

BRIEFLY
CRICKET

Boult, Latham
doubtful starters for
India series



Tom Latham picked up a finger injury during the third Test against Australia in Sydney.

Auckland: New Zealand pace spearhead Trent Boult and wicketkeeper batsman Tom Latham are doubtful starters for the home series against India after the duo suffered fractures in the recently concluded Test series against Australia. Boult was ruled out of the final Test between New Zealand and Australia after fracturing his right hand when he was struck on the gloves by a Mitchell Starc delivery and coach Gary Stead said the pacer was "touch-and-go to be available" for the Twenty20 series against India. Latham, 27, broke his right little finger while claiming the catch of Marnus Labuschagne on day four of the third and final Test between Australia and New Zealand in Sydney, ruling him out for days. "An X-ray has confirmed a fractured finger for Tom Latham. He will require approximately four weeks of rehabilitation after the fracture to his right pinky finger," New Zealand Cricket said in a statement. The Blackcaps take on the Men in Blue for a five-match T20 series starting in Auckland on January 24 followed by three ODIs and two Tests. Latham is the newest entrant to the Kiwi's worrisome injury list that includes speedsters Boult, Lockie Ferguson and Matt Henry.

Lewis hits 99*, WI
ease to victory

Bridgetown (Barbados): Opening batsman Evin Lewis fell agonisingly short of a century as his undefeated 99 helped West Indies to cruise to a five-wicket win over Ireland in the first one-day international at Kensington Oval on Tuesday. The 28-year-old left-hander made his runs off 99 balls with 13 boundaries and two sixes. After dismissing Ireland for just 180, the West Indies reached their target with 100 balls to spare. For Lewis, it was his eighth ODI half-century but he made a gallant attempt to go to what would have been a third century. With the scores level, he launched Barry McCarthy over extra cover but his hopes of a six to end the game in style fell just inches short. Off-spinner Simi Singh was the only Ireland bowler to complete his 10 overs, finishing with 2-44. Earlier, West Indies fast bowler Alzarri Joseph picked up four wickets as Ireland stumbled to 180 all out in the 47th over. The three-match ODI series continues at the same venue on Thursday and concludes in Grenada on January 12. That will be followed by three Twenty20 internationals in Grenada (January 15) and St Kitts (January 18 and 19).

SHAMIK CHAKRABARTY
KOLKATA, JANUARY 8

NOT MANY moons ago, the Ravis were dominating the ICC Test bowling charts – Ashwin and Jadeja. In fact, Ashwin had the honour of holding the top spot for two consecutive years, 2015 and 2016. Add Sri Lanka's Rangana Herath to the mix, and four seasons ago three spinners featured in the top-four of the ICC Test bowling rankings. The trend has been completely reversed now. The latest ICC Test bowling rankings have only Ashwin as a spinner in the top 10. In the top 20, the number of spinners is three, with the inclusion of Nathan Lyon and Jadeja. World cricket is witnessing a 'pace age' redux. Cricket had its 'Pace Age 1' in the 1970s till the mid-1980. The West Indies were so strong that Sylvester Clarke, one of the most hostile fast bowlers in the history of the game, could get into the team only after Andy Roberts, Michael Holding, Joel Garner and Colin Croft had left for the Packer series. Australia had Dennis Lillee and Jeff Thomson. England boasted of Bob Willis and Ian Botham, Pakistan thrived on Imran Khan and Sarfraz Nawaz's presence. New Zealand had Richard Hadlee. In India, Kapil Dev had arrived to end the spin hegemony. The latest ICC rankings also confirm an overwhelming dominance of fast bowlers. Every major Test nation – except Sri Lanka and Bangladesh – has become pace-reliant.

India

On Tuesday, during the India versus Sri Lanka T20I in Indore, Navdeep Saini breached the 150kph mark. He had been intimidating batsmen with his pace, wowing the fans in the process. With Bhuvneshwar Kumar fit and Mohammed Shami not rested for the Sri Lanka T20Is, Saini would have plied his trade in the Ranji Trophy. A fringe player coming in and making the batsmen hurry spoke volumes for India's fast-bowling depth.

