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India clear favourites but hopefully Sri Lanka will put up a fight

India clearly go into this three-match Test series with the upper-hand. They have a strong and established team with some genuinely world-class players. They have been playing great cricket and they present a young Sri Lankan team with a formidable challenge.

Sri Lanka have just finished a testing tour with the Zimbabweans – who from a world cricket perspective played with encouraging skill and character, showing signs they are a team on the ascendency again after some very difficult years – and India represents a far stiffer challenge.

Sri Lanka also showed character in the solitary Test match and managed to fight their way out of a very tricky corner with Asela Gunaratne playing brilliantly in that final innings. He has grown into a key player for Sri Lanka and I hope he is able to recover from the leg injury sustained in that game.

The loss of skipper Dinesh Chandimal for the first Test in Galle due to pneumonia is also a big blow. When you are in the middle of a major rebuilding phase, the last thing you need is for a couple of your most talented players to be absent.

India will be disappointed to have lost opener KL Rahul to a fever, but they have the advantage of strength in depth and they have good options to make up for the absence.

Sri Lanka will somehow have to try and find another gear against India. For me, the biggest challenge is going to be how to take 20 wickets. India's top order is very much stronger with several seasoned campaigners who have a reputation for scoring big hundreds.

A lot of pressure will rest on the shoulders on Rangana Herath. Unfortunately, though, Sri Lanka cannot continue to keep relying on one man. If India's batsmen are able to work out a way of combating him then it will put the rest of the attack under serious pressure.

I would expect Sri Lanka to go for a 7-4 balance with the two spinners – Rangana and off-spinner Dilruwan Perera. If the pitch is really dry and likely to turn sharply then perhaps they might even consider the third spinner option with Malinda Pushpakumara, a first-class veteran of 558 wickets, a potential debutant at the age of 30.

India's combination is a more balanced 6-5 as they have such a strong top six and the benefit of having Ravi Ashwin and Ravindra Jadeja to bat at No.7 and No.8. That team balance has worked well for them in recent times.

I hope we will see some tough competitive cricket. I know the Sri Lanka boys will be working hard and desperate to put up a fight for the fans. They at least won't be under as much pressure as they were against Zimbabwe as they will be clear underdogs. That will hopefully allow them to play positive and freely, which is always the best way for Sri Lanka.

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Sri Lanka need to get creative against dominant India

India were obviously the dominant team in the first Test in Galle and they will be delighted with the authoritative manner in which they started the series. Sri Lanka are in a very tough position that will require some creative thinking.

When India's top order plundered 600 at Galle it was always going to be difficult for Sri Lanka. The fact that Asela Gunaratne was injured was a real blow but even with him it would have been a major challenge to save the Test match.

The issue for Sri Lanka is taking 20 Indian wickets. Nuwan Pradeep bowled really well and Sri Lanka will be heartened by that but the bowling group, as a whole, needs to be more penetrative and needs to be clever about how they are going to create opportunities.

The bottom line here for the hosts is that they are 0-1 down against a superior team. If they are going to win they will need to play aggressively and take the attack to India. Ideally they would get runs on the board in the first innings as anything over 450 will create some pressure.

I am a big fan of India's 6-5 balance which gives Virat Kohli so many options as captain. Having the luxury of the Saha-Pandya-Jadeja threesome batting in the middle order provides Kohli with a bowling attack capable of taking 20 wickets even on good pitches.

It's not just the combination, of course, but also the skill and style of the bowlers. Having Mohammed Shami and Umesh Yadav, who can both bowl 140kph-plus, is an immediate advantage. They are also able to bowl with great skill too.

Then backing them up, they have Hardik Pandya in the mid-130kph's and the option of a world-class off-spinner in Ravi Ashwin and a canny left-artermer in Ravi Jadeja. It's a varied attack that returning captain Dinesh Chandimal must be very envious of.

For Sri Lanka, it would be great if they could follow suit and play the same 6-5 balance but that is a challenge given the options at their disposal. There is a chance of Dilruwan Perera being able to bat at No.7 but they are still then weak at No.8 and No.9.

I would therefore expect them to go into the game with a similar balance. This will leave the team management and selectors with a difficult choice over which four bowlers are best-suited to the conditions and most likely to take wickets.

The key thing is that this is a new Test match. Sri Lanka need to forget Galle and start afresh with the belief that if they play their best cricket, and if they play with aggressive intent and intelligence, they can put India under some pressure and force their way back into the series.

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India are enjoying the fruits of an intelligent rebuilding process

We all knew India were the dominant team going into this three-match series and they have shown just how strong they are in the first two games, wrapping up the series in an emphatic and impressive manner.

