

SOURAV GANGULY

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On Paper, India start far ahead of the West Indies

India start afresh at Port-of-Spain against the West Indies and, judging by the strength of both the teams on paper, India surely start far ahead of the hosts. The Indian team management needs to utilise this five-match ODI series as an opportunity to try out their youngsters and also various combinations, keeping the 2019 World Cup in mind. Series such as these can be perfect launch pads for the likes of young Rishab Pant to find how they settle in on the world stage.

Ajinkya Rahane sat out the entire Champions Trophy but is very likely to play with Rohit Sharma not being in the squad due to injury. It will be an opportunity for him to show that he is good in the shorter format of the game. What is important is for Rahane to decide which way he wants to play and stick to a game plan. He has enormous ability and can be a huge success in ODIs as well. At times, he has looked confused and one can't blame him as he has been in and out of the game for a while now.

Mohammed Shami is one more such candidate. He was in the Champions Trophy squad, played a warm-up game but then did not figure in any of the matches. Shami is a match-winning bowler who needs to be handled carefully because of his nagging injury problem and this could be the series where he is given the freedom to express himself.

As for the West Indies, the cricketing world needs them for the uninhibited flair they bring to the game. They should take a leaf out of Pakistan's success in the Champions Trophy — "If Pakistan can, we can too", should be their motto — and not qualifying for that tournament should give them enough determination to turn things around.

The Caribbean team has such a glorious past, has produced so many legends of the game. Only a year ago they were on top of the world in the Under-19, and the women's and men's game in the shortest format of the game. Just about a year ago, too, they beat India in a two T20 games. So the talent is there; it's just that they need a balance of experience and talented youngsters to be strong enough to compete against India. With that, however, not happening they will need to regroup at the earliest. (Gameplan)

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The decline of West Indies is not good for world cricket

India has muscled West Indies in the two matches that have happened so far, after the first match got washed out. The decline of West Indies is not a good advertisement for world cricket because the flair and the charisma of West Indian cricket has delighted us in the yesteryears. West Indian cricket officials somehow need to pull up their socks to get the legacy of West Indies back on track, because, without the charisma of free-flowing West Indian cricket, world cricket will only get poorer. How that is to be done, is for the Caribbean officials to sort out and they need to do it very fast.

One of the biggest talking points from the two matches that have happened so far is Ajinkya Rahane. He knows that he will be playing these five matches and the freedom of mind is showing in his game. I believe Kohli should immediately sit with Rahane and define his role in the team clearly, so that a talent like Rahane knows the road ahead clearly. A free-minded Ajinkya Rahane will not only take his game a few notches higher but will also feel his importance in the squad.

Another point of discussion is Kuldeep Yadav. This boy has lot of variation in his bowling, and especially on flat tracks his variation could be an asset for the side. Indian spinners looked a bit flat on the flat pitches during the Champions Trophy and you need bowlers like Kuldeep in such situation where the pitch is not offering much to the spinners. Kuldeep also has the ability to become an important clog in this Indian ODI squad because of the variation he brings to the table. The way it is going, it will not be surprising if India wraps up the series 4-0.

There is nothing much to be spoken about the West Indian team and I don't think anyone expected that the current West Indies will throw up any surprises in the series. It is also very sad to see the stands almost empty in West Indies despite it being well known that the West Indians love their cricket so much. There have been so many folklores in world cricket surrounding West Indies, and the Calypso cannot be allowed to go silent in this beautiful island country. (Gameplan)

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Despite the jolt in fourth ODI, India should win the series

Thursday's game is an important one after India, having gone 2-0 up in the series, just got a little bit of a jolt in the fourth One-Day International. They did not manage to chase down a modest total, and there was a bit of a hue and cry after the loss. This it is quite natural, as everyone expected India to beat this weak West Indies side without any problems.

It may have been a small total at Antigua but the surface made it look a lot more difficult and, to be honest, batting wasn't easy. It was important for someone to dig in and carry on and India had two batsmen who had settled down: One was Ajinkya Rahane and the other was MS Dhoni. However, both failed to take the team over the line.

