

How Azharuddin opened up a new chapter for Tendulkar

Former India skipper recalls the tour which saw the 'Little Master' don a new role

CRICKET

V.V. SUBRAHMANYAM
HYDERABAD

Mohammad Azharuddin and Sachin Tendulkar shared a special bond when it came to scripting some of the most memorable moments in Indian cricket history.

On March 27, 1994, at Auckland in New Zealand, skipper Azhar, in consultation with the manager Ajit Wadekar, promoted Tendulkar to open the innings for the first time, and the rest is history. The gifted cricketer responded with a stunning onslaught on the Kiwi bowling, scoring a 49-ball 82 (15x4, 2x6).

How exactly did that materialise? "I had been noticing that nothing big was happening with Sachin even though he was batting well at No. 5 and 6. We (Wadekar sir and I) talked on this issue and decided to let Sachin open after regular opener Sidhu (Navjot Singh) was unwell," recalled Azhar, in an exclusive chat with *The Hindu* on Friday.

Sachin's desire

"And, importantly, Sachin also wanted to open and we are glad that he went on to become one of the greatest batsmen of all-time," he added.

"I won't say I was surprised by his response, I



Mohammad Azharuddin.
FILE PHOTO: K.V.S. GIRI

knew Sachin had the talent. He just needed that opportunity to showcase his abundance of talent," Azhar said.

But, what was it about Sachin's batting that made you take the call? "He is an attacking batsman and with the field restrictions on, we thought once he gets going half the job is done for the team," the 57-year-old, former India captain said.

Even Sachin acknowledged it in his autobiography *Playing It My Way*. "I went up to Azhar and our manager Ajit Wadekar, a former India captain and a leading batsman of his time, and pleaded with them to give me an opportunity at the top of the order," he wrote.

"I can't take credit for his achievements. In fact, nobody can. He had the talent to go places," Azhar felt.



Smashing start: Sachin Tendulkar's 82 off 49 balls — after he volunteered to open — made a mockery of New Zealand's total of 142 at Eden Park, Auckland, on March 27, 1994.

FILE PHOTO: V.V. KRISHNAN

Dhoni will get one last chance: Banerjee

Childhood coach says the icon is using the facilities at home to stay fit

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
KOLKATA

M.S. Dhoni's much-anticipated comeback with the IPL may not happen any time soon, but his childhood coach Keshav Ranjan Banerjee remains hopeful that the wicketkeeper-batsman will find a place in India's T20 World Cup squad.

"In the current scenario, the IPL looks unlikely and we will have to wait for BCCI's call. His (Dhoni's) position will become tough obviously. But my sixth sense says he will get a chance in the T20 World Cup, which will be his last," Banerjee told PTI from Ranchi.

The Chennai Super Kings captain trained in Ranchi in the lead up to IPL 2020 and also led the camp in Chennai.

"I spoke to him last after he returned from Chennai and I'm in constant touch with his parents. He's doing his fitness training and is fully fit.

Experience counts

"True that he has not played a tournament (since July 2019) but for someone with 538 International matches, I don't think it would take much time to adjust."

"He trained in Chennai for a week or so. Now he's making use of the facilities at home. He has a gym, a



M.S. Dhoni.
FILE PHOTO: K. PICHUMANI

badminton court, and a running corridor."

"Let's wait for the BCCI's decision. There are no tournament. ICC tournaments are off till June. So we will have to wait and see."

Head coach Ravi Shastri had earlier said the IPL would decide the fate of Dhoni, who turns 39 in July.

India greats including Sunil Gavaskar and Virender Sehwag had raised a question mark on the return of the 2011 World Cup-winning skipper.

"I'm sure BCCI (president, selectors, captain) are aware of the scenario. They will make the announcement when it's the right time," Banerjee added.

We will talk about IPL later: Rohit

Let life get back to normal first, says the opening batsman

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
MUMBAI

Sport is of least priority in these troubled times, feels India batsman Rohit Sharma, who wants to talk about IPL only after normalcy returns.

Rohit, who has been out of action for last two months due to calf muscle injury was due for a comeback in the Indian Premier League, which has been postponed till April 15 but stands a good chance of getting cancelled if the prevailing situation continues.

"We should first think about the country. The situation needs to get better first then we can talk about the IPL. Let life get back to normal first," Rohit said.

The opener was responding to questions during an Instagram chat with team-



Rohit. FILE PHOTO: VIJAY SONEJI

mate Yuzvendra Chahal.

Thanks to the lockdown, all the Indian metropolises are wearing a deserted look.

"I haven't seen Bombay like this before. As cricketers, we don't get time with family. So much of tours and cricket is there.

"This is a time to spend with them and loads of it," said Rohit.