Clearly are very deserving of their No. 1 ICC Test ranking right now. They have been carefully and intelligently rebuilding their team for the past few years and that vision and strong decision-making is now bearing fruit.

In this series they have been doing the basics brilliantly. Their batsmen have capitalised on winning the toss and have piled up huge first innings totals. They have been backed up by strong bowling and fielding. It's been a great all-round team effort.

They have been tactically shrewd and they have the resources to execute those game plans. As mentioned several times, their ability to play with a 6-5 combination is extremely advantageous to India, providing Virat (Kohli) with lots of variety and options.

They will be going into this final Test in Pallekele full of confidence. I am sure Virat will be warning of complacency and urging his players to be ruthless. They will want a 3-0 clean sweep, which will be a great achievement in an overseas Test series.

Sri Lanka, meanwhile, have their backs to the wall. They were aware that this was going to be a tough series and that they needed to play exceptionally well to put India under pressure. Unfortunately, things have not gone their way.

A big concern for me is our first innings performance with the bat. In Test cricket you have to be able to put big runs on the table in the first innings. In both Tests, though, we have put ourselves under pressure and have spent the rest of the game playing catch-up; that is a very hard thing to do.

I think they'll also look back with the benefit of hindsight and ask whether they selected the right bowling combination at SSC. They knew they needed to do something different to take 20 wickets and they decided on a three-pronged spin attack.

I have no issues with that. They needed to take a risk and this strategy was a clear option. But I don't think two orthodox left-arm spinners was the way to go. I would have preferred the third spinner to be Sandakan with left-arm wrist spin, or a leg-spinner. You need the variety to take wickets.

For this final game we now don't have Rangana (Herath) either and that is a big loss. I would imagine they have to look at two pace bowlers given the extra bounce and movement that is often available in Pallekelle. They will then need to choose the best part for Dilruwan Perera.

I hope the Sri Lankan boys are able to stay positive despite all the pressures on them. They are talented and they need to go out there and play with freedom and aggression. At the end of the day, it's not their fault that we have a weak domestic first-class system in Sri Lanka that needs urgent reform.

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Pandya could turn out to be an all-round asset for India

The third Test followed an all-too-familiar pattern for the Sri Lankans: huge Indian run fest, top order collapse, large defeat. The 0-3 defeat on home soil has left many in Sri Lanka despondent and upset.

We need to be careful, though, and give the team support. The players are trying their best. The truth is that India arrived as the No.1 Test team in the world and they played like it. They were extremely impressive in all departments.

Should Sri Lanka have lost 0-3? Probably not. The wide margins of the defeats is disappointing. I think in hindsight it is fair to say that there were some tactical mistakes. We also did not play with the necessary attacking intent and passion required when taking on such strong opponents.

It was encouraging that Sri Lanka did try to innovate in the third Test in a bid to take 20 wickets. Their 6-5 balance was a positive move, although also a high-risk move given our weak lower middle order.

The plan might have worked also as wickets tumbled in the second half of the first day. The extra bowling options gave Dinesh (Chandimal) more variety. Unfortunately, though, with the game in the balance, Hardik Pandya produced a breath-taking innings.

I think Hardik is a terrific young cricketer and, although it's early days given he is just 23, he could be a huge all-round asset for India in all formats. The value of a genuine all-rounder is immense, as you see with the impact Ben Stokes has for England, so India will be hoping his development continues.

In the third Test he showed he has a good head, first guiding India towards a safe total and then exploding when batting with the tail. He showed temperament and what a strong clean-hitter he can be when in full song.

The question now for him is how he harnesses his talent and evolves as an all-rounder. The raw ingredients, including skill levels and character, are there. He now needs to be really mature and keep getting better and better every day.

After India reached 487 we were going to be under pressure given the feisty Kandy pitch. A disappointing collapse soon followed and our mental vulnerability was obvious when Virat (Kohli) opted for the follow on.

The challenge for Sri Lanka is now to regroup. The ODI series starting this weekend is a fresh challenge. Our ODI form has been reasonable over recent months and we beat India in the Champions Trophy.

That should give the guys some confidence. But what we need to be clear about is that winning against India will not be possible unless we play the aggressive, free-flowing cricket that helped us win in England.

We have to forget the Test series and go into attack mode. That will not be easy for all the players as I know they will be hurting after the Test series, but with help from the senior players and management team they have to get their mind-set right.

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Sri Lanka had their chances but India were just too strong

Sri Lanka threatened to be competitive in this series and I feel we had our chances. Unfortunately, though, India counter-punched strongly after being on the ropes in the second ODI and the end result is an unassailable 3-0 lead.