Dhoni, very rightly, took the game to the end but just didn't quite manage to finish it off. This is the way Dhoni plays in ODI cricket. There have been times when he has finished a game well and there have been times when, just like the other day, he has fallen short. There will always be a fine line of remarkability and failure in such situations and the big swing over mid-on didn't go Dhoni's way that day.

For me, the loss of Hardik Pandya was crucial as he is a very good batsman and was capable of taking the pressure off Dhoni. Along with that, the shot that Ravinder Jadeja played requires a little soul searching as he could have batted on with Dhoni till the end.

In spite of all the criticism, as someone who has played in the West Indies many times before, I would say that the pitch at Antigua was not an easy one. It got tougher as the ball got older, the bounce got uneven and the off breaks from the fast bowlers gripped considerably and, to be honest, had Dhoni got out earlier, the game wouldn't have gone as far as it did.

India play the final one-dayer at Jamaica, and it will be much better than Antigua. I feel India should win it there. Their combination may change but, whatever the combination, they should get past this West Indies side. (Gameplan)

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Ervin Lewis took the game away from Kohli and Co.

A full strength West Indies side can be a delight for world cricket and that was once again on display in the only T20 match of the series. Ervin Lewis looks to be in typical Caribbean mode — playing fearless cricket, entertaining cricket lovers and winning it for your country. He was the stumbling block for India the last time the two teams met in a T20 match and on Sunday again Virat Kohli's boys had to surrender to him. Yes, he was provided two opportunities but that can't take away any credit from him. India had few answers to his clean and fearless hitting, and it was a situation that needed such an approach from one of the Caribbean batters to take them over the rope chasing 190 in 20 overs.

From the way India started, they should have got past 200. But after the departure of Kohli and Shikhar Dhawan, the hosts clawed their way back. It was tough going for debutant Rishab Pant. Although Dinesh Kartick and Pant wanted to up the run-rate they just couldn't tear apart the opposition's bowling. After the departure of Kartick, both Dhoni and Kuldeep Yadav were back in the pavilion in quick succession which also affected the quick scoring spree.

Still, on a pitch which was ideal for batting with the ball not doing much, 190 was a fighting total. It all depended on how quickly the Indian pacers could make inroads into the West Indian top-order. Gayle played a waiting game but Lewis thrived in front of the great man. He wasn't going to let any bowler settle down and carried on in the same vein throughout his innings. If one pitched up, he was on the front-foot to thrash it straight. If one pitched short, he would hit it over the mid-wicket area. When you play such a high-flowing knock you are bound to get a few chances and Indians gifted him twice.

The best part was that the young man didn't curb his style, didn't become cautious but carried on the way he thought was best. The Indian spinners, except for Kuldeep Yadav to some extent, looked flat. Shami never settled to a rhythm and so there was no stopping Ervin. To win a T20 match with nine wickets in hand, and that too chasing 190 was quite an achievement. The innings Lewis played should go down as one of the best in the game.

This result should make the West Indies cricket board realise that they need to mix their team at all levels with the big guns and fresh talent. If that is done with care, West Indies cricket will not be in tatters it seems to be in. (Gameplan)

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Sri Lanka will need to put pressure on the Indian batsmen

India kick off a long tour in Sri Lanka from Wednesday, with the first Test at Galle. It's been a long while since India has played a series in Sri Lanka which included Test matches, ODI's and a T20. This Sri Lankan team, at least on paper, seems to be no match for the Indians but it's all about making things happen on the ground. The fact that Zimbabwe defeated Sri Lanka in an ODI series recently and almost repeated the feat in the only Test match they played is a guarantee that India will be able to just roll over the Lankans too.

Sri Lanka has been weakened by the absence of Dinesh Chandimal in the first match. He has been around for some time and his experience, besides his batting skill, would have surely helped his side. He, along with Angelo Mathews, would have added more depth to the Sri Lankan middle-order. The island nation will now be dependent on Rangana Herath with the side's bowling revolving around this man. It may just turn out to be a one-man bowling unit. It will all depend on how well the other bowlers ply their trade, and that will be the decisive factor for Sri Lanka in putting pressure on India's massive batting strength.

