the right-arm medium-pacer.

T20 WORLD CUP

Captain Harmanpreet counting on spinners, BBL experience in Australia



Harmanpreet will lead the 15-member India squad for the T20 World Cup in Australia, starting February 21.

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

MUMBAI, JANUARY 12

BENGAL'S ROOKIE batswoman Richa Ghosh was the only new face in a 15-member Harmanpreet Kaur-led India squad for the ICC Women's T20 World Cup in Australia, starting February 21. The team, announced on Sunday, has no other surprises.

The 15-year-old Haryana schoolgirl Shafali Verma will be playing her first global meet following some good performances at the international level in her first season.

Richa, 16, has been rewarded for her exploits in the recent women's Challenger Trophy, scoring 36 off 26 balls in one of the games with four boundaries and a six.

"See, in the past one year, we have taken five to six debutants. Earlier, the same team used to play but after the 2017 ODI World Cup, a lot of new prospects have emerged. We feel we have nurtured five or six new

players, who are playing now," chairman of women's selection committee Hemlatha Kala told reporters at the press conference "Richa Ghosh is a new player and here the role of selectors increases."

Source close to the women's team told PTI that Richa has been picked since she can lend solidity to India's middle order.

"Richa was the most impressive player during Challenger trophy. People questioned us when we picked 15 year old Shafali and she repaid the faith and I am pretty certain Richa will be on the same path," the source said.

"While shafali is the X factor at the top, Richa will provide the much needed firepower in the middle order. We had to give her the chance now. Anyway in women's cricket there are not many players to choose from in comparison to the vast talent in men's cricket."

The selectors also announced a 16-member squad for a tri-series in Australia prior to the T20 World Cup, with Nuzhat Parveen be-

ing added as the 16th member. That tournament starts on January 31 and also features England. Skipper Harmanpreet feels that playing the tri-series before the big event will be advantageous for the team.

"Before the World Cup, this series is going to be a big one for us and we will look for our best combination and with that we will give chances to newcomer also.

"As (Hemlata) ma'am mentioned, we have Richa, who did well in the Challenger Trophy and domestic cricket, so we will stick to our best XI. Before the World Cup, we will be able to decide our best XI," Harmanpreet said.

The skipper has had the experience of playing in the Women's Big Bash League and that will help her plan better.

"I think that experience will definitely help and we know how the wickets are over there and that definitely give us extra boost (over) there," said the skipper, who has played for Sydney Thunders in WBBL.

She also agreed that spinners have been

India's strength in bowling and it wouldn't change much on the bouncy Australian tracks.

"We are looking for more spinners on our side and we have got that. Now the only thing is how we are going to use their strengths. They are very good and always give us breakthroughs. Our strength is spin and we have to stick to that and whenever we need them they will perform for us," Harmanpreet exuded confidence.

She is well aware that 2019 didn't start off well for them but they picked up the pieces by the end of the year.

"See, it is always about how you execute yourself. We did not execute on what we were expecting from ourselves (in the first half in 2019). But against South Africa and West Indies, we played to our potential and that is the reason we were able to get positive result," she said.

The presence of coach WV Raman and his tactical acumen has also helped the team.

