

JACQUES KALLIS

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Mixed start for us, but fantastic to be back

I can't believe it's been almost a year since our last campaign. It feels more like a couple of weeks ago that I walked out of my room at the end of the IPL 2017 – but it's fantastic to be back.

The Knight Riders franchise is known for its stability and its success has been underpinned by a core group of senior and familiar faces but, like all successful teams, KKR has been able to change and grow into the future.

Lots of time was spent in the week or ten days before the first game helping the new players to settle in and find their feet within the KKR family. Dinesh Karthik has played a double role – both as captain and a new player himself – and, as expected, has been excellent.

It was a blow to lose Mitchell Starc at short notice but we are not alone – Pat Cummins and Kagiso Rabada were also 'casualties' of a hard-fought Test series between South Africa and Australia.

But Tom Curran is an excellent replacement and I'm excited to have him on board. Obviously he has particular skills for bowling at the end of the innings but he can bowl anywhere and I wouldn't be surprised if his batting doesn't make a few important contributions along the way.

We had the pleasure of Mike Horn's company for a week during which he entertained and inspired everyone with the stories and harsh realities of the journeys and explorations he has carried out – from both poles to the Amazon jungle and most mountains between.

I sensed that a lot of energy he infused into the players was still present when we won the opening match at a packed Eden Gardens – what a start, what an atmosphere!

The second match also looked to be going well after a sensational burst of boundaries from Andre Russell in Chennai but, as I've said on at least 100 occasions before, you never can take anything for granted in cricket – especially T20 cricket. Those high scoring games can often be harder to control than the tight, low-scoring ones, but congratulations to the Super Kings.

It's great to have Sunny Narine and Andre back in the mix along with all the other senior players but it's equally exciting to have some of the best young guys around. We have a trio of recent World Cup winners in Gill, Mavi and Nagarkoti who are straining at the leash. They will get their chance!

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Winning needs to start again soon

On one hand, it seems amazing how many games have gone down to the last over, even the last ball, but on another hand it makes sense. All eight teams are striving for the extra 'one-percenters' that can make the difference between winning and losing.

On many occasions in the past ten years, I have made the point that the difference between the top team and the bottom team in the IPL is smaller than in any other cricket league in the world – smaller than in most sports, I would guess. And that gap is now smaller than ever.

There are very few surprises these days in the IPL. Even the brand new players who are making their debuts have some sort of history which can be downloaded and analysed. One sentence you won't hear in a franchise changing room is: "We don't know much about him..."

It can be tricky for the senior players in a crunch situation because the opposition know exactly what his 'favourite' shot or delivery is when the heat is on. Your instinct is to reach for your 'go to' option but that can make you predictable.

Shubman Gill and Shivam Mavi have bags of talent and I would be very surprised if they don't both have lengthy and illustrious professional careers. Obviously Gill has been a top order batsman in every team he has played in but if his opportunity, for the moment, lies at six or seven then I'm sure he has the talent and temperament to be successful there.

Mavi has plenty of pace which is very exciting and, although his opportunity was limited against the Sunrisers, I see plenty more overs from him in the future.

We have fallen off the early pace with the defeat to Hyderabad and need to get back to winning ways soon. There is rarely much to be pleased with after a disappointing performance like that one but I was really impressed with the effort and determination to defend a sub-par total.

We have put ourselves under pressure at the back end of the tournament before and I'd rather not be in that situation again – so winning needs to start again soon, beginning against Delhi on Monday.

Coaching is not rocket science – we just need to make sure our basics are done a little better. We have some tough travel days and a demanding schedule over the next week but the positive side of that is that, if you get on a winning streak, a hard schedule can actually work in your favour.

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Keeping our eye on the ball

Two outstanding victories have put us back on track but you can never take your eye off the ball in this game – literally and metaphorically. We have to give it another mighty push on Saturday against the in-form King's XI before we have a week off and time to put our feet up.

Although it is my favourite time of the season, as regular readers of this column will know, it is time for the annual KKR Golf Day! Everybody knows how much I enjoy the game but this day is about so much more than trying to hit a small, white ball fewer times than everyone else. It's about thanking all of those people who support us and, most importantly, raising funds to help as many people as possible who are far less fortunate than we are.

Talking of balls – Andre Russell is seeing the cricket ball as big as a soccer ball at the moment. What a staggering intervention against Delhi! We were comfortably heading towards a total of around 175-180 when he arrived at the crease. He smashed six out of 11 balls for six and was out to the 12th. Wow. Just wow.