For India, interest will revolve around Hardik Pandya. He has been around for some time now and India should find way to fit him into the Test scenario as he has the potential to shape up into a useful all-rounder for the side. And this is not just in Tests, but in all forms of the game, in and outside the sub-continent. Hardik can be a useful batter at No. 6 or 7 and also shape up to be the fifth bowler in any conditions. As far as the fast bowling is concerned, I feel it will be Mohammed Shami and Umesh Yadav. The former had shown good signs of recovery in the West Indies and once he is ready, he should be in the side.

The big toss-up will be between Jadeja and Kuldeep Yadav. It will be two spinners to start off in Sri Lanka and there shouldn't be doubt about Ashwin. If Hardik is given a break as an all-rounder, then the balance will tilt in favour of Kuldeep Yadav who has, no doubt, exhibited more guile, variation than the others. (Gameplan)

Published 3.8.17

Shikhar's magnificent knock has opened up the completion at the top

The first Test against Sri Lanka was a perfect game for India. When a team scores 600 runs batting first, it follows that that team will be sure to dominate the match and India did just that.

Shikhar Dhawan has to be congratulated for his magnificent batting. It was not so much about the runs he scored; it is the situation in which he scored them that stands out. It is never easy when you are not picked in the first instant, then when you do get picked you go on to play such a blistering knock — it is a tremendous illustration of his state of mind. His performance in the recently concluded Champions Trophy is one of the reasons he is playing so well.

What this has done is open up a competition at the top of the order, but one which will settle down in due course. It will be hard to ignore Murali Vijay and KL Rahul simply because of the sheer number of runs they have scored in tough conditions.

Cheteshwar Pujara also needs a special mention: he doesn't play all formats of the game but he is never behind when it comes to making the best of the opportunities he gets in Tests.

For India, the balance of attack with five bowlers is the right way forward in all conditions. The second Test is in Colombo, and India will go into the match facing conditions which are lot different than they were in Galle, conditions that will assist fast bowlers.

Sri Lanka, however, will have to find a way to play differently, not just in the second Test, but also in the rest of the series as they need assistance from the pitch to get twenty wickets. They will have to take a few gambles because this Indian side will beat them on flat tracks just on the basis of their gigantic batting line-up. There are just two more Tests left, including the one beginning on Thursday, and if the hosts want to stop the Indian juggernaut they will have to really make a strong turn around and play extremely well. (Gameplan)

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Sri Lanka will have to get their bowling balance right

The third Test will be played at the beautiful Pallakelle stadium, and it will also be the first time India plays at this picturesque venue. It has been a mismatched series against Sri Lanka thus far, and a lot of credit should go to India for the way they have outclassed their opponents in the previous two matches.

Sri Lanka were not in any position at any stage of the eight days played to take the upper hand against the visitors and when you look at the quality of this Sri Lanka team I don't think any of the Indian cricketers will be losing any sleep before the final Test!

The toss was a good one to win at the SSC where the ball has spun enormously; at the same time one must understand that India had the bowling to exploit such conditions. I was amazed to see Sri Lanka play three spinners against a side which has the best players of spin in world cricket. They left too much for the toss and once they lost it, it was an uphill task for them.

With Nuwan Pradeep and Rangana Herath injured and out, Sri Lanka will have to pick bowlers from nowhere against India. They have to get the balance in their attack right and not leave everything on the toss. When a team goes through such situations it is important for young players to take a hard look at themselves and stand up for the country.

India has also gone through a transition stage but they never allowed that transition to be a long one. That is because Virat, Rahane, Ashwin, Jadeja, Pujara and the rest take enormous pride in representing the country. Pujara is the stand out and is definitely the batsman of the series and will probably look to get his third hundred against this attack.

The quality of this Indian team is very good: Pujara is not a surprise but Wriddhiman and Pandya has just made the side even stronger, and Pandya can make it even stronger if the management can get him to tighten his game a little. His talent is enormous; it's only his shot selection that needs to be a bit better and he has to believe he can score more consistently at this level.