It's a depressing outcome for Sri Lankan fans and one can certainly understand their frustrations. However, now is the time that the players really need a lift and I hope we will see the fans get right behind the boys in the final two games.

In the first ODI Sri Lanka had a reasonable start but then we lost wickets in the middle overs and were never able to regain any momentum. India batted exceptionally well and always looked like the winners.

In the second ODI we also struggled with the bat, but I thought we battled really hard in the field with Akila Dhanajaya being brilliant with the ball. It was a shame that the others were unable to back him up to finish off the job.

For me, losing that second game was a big loss for Sri Lanka. There was a chance there for the taking to make it 1-1. Sri Lanka would have had a huge confidence boost and that could have made things a little different in the third game.

I was surprised and disappointed that Sri Lanka chose to bat in the third ODI. It was a must-win game and India were clearly comfortable chasing. Being a day-night game the ball was likely to come onto the bat in the evening.

It was also a fresh pitch and there was always going to be a chance of some early movement for the seamers. The Indian pace attack used those conditions well and put the Sri Lanka top order under pressure. Once again, we were short of a challenging target.

I was delighted to see Thirimanne scoring runs on his return to the team. It's been a difficult couple of years for him and he's been working hard on his game. Hopefully he can now get an extended run and build-up some confidence and then cement a place in the middle order.

The highlight for Sri Lanka has definitely been the re-emergence of Akila. After breaking into the team in 2012 he had a bit of a set-back with his bowling action and needed to make some adjustments. He worked hard to do that with the coaches and has been doing well in first-class cricket.

He brings a lot of variety to the team and has the advantage of being able to threaten both left- and right-handers given the ease with which he can switch between finger spin and wrist spin. He also has a competitive spirit and it was great to see him attack the Indian spinners.

With the series already lost, Sri Lanka need to take the small positives there are and just keep playing for pride. It's not easy being on a losing run and I know just how tough it will be for the guys. But somehow they must keep believing in themselves and keep trying to play aggressive, positive cricket.

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India's unity and clarity bodes well for the future

India's dominance continued in the final two ODI's and their whitewash was richly deserved. They are a world-class team right now playing with clarity and unity, which from an Indian perspective must be hugely exciting as they look forward to the future.

It is true that Sri Lanka never really pushed them. Their one small wobble was with their top order batting in the second ODI. Bamboozled by the unorthodoxy and skill of Akila Dhananjaya, they momentarily lost their way before M.S. Dhoni restored order.

However, you can only beat the opposition presented and the players and management deserve great credit for the manner in which they outplayed Sri Lanka. They were extremely steady throughout and what really impressed me was the way everyone was very clear about their roles.

India have found combinations that really work for them and the balance of the ODI team is excellent. They have variety in their bowling, lots of options with fast bowlers, all-rounders who add depth to the batting, and they have young players putting up their hands and taking responsibility.

For Sri Lanka, sadly, the situation is obviously very different. We expect to compete at home even against the best teams and clearly that has not been the case in the past few weeks. Everyone is hurting; the players, management and fans. There is a great sense of disappointment and concern.

The eventual results aside, it was disappointing for me to not see an improvement during the series. I'd hoped we would grow in competitiveness. However, it's obvious that confidence is extremely low and we are not playing well as a unit.

It's important, I think, that the players and the management take a couple of days' break and then pull together for a really honest team review. This should be just the players and the coaches and they need to discuss what happened and what needs to now change going forward.

The team does not have long to regroup. Within two weeks the guys will be boarding a plane and flying off to Dubai for a tough tour against Pakistan. Straight after that it's India again! That's three very challenging months of international cricket.

The guys have to approach that schedule with a positive attitude. As I have said many times, I really believe we have the talent. The domestic structure is not helping that talent prepare for international cricket but we can still be much better than we are.

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India will make it hard for the Aussies

It's the beginning of a new series and another opportunity for India to continue their good run in their backyard. The hype before an India-Australia series is normal because whenever Australia comes to India, people get very excited, imagining that it is going to be like the series against the Aussies of old. But the fact of the matter is that the record of the Australians of this generation in sub-continent conditions, be it against Sri Lanka, Pakistan or India, has been very poor and I believe it's going to take a monumental effort for them to change it.

The biggest advantage of the Australia side of 2001 was that there was pressure from both ends at the time of their bowling. To win Test matches one needs 20 wickets and that is why India is so good in these conditions as their group of bowlers do that consistently. The Australian side of that era, along with Shane Warne, was terrific. The fast bowlers kept the pressure on at one end and Warne, despite being under pressure, bowled well. It is surprising to see that Nathan Lyon's strike rate in these conditions has been better than Warne's; unfortunately the results have not been the same!