Adhere to lockdown rules, pleads Kartik

The experience of isolation when injured has helped the former India cricketer

VIJAY LOKAPALLY
NEW DELHI

For a man used to "living out of a suitcase", former India spinner Kartik Murali has "adapted" to a life indoors. The cricketer has lost little time in accepting the situation and also strictly adhering to lockdown rules.

"This is something that has never happened in our life. Can we fret or fume about it? Do we have control over it? From day one I never panicked. It was acceptance of the extraordinary circumstances.

"Focus was on ways to curb it now that the outbreak has happened. I have always been an outdoors person — golf, cricket, travelling — but not anymore.

"For the sake of the world, I have to stay indoors. I may miss my golf, but that is the smallest thing in the larger scheme of my responsibilities to the planet," he says.

"It is a luxury to be at home, remember the homeless



Forced break: Kartik Murali had a back injury during the 2001 series against Australia in which V.V.S. Laxman and Harbhajan Singh were India's stars. FILE PHOTO: SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

stranded all over the country. There will be issues to sort out in future, but now the challenge is to protect yourself and others. It pains all of us to see so many people struggling.

"I am shocked to see people venturing out for walks as if these are normal times. If you want to walk, walk inside your house. There is a compelling reason why the authorities want us to stay at home. You can read, connect with friends, family and yourself. You can do what you could not for so many years," Kartik said

in a chat with *The Hindu*.

He spoke of his "respect" for people working to keep others safe. "My heart goes out to the health workers. To the doctors. To all the people providing essential things risking their own safety. I pray for their daily.

"I firmly believe that prayers and faith can move mountains," said Kartik, who has made arrangements for the families of the domestic helps employed by him.

Time spent in isolation while attending to injuries in

the past now helps him cope with the lockdown.

"I have had several injuries that kept me in isolation. When I had my knee and shoulder operated on I could not move out. I once got hit in Pakistan and I have had jawbone surgery.

"Once I was in bed for two months. The back injury kept me out of the 2001 'V.V.S. Laxman-Harbhajan Singh' series (against Australia). All those occasions were spent at home," he said.

Things to do

A voracious reader — like Sunil Gavaskar, W.V. Raman and Deep Dasgupta — Kartik has a few books to finish.

"I am currently reading *The Lone Empress* on the life of Jayalalithaa [former Tamil Nadu Chief Minister]. Next will be *Half-Lion* on P.V. Narasimha Rao [former Prime Minister]. I also have a list of movies to watch. We can all find ways to be busy. Stay at home, please."

Key questions that Wimbledon faces

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
LONDON

The All England Club will hold an emergency meeting next week to discuss the possible postponement or even cancellation of Wimbledon in the light of the coronavirus pandemic.

AFP Sport looks at the key questions facing the organisers of the world's most prestigious tennis tournament.

What are the options for Wimbledon this year?

Wimbledon, scheduled to take place from June 29 until July 12, has been staged every year in peace time since 1877, shelved only during the two world wars.

The grass court season is relatively short, five weeks for the leading events, so Wimbledon would appear to have time on its side.

However, building and preparation work at the All England Club site in leafy south-west London takes two months to complete and is set to start at the end of April.

There is also the issue of when the coronavirus will



Much to mull over: The organisers of The Championships will have lots to ponder about before deciding the fate of this year's event. GETTY IMAGES

peak and the United Kingdom has been badly hit.

Health is the top issue for an event which attracts not only the superstars of the sport, but also close to 500,000 spectators each year as well as 6,000 staff and around 3,200 accredited media.

Why can't the tournament be played later in the year?

A slot has opened up in the calendar after the postponement of the Tokyo Olympics until next year.

However, Wimbledon organisers know that a postponement by a just fortnight to take advantage

of that opening would solve little.

"At this time, based on the advice we have received from the public health authorities, the very short window available to us to stage The Championships due to the nature of our surface suggests that postponement is not without significant risk and difficulty. Playing behind closed doors has been formally ruled out," said a spokesman.

What would be the financial implications of a cancelled Wimbledon?

The tournament is an annual money-spinner.

For example, in the 2017-2018 fiscal year, it was reported that Wimbledon generated \$336 million with a pre-tax profit of \$52 million. Over 90% of that was ploughed into British tennis.

The BBC, which broadcasts Wimbledon, will have a two-week black hole if the event is called off. It reportedly shells out around \$72 million a year for the rights.

Who would be the losers of a cancelled Wimbledon?

As well as the purely sporting implications of a binned Wimbledon, Britain's well-heeled would suffer a jolt to their busy summer social season.

The Henley Royal Regatta on the River Thames, a feature since 1839, has already been cancelled. Wary eyes will now be cast towards June's Royal Ascot, which has drawn British royalty and the cream of society since 1911.