One of the most pleasing aspects of our start is the number of players who have contributed and the fact that we are not relying on certain individuals. Having said that, you just can't stop certain guys from performing – like Sunny Narine who has been in prolific form with bat and ball. Only those who have seen him regularly behind the scenes will know just how much work he has put in to remodel his action and remain effective. I don't think he's as good as ever – I think he's better than ever.

We are very fortunate to have three of the best spinners in the tournament – in the world, in fact – with Kuldeep Yadav and Piyush Chawla also proven match-winners. It's also been a pleasure watching Nitish Rana scoring quality runs at important moments. There is certainly no lack of talent within the squad, but we knew that when we were assembling it.

Finally, I'd like to thank DK for all his hard work and commitment in taking over the captaincy. He had an especially good game as both captain and batsman against the Royals and he knows that he enjoys the 100% support of all the players, coaches and support staff.

Many people tell me King's XI are the most in-form team at the moment with Gayle at his best and Ashwin proving to be an astute captain. But I don't think our own form is too bad at the moment... should be a very good game!

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Time to play to our strengths

The last week has been a welcome and refreshing break for all of us at KKR and I'm confident that most of the squad have managed to do exactly what they needed to do – which wasn't very much!

It is natural for young players not to fully appreciate the value of rest in any professional sports career but that's why they have coaches and support staff. It is equally normal for cricketers at the beginning of their careers to want to play and train every day – they are living their dream.

But the first thing I do when the IPL schedule is announced is to look to see where the 'refuelling' stops are along the way. I have run this race every year since 2008 as a player and a coach and I've seen many individuals and teams run out of energy at critical times because they sprinted at the start and didn't think about staying mentally and physically fresh.

The annual KKR Golf Day was a great success, as it always is. The chance of saying thank you to our sponsors and raising very significant funds for the less fortunate have always been an important part of the team culture and I'm sure it will stay that way.

I didn't watch too many games, it's never been part of my style. I find watching cricket exhausting and, like the players, I need to be mentally fresh for the rest of the tournament! But obviously I do catch up on the highlights for analysis purposes.

Sunrisers proved that anything is possible in this game by defending 118 and MS proved that he is very much still 'the man' when it comes to temperament and experience with a game needing to be won. Neither of these things needed to be proved, of course. I assume everyone who watches enough cricket would know them to be true!

We have a huge game coming up against Delhi, and in some serious heat – it was 47 degrees mid week. Ouch! I am not familiar with the background to Gautam stepping down as captain but I am concerned that it might galvanise the team into finding fresh energy and purpose. GG is an honest assessor of his team, the opposition and himself and I wish him the best. Especially after our game.

The KKR boys are fresh and raring to go. It's time for us to concentrate on what we do best and make sure we steer matches towards our strengths and then play to them. Like the players, I now can't wait to keep on with the tournament. That's what a good break does for you.

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Bouncing back right on track

As I suspected, there was a strong emotional response amongst the Delhi players and squad to the resignation of captain Gautam Gambhir and we were caught up in the backlash a little bit after our six-day break. They played well, we were disappointing and were well beaten.

There is always some learning to take away from every game, win or lose, but sometimes it can be counter-productive to over-analyse. The most important thing for us was to make sure we bounced back against the Royal Challengers.

It was an excellent and very satisfying bounce back to make sure we returned to the right track. Naturally every team prefers to have a healthy win/lose ratio but I'm not too unhappy with 4:4 record at this stage of the tournament.

I regard it as a solid platform from which to push for a top-two finish. On many occasions I have been part of KKR teams which have won four, five or even six consecutive games so we all know it is possible – and I have no doubt that this squad is capable of doing exactly that.

Selection has been consistent and every player knows where they stand. Showing faith in players always breeds confidence but it is equally important for them to know and understand exactly why they might be sitting out a game, almost always due to the conditions on the day.

We have injury concerns but so do most other teams. The moment you start regretting the loss of players, or start making excuses, is the moment you run the risk of losing the plot. Everybody has to get on with it – injuries are a test of the contingency plans you have put in place. I have said it many times before, but the intensity of the IPL and the pressure it places on players and their support staff is just as much of a challenge as taking wickets and scoring runs. If you complain, then you have failed the challenge.

Sometimes an injured player may be able to recover within 24 hours in 'normal' circumstances but, instead of being on the treatment bed, he is travelling for 12 hours. That's the nature of the IPL. Travel-Play is hard work but we now have the benefit of a schedule which allows for a day or two off between games. Hopefully that will benefit us. We are attempting to manage workloads – sometimes, two days' rest is worth more than one day of training.

It is always a huge game against Chennai. MS has been grabbing the headlines on a regular basis but the team is so much more than him. A top-two finish is still our priority but the old cliché is truer than ever – one game at a time. But there is no need to keep anything in the tank now – it's time to start pushing with everything we have.

