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Nervous times as Lynn may miss rest of IPL

It surely can't be a year already? The time has flown past and now the Knight Riders family is back together again after what feels like no more than a short holiday apart.

It's a good job that some of the players have had a short break, too, because the tournament this year is a week shorter than last year which means even less time between games and shorter recovery periods.

Our preparation was better than ever this time around with a couple more practise matches than we've been able to schedule in previous years so most of the guys were familiar with each other and the style we wanted to play.

We have as strong a squad as there is in the tournament – probably in any tournament in the world, actually. A few players are still recovering after busy international seasons so we'll be even more formidable once Umesh Yadav, Nathan Coulter-Nile and Colin de Grandhomme come into contention.

Like every other squad we have worked hard to make sure we have the players to take advantage of all conditions, home and away, and that also meant we had to adjust our strengths because 'home' has changed!

We're all pretty excited about the relaid square at Eden Gardens which looks like it's going to be consistently high scoring. But it's not only the batsmen who have enjoyed it – the fast bowlers feel there is reward for their efforts and the spinners enjoy the extra bounce.

Chris Lynn was most impressive in the opening victory against the Lions although Gamby wasn't too far behind. It was disappointing to lose the second game against Mumbai especially because I felt it was there for us to win.

We lost the game rather than Mumbai winning it which has a different feeling – it can be less frustrating to simply be beaten by a better team on the day. We controlled the game for 36 overs but, as we all know, the game is played over 40.

Our fielding has not been up to the standards we set ourselves and the players know that that aspect of our game will have to improve. It's certainly not because of a lack of training and hard work. I am convinced it is an area of T20 cricket which decides the outcome of many more matches than most people realise.

As I write this we are awaiting the results of the scans to Chris Lynn's shoulder which he dislocated on the field. It is a notoriously difficult area of the body to heal so these are nervous times. He will undoubtedly need a substantial period of rest and may even miss the rest of the tournament which would be desperately disappointing for him and our fans after seeing what he is capable of doing during the first two games.

It is wonderful, however, to be back in my second home, back amongst friends and familiar faces.
(Gameplan / Hawkeye)

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Gauty is a shining example of how experience pays dividends

Many years ago, as early as the first or second season of the IPL, I wrote on these pages that T20 cricket might not be the “young man’s game” everybody seemed to believe it was.

In fact, I went so far as to say that I thought it would not only prolong the careers of some of the best players in the world but also bring out the best in them at a time when, in first-class or 50-over cricket, they might normally be in decline.

Naturally there are many brilliant youngsters also playing the game with great success and it is always useful to have a couple of them chasing balls in the deep and diving in the covers, but I think there are enough 35+ year-olds performing well enough to prove my theory right.

The KKR skipper, of course, is a very, very young 35-year-old and can no doubt play for as long as he would like to! Seriously, it was a shining example of how experience pays dividends because he not only read the game at every stage but he looked like he was reading the bowlers’ minds.

Ten years ago the game was so much more rudimentary than it is now. There were basic ‘hitters’ who flourished and a lot of bowlers still looked to the ‘yorker’ for their stock dot ball. These days the ‘hitters’ are almost always worked out quickly by bowlers who have learned dozens of different tricks.

As the skill levels have climbed, so has the need for cricketers with an ability to stay one step ahead of the game – or even two or three. The reduced physical impact of 20 overs is, of course, another reason why players can carry on for longer provided they look after themselves.

Having said that, everybody – of any age – will feel the impact of this year’s tournament which has been squeezed into a shorter time frame. We barely have time to catch our breath after an excellent win against a strong King’s XI before we tackle another of the tournament favourites, the Sunrisers.

At some point I imagine every team and every coach will have to start contemplating a bit of rest and rotation based not just on conditions but the amount of sleep their top players are getting! Fortunately we have a strong squad and I’m confident that we can keep everyone fresh.

The most important thing is to maintain the tempo that we have started with – two very impressive victories have certainly served notice of our intentions but we have barely crossed the starting line, never mind thinking about the finish line. (Gameplan / Hawkeye)

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Good to see Narine scoring runs at the top

It is quite amazing just how quickly the pressure builds on teams after a couple of losses in this tournament and I feel for those who are already feeling desperate for a victory to get their campaigns back on track.