The good thing for the Aussies will be the pitches they play on. During their last trip, the pitches were absolute rank-turners but of late the Indian team has played on good pitches. The series against England was ample proof of that. England got big totals with the bat but ultimately could not get India out. I completely agree with Darren Lehmann that tosses will not decide matches but it depends on how both teams play.

The last time India lost a series at home was when they came back battered and bruised from Australia and faced a mighty England with two outstanding spinners in the form of Graeme Swann and Monty Panesar. But this Australia will face an Indian team that has lost nothing in the recent past, and this will be their main problem. India in India believe they can get out of any situation and their performance has proved that time and again.

Australia will need Lyon to bowl well. That, however, will not be enough. If they are to make an impact as a team, it will take Lyon picking 30 wickets in four tests and at the same time for the likes of Mitchell Starc, Josh Hazlewood and maybe another spinner to stand up and be counted. The test for the Aussies will be mental as well. A loss early on will make the slide quicker, as it did for England. Cook and his team lost momentum as the five Test series progressed. Performing became very difficult, and it could turn out to be the same for Australia. I don't generally make predictions in sport, but India can really make it hard for them. (Gameplan)

Published 4.3.17

India are an outstanding side, and need to put this loss aside

India begin the second Test against Australia in Bengaluru on Saturday. I have been amazed by the outcry about India's loss over the last four days. Every newspaper and television channel were scrutinising, criticising, evaluating, whatever way you want to put it, the reasons for the loss and, as I sat on the sofa watching, I thought, what's going on? India have just lost one Test and they have been unbeaten in the last 16. Every cricketing side goes through this.

There are still three Tests to go and I guarantee you it's going to be a tough series for Australia. India may win – chances of which are more – or may not win, but it will not be as easy as the Test in Pune. Australia were exceptional on all the three days of that match. Their batting on a difficult pitch was brilliant. Mitchell Starc was the unsung hero but Steve Smith played the innings of a lifetime. There was never a doubt about his quality but the second-innings hundred on an absolute square turner has put him right up there with the all time greats of Australian batting.

Greatness of players are judged as they travel around the world, score runs in every condition and Smith has done that. All eyes will be on the surface in Bengaluru and I have a feeling that it will not be a square turner. India wanted to blow away the Aussies in Pune considering their poor record in the sub-continent in the recent past. Smith was candid in his post-match press conference, saying: 'It took Australia 4000 days to win in the sub-continent'. The reason it has happened is because, after a long time, he has managed to put pressure at both ends with spinners. Stephen O'Keefe got wickets and one expects that on turning pitches. But what stood out and will stand him in good stead in the remaining Tests is that he hardly bowled any bad deliveries. He hardly got cut off the back foot, which is one of the easiest ways of playing on turning pitches.

India, on the other hand, should not worry much. They have been an outstanding side; they just need to put this defeat out of their mind. One loss doesn't make them a poor side overnight. I was happy to see them enjoying a break in the mountains. It will help them to get the defeat out of their system and start afresh. I don't see any changes in the side. There could be a question of playing an extra batsman but I think India should continue with five bowlers; it has long term effects. For the present, however, the focus will be on the pitch in Bengaluru. (Gameplan)

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Aussie spin attack will make the toss important

Ranchi will host the most important Test match of this series, a match which will decide which way the series will go. India played superbly at Bengaluru to win the second one and tie the series 1-1. It was the marvelous knock from Cheteshwar Pujara in the second innings which gave the bowlers a target at which to bowl. The innings emphasised what I had always said about Pujara and his importance to this team. He is a solid player in Test cricket, especially at the No. 3 position, who cannot always be judged by his strike-rate – though his strike-rate in the recent past has been exceptional. His technique, his solidity, is a must for this team and the value of the knock in Bengaluru was worth its weight in gold.

The toss will once again be crucial in Ranchi. There will be turn on offer on that pitch, no matter what the curator says. The reason why I say the toss will be important, which was not the case against New Zealand or England, is because of the way the Aussie spinners have bowled. Not many times in the recent past has an overseas spinner picked eight wickets on the first day of a Test match in India and both Steve O’Keefe and Nathan Lyon will keep putting pressure on India if the pitch provides spin. There has been lot of talk about the pitches in Pune and Bengaluru but I believe Ranchi will be a lot better in terms of the bounce but will ultimately spin.

The Indian team’s body language on the field was exceptional and hopefully they will hold on to it for the rest of the series. Both the boards should be credited for the way they have handled the situation arising out of the second Test match. The competitive spirit should be kept alive because that’s what an India-Australia Test series is all about.

