

WOMEN'S WORLD T20 SEMIFINAL

England's worries: Verma's aggression, India's spinners and rain

VISHAL MENON
NEW DELHI, MARCH 4

ENGLAND WOMEN'S team have a distinct edge over India at ICC events. They last met in the 2018 World T20 semifinal in Antigua, where England won by eight wickets. Before that, they faced off at Lord's in the final of the 2017 50-over World Cup. The summit clash ebbed and flowed before swinging in England's favour under thrilling circumstances. These two teams are now pitted against each other in the World T20 semifinal at the Sydney Cricket Ground.

England will know that past record means nothing because this is a different Indian team from the one they played at Lord's and in the Caribbean. Blessed with match-winners such as Shafali Verma and Poonam Yadav, Harmanpreet Kaur's side has been on a rampage in this World Cup, quelling hosts Australia and registering wins over Bangladesh, New Zealand and Sri Lanka to top the group stage.

Ahead of this epic duel, here are some of the talking points.



India is the only team with a 100 per cent win record in this tournament. ICC

India bank on young stars

India have progressed seamlessly from the group stage to the knockouts on the back of the individual brilliance of dashing 16-year-old opener Shafali Verma and leg-spinner Poonam Yadav. Verma has smashed 161 runs from four matches with her blazing starts upfront winning fans. She has bagged a couple of Player-of-the-Match awards and also possesses the best strike rate in this tournament.

On the other hand, Yadav has cast a spell of opposition batters, bamboozling them with a mixture of slow, loopy leg-spinners and googlies. With nine scalps, she is currently the highest wicket-taker and much of India's success against England will depend on how these two youngsters perform. Not surprisingly, England captain Heather Knight has singled out Yadav as a big threat. "She is a massive threat for us, and is an improved bowler since the last World Cup. So, for us to be successful, we're going to have to play her well. That's going to be the key in the game," she said.

India's misfiring middle order

India was the first team to qualify for the semifinals. However, beneath the glossy veneer is their misfiring middle order. Barring Shafali,

no one else have managed to make an impact. Smriti Mandhana, Verma's opening partner, has managed just 38 runs in three games, while Harmanpreet has tallied a dismal 26 runs from four games. Consequently, the belligerent starts given by Shafali have not been capitalised as wickets have often fallen in a heap, which meant that there has hardly been any momentum in the middle overs. This is an area that England bowlers will look to exploit in Sydney.

England's all-round might

England have made it to the last four on the back of superlative batting performances from Natalie Sciver and captain Knight. With 202 runs, Sciver is the top run-scorer in this tournament, followed by her skipper, who comes has 193. If the pair can continue its good form, England will have a great chance of making it to their second successive final.

They also have a very reliable left-arm spinner in Sophie Ecclestone, the second-highest wicket-taker with eight scalps. With 21 wickets, India's spinners have been the most prolific in this tournament, but their England counterparts have been the most economical, conceding just 4.3 runs per over.

WEATHER COULD PLAY SPOILSPORT

With heavy rain forecast in Sydney on Thursday, there's a high probability of both the semifinals being truncated affairs. Teams need to play 10 overs each to constitute a T20 match in ICC tournaments. Since both semifinals (India vs England and South Africa vs Australia) are scheduled at the SCG, there will only be a 30-minute window between both games in case overs are lost because of rain interruptions. The India-England match is scheduled to finish at 6 pm local time, while the South Africa-Australia game is scheduled for a 10 pm finish. There is no reserve day for the semifinals, and if there's a washout, India and South Africa will advance to the final in Melbourne on Sunday since they topped their respective groups.

Real Kashmir climb to 3rd spot in I-League

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
SRINAGAR, MARCH 4

REAL KASHMIR FC continued to make the most of their seven-game run at home, registering a 1-0 victory over NEROCA FC at the TRC Turf Ground here on Wednesday. One of Kashmir's own, Danish Farooq scored what turned out to be the match-winner in the 42nd minute. The result takes Real Kashmir to the third place on the Hero I-League standings with 22 points, while Neroca remain in the relegation spot with 15. Sandeep Chattoo, co-owner of Real Kashmir FC, said, "It was an emphatic win after a surprise draw on last Saturday. The win was important for lifting the morale of the team."

Tributes poured in from the stands and the Kashmir squad for their young midfielder Ritvik Kumar Das, who couldn't be part of the action following the untimely death of his father. Chesterpoul Lyngdoh took his place in the XI, accounting for the only alteration David Robertson made to his line-up.