Similarly, it is true to say that the air is a little cleaner at the top end of the league table and breathing is just a little easier. The incentive to stay ahead of the chasing pack has never been greater.

The win against Delhi was a classic nail-biter and the effect of winning those games is even greater than winning a game easily or by a big margin. When you are in the thick of the action against a quality team like the Daredevils, your nerve and character are tested as much as your cricket skills. It does a lot for a team's confidence to pull through in those situations.

Chris Lynn is receiving ongoing treatment to his shoulder and still has a fighting chance of being able to play again at the business end of the tournament. He could still make a huge impact on our season if we make the play-offs.

In his absence we have made use of a couple of different batsmen as partners for Gauty because, despite Robin's great success as an opener, we had made the decision to utilise his experience at number three and he was happy with that.

It was particularly pleasing to see Sunny Narine score some runs at the top of the order, and quickly too. He was hitting the ball sweetly in training and, although it seemed like a good idea in theory, it still took a bit of courage to send him in first in a match. It was a collective coaching decision!

We have an excellent squad of players and I'm keen to make use of as many of them as possible. If you are good enough to be in the KKR squad then you're good enough to play. The coaching team and captain have assessed the opposition and conditions closely for each game and tried to select the best XI to suit the fixture. I think we've done a pretty good job so far.

No team can win the IPL on the back of two or three players. A couple of games, yes, for sure, but to win the title requires many different players to produce match-winning contributions, especially with such a tight schedule this year.

We have two days completely off now before returning to work on Thursday in preparation for Friday's game, and well deserved they are, too. It's a chance for the players to relax and switch off from cricket – at least for a few hours. I might even find time for some golf, although I'm finding it far more of a challenge to 'switch off' as a coach than I did as a player... (Gameplan / Hawkeye)

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Brave, attacking bowlers will make the most impact

The bat has dominated the ball in most games so far this year which is generally regarded as 'crowd-pleasing' but, personally, I don't mind the occasional low-scoring thriller in which the bowlers have their day.

All the teams have been chasing well and there is an increasing sense that no total is safe. A few years ago 160 meant you were 'in the game' and 180 made you favourites with 200 putting you out of sight. Not anymore.

All of which means that teams with bowlers who can work out ways to take wickets rather than just bowl dot balls are likely to succeed most consistently. Some bowlers prefer to stick to 'general' plans for certain types of batsmen while others have very specific plans for each individual they bowl to.

Either way, I believe the bowlers who are brave enough to attack and look for wickets are likely to make the biggest impact. Of course they can be expensive, too – but will they be more expensive than the defensive bowler who is just hoping not to be hit for a boundary? I'm not sure.

The Lions are a much better team than their league position suggests and they were bound to come right sooner rather than later. We played well on Friday – but they played a little better. That's how this tournament has always worked, there is very little between any of the teams. We had 48 hours of rest and recuperation before the game and the freshness showed. But when a team is as desperate for a win as they were, they can be hard to resist.

We need to jump back on the winning track against Bangalore on Sunday in order to consolidate our place in the top two of the league and we'll be looking closely at our tactics and team composition in order to do that.

With just two wins from six games Bangalore are likely to come at us with the same passion and intensity as the Gujarat players did so we will need to be ready for the onslaught. No doubt the media and fans attention will once again be on Virat Kohli and AB de Villiers but we won't be making that mistake. Their squad is full of potential match-winners and we must be prepared to face all of them.

The tournament has been moving quickly from the very first day but it will get even quicker for us over the next 10 days or so with back-to-back games becoming a regular occurrence. It's pretty similar for all the teams and the potential for wheel-wobble will be a danger for everyone. Stay calm, stay focussed, and hang on tight! (Gameplan/Hawkeye)

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Narine took his chance and surprised us all

It was ironic that I spoke about the attraction of low-scoring games just a day before the one against Royal Challengers during which we made 131 and they were bowled out for 49. I did not see that coming and I was certainly not making a prediction!

Besides, I was referring more to a bowler-friendly pitch on which batsmen do not have everything their own way and have to work hard for their runs and display a technique which is more than just 'hitting'. There was absolutely nothing 'wrong' with the pitch for that match. There was a little bit more pace and bounce than the average Indian pitch – and certainly more than there used to be at the Gardens – but nothing that a decent technique couldn't handle.

