



Kidambi Srikanth has his task cut out to qualify for the Tokyo Games. File

For Srikanth & Co, scramble for Tokyo quotas begins at Asian Team Championship

SHIVANI NAIK
MUMBAI, FEBRUARY 10

THE SCRAMBLE to qualify for the Olympics for India's men's singles shuttlers is also a brain-scrambling number-crunching exercise. It can prove a pretty mirthless exercise with several permutations and combinations for the players who will be advised to stop micro-calculating and get on with the simpler plan of playing well in whatever tournament they set off to.

The furious pursuit takes five of them — B Sai Praneeth, K Srikanth, HS Prannoy, Lakshya Sen and Subhankar Dey — to Manila's historic Rizal Memorial stadium, where the men's team is playing the Badminton Asia Team Championship. Trials were needed when the Indian men landed themselves in this knot — with about seven of them in with a chance (realistic or mathematical) as India aims to qualify two men's singles shuttlers for the first time.

Here's the boring lowdown which fans can keep chewing on, but players would best avoid chewing their own heads over:

What points are on offer?

Simply playing a match gets them 10 per cent of their best 10 results aggregate: Praneeth — 5597 points, Srikanth — 5211, Prannoy — 4114, Sen — 3742, Dey — 3118. Additionally, they can earn top-up bonus points which are one-hundredth of the total ranking points of their highest-ranked opponent snared.

Kento Momota carried a chunky bounty of 1000 points against his name, but he's recuperating from surgery. Indians would love to run into and snare the Indonesians — Anthony Ginting and Jonatan Christie, 760 points-odd apiece or Chou Tien Chen, roughly 800, or either of the Japanese Kanta Tsuneyama (570) or Kenta Nishimoto (520).

The immediate one in their sights will be Malaysian 21-year-old Lee Zii Jia (520) when India play Malaysia on Thursday. The bonus points might matter only if things get close.

What's the equation for Srikanth?

Srikanth starts in the first singles against Kazakh No. 1 Dmitriy Panarin in Group B on Tuesday to lock those 5200 points. The way these calculations go, he'll drop 2750 points as well, which is a gain of 2460 points in balance. As things stand, Srikanth is defending around 20,000 points till the end of April, and will need another 18,000 after this to get into the Top 16. A simpler equation (and infinitely tougher task) is to hoard whatever he gets in Manila, and then target the biggies — quarters at the All England Super 1000 and Malaysia Super 750 plus a final in either India/Singapore Super 500.

A semifinal at the All England takes him



Sai Praneeth is best placed among Indians to seal an Olympic spot.

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closer along with three quarters in India, Singapore and Malaysia. The last-gasp desperate push can come at the Asian Badminton individual Championships, though that's teetering as it's scheduled for China in late April. Srikanth could start by playing steady in Manila.

What about the rest?

Everyone's sniffing points: all five will definitely take to the court. Sen will play Artur Niyazov in the opener against Kazakhstan and Dey lines up for the third singles against Khaitmurat Kulmatov. With Satwiksairaj Rankireddy nursing a bad ankle, HS Prannoy is listed to pair up with Chirag Shetty for the first men's doubles against Panarin-Niyazov while MR Arjun and Dhruv Kapila play the second doubles rubber. Praneeth should fetch up against Malaysia on Thursday, though bonus is not on top of their minds. Lee Zii Jia, by the way, is no mug at all, having beaten Viktor Axelsen in Korea and Chen Long in Indonesia last year.

Where do India stand in the tournament?

India medalled a bronze in 2016, but this edition is strictly Olympics qualification. China and Hong Kong are not travelling owing to Coronavirus fears, neither is India's women's team risking heading out. After Kazakhstan and Malaysia, India can aim to scalp the bonus names, but going deep into the title conquest isn't exactly a priority.

Conquering mind to win the world

Learning from seniors' defeats to India, Bangladesh focused on improving mental strength of the colts

SHAMIK CHAKRABARTY
KOLKATA, FEBRUARY 10

THE BANGLADESH Cricket Board (BCB) probably took a cue from the senior team's home-stretch meltdowns to groom the colts, who would go on to win the U-19 World Cup. At 102/6 in the final against India, a typical Bangladesh side would have cracked under pressure. Akbar Ali and company proved to be a different kettle of fish.