Gift Raikhan, on the other hand, made three changes. Chanso Horam and Zodingliana Ralte were reinstated in midfield, while Ronald Singh started ahead of Boubacar Diarra up front. The hosts threatened early and had the better exchanges. The first knock arrived in the 7th minute, when Bazie Arman's wayward clearance turned out to be a good cross-field delivery for Mason Robertson instead. The Scot latched onto it and went for the spectacular on the volley from the edge of the box, finding the side-netting. A bizarre turn of events ensued four minutes later. Neroca's Ousmane Diawara was shown a straight red. The Neroca players pleaded his cause and after a brief consultation with the assistant referee, the red card was overturned, much to Raikhan's relief.

Bagan inch closer to title

Kalyani: Runaway I-League leaders Mohun Bagan will aim for their eighth win on the trot when they face defending champions Chennai City here on Thursday. With six games to play and a 12-point lead at the summit of the I-League table, Mohun Bagan need six more points (two wins) to clinch their second title. The reverse fixture between the two sides in Coimbatore showcased a grandstand finish with Chennai roaring back from three goals down for a 2-3 finish. Despite being in pole position, Mohun Bagan head coach Kibu Vicuna understandably asserted that the job isn't done yet for his side.

Jaydev's dream season continues

Seven-wicket haul takes his tally to 65 wickets from 9 games as Saurashtra reach fourth Ranji final in eight years

DEVENDRA PANDEY
MARCH 4

LEFT-ARM PACER Jaydev Unadkat's seven wicket haul enabled Saurashtra to reach the finals of Ranji Trophy for the second successive year as they beat Gujarat by 92 runs on the final day at Rajkot's Saurashtra Cricket Association stadium. Unadkat not only shattened the timber first and then dreams of Gujarat but he gave Saurashtra another chance to clinch the title which they have never won.

With this win, Saurashtra entered the finals of Ranji Trophy for the fourth time in last eight years proving their consistency in domestic cricket. The final day had some notable twists and turns. In the afternoon, things had looked vastly different as Gujarat's most experienced pair of Parthiv Patel and Chirag Gandhi were leading a great fightback while chasing a score of 327 runs. Gujarat were 63 for 5 at one stage and it looked Saurashtra would have an easy ride ahead before the two seasoned campaigners of Gujarat—Gandhi and Patel put up a courageous roadblock.

Unadkat too sensed the game slipping away from his hands, and realised something needed to be done to break the partnership. He knew one good ball could do the trick. But this Rajkot track was notorious for being friendly to batsmen.

Parthiv and Gandhi had added 158 runs for the sixth wicket and Gujarat needed 106 more to register an emphatic win in the semis. They were cruising slowly.

"Someone said we will get wickets with the new ball. The new ball was due only after 16 overs and by then the game would have been over. So I just waited for tea because they were playing really well and I wanted that break desperately. I knew if I had to do it for the team, it would have to be after tea when they are not sure how to go about the last session," Unadkat recalled those moments.

For a pacer, who was in supreme form throughout the season, it was a now-or-never moment. Unadkat knew that only he could break the partnership. He boasted how nobody knew better than him how to bowl on this black soil. "On a good pitch one bowls five good balls and chances are out of five, two will give you a wicket. Here (Rajkot), out of ten balls one ball might give you a chance of a wicket. I was waiting for that one ball which does something after



This season, Jaydev Unadkat has picked up a five-wicket haul on seven occasions, of which three have come on the unresponsive tracks in Rajkot. Twitter

landing," he recalls.

When it happened, Parthiv had moved tentatively forward, and tried to defend. But by the time he could get his full bat in the way the ball had kissed his bat and sailed towards first slip to see a simple catch by Harvik Desai. The wicket changed the course of the game and to Saurashtra's delight, Unadkat got another wicket next ball.

Double strike

He took a low catch off his own bowl-

ing to see all-rounder Axar Patel depart first ball. With two wickets in two balls, Saurashtra knew the game was in their hands and it was a matter of time, pressure would play its own tricks on the Gujarat lower order. Gandhi tried to cut Unadkat but played on for a gritty 96. The Saurashtra captain got the last man Arzan Nagwaswalla to finish the game with a ten-wicket match-haul.

It has been a dream season for Unadkat, he has taken 65 wickets in nine matches.