In truth, it was a poor batting display from both teams. I thought we were definitely the underdogs at the halfway stage and I was worried. The exception, of course, was Sunny Narine who produced another gem of an innings at the top of the order.

Thirty-four from just 17 balls when nobody else reached 20 in our innings and nobody even made 10 in theirs! Sunny's entire career was in jeopardy a couple of years ago with the remodelling of his action but he showed the strength of personality and character to overcome that so becoming an opening batsman was simple compared to that ordeal!

But the signs were there before we gave him the chance. He struck plenty of sixes in the PSL and even opened the batting a couple of times in the Big Bash in Melbourne. Now he has taken his chance superbly and his consistency has taken us all by surprise.

He learned a bit about good ball-striking during his 'Windball' games in the Caribbean but you wouldn't normally expect batting form against a soft ball on a concrete surface to translate to the IPL in front of a full house. It's one of those great stories that cricket produces now and then.

If our batting was modest, our fast bowling was outstanding. Just as we had spoken about, we bowled for wickets rather than dot balls and the plans worked out superbly. Actually, the bowlers on both sides were excellent and made the very best use of a pitch that, for once, offered them something to work with.

Pune up next and it looks they're on a hot streak. They have some of the biggest (and most expensive) players in the game and will be hard to beat at home. They will be full of belief now that they have moved into the top half of the table. Ben Stokes and MS can make anything happen – and often do. We'll need our best game for another win but, fortunately, we've had it for much of the tournament so far. (Gameplan / Hawkeye)

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Robin is a consistent and proven match-winner

The win against Pune was achieved with one of our best performances of the tournament so far but was also a fixture that graphically illustrated the demands the IPL can make on players, especially with the congested schedule this year.

We returned to the hotel after the game for just an hour before it was time to leave again for the airport to catch the two-and-a-half hour 3:30am flight back to Kolkata. I'm not sure what time everyone finally made it to bed but it was after 8:00am.

It was a rough night all round and a pretty untidy travel schedule but that's the way it had to be. We all knew about it a long time ago and, true to the KKR spirit, there were no moans or complaints – but plenty of jokes. There were some very tired bodies sleeping through till lunch time on Thursday.

The journey, of course, was made far easier by the quality of the cricket we played and the result which followed. Once again we made full use of the squad which was something we always planned to do. Nathan Coulter-Nile stayed behind to ensure he was fit and fresh for the game against Delhi and because he had a slight niggle in his back. He certainly didn't mind missing the travel.

We always wanted to play an extra spinner against Pune so Piyush played and that also created a place for Darren Bravo in the batting line-up although Robin and Gauty made sure the job was done by the time he got to the crease.

The senior pros were, once again, quite brilliant. As I have always said, there is a lot to be said for the enthusiasm of youth but it is nothing without experience. The captain is batting as well as he has ever done while Robin was not only brilliant with the bat but with the gloves as well. I cannot believe he won't play for India again. He is a proven and consistent match-winner.

Last year and in previous seasons teams have needed eight wins to reach the play-offs but the aim is to finish in the top two so there will be no easing off with our match-day intensity. We will continue to make full use of our outstanding squad to ensure there are always fresh legs and ideas on the field. We all know that you never flirt with form or take anything for granted in this business. Cricket is a funny game and you disrespect it at your peril. We will not be making that mistake.

I am surprised at Delhi's results because they have a strong team and have played some high quality cricket. They are perfectly capable of putting a winning run together – hopefully starting after us.
(Gameplan/Hawkeye)

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Lynn should be back in action soon

One of the most commonly recurring themes of the KKR approach is the importance of team work, of supporting each other and making a contribution towards winning the match. Naturally there will be players who score more runs or take the most wickets on a given day but we always say that even the smallest contribution can make a difference.

However... The truth about this format is that sometimes, very rarely, a match can basically be decided by a single individual who produces a brilliant solo performance. With respect to the rest of the Hyderabad team, it felt like we were 'Warnered' a couple of days ago but, having said that, we had our chances but failed to take them. Aggressive players like Warner usually give a few chances and he did but, unfortunately, we couldn't hang on to them.

Although one man made the difference on the night we are not kidding ourselves about our own performance. We were outplayed in all aspects. Professional sportsmen strive for consistency almost above everything else and we have achieved it for most of the tournament.