The Indian side will go into this match unchanged. Murali Vijay will be back at his opening slot after having recovered from injury. The four-bowler option is what should be continued as the two spinners are good enough to pick 20 wickets. Australia, however, will miss Mitchell Starc, not only for his bowling but also for the footmarks he created for Lyon. The injury to Mitch Marsh may not be that sort of a problem for them as his form in Test cricket has not been something to write home about and young Marcus Stoinis or Glenn Maxwell could be the option. (Gameplan)

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Pujara's strike rate should not be made an issue

Australia deserve credit for the way they managed to save the third Test match. Not many believed, at the end of Day 4, that the visitors would save the match at Ranchi. With the absence of Mitchell Starc, or for that matter any left-arm fast bowler, there was always this issue of how much rough would be created outside the off-stump. In the end, however, the Aussie right-hand batsmen managed it all very well.

To that end, Peter Handscomb and Shaun Marsh showed exceptional resilience and excellent technique on Day 5. This will be a huge confidence booster for both, which will stand them in good stead going into the deciding Test of the series, which begins in Dharamsala on Saturday. Still, I would say Australia would probably have come away from Ranchi feeling slightly disappointed. With a score of 450 on the board, they should have put a lot more pressure on India. It would not have been that easy for the Aussies had India won the toss.

For India, Cheteshwar Pujara has grown in stature as the series has progressed. He has played two absolutely amazing knocks, and I would rate his 90 in Bengaluru even higher than the 200 he got in Ranchi. It confirms my belief about his value to this team at No.3 and would request all to stop the discussion on his strike-rate for a while.

The series is nicely set up and that's how an India-Australia series should be. Once again the curator is the point of discussion. It will not be easy for him to keep the grass on this pitch and the right picture will be seen only on the morning of the Test match as it is still coldish in Himachal Pradesh, being right up in the north. I will be looking forward to seeing how much the fast bowlers get purchase from this Dharamsala track, on which a Test will be played for the first time. The good thing is that the curator has spoken about bounce, which will take the game forward. Bounce is good for spin as well as for batting.

The next big question is about Virat Kohli. Yes, this is an important match, but he must play only if he is fully fit. It's a tough call, and one that only he can take. There is important cricket ahead, too, especially the Champions Trophy coming up after the IPL. Also for his performance to be at the peak, he needs to be fit as he has set high standards for himself.

I don't see Australia going in with another fast bowler. There would be a feeling that with all the grass there could be enough moisture to hold the top surface but over a period of five days, the spinners will come into the game a lot more. For India, the call on going in with five bowlers will depend very much on Kohli's fitness. (Gameplan)

Published 30.3.17

India need to find another fast bowler for away conditions

What a Test match and what a fantastic way to finish off the series! At a time when Test cricket fails to draw people to the ground these sorts of matches are a perfect advertisement for the game. That is why India-Australia contests are so amazing and the competitive spirit should not be publicised in a negative way. We should all understand that when two teams with champion players compete the intensity levels are enormous, stakes are enormous, the results have a huge effect and everyone connected with the game must allow the show to go on.

I never expected Australia to compete so well with India, especially with so many young players coming to the sub-continent for the first time. They have shown terrific grit and determination. Captain Steve Smith was remarkable — his performance in the series has put him on the list of all-time greats, and one needs to score in every condition to achieve that feat. His innings in Pune was probably the best of his three hundreds. He did not change his game on difficult pitches and continued on in a positive way which at times is extremely difficult in sub-continent conditions.

Despite the loss, Smith will return home a satisfied man mostly because of the performances of his bowlers. All good Test teams have had spinners of great quality, whether it was the Australia of the late 90s and early 2000s, or England from 2006-2010. Nathan Lyon, with his performance in this series, has become a real asset, ably supported by some terrific fast bowlers. If Smith can get the batting unit going, this side will become a formidable one in a few years.

India once again proved how tough they are to beat in home conditions. After going 0-1 down in Pune, they played excellent cricket to win the series. For me, the stand-out performances came in the second innings at Bangalore and on Day Three of the final Test at Dharamsala. On a tough pitch in Bangalore, Pujara and Rahane showed their class and in Dharamsala, I saw Australian batters being intimidated by pace after a long time. Umesh Yadav stepped up in this series and for the first time bowled to his potential. The challenge for him will be to remain consistent as he, Shami and Bhuvneshwar will be very important when India starts touring.

India need to find another fast bowler for away conditions. Ishant has been good but the lack of wickets keeps frustrating all his well-wishers like me. His talent and effort are beyond doubt but the numbers in the wickets column don't justify that. My faith in KL Rahul continues to keep growing. This series has once again proved his class and he will prove to be fantastic for India.