On a good pitch one bowls five good balls and chances are out of five, two will give you a wicket. Here (Rajkot), out of ten balls one ball might give you a chance of a wicket. I was waiting for that one ball which does something after landing."

JAYDEV UNADKAT,
SAURASHTRA PACER

RICH HAUL

65 Jaydev Unadkat's tally of 65 wickets this season is the most by a pacer in Ranji Trophy history. He bettered the long-standing record held by Karnataka's Dooda Ganesh's 62 wickets in the 1998-99 season.

30 The last time Bengal won the Ranji Trophy title was 30 years ago in the 1989/90 season.

Seven times he took a five wicket-haul, of which three came on that so-called Rajkot track, which has always been termed as patta.

"They have a long batting line-up and we discussed in the morning as well that we won't be bogged down due to a partnership or two. But when you are on the field and such a partnership takes place, there are some nerves. But I felt the spell after tea was going to be the game-changing spell, and if someone could do it, it had to be me. And I am just happy that when we needed a wicket, I was able to provide it," he later said.

Saurashtra will take on Bengal in the final at Rajkot's Khanderi Stadium next from March 9. The home team will be boosted by the presence of Cheteshwar Pujara while Bengal will see Wriddhiman Saha back in the squad. Bengal has reached the final after 13 years in which time Saurashtra has been runner-up thrice. Unadkat reckons this could be their chance. **BRIEF SCORES: Saurashtra:** 304 and 274 beat **Gujarat:** 252 and 234 overs (Chirag Gandhi 96, Parthiv Patel 93; Jaydev Unadkat 7/56) by 92 runs.

ASIAN OLYMPICS QUALIFIERS

Sakshi beats fourth seed Techasuep

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
AMMAN, MARCH 4

FORMER JUNIOR world champion Sakshi Chaudhary (57kg) stunned Asian silver-medallist and fourth seed Nilawan Techasuep of Thailand to enter the quarterfinals of the Asian Olympic Qualifiers for boxing here on Wednesday.

The two-time youth world champion Indian, who is only 19, prevailed in a split verdict against the Asian Games bronze-medallist in an engrossing bout. She will next be up against Korea's Im Aeji on March 9. Making the semifinals would assure her of a spot in the Tokyo Olympics scheduled in July-August this year.

Even keel

The opening round was fought on even keel for most part but Sakshi managed to be ahead of her fancied rival in a split verdict. Techasuep came out all guns blazing in the second round and caught Sakshi off-guard with a barrage of combination straight punches.

The Indian was pushed to the backfoot by the aggressive Thai, whose left jab was particularly eye-catching. But the judges ruled in Sakshi's favour in a 3-2 second round verdict.

In the final three minutes, Sakshi's counter-attacks proved enough to trump Techasuep's consistent aggression.

On Tuesday, the seasoned duo of Gaurav Solanki (57kg) and Ashish Kumar (75kg) advanced to the pre-quarterfinals in the men's draw. Commonwealth Games gold-medallist Solanki defeated two-time Kyrgyz national champion Aylbek Esenbek Uulu, while Asian Championship silver-medallist Ashish got the better of Taiwan's Kan Chia-Wei.

Ashish will square off against Kyrgyzstan's Omurbek Bekzhigit Uulu, who has been seeded fourth.

Solanki, whose CWG gold was in the 52kg division, will be up against top-seeded Uzbek Mirazizbek Mirzakhalilov who got a bye into the second round. Mirzakhalilov is the reigning world champion in this weight category besides being a gold-medallist at the 2018 Asian Games as well as the Asian Championships.

[SPORTS BAR]



Rutuja, Ankita win as India beat Uzbekistan

Rutuja Bhosale recorded a come-from-behind win before country's number one player Ankita Raina won the second singles as India secured the Fed Cup tie against Uzbekistan by taking an unassailable 2-0 lead here on Wednesday. Rutuja erased a one-set deficit to defeat Akgul Amanmuradova 2-6, 6-2, 7-5 in the opening singles to put India ahead. Bouncing back from the narrow defeat against China's Qiang Wang, Ankita regrouped to humble Sabina Sharipova 7-5, 6-1 to seal the tie in India's favour in one hour and 34 minutes. It was the sixth meeting between the two players with Ankita winning only the second time. After trading breaks twice, the first set was on serve and Sharipova was serving to stay in the set in the 12th game. She began by a double fault and Ankita pounced on the opportunity to put pressure on her rival.