"Yes, we put a lot of emphasis on the psychological aspects of the game. We wanted to make the boys tough nuts to crack. Not that we employed sports psychologists, but I had sessions with the boys on mental toughness. The coaching staff regularly spoke to them on this aspect and it helped. We wanted to make the boys self-confident," BCB's manager (game development and high performance) Abu Emam Kawsar, who was also the Bangladesh team manager at the U-19 World Cup, told *The Indian Express*.

He gave a low-down on the dressing-room atmosphere after the team had suffered a middle-order collapse in the final. "The dressing room was tense when we lost six wickets. But our message to the boys was simple, we needed one decent partnership. We told them that on this pitch, it became easier once a batsman was set. We never thought about losing the match."

Bangladesh usually wilt under pressure; their senior team at least. The 2016 World T20 game against India in Bangalore was a case in point, so was the Nidahas Trophy final in Colombo two years later. On both occasions, the Tigers had snatched defeats from the jaws of victory. The 'cubs' refreshingly scripted a different story. The success didn't come overnight. The seeds had been sown about three seasons ago, when Bangladesh revamped their youth cricket structure. "A structure was in place for the past seven-eight years, but about three seasons ago, we revamped the selection process, training process and also the education process for the coaching staff. We gave greater importance to international exposure and also developing human resource," Kawsar informed.

Organised cricket in Bangladesh starts at school level, where schools from all 64 districts participate. Talented boys then move to the district level in three age-group categories — U-14, U-16 and U-18. "We organise district trials, open trials, and after that we do age verification through dental examinations and if required, bone tests. Selected boys are placed in three different age groups accordingly. The next step is divisional cricket, with 10 divisions playing and the better performers coming into the national team reckoning in age-group cricket. We pick U-14 boys for the U-15 national team, U-16 boys for the U-17 national



Bangladesh defeated India to win the under-19 World Cup in Potchefstroom on Sunday. PTI

Match referee summons team officials

Kolkata: The ICC summoned representatives from both India U-19 and Bangladesh U-19 team management after the Senwes Park, Potchefstroom witnessed ugly scenes at the end of the U-19 World Cup final on Sunday. It is learnt that match referee Graeme Labrooy took the matter seriously and mentioned the whole incident in his report.

The post-match incident was basically a carry-over of the on-field friction between the two sides that saw players from both teams take their sledging and gesturing a little too far at times. After the match, players from the two teams were seen engaging in altercations and even some pushing. "What happened wasn't good for the game. Both teams must share the blame. We warned our players and reminded them about the right behaviour that international cricket demands," Bangladesh U-19 team manager Abu Emam Kawsar told *The Indian Express*.

Yesterday, at the post-match press conference, Bangladesh U-19 captain Akbar Ali regretted the incident. "What happened shouldn't have happened," he said. His Indian counterpart Priyam Garg, however, laid the blame on the Bangladesh players. "We were easy. We think it's part and parcel of the game; you win some and you lose some. But their reaction was dirty. I think it shouldn't have happened."

SHAMIK CHAKRABARTY

team and U-18 boys for the U-19 national team," Kawsar said.

The U-19 squad was assembled about 18 months ago and went through a thorough grooming process for the World Cup. The primary focus was on gelling the boys as a unit and giving them enough international exposure to ensure that they were big tournament-ready. Over the past 18-odd months, the Bangladesh U-19 side played 30 youth

ODIs, winning 18 of them. "We reached the tri-series final in England where we lost to India. We won 4-1 against New Zealand. We beat Sri Lanka home and away. The team carried a winning mentality to the tournament. They were confident about going the distance. The team's performance in the lead-up to the World Cup allowed us to raise the bar. We believed we could do it," the team manager explained.

According to him, the title triumph is going to be significant for the future of Bangladesh cricket across all levels. "Winning a world title is something you take pride in. And that we withstood pressure and did it against India would give us immense belief. When these boys would graduate to the next level, they would carry the winning mentality. The success would bring pride to Bangladesh teams across all levels."