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Up, down and hopefully, up again

It's been a slightly frustrating week in which we produced one of our best and most clinical performances of the competition and then followed it up with one of the most disappointing.

There were so many aspects of the victory against Chennai that were impressive but the calmness and clear-thinking really stood out for me.

At the halfway point of their innings it seemed highly likely that CSK would set a target of 200+ on a perfect batting wicket but the spinners pulled it back superbly, all three of them delivering dot balls and preventing boundaries at crucial times.

We also lost a couple of early wickets but, once again, we stayed calm and played clinical cricket. It gave an opportunity to Shubman Gill to bat higher up the order and he took it in some style.

We were very clear in our management of his first experience in the IPL – we wanted to ease him in gradually rather than throw him into the deep end with great expectations.

So by the time he walked out to bat at number four against Chennai in a match we really needed to win, he was not a rookie and knew exactly what to do. There are no shots or options he does not have as a batsman but his decision-making and ability to think clearly under pressure is equally impressive. He has a very bright future with a mature head on his shoulders.

We had the opportunity to cement our place in the top four and really push hard for a top two finish, against Mumbai, and we should have won the game. I believe it was a case of us losing it rather than Mumbai winning it. I've always said, I don't mind losing – as long as the opposition win it through their own performances!

After 12 overs, we were 110 for two chasing 180 and would win pretty much 90% of the time from there. A couple of soft dismissals cost us the game and we will have to learn from those mistakes because we are rapidly approaching that stage of the competition where they will prove to be fatal.

We have the chance to atone for that performance against Mumbai at home on Wednesday and I'm expecting to see a little more ruthlessness at the crunch times when the game is on the line. There's no doubt the players all have that ability – they displayed it just one game earlier!

The starting XI and the batting order has changed a little from game to game depending on conditions but the decision to open with Gill and bat Sunil Narine at seven was practical rather than tactical with the heat having taken its toll on Sunny. But we don't mind keeping the opposition guessing...

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Ruthlessness at crunch times a must

The last few days have been a reflection of most of our tournament so far – some extremely good and some fairly poor. We've been threatening to string together a few wins right from the first match yet we still haven't done it – now would be a very good time.

We simply had a poor performance against Mumbai, which can happen. We prepared well and the guys were in exactly the right frame of mind. Sometimes that can just happen, other times there are reasons for a disappointing game but Mumbai Indians played well on the day and we didn't.

As I seem to be saying after every second game, it's not the defeat that matters – it's how well you bounce back that counts. And it's fair to say that the King's XI match was one of the most emphatic of the whole tournament so far.

We were very clear with our plans against Punjab and ruthless in our execution. Each player knew exactly how they were going to tackle the opposition with bat and ball and most of those plans worked out perfectly. It doesn't always happen but it's very satisfying when it does.

It was always going to be a high scoring game on a tiny ground at Indore and, in those circumstances, it can be a question of who holds their nerve best with the ball spending as much time bouncing around in the stands as it does on the field.

We have a few injury concerns at the moment but that's normal for this stage of the competition – it is the same for most if not all of the teams. We had a few changes forced on us but we were all delighted with strength of our bench reserves.

There are always so many 'mathematical possibilities' with a couple of group matches to go and this year is no different. Realistically, it seems likely that the top two places will be taken by Sunrisers and Chennai which leaves – as I write this – five teams chasing a place in the eliminator match.

There is only one question which concerns me, however, and that is: "Are we still in charge of our own destiny?" The answer, fortunately, is "yes we are". If we win our remaining two matches then we will finish in the top four and our tournament continues.

Rajasthan are currently on a roll and will be tough to beat while Hyderabad will play us with the luxury of a top-two finish guaranteed so they, too, will be dangerous. But I have absolutely no doubt whatsoever that we have the quality and the temperament to win both matches. There is nothing like a good win to raise spirits and they don't come more emphatic than the last one.

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Every game a final from here on

Naturally I am extremely pleased with the way the last two games have gone. I wouldn't say that two victories constitute a winning 'streak', but who knows – perhaps it might be the start of one.

Individual performances from some great players are part and parcel of every team and the tournament as a whole but it's when the whole team has its collective character tested – and passes the test – that impresses me most.

I have especially enjoyed those moments this season – like when the Rajasthan openers were 59-0 after four overs. It would be easy and even understandable for a bit of panic to set in but that wasn't the case with our guys. They stayed calm and focussed, and fought back by keeping things simple and backing their ability.

It was also great to see the Eden Gardens pitch offering some generous turn – we have some of the best spinners in the world, never mind the IPL, so it makes sense to give them a bit of assistance.

