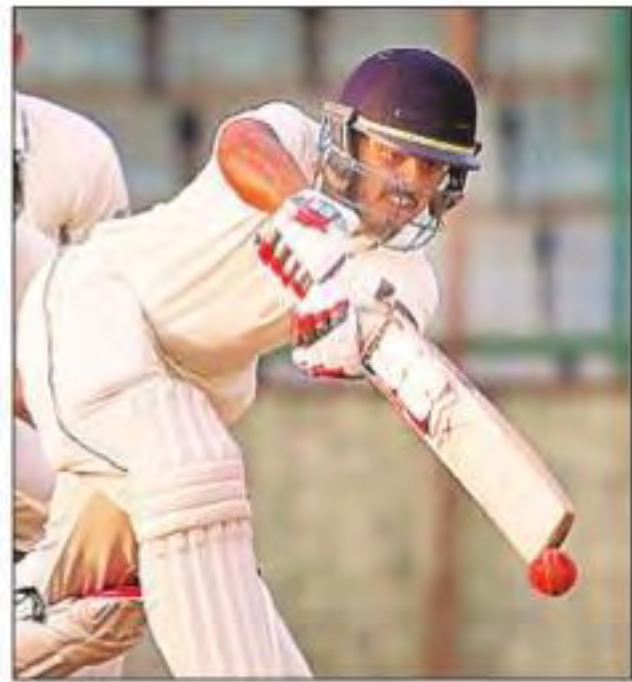


On Tv Today: EPL
WOLVES VS LIVERPOOL
 Live on Star Sports Select: 1:30 am (Friday)

Rana summons his white-ball prowess, takes Delhi home before dusk



Nitish Rana scored 105 * off just 68 balls. *Express file*

SANDIP G
 NEW DELHI, JANUARY 22

LIKE MANY youngsters of his age, Nitish Rana hates advices. “A lot of people ask me why I play rash shots. Why could you play like that, why could play like this. Yeh toh first-class cricket hain, kyun itne shot maarte hain?” Rana has grown so immune to both advice and criticism that he retorts: “I tell them, I play this way and I would continue playing this way. I am open to advice, if I’m batting badly or something, but not when I am batting well.”

It is because of statements like these, Rana often gets labelled as arrogant and headstrong. There have also been whispers that he is only bothered about white-ball cricket and IPL. He counterpoints: “People have to accept that this is the way I play. It has made me a successful player. When the rash shots come off, they

praise and when they don’t, they criticise.”

On Wednesday his enterprise was the tonic behind Delhi’s unprecedented six-wicket heist over champions Vidarbha. The fact that Rana wrapped up the game with a slog-swept six over mid-wicket ensured that the story of this thrilling game would be narrated at Kotla for years to come.

Take his unbeaten 68-ball 105 away, and the team would have been staring at an unenviable task of winning two out of their four remaining games to remain in the knockout fray. That they came back from the brink, wagered not even an outside chance at the end of the third day to knock down the steep target of 347 could have season-transforming value. “These are situations that transform a team, infuse them with the belief that they could achieve anything,” asserts coach KP Bhaskar.

Self-belief is the word Rana repeats at least twice in a sentence. Even when Delhi were

tasked with an unrealistic target, Rana didn’t lose hope. “I told the openers in the morning that if you guys can bat till lunch, I can win you this game,” he recollects.

The openers did their part, stitching a 164-run alliance, Delhi’s first century opening stand in 45 games and their highest in seven years, but a victory still looked remote when Rana strode in at No 3. The challenges he faced were manifold: Vidarbha, fearing if they would lose match, devised an outrageously defensive tactic. The off-side was packed with seven men, three in the ring including the slip and four patrolling the boundaries. The medium-pacers were bowling far outside the off-stump, almost hugging the side-crease, taking an eternity to set fields, often pulling out midway through their delivery stride. “More than the negative lines, I was irritated by their time-wasting tactics,” Rana admits.