India no longer play their home Tests on dust bowls. Just three months ago, after being 'outpaced' by India, South Africa captain Faf du Plessis spoke about how the home team's relentless pace attack, even without Jasprit Bumrah, weighed heavily on the mind of his team mates.

Bumrah is the jewel in the crown. At 19.24, he has the lowest average for any bowler over the past 60 years. He is aided by Shami and Ishant Sharma. Both are in the top 20 in the latest ICC rankings – Shami at No. 10 and Ishant at No. 19. Umesh Yadav, not an automatic pick in the playing XI, is at No. 21.

Even some Ranji sides these days boast of 140kph bowlers. A few years ago, when Varun Aaron had clocked 150kph in a domestic game, he was straightway drafted into international cricket. Saini breaking the 150kph barrier on Tuesday didn't trigger a social media hyperbole. In the 'Pace Age 2', India's pace bowling has come of age.

England

At Newlands on Tuesday, Ben Stokes's three wickets at the death triggered South Africa's lower-order collapse. The England all-rounder was bowling at 146kph in the final session on the fifth day. But such is the competition these days that Stokes is still not among the top 20 fast bowlers in the world. The Cape Town heroics saw his upward climb to No. 27. England's fastest, Jofra Archer, is not in the top bracket either. The golden oldies, Jimmy Anderson and Stuart Broad, continue to rule the Poms' pace attack. Anderson, at 37 years of age, is still among the top 10 bowlers in Test cricket, at No. 7. Broad's ranking is No. 14.

Australia

Pat Cummins didn't have a very good



Australia pacer Pat Cummins leads the chart with 904 ranking points.

home series against Pakistan. A tally of eight wickets at 32.12 from two Tests was below par by his standards. But he more than made up by taking five wickets for 28 runs against New Zealand at the MCG. Over the past 12-odd months, the Aussie has had 63 wickets in 13 Tests at an average of 20. He is the most sought-after fast bowler across formats, along with Bumrah, at the moment. A Rs 15.5 crore IPL price tag attested that.

Spare a thought for Mitchell Starc and Josh Hazlewood, ranked fifth and 11th respectively. Several injuries notwithstanding, Starc hasn't lost his pace. He was Australia's highest wicket-taker against Pakistan – 14 scalps in two Tests. Then, against New Zealand, he started off with a nine-wicket match haul in Perth. Unlike Starc, Hazlewood is not express but is arguably the most effective in swinging conditions.

South Africa

They are a team in turmoil. At Centurion last month, they had won their first Test in six matches. And yet, the Saffers can unleash the excellent Kagiso Rabada who, at 40 balls per wicket, has the fourth best strike rate in Test history. Rabada is at No. 4 in the ICC rankings. Vernon Philander is at No. 8. After Dale Steyn's departure, South Africa are grooming Anrich Nortje.

New Zealand

Neil Wagner's rise to the second spot threw up a surprise. But the 33-year-old left-arm seamer had an excellent series against Australia – 17 wickets in three Tests. Veteran Tim Southee too was pretty good – 12 scalps from two Tests. It helped him stay at No. 13 in the ICC rankings. New Zealand also have Trent Boult's left-arm swing and the serious pace of Lockie Ferguson and

Matt Henry.

West Indies

Old-timers, who revelled on the fearsome pace quartet, would probably dismiss Jason Holder as a fast bowler. But the West Indies Test captain has been a consistent performer and more importantly, his numbers can't be argued with. Holder is third in the ICC list with 830 rating points. The Caribbeans also have Kemar Roach and Shannon Gabriel at No. 12 and 20 respectively.

Pakistan

Their factory – read, street cricket and natural talent – keeps rolling out exciting fast bowlers. Mohammad Abbas has slid to No. 16. But Shaheen Afridi looks to be a man for the future. And forget the debate over Naseem Shah's age, the youngster is a mighty fine talent.