Chawrasia, Shubhankar ready for Qatar Masters

SSP Chawrasia, who closed last week's Oman Open with a sterling five-under 67 despite two late bogeys, is confident of another good show at the 2020 Commercial Bank Qatar Masters. Chawrasia, a four-time winner on the European Tour, is one of the two Indians in the field, with two-time winner, Shubhankar Sharma being the other one. Chawrasia finished T-25 but Sharma missed the cut last week. Sharma has now missed four cuts in last six starts since his T-7 finish in Turkish Airlines Open in November. Sharma plays his first two rounds with young Nicolai Hojgaard and Kalle Samooja, while Chawrasia goes out with Qatar's Saleh Al Kaabi and Australian Maverick Antcliff.

Long-distance runner Kaur fails dope test

Long-distance runner Kiranjeet Kaur, who won the Tata Steel Kolkata 25K, has tested positive for a banned substance and has been provisionally suspended by World Athletics. The 31-year-old Kaur had clocked 1:38:56 to finish 11th overall and first among Indians in the Kolkata 25K in December last year. "Presence of Prohibited Substances (SARMS22) (Article 2.1) - Notice of Allegation Issued," the Athletics Integrity Unit said. She won bronze in 10,000m at the Federation Cup National Championships in March last year in Patiala.



Chad le Clos wants his silver to be upgraded, which would secure a second Olympics gold after he collected a win in the 200-m butterfly in London in 2012.

Le Clos had no doubt Sun Yang was a 'dirty swimmer'

South African Olympic champion Chad le Clos says he had no doubt that Chinese swimmer Sun Yang was cheating and believes he was robbed of his special gold medal moment at the 2016 Games in Rio de Janeiro. Sun, a multiple world and Olympic champion, was banned for eight years last Friday for missing an out-of-competition test in 2018, and Le Clos, who lost to his rival in the 200-metres freestyle final in Rio de Janeiro four years ago, believes justice has been done. "It's absolutely no surprise to me. He failed two drug tests in 2014. We've all known that he's a dirty swimmer," Le Clos told South Africa's Eye Witness News on Wednesday. "It's not just me who knows this, it's the whole swimming community. Finally, he's being punished. I was ahead by a long way with 50 metres to go in that race, but Sun Yang came past me. He was the only man who did that, and that says it all really. Le Clos wants his silver medal to be upgraded, which would secure a second Olympic gold after he also collected a win in the 200-metres butterfly in London in 2012.

'Rooney will have point to prove against United'

Ole Gunnar Solskjaer believes Manchester United great Wayne Rooney will be a threat in Thursday's FA Cup clash against Championship side Derby. Rooney, United and England's all-time top scorer, will line up against the club where he enjoyed so much success when lining up for the Rams at Pride Park. He joined the second-tier side as player-coach after a stint in the United States with DC United and former team-mate Solskjaer is wary of the 34-year-old's threat in the fifth-round clash. "He gave absolutely everything for this club and we all appreciate that," the Norwegian manager said. "But any goal he scores against us will be chalked off his goal tally."

2023 IOC session to be held in Mumbai

The International Olympic Committee's annual meeting of members, known as the Session, will be held in Mumbai, India, in 2023. The decision was announced after the IOC's executive board meeting in Lausanne, Switzerland, on Wednesday. President Thomas Bach said the decision will be rubber-stamped at a meeting in Tokyo before the Olympics in July. India had bid for the session, where the hosts of 2030 Olympics are likely to be announced, last year. Bach said Olympic sports wanted to tap into the potential of youth in the world's second-most populated nation.



Sharmila lying seventh in Jabra Ladies

Three-over after eight holes, Sharmila Nicolle made a superb recovery on the back nine and was lying tied seventh at the end of the first round of the Jabra Ladies Classic on the Sunshine Ladies Tour. Sharmila, who had a Top-10 finish last week fought back from a disappointing front nine to strike a purple patch at the start of the back nine. She bogeyed the third, fourth and eighth and turned in three-over. She found her rhythm on the back nine with four birdies and one bogey between 10th and 14th and another birdie on 18th as she compiled one-under 71 in the first round. South African golfers occupied the top three spots as Ashleigh Buhai, a three-time winner on Ladies European Tour had eight birdies and an eagle against one bogey in a sizzling nine-under 63. She had five birdies in a row on the back nine of the Glendower Golf Club.