Jadeja's unfortunate suspension will allow young Kuldeep Yadav an opportunity and in these conditions he will make life difficult for Sri Lanka. When a side has an automatic replacement for an important member who is missing a game, it is a clear indication of the progress made by him. (Gameplan)

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Sri Lanka need to take a leaf out of India's book

India kick off their ODI campaign against Sri Lanka on Sunday after their phenomenal success in the Test series. The hosts' performance in the longer version deteriorated as the series progressed and this is a common syndrome for weaker teams for whom, once they lose their confidence after the first Test, the slide is rapid.

The word transition is common and easily used when a strong team like Sri Lanka gets blown away in their backyard. A lot of these teams must take a look at India. Indian cricket has been strong for sometime despite great players leaving the arena in the natural cycle of sport.

This country has continued to produce players like Kohli, Pujara, Rahul, Rahane, Rohit, Ashwin, and Pandya who, with their determination and hunger to play top level cricket, have never allowed the transition to effect the squad. When you see Kohli and company marching on to the field, the pride is evident.

When I look at this Sri Lankan side, I see talent. However, they are missing the fighting spirit and they will have to compete with the best and raise the bar. Cricket is not only about talent but also about will and courage. Yes, the Sri Lankan bowling looks very, very weak but somewhere down the line it is for the players to stand up and be counted.

Their loss against India should be an eye-opener and learning curve. It will be huge mistake for them to just put this performance behind them. The names mentioned above should be motivation for all the Sri Lankan players to be like them. Some of the dismissals were soft, some of the shots showed lack of determination and, if that continues, their transition will be very long.

Sri Lanka will go into the ODI series with mixed emotions. Their win at The Oval against India in the Champions Trophy will give them some confidence. On the other hand, the loss against Zimbabwe at home could be a setback. They know they are up against a very strong team, and a team that was strong in the Tests will most likely be even stronger in the ODIs.

Though key members of the India side have been rested, the team still has some terrific match winners. Rohit's elevation to the vice-captaincy is a very good decision. His success in the IPL has been rewarded as he has done a wonderful job with Mumbai Indians. I will be watching a lot of them closely but at the top of that list will be young Pandya who, I believe, is a very exciting cricketer. (Gameplan)

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India blow away disappointing Sri Lankan batting

Sri Lanka once again suffered a heavy loss in the third ODI and it was not a surprising result. After the second ODI, from a situation where they had reduced India to 130 for 7, Sri Lanka seemed to be still reeling under the loss and the psychological blow. So, from 61 for 4 India managed to organize themselves to another win, thereby clinching the series. To recover from such defeats one needs a lot of ability and class and that is what is missing from this Sri Lanka team.

I was really surprised that Sri Lanka captain Chamara Kapugedera decided to bat first despite the fact that they lost the first two matches batting first. It is said in cricket that if one keeps on playing the same way, one will end up with the same results and that is exactly what happened in the third match. You can't beat India by scoring just about 200 runs. We have been harping on about the lack of penetration of the Lankan bowling but one also needs to recognise that their batting has been a huge let down.

Rohit Sharma was once again at his blistering best and when he plays his usual game, he makes batting look so easy. In spite of the Dhyanjaya blip in his first two overs, the experience of Dhoni and the quality of Rohit arrested any further inroads the hosts could have made and the situation became too much for Sri Lanka to handle.

So what next for Sri Lanka? Where do they go from here? The answer is simple. Each one of them has to look deep within and ask himself: what can I do better as an individual? One has to forget playing for selection, go ahead, see the ball and hit the ball because the more you see the ball and hit the more you score runs. There is no other solution to this. The individual has to rise and the level of individual brilliance needs to be raised further, too.

For India, this is an opportunity to give everyone a go in the middle. Maybe try out Kedar Jadhav and see how he fares at No. 3, or Hardik Pandya at No. 4. Maybe see what Shardul Thakur can do with the new ball. I know the thought of a 5-0 sweep is looming large in everyone's mind but I am sure that even with these experiments that will still be possible. (Gameplan)

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Australia won't find it easy against a confident India

India take on Australia in a five-match one day-series beginning Sunday, and hopefully this will be a competitive one. Last time both sides played a one-day series in India it was a big scoring one, and the hosts did very well to come from behind to win it. If the pitches are good this time, I think it is going to be another high scoring one. India have just come off a very good series against Sri Lanka — irrespective of what the opposition may have been — so it will not be an easy fight for Australia against a very confident side. It will be a different series if the ball turns and yet different if it doesn't.