Unfair comparison

'Pace Age 1' produced all-time greats. The majority of the performers in 'Pace Age 2' still have some way to go before their career assessments are done. In the 1970s, batsmen didn't wear helmets. Bats hardly had a sweet spot, the pitches used to be uncovered and neutral umpires didn't exist. At the same time, batsmen were technically superior.

Now, batsmen are protected from head to toe. Bouncers are restricted to only two per over. Beamers aren't allowed. Pitches are covered and mostly benign. Bats have an extended sweet spot. But the bowlers these days can analyse the rival batsmen inside-out through video technology. They have a battery of support staff to assist them. And the overall quality of batsmanship probably has gone down, as so many head injuries would suggest.

HAT-TRICK FOR RASHID

Afghanistan leg-spinner Rashid Khan on Wednesday claimed a hat-trick during a Big Bash League encounter between Adelaide Strikers and Sydney Sixers. Adelaide Strikers' Rashid dismissed James Vince (27), Jordan Silk (16) and Jack Edwards (0) in the last two balls of the 10th over and first delivery of the 12th over respectively.

New coach
Arthur wants
to build Sri
Lanka around
their culture

Indore: Few cricket coaches are as well-travelled as Mickey Arthur, who has coached South Africa, Australia, Pakistan and now Sri Lanka. He has a glittering CV to match his experience too—he took South Africa to the helm of Test rankings in 2005 and guided Pakistan to Champions Trophy in 2017.

Now, he's tasked to resurrect Sri Lankan cricket from half-a-decade of stasis and chaos. He plans to build the side around team culture and not impose a different culture on the team. "Getting in and building a team that is representative of that culture, and that is the most important thing, that the culture comes first. That is probably something I got wrong with Australia. That is one of the challenges of coaching, that's what makes it so special," he explained.

Despite the indifferent start to his tenure, losing a Test series in Pakistan, he's hopeful of moulding a bunch of youngsters into a winning unit. "The exciting thing for me though is that there is a very young core group of players and they are very skilled. But we need to coach game plans, match awareness. Pakistan was a team that was ranked No.9 in T20 cricket and we got Pakistan to win 11 series in a row—we did not play India—and got ourselves to No 1 in the world. There were good values because we used the sum of our parts. And that is kind of what I see with Sri Lanka."

Arthur has taken over a team that has been struggling ever since the likes of Mahela Jayawardene and Kumar Sangakkara retired. He acknowledged it being a massive challenge. "I told the boys in the dressing room that we have got to go to the 2020 World Cup (T20), qualify. We first have to qualify to get into the main draw and that is the reality of where we are at," he said, referring to Sri Lanka's seventh rank.

The short-term target is to qualify for the T20 World Cup. "The exciting thing for me though is that there is a very young core group of players and they are very skilled. But we need to coach game plans, match awareness. It is going to be a challenge, we've got eight months to that 2020 World Cup. I am thinking even one World Cup further than that -- I am thinking (about) coming back here in 2021 when the guys would be a real finished article, but it is going to take a lot of work."

However, he needs thoroughly overhaul the line-up. The deficiencies in batting stood out in their shuddering defeat to India in Indore. He admitted as much. "We have got some serious work to do in terms of game-plan, match awareness and playing the big moments. I think we had 49 dot balls tonight, which is too many, as the best teams in the world (would) have 25 dot balls," he pointed out.

Impressed with India's bench

He pointed out one of main let-downs of Sri Lanka. "There is too many big shots without the ability to keep rotating the strike. If you cut those 49 (dot balls) by 24 then you have got another 24 to score off, and with strike-rotation you put the bowlers off a little bit. You (may) get a bad ball, an extra boundary, and suddenly we are up to 170. And with that you can challenge the likes of a very good Indian team," he explained.

Meanwhile, he was impressed by India's bench strength. "It has been interesting watching them introduce young players and giving them responsibility at critical times, that has been so good. And seeing those young players respond has been amazing. I think India in cricket is in really, really good shape at the moment," he said. **PTI**

Stokes had more than cricket on his mind



Stokes's all-round performance at Newlands helped England level the series.