The British tabloids would also be stripped of their two-week Wimbledon headline bonanza and celebrity fix.

Age factor worries Tarundeep Rai

But says, 'the good thing is that we have already qualified'

ARCHERY

Y.B. SARANGI
KOLKATA

Following the postponement of the Tokyo Games, 36-year-old archer Tarundeep Rai has only one concern - he is getting older.

Waiting to compete in his third Olympics in his 17-year international career, two-time World championships team silver medalist Tarundeep is assessing the challenges the new scenario may pose for him.

Loss for athletes

"The postponement is a loss for every athlete. In my case, I am 36 years old. Next year, I will be 37. I am not getting younger, but if I train harder, then I will not lag behind. But, I have to start afresh," Tarundeep told *The Hindu*.

Tarundeep, who competed in 2004 Athens and 2012 London Olympics, bagged recurve men's team silver medals in 2005 Madrid and 2019 Den Bosch World championships.

The Armyman looked at the brighter side. "We have to take it positively. The archery community may suffer, if we look at the negatives. The good thing is that

we have already qualified. The younger generation of the country can also get a chance (as the quota place belongs to the country), and should grab it as they will not get another such opportunity."

Sharing his ideas about training during the lockdown, Tarundeep said, "Whatever archery-specific exercises are there, one should do that. In this age of internet, everything is available on the phone. One should take advantage of that. When the lockdown ends, then one should be ready to resume shooting."

Stuck away from home

Tarundeep, who has not been to his home in Sikkim for about a year now, was part of the national camp at the Army Sports Institute, Pune. Even after the camp was shut down on March 22, he could not go home owing to the lockdown.

In the time of social distancing, Tarundeep, nevertheless, is happy to have stayed connected with his family from a distance. "At least, I am safe here and my family is safe in Sikkim. I am getting a lot of time to speak to my family," he said.

ICC Board discusses contingency plan

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
NEW DELHI

The International Cricket Council (ICC) Board discussed, via teleconference, on Friday various contingency plans for its flagship tournaments, including the World T20 and World Test Championship, in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic.

Sourav Ganguly was welcomed as the BCCI representative on the Board.

ICC Chief Executive Manu Sawhney said, "We continue to undertake a comprehensive business continuity and contingency planning exercise which will allow us to adapt to the rapidly evolving world in which we find our-

selves. The ICC management will continue our contingency planning around ICC events and will also work with Members to explore all options available to us based on a range of scenarios connected to the pandemic."

When a Board member was asked what happens if England, which is due to host Pakistan and West Indies at home is unable to do so, he said the matter of points allocation will be referred to the technical committee.

A couple of Board members felt that World T20 in Australia is not under threat as it is still some time away.

Disappointing to see our sincerity questioned: BWF secretary-general

BADMINTON

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
NEW DELHI

The Badminton World Federation said it is "disappointing" that some top players questioned its "sincerity and motives" when it continued with the All England Championships despite the rapidly-growing threat of COVID-19 pandemic.

The decision to conduct the event came for sharp criticism from the top shuttlers of the world, including Saina Nehwal, who had accused the administrators of

placing money above players' safety.

In an open letter, BWF secretary general Thomas Lund said the decision to go ahead with the All England Championships was made based on the best advice at that time.

"It has been very disappointing to see some members of the badminton community speculate on the sincerity and motives of the BWF in this time of crisis," Lund wrote. "Our number one concern has always been the health and safety of all of our participants."

Shukla contributes MLA salary, BCCI pension

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
NEW DELHI

Former India cricketer Laxmi Ratan Shukla, currently the sports minister of West Bengal, has donated his three months' MLA salary, along with his BCCI pension for the same period, to fight COVID-19.

"It is the need of the hour that we all contribute to the best of our abilities. I have already donated three months of my MLA salary to the Chief Minister's Relief Fund.

"I also get pension from the BCCI and I have donated three months of that too," said Shukla, who played three ODIs for India in 1999 and was part of IPL-winning KKR team.

Hima's gesture

Meanwhile, India sprinter Hima Das has donated a



Laxmi Ratan Shukla
FILE PHOTO: P.K. AJITH KUMAR

month's salary to the Assam government to help it combat COVID-19. Hima is employed with Indian Oil as an HR officer in Guwahati.

She joins a growing list of sports personalities who have come forward to provide financial aid to fight the pandemic.

The Assam Cricket Association offered to convert the Barsapara Stadium into a quarantine centre as the state government braced up for the COVID-19 pandemic.



Starting afresh: While he is not getting younger, Tarundeep Rai feels that if he trains harder, he will not lag behind.
FILE PHOTO: M. MOORTHY