Vidarbha’s tactics were working. A session

that began with a flurry of boundaries saw Delhi struggle to slit the gaps, resulting in their openers perishing in pursuit of extravagant shots. For a while, Delhi wondered how to pierce the off-side maze. Then kicked in Rana’s daring, beginning with a brace of sixes off Aditya Thakare. Rana would widen his stance, Chanderpaul-like, walk across the stumps, pick the length and smear him straight over his head. “They were bowling to my strengths. Had they bowled straighter, they would have had better chances of getting me out.”

Maybe, Vidarbha thought it was just a passing storm — that an impetuous shot would bring his downfall. After the flashes of unorthodoxy, Rana began unfurling the more conventional boundary-scoring shots. A couple of gorgeous cover drives followed a brace of deft cuts, panicking the Vidabha’s bowlers, including Umesh Yadav, who was far from his usual robust self, bowling from a shortened run-up. A

thunderous drive completed his half-century off only 27 balls, just before the tea interval. By this time, Delhi, at 246/2, were rolling to a memorable win.

But doubts still lingered. Yadav could return for one last spell and slice through. The light could rapidly deteriorate, Rana could play a rash stroke and get out. Of all these challenges, Rana was only bothered about the light. “I constantly kept looking at the sun, whether it was over the grilles of that stand (Bishan Singh Bedi). Once the sun goes down the grille, I know it will go down in the blink of an eye. So I was pacing my innings accordingly.” Rana, in the end, cleared all doubts, beat the sun and the bowlers, and silenced his critics.

BRIEF SCORES: Vidarbha 179 and 330/4 decl lost to Delhi 163 and (target 347) 348/4 wickets (Nitish Rana 105* off 68 balls, Kunal Chandel 75, Hiten Dalal 82) by six wickets. **Points:** Delhi 6, Vidarbha 0.

With 301*, Khan makes a point (and three)

Sarfaraz’s 391-ball knock — his first FC triple century — helps Mumbai overhaul Uttar Pradesh’s mammoth first-innings total and secure 3 points

DEVENDRA PANDEY
 MUMBAI, JANUARY 22

IT WAS more than just a game of cricket for Sarfaraz Khan against Uttar Pradesh. His celebrations after he brought up the 200-run landmark could be termed wildly exuberant. On a roller-coaster ride, as it were, he couldn’t even stop himself to hug his partner but kept running towards the boundary line. He had one hand on his chest, tugging at Mumbai’s lion crest emblem, screaming — but his eyes were firmly on the Uttar Pradesh dressing room.

The context of that look is this: He had left Mumbai to play for Uttar Pradesh four-and-a-half years ago but felt he wasn’t given enough opportunities in his new team, returned to Mumbai, waited out the cooling-off period before being selected again. All in all, three years down a rabbit hole. All that pent-up emotion was on display in that manic screaming run.

When he reached 300 with a six — a marathon innings that dragged Mumbai out of a hole and got them the first-innings lead — he went down on his knees. Later in the day, the 22-year-old explained how he had high fever after the opening day’s play and that the team doctor had advised him not to come out to bat. Sarfaraz ignored it as it was more than a game to him.

For all the emotion, what caught the eye of seasoned cricket-watchers was the immense patience he showed during the knock. For a batsman known to hit big but not for stitching patient knocks, this was a revelation.

But one man wasn’t surprised. In fact, if anything that aspect gave the greatest thrill to Sarfaraz’s father-and-coach Naushad.

“It was how we trained him this season. We had a wet sponge ball and would fire it really fast from short distance — and Sarfraz had to leave most of it. Around 1,000 balls in a training session. The aim was to train his mind to just leave, learn patience, almost re-work his natural urges to feel for the ball,” Naushad told this newspaper.

Signs of change

The excited father showed a video of the training that validated his statement. Short distance, bowlers firing the ball at high pace, and Sarfaraz shouldering arms. Again, and again. Naushad felt the first signs of change came when his son competently handled a decent Karnataka pace attack on a green wicket for an unbeaten 71.

That emotional celebratory run was his punch-back at the Uttar Pradesh cricket establishment. The stories of perceived neglect are quite a few. Here is one of them: He once scored 70 at No.3 in the Syed Mushtaq Ali tournament but was made to bat at No.7 in

the next game, without any explanation forthcoming. Stuff like that had accumulated and burst out during this grudge match.