There are three things that Australia will be happy about: they will not get to see Shikhar Dhawan and the two spinners, R. Ashwin and Ravindra Jadeja. The both of them are very dangerous in these conditions and the enormous experience and more-than-capable batsmanship down the order have made India a stronger side. But, then, at some stage the selectors have to find new players and I feel it was the right decision to rest the spinning duo. Along with Bumrah, Mohammad Shami will just walk into the side but with no Bhuvneshwar, the batting after Pandya becomes a bit weak.

So, Axar Patel, Kuldeep Yadav and Shami will have to play important knocks under pressure. Dhawan is not only good but has been in tremendous form lately and India will miss his services. His replacement could be Ajinkya Rahane but that will only happen if India decide to rest either Manish Pandey or Kedar Yadav. The latter, with his uncanny bowling, has become an important member of the side and with the good series he had against England at home, it will not be easy to leave him out.

For Australia, they have match winners, but it will be important for their batters to pace the innings correctly. Both Pat Cummins and Josh Hazlewood will be handy and with James Faulkner down the order it's a deep batting line up. It will also be an important series for Glenn Maxwell and if he has to establish himself in this side, this is the place to stand up. (Gameplan)

Published 21.9.17

Both India and Australia need to play an extra fast bowler at the Eden

Eden Gardens has seen some very severe rain over the last few days but this is not at all surprising. It is but natural in the month of September that we would be experiencing such weather. However, having said that, once the rain stops the ground conditions are so good that the game can start immediately.

The groundsmen at the Eden have done a remarkable job over the last two years not only with the drainage and covers but also with keeping a sense of timing in preparation for a game. We had played a Test match against New Zealand in September last year and I don't see any reason for this game not going the full distance on Thursday.

The pitch at Eden Gardens will be a completely different surface to the one we saw in Chennai. The fast bowlers will have a huge role to play on this ground, more so after all the rain over the past three days. If we get in a good bit of sunshine a couple of hours before the match it will be a lot harder but there will be enough carry for the fast bowlers. It will be a good toss to win and a terrific surface on which to bowl first, not only because of the pitch conditions but also because both the captains will have an eye on the overhead conditions.

It is a very important game for Australia because if they go 2-0 down, it will be hard for them to recover. It is a great opportunity for both sides to play an extra fast bowler. India played two spinners in Chennai and will probably have to wait till the last moment to decide whether to go in with an extra seamer or extra spinner. I would still go in with an extra spinner looking at the way the likes of Travis Head and Marcus Stoinis handled spin in Chennai.

The visitors also need to look at Peter Handscomb for Matthew Wade. Handscomb is not only good player of spin but is also in form and can keep wickets. Australia need a bit of depth to compete with this Indian side. (Gameplan)

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Kohli's classic knock shows he is mentally stronger than the rest

India look all set to win the series in Indore and Australia will need to do something extraordinary to stop this Indian juggernaut. The hosts' batting has not been at its best, admittedly, yet the totals have been good enough to get past Australia.

The teams now move to Indore whose pitch is a fantastic batting surface. It is not, however, the biggest of grounds and this is not very good news for the visitors. The Australian batting has really been a let-down and they must be very disappointed at not chasing down 250 at Eden Gardens.

In Chennai, the ball spun a bit, there was a bit of purchase and the rain also came into play but the Eden had a better batting surface and the way the Aussies tackled spin on that surface does not augur well for them for rest of the series.

Moreover, the young Australian batting has not really stood up, and hence there is a feeling that once David Warner and Steve Smith are dismissed they will find it very hard to chase down targets. Their only option is to bat first and defend the score with their bowling which has been a big plus for them. Pat Cummins has been sensational, as has Nathan Coulter-Nile.