It is impossible to maintain all the time, of course, and we had a bad game which can happen. Fortunately our fate is very much in our own hands and a place in the top two for the play-offs remains our goal. We've had a couple of days off now to refresh and prepare for what is shaping to be a hugely important game against Pune at the Gardens – for both teams.

We still need at least one more victory to be certain of qualification and we don't need that pressure going into the last few group games. No doubt Pune are also sensing that a top four finish is within their grasp after a stunning win against Gujarat on Monday. If we were 'Warnered' it's fair to say the Lions were 'Stokosed'!

Some excellent news for the KKR fans is that Chris Lynn's rehab is coming along very nicely and is going according to schedule so we should have him back in action within the next few days. Having made such an emphatic impression at the beginning of the tournament Chris was desperately unlucky – and upset – to be injured and now cannot wait to be involved again. Hopefully we'll have the freshest pair of legs in the play-offs.

After another hectically busy week we even had enough time to squeeze a rare game of golf in on Monday and I can report with some satisfaction that the team of Kallis and our physio/trainer, Adrian le Roux, remains unbeaten. Hopefully a good omen for KKR... (GAMEPLAN/HAWKEYE)

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There's just 5 percent between the top and bottom teams

If we had been told that this would be our position at the start of the tournament then nobody would have been disappointed. We are entirely in control of our own destiny with three league games to go.

Bangalore, Punjab, and then Mumbai Indians. If we win them all we finish top of the league and give ourselves the best chance of reaching the final. If we don't then we may have to do it the hard way by playing an eliminator and a qualifier. I have learned many things over the course of the last 25 years in professional cricket but of the simpler lessons is: don't look too far ahead!

Right now all of our focus is on the Royal Challengers who I believe pose an even greater threat than normal precisely because they cannot make the play-offs. It has been a disappointing campaign of them and we all know how determined they will be to the end the season on a high.

If they needed to win to stay in contention for a play-off place then we could expect a certain amount of tactical caution, making sure they stayed in the game. Now they can throw caution to the wind which makes them extremely dangerous.

It makes no sense that they have won only two games out of 12 but, as I say before every IPL there is no more than five percent difference between the top team and the eighth team. Small things make big differences – a catch, a run saved in the field, a direct hit.

Six teams were still 'alive' with just three or four games to go before Saturday's matches although Delhi may have fallen away if they lost the late game against Mumbai. It all makes for a tense but exciting finish which is exactly what you would expect from this league.

To be involved when your nerve is tested, to be in situations where matches can be won and lost with a single delivery and play-off places secured or given away – that's exactly the reason we play this game. If anybody doesn't enjoy those situations or tries to avoid them then they are in the wrong job. The KKR boys know how fortunate they are to have this job!

The more you have been in these situations, of course, the better you are likely to handle them. When people ask about the importance of experience, I tell them it isn't knowing where the changing rooms are in a stadium (although that is useful) – it is about handling your emotions and making good decisions at critical times. I believe that is one of the KKR squad's best features. (Gameplan/Hawkeye)

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Our focus is on finishing in the top two

We let ourselves down a bit during the last game after bowling and fielding tidily. It was a game we should have won and the best thing I can say is that, nine times out of ten we probably would have. But Punjab had an outside chance of getting into the play-offs through the back door and they must be given credit for the way they have fought for victories against us and again against Mumbai.

It's that time of year again when fans spend hours looking at the league table working out all the permutations for play-off places. I was never the best in my class at math so I stick to cricket and trying to help win games. Basically, I think we'll need to lose by about 70 runs against Mumbai on Saturday to have a chance of not featuring in the play-offs but as I have said for the last ten days, our focus is on finishing in the top two and a victory is likely to make that happen.

Winning the IPL requires peaking at the right time. That does not mean that you take it easy at the beginning or in the middle – intensity is required for every game – but the best teams, with a bit of luck, are able to find their best collective form and fitness in the final week.

Mumbai are proven winners so I'm sure they won't be too worried about recent results but it's easier said than done putting a game out of your mind after conceding 230 and they will hope they haven't peaked too soon. But it's generally a good wicket at the Wankhede and everyone can have a bad day.

Nonetheless we've had a couple of useful debriefs after both games and have taken some important lessons and notes which, hopefully, will help us during the play-offs.