The spinners did what they were expected to do on these turning tracks but the clever selection of Kuldeep Yadav has added some terrific variation for use on good pitches. At times, the team management needs to persist with certain talent who need to be looked after and with Anil at the top — a perfect coach for youngsters — the team and the selectors need to walk that extra mile and help him mature into a quality spinner.

The win at Dharamsala has confirmed my view that this team does not need turning pitches to win Test matches; such pitches will only help make them a better team away from home. Well done, Virat and Ajinkya. (Gameplan)

Published 12.4.17

RCB missing leadership, determination of Kohli

So, we have seen yet another terrific start to the IPL and, from the point of view of the popularity of the tournament, it has gone even bigger. The opening game at Hyderabad for the 10th edition of the tournament was a huge success. All the stands were packed at the Rajiv Gandhi International Stadium and the atmosphere was just electric.

Over the years, with the erstwhile Deccan Chargers not succeeding so much after their win in 2009, the crowds had begun to dwindle. Now, however, with the likes of David Warner, Yuvraj Singh, Moises Henriques and Rashid Khan playing some exceptional cricket, the fan base for the defending champions has just got bigger and bigger.

It has been a pretty even start for most of the teams except for Royal Challengers Bangalore who have lost a lot of players due to injury. AB de Villiers made a comeback on Monday night and made his presence felt straight away but you can see the side is missing the leadership and determination of their captain Virat Kohli.

Sunrisers Hyderabad, along with Kings XI Punjab and Kolkata Knight Riders, have so far been best of the lot. The Hyderabad side look a confident and balanced team and with the return of Mustafizur Rahman at some point, they will become an even better team. The Knight Riders look like a power-packed side but the injury to Chris Lynn might just be a set-back for them. Hopefully they will find a solution to that.

For Punjab, the IPL has been an amazing rollercoaster ride, from getting to the finals a couple of seasons ago and then not even qualifying last season! They have looked a good side so far this year, with their captain leading from the front. When Glenn Maxwell is in the form he is in, he can win anything.

Punjab have remained flexible in the way they have approached T20 cricket, but the biggest difference so far is the presence of Virender Sehwag. He has brought calmness and a pressure-less attitude into the team, something which he was so very good at doing in his playing days, and which is very important in this format. (Gameplan)

Published 21.4.17

KKR's Pandey getting better all the time

The Kolkata Knight Riders play two important matches, with just a day in between, against the Gujarat Lions and Royal Challengers Bangalore. Though the Kolkata side is very comfortably placed at the moment, everyone knows that it's still early days in the tournament and things can change very, very quickly.

The Knights will have been pretty satisfied with their performance in their last match, against the Delhi Daredevils on Monday. When any team plays big tournaments, there will be a few jolts along the journey to the top. As a team, one has to overcome these jolts and the Knight Riders did just that that day. For a team to win big competitions everyone has to fire at different stages, and the runs from Yusuf Pathan will give the KKR management a lot of confidence.

With the injury to Chris Lynn, Kolkata must have felt that they had lost a bit of power in the side. I must say, however, that Manish Pandey and Yusuf stepped it up for them when the team required it. Manish has become a most valuable player and is someone who is getting better all the time.

In the first of the two up-coming matches, against the Gujarat Lions on Friday, the Kolkata side definitely starts as the favourite. Gujarat have had a stop-start tournament till date and their spin bowling has let them down – which is contrary to KKR's spinners. The likes of Sunil Narine, Kuldeep Yadav and Piyush Chawla have been very strong on various surfaces and they have been the difference between 160 and 180 for the opposition sides. The Gujarat Lions need to find form – especially the spinners who are going for plenty at the moment – before it's too late and things move deeper towards the business end of the tournament.

Bangalore have made the best decision by bringing Chris Gayle back into the system and what has been even better for them is that he has found form. He has been an important part of their success in the past and Virat Kohli will look for consistency from Gayle in this critical stage of the tournament.

Between the two teams KKR take on next, I think Bangalore will be a bigger challenge than Gujarat although, considering the current form they are in, I would consider the Knights as favourites in both matches. (Gameplan)

Published 25.4.17

Bangalore boys surprised by pace of Eden pitch

The Kolkata Knight Riders pulled out an absolute blinder against Royal Challenger's Bangalore on Sunday night and Virat Kohli's reaction after the game was quite understandable. It was a crucial game for Bangalore and points here would have pushed them up the ladder.

A score of 132 on the Eden surface, and on this outfield, was not a big total but the Kolkata fast bowlers really bent their backs to see their team through. The pitch at the Eden is probably one of the best in the country at the moment, one where everyone gets a fair bit of purchase and it was great to see that the spinners came into play in the first innings and the fast bowlers in the second. For Bangalore, Yuzvender Chahal has been having a good run in this format; he has developed as a very fine bowler and looks to be getting better and better with time.