For India, Virat Kohli's knock at the Eden was a classic not just because he scored runs – that is something he does anyway in one-day cricket – but for the mental adjustment he has made and the ability he has shown in his application while batting, and that is why he is different from the rest. I am sure a lot of young batsmen have learnt a thing or two from that innings about how to apply themselves.

After the Champions Trophy I had a feeling that India wanted wrist spinners in their mix and that's why Yuzvendra Chahal and Kuldeep Yadav have been persistently featuring in the squad. Kuldeep has lot of variation in his bowling but Chahal has stood out for me: his temperament is the biggest plus for India and the word is that the Aussie batsmen are not being able to pick him very well. Once again, this is not good news for the visitors for rest of the series! (Gameplan)

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Spinners will continue to dominate the Aussies in the T20s too

Australia will have an uphill task in stopping the Indian onslaught in the three-match T20 series. As the format is shorter, the difference between the two sides will reduce to some extent but the major difference – that of quality – will once again make life difficult for the Aussies. Until they find a way to play spin properly, India will dominate even in this format of the game.

I am very happy to see that Ashish Nehra is back in the Indian side. He, along with Bumrah, is one of India's best Twenty20 bowlers. Being a left-hander he creates a different angle for the batters.

The Indian spinners will once again continue to be a threat to the Australians. For them the key is to learn very, very quickly, which to my surprise, the young players have not been able to manage. For me, more than anything else their shot selection has been very ordinary, mostly has been against spin and other than VVS Laxman I have not seen anyone hitting against spin and being successful for a long period of time.

What I fail to understand is that how one cricketer keeps playing in similar conditions and keeps on making the same mistakes over and over again. The likes of Travis Head and Glenn Maxwell will have to stand up and do something different for Australia to put pressure back on India. The only player to improve has been Marcus Stoinis and hopefully the others will learn from him.

Australia will be without Pat Cummins, their best fast bowler in the ODI series, who has been surprisingly sent back for the Ashes, a series which is due to start in 50 days' time! This particular move makes me wonder if Australia have given up trying here in sub-continent conditions. They have lost 14 of the last 15 games in the last one and half years and the pressure on Steve Smith will be huge.

India are on a roll and once again will start as favourites, irrespective of who has been rested and who they have picked. (Gameplan)

Published 22.10.17

NZ spinners need to perform well to give India a fight

The start of another series and, not surprisingly, India will start as favourites, again. India has had a very good run over the last one and a half years and I don't see any reason why this can't continue for the rest of the year. New Zealand got walloped in the Test series although I believe the shorter format will be a better option for them to compete against India. They have started well with a good victory in their warm-up game against the Board President's XI which should give them a bit of confidence.

The difference between Australia and New Zealand is in the spin department. The Black Caps have spinners who are more accurate than the Aussies and if there is a bit of turn they will have wicket takers in the middle-overs, which wasn't the case with Australia. They will be happy with the form of Ross Taylor who got a 100 in the warm-up. If New Zealand has to compete then the likes of Taylor, Guptill, and Williamson will have to have a very, very good series or else it could be a repeat of the past.

The visitors' batsmen in previous series have looked strong against fast bowlers but faded away against the spinners. Hopefully, they will have learnt from their previous experience, which was not the case with Australia or even for that matter England, in the Test matches. The key for the Black Caps will be to have wickets in hand when the spinners come on. New Zealand will play their first game at the Wankhede which will have a bit of bounce – it's a good place to start the series.

India have picked a side which picks itself and I am not surprised with the selection. It's a very strong unit, most importantly one which has been consistent. But I beg to differ with the dropping of KL Rahul. He is someone who has scored runs against good attacks, be it in Australia or a tough pitch in Sri Lanka or a brilliant 100 in a T20 game in America. He is a player for the future and he should have been persisted with. Admittedly, he has had 3-4 bad ODIs but I personally believe he is exceptionally talented. The selectors must get him back at the earliest.