Stokes' Herculean performance
comes as his father Ged receives
treatment in a Johannesburg
hospital having suffered a stroke
ahead of the first Test in Pretoria
that started on Boxing Day.

wickets. "I said, 'You're not getting the ball out of my hand until this day is done.' It was one last push," Stokes said. "We have a few days off (after the Test), so I was trying to put everything into every ball. For some reason it just

started reverse-swinging, which helped getting the right-handers nicking the ball."

Stokes will now seek to give England the advantage in the third test that starts in Port Elizabeth on January 16. "The best thing about being an all-rounder is that there are four innings in a Test match so four opportunities to influence a game. I will always try to do that," he said.

Anderson ruled out

England fast bowler James Anderson has been ruled out of the final two tests of the four-match series against South Africa due to a rib injury.

FICA unlikely to back 4-day-Tests proposal

REUTERS
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PLAYERS ARE unlikely to embrace the proposed four-day Tests until administrators clarify how they plan to utilise the calendar space freed up by the move, the Federation of International Cricketers' Associations (FICA) said on Wednesday. The International Cricket Council is set to discuss the idea of trimming the current five-day Tests by a day to ease a crammed international calendar and reduce player workload.

FICA, which counts players from England, Australia and South Africa as members among others, fears the new gaps in the calendar could well be filled with more cricket.

"From our discussions with players around the world, and our global survey data, it is clear that there is currently a lot of negative sentiment, within the global collective of players, towards such a significant change to the game's most traditional format," FICA said in a statement on Wednesday.

Four-day matches were given the green light by the ICC in 2017 when South Africa hosted Zimbabwe, and England have since played one against Ireland. With an increasing number of Test matches ending prematurely, the administrators are keen to free up more space in the schedules for lucrative shorter-form matches. "Given the obvious cricketing implications, if the ICC and/or Boards do want to make a broader case for

four-day test cricket, we would need to clearly understand what both the economic and scheduling benefits would be, so we can discuss that with players and gauge genuine collective feedback," FICA said.

Cricket, at this time, needs clarity and not confusion, it insisted. "It is particularly important for us, and the players, to understand how any additional calendar space in the playing schedule would be used. Making a fundamental change simply in order to provide calendar space to fill with additional or meaningless cricket is clearly not something we can support. Cricket's global structure desperately needs clarity, rather than further confusion."

England have said they will support the idea after 2023, Australia are to give serious consideration to the plan, while South Africa have advocated for four-day games to be played in the future. However, England director of cricket Ashley Giles said five-day tests were "precious" to him and the players after England's 189-run victory over South Africa in Cape Town on Tuesday, a dramatic clash that went into the last hour of the fifth day. "If we played four-day cricket, I fear we would miss out on a lot matches like yesterday," Giles told the BBC. "I know a lot of Tests now don't go to the fifth day -- but you know it is precious to me, and I know it is to the players."

"There's a decision far from made yet, but it's a responsibility as the guardians for the game in this country to look after everything

that would take the game forward, and also look after the workloads of our players."

The powerful Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) has yet to offer an opinion, but India captain Virat Kohli said he was totally against the plan.

Newlands thriller convinces
Root and du Plessis

England captain Joe Root and his South African counterpart Faf du Plessis have both backed five-day Tests, despite their cricket boards advocating for four-day games to be played in the future. "I like five-day test cricket. I'll leave at that, otherwise I'll get in trouble," Root told reporters in the wake of the thrilling Newlands win.

Du Plessis was more forthcoming on a day in which Cricket South Africa sent out a statement in which they officially backed the plan four-day Tests. "I am a fan of Test cricket going five days," he said. "The great draws of the game always go to five days. I'm not speaking about the other stuff that comes to four-day cricket. I understand there is a lot of money being burned on five-day cricket because a lot of games are not going to the fifth day," he said.

"There will always be an opinion on both sides, but I am still a purist of the game and have been part of some great draws that went five days. There would definitely not have been a result in four days on the wicket we have just played on now," he added.