After a terrific start by Kolkata, the Bangalore spinners did manage to pull it back and by half-time, 75 percent of the people at the ground must have believed that the visitors would win. Nathan Coulter-Nile, however, bowling at good pace and dismissing Virat Kohli early, gave Kolkata the momentum they needed. Kolkata picked this year's squad based on conditions at the Eden, and look how well that decision helped in this very important game.

I just felt that the Bangalore boys got surprised with the pace of the pitch because the likes of Chris Gayle and AB de Villiers, who are such outstanding players, rarely get out in such fashion. And it is even more rare for teams to get bowled out in T20s, so the Knights deserve to be given special credit.

Another week into the IPL has seen some teams have move up the ladder, while some have slipped. Delhi Daredevils and Gujarat Lions are probably two sides who might be disappointed, especially the latter who lost two back-to-back home games and which will make life a bit difficult for them. The team which is showing good signs of improvement, however, is Rising Pune Supergiant. With Dhoni playing a good knock and the team balance being set right by the management, they will be the side to watch.

The tournament is half-way done and wins and losses have lot more effect at this stage. The atmosphere at the Eden was crackling, and every seat was sold. This has been the story so far this IPL all over the country and that is fascinating to see. (Gameplan)

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Punjab's 'cool' the influence of mentor Viru

Last year's second-place finisher Royal Challenger's Bangalore is the first team to exit this edition of the IPL. Last season, they were in a situation where they needed to win four games in a row to make the knock-out stage. This time, however, even if they win their last few games, getting to the qualifiers is beyond them. That's definitely sad news for Virat Kohli fans, not least because you want players like him to be there till the end to entertain the cricket loving public with their plethora of talent.

A team comprising players like Kohli, AB de Villiers, Chris Gayle is generally expected to blast past the others. But I feel that Bangalore never got into the groove with Virat and AB missing out on a few early matches due to injury, Chris Gayle encountering inconsistency and, on top of that, their bowling never looked settled enough.

Virat, AB, Gayle may be exiting but David Warner continues to entertain. The other day, his was a cracker of a knock that took the wind out of the entire opposition. As the IPL arrives at the business end, Mumbai, Kolkata, and Hyderabad have all staked their claim for a last-four finish. It seems, however, that there will be a keen tussle between Pune, KXIP and Delhi. The latter, who won their last home game in style, could also be strong challengers for the fourth qualifying spot.

Punjab have looked a very settled team with an aura of coolness around them. This could be the influence of mentor 'Viru Paaji' but they will need to win a few big games coming up and the likes of Maxwell, Miller, and Amla need to fire big time to carry the team through. Delhi, meanwhile, boast of quite a few talented youngsters, both in their national and international kitty. Their bowling has variety; it's only that 'come the big moment' these young talents will need to put their hands up.

Mumbai, Kolkata and Hyderabad have looked very settled be it in the depth and power of their batting or in the variety of their bowling. Warner, Kieron Pollard and Robin Uthappa have been finishing off games single-handedly, while the bowling units of these three teams have so much variety for the captains to choose from that I personally feel that any knockout game these teams play against each other will be a cracker! Any team qualifying in the fourth spot will have a tough time challenging these three but as they say, in cricket and more so in the IPL, no prediction is valid because it's all about what happens on the day. (Gameplan)

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Dan, Shardul add zip to Pune attack

The IPL has arrived at its most important stage and the Mumbai Indians are probably the only team sure of making the last four. Having said that, the Kolkata Knight Riders and Rising Pune Supergiant are not far behind and will need to play very poorly to not make it to the knock-out stage.

The Knight Riders have slipped up in the last two games, but this is natural in such a long tournament. Robin Uthappa and Chris Lynn's absence has probably hurt them a bit and they will be hoping for both to come back in the next few games. They will also need to take a look at their opening combination as Sunil Narine has just dropped off a bit from the blows he was handing out in the earlier games.

Pune are the most improved side going into the business end of the tournament. They have got their balance right, and Dan Christian and Shardul Thakur have added a bit of zip to their attack along with Jaydev Unadkat. I expect these three teams to make it the qualifiers unless something major happens. Sunrisers Hyderabad are holding on to fourth position and although Kings XI Punjab and Delhi Daredevils are challenging them, they are still a bit ahead.

A lot of players have also made their mark on the tournament thus far. Ben Stokes' innings the other night was remarkable, one which single-handedly took Pune to victory. There have been a few more innings that have impressed like those by Rahul Tripathi, Sanju Samson and Rishab Pant. Samson looks a very classy player and, hopefully, under the guidance of Rahul Dravid will be able to keep his head in the right place. Tripathi also looks exceptional, his knock against the Knights was one of the best this IPL and he looks more and more confident with every run he adds on the board.