Some players in the Bangladesh U-19 team looked good enough to qualify for the senior national side. The maturity that Ali showed in the final, Mahmudul Hasan Joy's match-winning hundred in the semifinal against New Zealand U-19 and left-arm pacer Shoriful Islam's bowling against a strong Indian batting line-up in the title showdown should augur well for the future of Bangladesh cricket. Kawsar, though, doesn't want to fast-track them to the man's world. In charge of high performance, he is in favour of a step-by-step approach.

"The boys must serve at least one year at the high performance centre. They must have adequate first-class experience before moving to the senior team. The difference between U-19 cricket and the senior level is big and the boys should prepare themselves properly for a bigger challenge. Fast-tracking them to the senior team might not yield the desired result."

'Indian' team in Pakistan in 'individual' capacity: Coach

NITIN SHARMA
CHANDIGARH, FEBRUARY 10

THE COACH of an Indian kabaddi team currently in Pakistan — without approval of the government or IOA — to take part in a World Cup said on Monday that the players had gone across the border in their individual capacity and it was not the first such instance.

The players representing India at the Kabaddi World Cup (Circle Kabaddi) all hail from Punjab and coach Harpreet Singh Baba said they got the invitation for the tournament at an individual level and have been playing in such events earlier also without the approval of the Ministry of External Affairs or the Indian Olympic Association.

The Kabaddi World Cup features teams from 10 countries but the Amateur Kabaddi Federation of India and Punjab Kabaddi Federation (India) denied sending any official team to the event. "We had got the invitation for this event last year and the invitation was sent to individual players as well as clubs and the Punjab Kabaddi Federation. Players have played in such tournaments in-

dividually and on their own and as a promoter, I have always encouraged players to play and help in the growth of the sport," Baba told *The Indian Express* from Lahore. "Each of us had applied for visa individually and the team was named India since the tournament is called the World Cup. If there was any objection from the Ministry of External Affairs, sports ministry, Amateur Kabaddi Federation of India or Punjab Kabaddi Federation, they should have stopped us..."

HARPREET SINGH BABA
COACH

coming here. We have come here on a valid visa. Most of these players have played across the world as individuals in various events."

The Indian Olympic Association too distanced itself from the 'Indian' team in Pakistan as did AKFI. Justice SP Garg (retired), administrator, AKFI denied giving permission to any team to go to Pakistan. The tournament is being played at Lahore, Faisalabad and Gujrat in Pakistan from February 9 to February 16. "No permission was ever granted by AKFI to any team to go to Pakistan and play any kabaddi match there. We came to know about it only after information was sought. AKFI does not support any such activity. Legal action may be taken," Garg said in a statement.

Punjab Kabaddi Federation denied approving the visit across the border. "We did not issue any letter or any official communication to players regarding this tournament. The Pakistan Kabaddi Federation had sent Punjab Kabaddi Federation the invite to this tournament to support this tournament and had mailed the Federation apart from sending invites to players individually. Players from Punjab are competing in this tournament as a

unit and as per my information, the Pakistan Kabaddi Federation, which is recognized by Pakistan Government, is organising the tournament," said Tejinder Singh Middukhera, vice-president of Punjab Kabaddi Federation.

The team, which won its opening match of the tournament against Germany, consists of Amritpal Singh Ninni, Amritpal Singh, Arshdeep Singh, Gurlal Ghanaur, Kuldeep Singh, Malwinder Singh, Navjot Singh, Tarinder Singh, Vinay, Ravi Parkas and Deepak. Chanour, the captain of the team who attended the opening press conference in Lahore on Saturday, had said: "We are here to support the game and thankful to the organisers. There is no fear for us as players here. People here are appreciating us and will come to see us play."

Didn't approve any team: IOA

PTI: The Indian Olympic Association (IOA) said it has not sanctioned any kabaddi team's visit to Pakistan for a world level tournament. "The IOA too has not given any such approval... We don't really know who has travelled to Pakistan. No one can use India's name without the approval of the IOA and the government," IOA chief Narinder Batra said.