The plan for the next game – and hopefully a few more after that – is for more of the same. More calm, clear thinking, and more ruthless execution of our skills which we know, at our best, are good enough to beat any other team.

I've heard all the permutations about who can reach the play-offs and net run rate and so on – all that bothers me is that we can still miss out if we lose against Sunrisers, and we definitely make the eliminator match if we win. So that's what we aim for. Play it like a final. Every game is a 'final' from here on.

It was something of a relief to touch down in Hyderabad after being knocked about like a cheap kite in 70 km winds and a massive storm. A few of the boys looked a bit green upon landing... I find it quite amazing how a pilot can control a plane in those conditions.

It's now time for the senior players to lead the way and the youngsters to provide the spark and energy to make things happen and keep us alive at the business end of the tournament. Nobody wants to go home early. We feel like we have played too much quality cricket not to carry on further. But I guess that applies to all the teams in the most closely contested IPL I can remember.

All we need now is for the medical staff to have a really productive few days and provide us with the good news we need on match day – "Everybody is fit and available for selection."

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Calmness under pressure, trust our greatest strengths

For the third game in succession, we fought back from a position in which we could have been dominated, this time in the final five overs of the Hyderabad innings.

Several people have told me they thought the Sunrisers would set us a target in the region of 200 but we produced our best 'death' bowling performance of the entire campaign to restrict those final 30 deliveries to just 31 runs. It was a truly special and rare performance.

There are moments when spontaneity and 'instinct' are appropriate during a T20 game but there is also an awful lot of planning and strategy that goes into the preparation for each member of the opposition so it is especially satisfying for the players when those plans work.

They don't always work – otherwise we wouldn't need to keep fighting back! We still needed to chase the runs down and there's no doubt that doing so in a knockout situation can be quite different to a normal league game. But it was a terrific start from the openers and I could sense the wind being taken out of the Hyderabad players quite early on. It was a clinical run chase without any signs of a wobble, exactly what we wanted.

We will approach Wednesday's game against Rajasthan with momentum and confidence and also with the same aggressive brand of cricket we have tried to play with all season. We honestly had no preference who we played when there were still three or four teams vying for that fourth place but it did look as though the Royals were 'outsiders' with a couple of games to go.

The Rajasthan players probably feel as though they have been given a second life, a chance at the play-offs they almost certainly weren't expecting, so that makes them dangerous. This is a bonus for them and I expect they will throw caution to the wind and try to take the game away from us early.

All the 'one-percenters' count double in KO matches, that's where the game is often decided. Calmness under pressure and trust in each other have been two of our greatest strengths this season and I'll be hoping for plenty more of the same. As well as loads of energy and a little bit of luck!

Home ground advantage will be enormous, of course. Naturally I'm biased but Eden Gardens is the best stadium in India with the best crowd – the Royals will have to overcome them as well as the players to stay alive.

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Our best so far, and better yet to come

Once again the most pleasing aspect of Wednesday's victory against Rajasthan was the way we fought when it looked like we were in trouble, whether it was being 24 for three or when they reached 100 for one. This team simply does not know when to give up, and I trust they never will.

DK has been superb in controlling the middle order and the middle overs throughout the tournament and, once again, Shubman Gill showed that he is a class player with the valuable ability to read the match situation and play accordingly. Normally we put that down to experience but he's only 18!

Russ showed how dangerous he can be and, although some people may still have thought we were a few runs light, when he was doing his thing in the last four overs I always thought he was putting us not just back on course but slightly ahead of the game. It was a tough wicket to bat on but he is a remarkable cricketer.

Despite the Royals making a really good start and laying a strong platform, we bowled well enough to stay in the game and the run rate never dropped low enough for them to take control. It was a hard surface to score quickly on and that's why the Royals weren't able to accelerate when they needed to.

When we took a wicket we pounced, turning the screws on the new batsman and giving him nothing. A couple of dot balls and singles at the start of a batsman's innings can put him under huge pressure almost immediately and suddenly the asking rate is more than ten an over and climbing.

Our last four overs with the ball were as good an exhibition of 'death' bowling as I have seen from KKR in many, many years. I said the last game against Sunrisers was our best of the tournament so far but this was even better. We just need to do it in two more games...

The boys are naturally on a high and full of confidence which is a vital ingredient of any successful T20 team. SRH are obviously on a losing streak but they are a good side and finished top of the league for a good reason.

We have great respect for Sunrisers, as individuals and as a team, not to mention the coaching staff. As we saw during the league stage we can beat them if we play well but, once again, we'll have to be at our best.

We need to recover and rest well before getting ourselves 'up' for the challenge once again on Friday. Eden Gardens will, no doubt, provide that extra couple percent that so often makes the difference – we pull so much energy from them, thank you!