For me, however, the lad to watch out for is young Rishab. Good teams need youngsters with spark who can win big matches and he is one such player. Delhi have recorded two remarkable victories and the win against Gujarat was one of the best. Samson did play a major part but it was mostly Pant's 97 that got them over the line. He looks like someone who, on his day, can run away with a game and is a serious match-winner. (Gameplan)

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Gambhir needs to open for Kolkata

The IPL crescendo is reaching its peak and KKR find themselves in a knockout-like situation for a finish in the top four. I am pretty sure KKR will go through but if they lose the last match to Mumbai and, on the other hand, RPS, Sunrisers and Kings XI win their last games, KKR will need to depend on the run-rate factor, which I believe they will be keen to avoid.

Mumbai Indians will want to assert their supremacy and in order to that they would like to finish off the league phase with a win and become remain the undisputed No. 1.

Kolkata need Gautam Gambhir to open. Sunil Narine can do a cameo but if Gambhir settles down and plays long, he has the ability to finish off the match, with Chris Lynn providing the power at the other end. It will be interesting to see how KKR line up their bowling attack. Their pacers blasted RCB and with Umesh, Coulter-Nile, and Boult available, they have the fire-power, not to forget Narine and Kuldeep Yadav. It will also be a test of nerves for both the sides and whoever holds on till the last will have the last laugh.

Mumbai will find the new Eden Gardens pitch to their liking as it has pace and bounce which should suit their stroke players. The likes of Pollard, Rohit Sharma, Hardik Pandya, and Rana love the ball to come on to the bat. They seem to be the most balanced team in the competition, be it in bowling or batting. They have good pacers in the likes of Bumrah, Johnson, McClenaghan, and Malinga and, with Bhajji bowling well, it has added to their spin armoury. Their batting depth, with Hardik coming in at 7 or 8, is enviable.

Kings XI surprised many with their closely-fought win over KKR but they will have to be consistent in their last two games if they want to sneak into the last four. Sunrisers have a bit of an advantage after getting one point in a washed-out game, but it's a must-win situation for the defending champions – it's their last game of the group stage and they have no option but to win to stay in the hunt. (Gameplan)

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Sunrisers and KKR evenly matched

Royal Challengers Bangalore, last year's runners-up, and Gujarat Lions, the another team that reached the qualifiers last season, are nowhere in contention for this year's IPL title. It has been a year of disappointment for these two teams and I believe they never got themselves settled. It must be also very disappointing for Kings XI Punjab: in the crucial last game no one stood up and delivered. It was a rather tame submission and even the otherwise cool 'Viru paaji', looked frustrated.

As far I'm concerned, the best teams on form have reached the last four and any of them could go on to become the champions. On their day, any of these four could deliver the killer blow and there are no real favourites. Last year's champion, Sunrisers Hyderabad, must consider themselves lucky for that one point in the washed-out game that helped them to scrape through. The team is led from the front by David Warner and whenever he has stood up it has been a one-man show. They have a mix of quality players, be it the experienced Yuvraj, Shikhar Dhawan and Kane Williamson, or young talents like Vijay Shankar. Hyderabad have a good mix in the bowling department too; Bhuvni and Asish Nehra, along with the effective Afghan Rashid Khan or the young Siraj. It's only that the right combination needs to be chosen for the day and they will need to deliver.

Sunrisers play Kolkata Knight Riders but that is just the first step for both teams in their effort to reach the final. Both are evenly matched, both enjoy chasing and it will be a tricky call for the teams at the toss because one slip there and that could be the end of the tournament for them. I would still maintain that Gautam Gambhir should start at the top to control the situation.

Mumbai Indians and Rising Pune Supergiant are in a better situation than Hyderabad and Kolkata. The winner goes straight into the final but the loser gets one more chance to stake a claim for the title as they will play the winners of Hyderabad-Kolkata in the second qualifier. That is the advantage of finishing 1-2 in the IPL. Pune is really a much improved side than they were at the start. With the likes of Smith, Rahane, Tripathi, Manoj Tiwary, Stokes and Dhoni, they have a formidable line-up but the captain will need to martial the bowling well. The biggest challenge for Smith will be to cover for Ben Stokes, who is not available for the rest of the IPL and it will be interesting to see how Pune plugs this big hole.

Pune will be up against a team who, with five new players in the line-up, rattled Kolkata on the latter's home turf. Mumbai has been playing well and rightly deserve to finish the group phase on top. Their bowling mix, their batting depth, their hitting power – they have it all but one needs to remember that they can also have bad days. (Gameplan)