We had a tremendous KKR Charity Golf Day at the Royal Calcutta Golf Club a couple of days ago at which our CEO, Venky Mysore, prevailed to take first prize against some very determined opposition (you won't find an uncompetitive cricketer on a golf course!).

We hold the event every year and the satisfaction increases with each one that the KKR family is able to contribute to those who are less fortunate, particularly with their health. This year the money raised went towards paying the bills of cancer patients in the community and several other local charities. (Gameplan/Hawkeye)

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No more second chances now, we have to 'seize the day'!

At the beginning of the tournament each team sets out with the goal of reaching the play-offs and we were no different. Naturally everybody wants to win it and be champions, but one step at a time. We know we could and should have finished higher than fourth and actually had very good chances to win the league stage but it is what it is and there's no point looking backwards.

Everything that happened in the group matches is now redundant. All the results, the individual performances, the runs and wickets... all meaningless now. All they did was cut the starting field in half. Now we go again.

Mumbai and Pune will get two bites at the cherry but for us and Hyderabad the equation is simple. We need to win three knockout games in a row and they always bring a different sort of pressure. There are no more second chances now – it is carpe diem time, 'seize the day'! The players need to trust their skills and instincts and remember that they have been here before and emerged as champions.

We talk a lot about the speed at which T20 is played and how a single mistake can be critical. But there is still time to think and make calculated decisions and that, I believe, can make the difference between winning and losing in the knockout games.

Sure, there isn't time to discuss tactics over lunch with your teammates like you get in a Test match but there is time to evaluate your options as a captain, a batsman or a bowler – even as a fielder – and make the strategic decision which gives the team the best odds.

I also believe that doing the basics right in these games becomes critical. There is a tendency to keep things a little simpler when the pressure is on so if you can do the basics better than the opposition then you're in with a good chance.

Another key to winning is recognising the game-changing moments or even when the result itself is on the line, and rising to the occasion. It is not, contrary to popular belief, always in the final over or two. On many occasions in the change room you will hear players say "that was where we won/lost the game" and it may be the first four balls of the 12th over.

It feels good to be back at the Chinnaswamy. We have good memories of winning the title here so hopefully that's a good omen. The defending champions are a fine team with 'big' players who have delivered when it has mattered most, none more so than David Warner. Naturally, if we can knock him over early we can put them on the back foot but no team is just about one man.
(Gameplan/Hawkeye)

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It was truly crazy to see the winning runs being hit at 1:30 am!

The Eliminator match was our best bowling and fielding performance of the tournament, and what a time to produce it. The Sunrisers just weren't able to get going, the overs kept ticking by and the lack of boundaries continued to build the pressure.

It was a triumph of planning but, more importantly, of making those plans work. Every team in this tournament walks onto the field with good plans, as you expect with the world's best cricketers here, but it's how you make them work which counts.

We had specific, individual plans for each one of the batsmen and the bowlers barely missed a delivery in 20 overs. It was absolutely outstanding and nobody would have been more disappointed than them if we had not got back on the field.

At one stage it actually looked like we might not and there were some anxious KKR management – we all felt so strongly that we deserved the chance to win it after a first innings performance like that.

We're all used to the hectic travel schedule, late nights and early mornings that the IPL throws at you from time to time but it was truly crazy to see the winning runs being hit at 1:30 in the morning.

With 48 needed of 36 balls it was just a matter of batting normally and sensibly and, even though we had a couple of hiccups early on, I was never worried or had any doubts. Even if we'd somehow managed to lose six or seven wickets I would have been calm in my confidence.

The boys all enjoyed a very well earned day off on Thursday – I don't think they woke up before mid-afternoon – and we'll go into Qualifier 2 full of confidence because conditions will be similar, just hopefully without the rain.

As always there are a few injury niggles at the end of two months but, barring any last minute surprises, everybody is fit and available for selection. We have selected very carefully throughout the competition in order to match the best team to the conditions so, given that they are likely to be the same, our starting XI is likely to look similar to Wednesday's.

No doubt the head-to-head record between KKR and Mumbai will come under scrutiny but I honestly believe it is irrelevant. Yes, they have won more games than we have over the last ten years – how does that affect today? Two very good teams will take to the field with a place in the final at stake. The one which makes the best decisions is likely to prevail, and I'm sure the entertainment will be value for money. (Gameplan/Hawkeye)