Those who have followed Sarfaraz since his school days must have been surprised and thrilled with the application he showed. The intention was quite evident when he lost his cool after number seven Shams Mulani played a pull shot and was dropped.

Resuming on 353 for 5, Mumbai still needed 273 runs on the final day to secure the first-innings lead. The hosts had Tare on 9 while Sarfaraz was batting on 132. Uttar Pradesh tried the short-ball tactic frequently against Sarfaraz but he refused to buckle.

After the first hour that the pair saw out, it increasingly became clear that Uttar Pradesh didn’t have much of a chance to come back into the contest. Sarfaraz brought up his double hundred after lunch and though the visitors managed to get the much-needed breakthrough from their part-timer Rinku Singh as Tare edged to slip, Sarfaraz pulled down the shutters again.

When the Mumbai skipper departed, they still needed 108 runs to take the first-innings lead. Uttar Pradesh had an opportunity when Mulani pulled Ankit Rajpoot and the ball limped towards square-leg where Almas Shaukat got his hands to it but couldn’t hold on. Mumbai needed another 86 runs then. It was the only chance Mumbai gave the entire day.

Uttar Pradesh did try to waste time, bowling 31 balls in 40 minutes after tea but it didn’t work as Sarfaraz played a few strokes all round the ground. Mulani too chipped in by finding the boundary despite the presence of men on the rope.

Sarfaraz’s maiden unbeaten triple hundred came off 391 balls with 30 fours and eight sixes.

A total of 1,313 runs were scored in four days of Ranji Trophy cricket and only 15 wickets fell. In the game which showcased courage and fightback, it also said much about the pitch.

Those following Sarfaraz since school days weren’t surprised by his landmark achievement. After all, he hails from a traditional school Rizvi Springfield, which in the past has broken various school records. His contemporaries are Prithvi Shaw, who has gone on to play for India, but Sarfaraz seemed to have fallen behind. Time will tell whether his second innings with Mumbai will bring in more favourable results.

BRIEF SCORES: Uttar Pradesh first innings 625 for eight declared vs Mumbai first innings 688 for seven (Sarfaraz Khan 301 not out; Siddesh Lad 98, Aditya Tare 97; Ankit Rajpoot 3-133).

Points: Mumbai 3, Uttar Pradesh 1.



Sarfaraz Khan hit eight sixes and 30 fours as Mumbai made 688 for seven in the first innings. *Ganesh Shirsekar*

Mathews hits double ton vs Zimbabwe

Harare: Angelo Mathews struck his highest Test score with an unbeaten double century on Wednesday as Sri Lanka left Zimbabwe battling to save the series opener going into the final day at Harare. Former skipper Mathews eclipsed his previous Test best of 160 and finished 200 not out after a marathon knock spanning 468 balls, as Sri Lanka declared their first innings on 515 for nine.

Zimbabwe, playing their first Test since November 2018, ended the fourth day on 30 without loss and trailing by 127 runs after Brian Mudzinganyama was drafted in as a concussion substitute for opener Kevin Kasuza.

Debutant Kasuza, who made 63 in the first innings, suffered a delayed concussion after he took a blow to the helmet while fielding at short leg on Tuesday.

Mudzinganyama became the fourth Zimbabwean to make his Test debut in this match. He was unbeaten on 14 with Prince Masvaura 15 not out at stumps. **AFP BRIEF SCORES (DAY 4):** Zim 358 and 30/0 trail Sri Lanka 515 for 9 dec (Angelo Mathews 200 not out, Kusal Mendis 80; Sikander Raza 3-62, Victor Nyauchi 3-69) by 127 runs.

Shaw leaves troubled past behind, seeks redemption

DEVENDRA PANDEY
 MUMBAI, JANUARY 22

PRITHVI SHAW woke up on Wednesday morning in Christchurch to unexpected but happy text messages of his selection in the one-day squad for India’s series in New Zealand. Until a week ago, he wasn’t even sure of travelling to New Zealand for the A series. He was fretting whether the new year would be similar to the previous one when injuries and dope bans had derailed his comeback.