India have New Zealand and then Sri Lanka to play before they embark on the tour of South Africa. There is no Umesh Yadav or Shami, who have been released to play domestic cricket. But I think it's important that these two play ODI's. Bhuvni and Bumrah could have been given a break and Umesh and Shami given a full ODI series to keep them interested, considering they did not play many matches in the recently concluded series against Australia. India will not need two but 5 quicks to be in good rhythm over the next 15 months. (Gameplan)

Published 25.10.17

New Zealand seem to have a grip on spin in Indian conditions

New Zealand put up a clinical display while playing the Indian spinners in the first ODI on Sunday and have deservedly gone ahead in the three-match series. The partnership of Tom Latham and Ross Taylor stood the test in the middle overs and ensured that the Black Caps sailed home smoothly. India captain Virat Kohli shuffled his bowlers around but didn't take chances with part-timer Kedar Jadhav as it seemed like not the day to bring about a collapse in the New Zealand line-up.

New Zealand started well with Trent Boult striking early but after that it became a Virat Kohli show. The entire cricketing world has been effusive in praise for Kohli but this time words fell short in describing his ability. It was a hot, humid, draining day at the Wankhede yet he showed what champions are made of. For any young player watching Kohli, what stands out is his ability to adjust in different conditions. He is still some distance away from Sachin's landmark in one-day cricket but if anybody can surpass it, it could be Kohli. He neutralised the initial advantage which New Zealand gained and then from there on built on it. This despite partnerships being scarce as India lost wickets at regular intervals but still Virat stood tall and played one of the most memorable innings of his career. Without his hundred the Indian scorecard could have looked even frailer and that is why his knock was so important. India have been trying out various players at No. 4 but it's important for them to find a solid player at that spot because in tough conditions they need a good top four.

The New Zealand bowling showed they had more meat than the Australians. Boult is a fantastic bowler and finished with great figures in these conditions. The difference, however, between New Zealand and other touring teams is Mitchell Santner. Spin is very important in the sub-continent and he showed good control against quality players. The Black Caps seem to have done their homework well, not only in bowling but also in terms of handling the Indian wrist spinners. Latham used his strong point – sweeping – to great effect while Ross Taylor kept things calm at the other end. The Wankhede pitch had enough for the spinners and both Latham and Ross showed great control under pressure. New Zealand will be hoping for their skipper to join the party as that will surely make their batting look more solid.

India should not worry about this loss as they have the ability and firepower to bounce back strongly and take on this New Zealand team. They must, however, up their game a lot more as they are up against a very disciplined opponent. (Gameplan)

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Bhuvi and Bumrah pushed NZ on the back foot early

India bounced back strongly against New Zealand in the second ODI of the series and I believe Virat and his boys will want to carry the same momentum into the decider at Kanpur. It was indeed an all-round performance by the Indians and they put up a good show against a New Zealand side which was willing to compete hard. It was the typical Pune wicket: flat, and more on the slower side.

The Indian bowlers came to the party early and it was some superb bowling by Bhuvneshwar and Bumrah which pushed New Zealand onto the back foot straight away. Bhuvneshwar and Bumrah have matured immensely and have added so much to their repertoire that they have become a pair to reckon with in the shorter format.

I had mentioned in my series preview that if the Black Caps wanted to make a match of it then one of the three seniors — Martin Guptill, Kane Williamson or Ross Taylor — would need to stand up, with the rest building the innings around them. In the first match Tom Latham played a stellar knock but one can't take away the fact that Taylor played one which held the innings together.

Williamson hasn't made a mark yet and with Guptill also not standing up the entire pressure is on the middle-order. Against a well balanced Indian attack it is not possible to thrive every day after losing the top-order early and that is exactly what happened at Pune. India's batting has always been their strong point but the way the bowling is shaping up, the reciprocal support between the two departments will only help them become a bigger force in all conditions.

New Zealand's decision to bat first in Pune can be debated but in Kanpur I am sure the captain who wins the toss will want to field first because dew could be a factor there around this time of year. Green Park generally produces a twenty yards which is low and slow in nature, with the possibility of spinners getting more help. India brought in Akshar Patel in place of Kuldeep Yadav, a move I believe was more aimed to give the young bowler a break and Akshar delivered well.