[SPORTS BAR]



Pakistan athletes abandon China

Five Pakistani athletes abandoned their training programme in China's top-notch facility and returned home soon after the outbreak of the coronavirus. They were preparing for a few upcoming tournaments, including the Tokyo Olympics. China has been forced to cancel or put off a host of sporting events due to the coronavirus epidemic, from suspending all football matches in the country to postponing the first badminton tournament of the 2020 world tour season. Arshad Nadeem, who has qualified for the Tokyo Olympics, said that they were scheduled to train in China under Chinese coaches till February 28. "After the virus broke out there was so much panic and fear in China that we decided to return home immediately. We contacted the federation and they arranged for us to come back immediately," Nadeem said.

NE, Jamshedpur play out 3-3 draw in ISL

NorthEast United FC and Jamshedpur FC were on Monday involved in a six-goal entertainer that ended 3-3 in a Hero Indian Super League clash at the Indira Gandhi Athletic Stadium in Guwahati. Although both teams are out of the play-off race, there was plenty of goalmouth action on show and in the end it was difficult to separate the sides. Jamshedpur and NorthEast United stand seventh and ninth on the table. Federico Gallego (4th minute), Redeem Tlang (77th) and Jose Leudo (66th) scored for the hosts while Davide Grande (45+1st), Noe Acosta (82nd) and Memo (85th) found the back of the net for the visitors. On Tuesday, in I-League, Aizawl will face newcomers TRAU FC.

'Banerjee alert and responding well'

Legendary Indian footballer PK Banerjee, who was admitted to a city hospital due to a chest infection, is responding well to the treatment, said a statement from the medical facility. The 83-year-old was admitted to the Medica Super Specialty Hospital for a second time on Saturday. "Banerjee is alert and responding well to the ongoing treatment," a statement from the hospital read. The 1962 Asian Games gold-medallist is being treated by a panel of specialists.



Vivek Sagar Prasad is the first Indian to win this award. Hockey India

Vivek, Siami named rising stars of int'l hockey

The Indian men's team mid-fielder Vivek Sagar Prasad was on Monday named as 2019's rising star of the year by the International Hockey Federation (FIH). Women's team forward Lalremsiami, too, was named the best young player after an incredible year where she played a crucial role in India qualifying for the Tokyo Olympics. Vivek, 19, won the accolade ahead of Argentina's Maico Casella and Blake Govers of Australia, who finished second and third respectively. Vivek polled 50 per cent of all National Association votes, 23 per cent media votes, 15.1 per cent fans/players votes for a combination of 34.5 per cent votes. Casella polled a combined 22 per cent votes, while third placed Govers got 20.9 per cent combined votes. When he was just 17, Vivek became the second youngest player ever to represent the India national team, in a Four-Nation Invitational tournament in January, 2018. Since then he has appeared for the senior side on more than 50 occasions.

ITF to monitor WTA's on-court coaching trial

The International Tennis Federation is still opposed to on-court coaching outside of team competitions but the world governing body will use data from a WTA Tour trial this year to revisit the issue, ITF President David Haggerty has said. The top women's tour said last month that it would trial a new system at all Premier and International tournaments this year allowing coaches to help their players from the stands. There are no plans to extend the trial to the Grand Slams or the men's tour ATP.



Harika beats former world champ Kosteniuk

India's Dronavalli Harika got the better of former world champion Alexandra Kosteniuk in the third round of the Cairns Cup in St Louis, America. Meanwhile, Koneru Humpy, the other Indian in the fray in the 10-player tournament, drew with reigning world champion Ju Wenjun of China in 22 moves late on Sunday, to take her tally to 1.5 points. Harika who is unbeaten after three rounds, is joint second with two points along with former world champ Mariya Muzychuk (Ukraine) and Kateryna Lagno (Russia). Georgia's Nana Dzagnidze beat American player Carissa Yip in 55 moves with white pieces, overcoming a stubborn challenge from the youngster. She leads the field with 2.5 points after three rounds. Defending champion Valentina Gunina defeated Irina Krush to earn her first win of the tournament.