Shaw admits that the call did come as a surprise as he was more focused on performing after his shoulder injury.

“I wasn’t expecting anything and, frankly, didn’t think that I will be picked in the ODI squad. I got to know about my selection very late in the night, early morning actually. I was just thinking about how this tour will go and wanted to take each game at a time. I am happy with the way I have being batting lately. The hundred (150 off 100 balls in the warm-up game) gave me confidence and now I am looking forward to the ODIs,” Shaw told The Indian Express.

Before travelling to New Zealand, Shaw

recalled the time when he couldn’t move his hand after the injury.

“I was at the NCA (National Cricket Academy) for three days and couldn’t move my hand. I felt that the New Zealand tour was gone, that I would miss it. I was focusing on icing, mobility and was doing my exercises and praying to be fit as soon as possible. I cleared the yo-yo test too, it was my fourth yo-yo test in the last four months. 2019 went in recovering, last year went with me away from the game most of the time. When the injury happened everything bad came to mind in a flashback,” he recalled.

Shaw had injured his shoulder diving while playing for Mumbai in a Ranji Trophy game against Karnataka. He rushed to the NCA for further assessment. He doesn’t recall the grade of the muscle tear and can only remember the happy moment when he was told that he was fit and can travel to New Zealand for the A tour. Shaw has now made it to the Indian senior team after regular opener Shikhar Dhawan injured his shoulder during the game against Australia in Bangalore on Sunday.

Around the time the news of Dhawan’s injury broke, Shaw hit a 150 off 100 balls in a warm-up game in New Zealand. It convinced



Prithvi Shaw made 48 against New Zealand A on Wednesday.

the selectors that he is ready for international cricket. A month ago, former India wicket-keeper and selector Kiran More was at the Reliance ground in Vadodara where Mumbai took on Baroda in their opening game. Shaw

scored 66 and 202 and More told this paper how Shaw’s batting reminds him of Sachin Tendulkar, in particular the fearless brand of batting. More had stated how the Mumbai batsman is “Bilkul paka hua player” (fully ready and seasoned) and should be picked in the Indian team right away.

On Wednesday, Shaw scored a 35-ball 48 in India A’s second win against their Kiwi counterparts. Having played in New Zealand twice before has helped Shaw in understanding the conditions. The Kiwi bowlers bowled short of a length to him, thinking it might trouble the short-statured Shaw but he thwarted them comfortably.

“I have played in New Zealand twice before and am familiar with the conditions. A lot of hard work has gone in the past few months, be it diet or training. The way my domestic season started, I was happy with it. I am in a good batting zone and hope to carry this in ODIs too. I always believe that something good is about to come and I have left my worst moments behind me.”

BRIEF SCORES: New Zealand A 230 all out in 48.3 overs (Rachin Ravindra 49, Tom Bruce 47; Mohammed Siraj 3/33) lost to India A 231/5 in 29.3 overs (Prithvi Shaw 48) by 5 wickets with 123 balls remaining.

CAB wants Saha for next Ranji game, seeks BCCI’s nod

Kolkata: Cricket Association of Bengal (CAB) has written to the BCCI, requesting Wriddhiman Saha’s participation in their Ranji Trophy match against Delhi to be played at Eden Gardens from January 27. The letter signed by CAB joint secretary Debabrata Das has been sent to BCCI secretary Jay Shah, it is learnt.

Saha is undergoing his rehab at the National Cricket Academy right now after recuperating from a finger surgery for a fracture suffered during the pink-ball Test against Bangladesh last November. With the Test series in New Zealand on the horizon, it needs to be seen whether the selectors allow the 35-year-old ‘keeper to turn up for a Ranji fixture. Earlier, Mohammed Shami wasn’t allowed to play for Bengal against Gujarat, with an eye on the ODI series against Australia.

Meanwhile, according to sources close to the Bengal selection committee, Manoj Tiwary is likely to return as the Ranji captain against Delhi, as Bengal’s regular skipper Abhimanyu Easwaran will be away in New Zealand, representing India A.

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