If New Zealand want to threaten India for a series win they will need their openers to stand-up well against Bhuvi and Bumrah, with and one of their senior players piling up a big one. Their bowling has been impressive so far with Boult being the stand-out and Santner delivering well in the middle-overs but the batters need to come to the party immediately. As for India, they will just need to play the way they have been so far without letting complacency creep in. (Gameplan)

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India pull off thrilling win over a feisty New Zealand

India pulled off an amazing victory in Kanpur and the crowd there was treated to some fascinating cricket, more so because New Zealand didn't get bowled down by the 337 runs on the board and put up a grand chase. It was ultimately India's being able to deliver with both bat and ball that gave them the thrilling victory.

The Kanpur pitch was terrific, so different from the low and slow pitches of old. Rohit Sharma continued his amazing form in the one-dayers and I get a feeling we might just see a transformation in his Test career. He, along with Virat Kohli, put up a partnership which not only delighted the cricket fans but also helped India reach a total that provided the bowlers a cushion even when they were bowling with the effect of dew.

Virat and his boys needed as many runs on the board as they could manage, batting first, so that even if, with the dew, the pitch became easy to bat on or the bowlers found it difficult to grip, the opponents would still know that they have a mountain to climb. And that created the ultimate difference. That's why this victory was even more satisfying. If India were in the position New Zealand were, they would never have lost the game but all credit to Bumrah, and Bhuvni who came back well after a poor start.

The scene now shifts from the shorter to the shortest version of the game where it will also be a tough competition. This New Zealand team is getting better since the last time I watched them on the Indian soil and even without huge contributions from their senior three, they competed with India till the very end.

The first T20 match at Delhi will be an emotional swansong for Ashish Nehra. How much he loved the game is amply proved by the way he has survived for so long even with so many injuries. Zeal, guts, determination, skill... you name it and he had it all. He has been a survivor, a superb team man and I definitely can vouch for that. Whenever the captain needed, he would run in hard. His ability to adapt to any format and his desire to succeed also helped him come back after being away from the team for so long. I simply wish the Indian team gives him a befitting goodbye with a win in the first T20 on his home ground. It will be a good game at Kotla and, with winter setting in, the toss would be crucial once again. (Gameplan)

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NZ played and bowled spin well to give India good competition

It has been a good series, very different from a lot of the home series over the last one and a half years. Although India came out the better side in the end, a lot of credit needs to go to New Zealand for the way they played. They have, by far, looked the best side of all the recent touring teams. I have always said that when you come to India you will have to play spin and bowl spin well. New Zealand excelled there and that is why they were so good.

We saw some outstanding performances from Tom Latham, Colin Munro, Ross Taylor, Trent Boult, Tim Southee, and Mitch Santner. The middle-order played spin well and the Black Caps will be highly satisfied with their performance. However, if I were Kane Williamson, I would be unhappy that they did not win the series. Thirty-five runs from 24 balls and 68 to get in eight overs had New Zealand in the driver's seat. I can guarantee you that if India had been in that situation they wouldn't have lost.

India has actually benefitted a lot from these six games. We all speak about doing well away from home but the conditions which were on display have made these victories more satisfying. The conditions in Kanpur and Thiruvananthapuram, when India was defending, were against the home side. For me, it was not just the wins, which you would expect at home, but the fight and quality India showed in pressure situations that were remarkable.

The form of Virat Kohli, Jasprit Bumrah, and Bhuvneshwar Kumar has been exemplary. India need to invest consistently in Yuzvendra Chahal because I think he is someone who will do well overseas. I completely understand Virat's decision to experiment in the middle-order because if you don't do it now you will not get time to do it later. Of all the players he has tried and tested KL Rahul has looked the best. He was left out of the side which I presume is to give others an opportunity but its time he was bought back. His performances have been strong around the world, whether in Australia, Sri Lanka, or America. He got a terrific 100 at No. 4 in a T20 match and maybe it's time Virat gave him a fair go over a longer period.

Also it's important that India look at options other than Bhuvi and Bumrah in the fast bowling department. With such a lot of cricket around it's important that the likes of Umesh Yadav, Mohammed Shami, Shardul Thakur get a go and the home series against Sri Lanka could be the perfect opportunity. (Gameplan)