

**STEPHEN FLEMING**

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**We need to combat Rashid, Bhuvni's bowling**

When I started out with the Indian Premier League in 2008, the tenth anniversary seemed very far away. To be honest, I'm sure none of us were even thinking that far ahead. And look where we are now. On a personal level, I've been part of a great team, as a player and then as a coach, and then I've been entrusted the task of building a new team. Over the years, the tournament has grown bigger and more challenging, but never dull or boring or familiar.

This is a particularly important year for us as a new franchise, and technically speaking, this is our first proper season at home. We know we haven't yet given the home fans anything significant to cheer about, which is something we hope to change quickly. It's a fantastic ground, and as soon as we hit a winning streak, we know the fans will fall solidly behind us.

We've had a few good training sessions, and we're just coming off the back of a great win over Royal Challengers Bangalore. Therefore, we are confident of a good show against Sunrisers Hyderabad, the defending champions, when we face them on Saturday.

One of our key focus areas will be to effectively combat the bowling of Bhuvneshwar Kumar and Rashid Khan because, if we play them well, we have every chance of exerting pressure. That is not to say we'll ignore the other players! SRH is one of the most balanced sides in the league, and it will take a considerable effort to put them under pressure.

As for our own bowling, we have chopped and changed a bit at the start of the season, mainly because we need to get to know our players quickly, and we would like to offer every bowler an opportunity to showcase his strengths. However, we put up a highly efficient display against Bangalore and we will build on that. As a team, we remain focused on the need to break into the top three, with the points table so interestingly divided between the three at the top and the remaining five.

All in all, we can't wait for the game. The boys are charged, and captain Steve Smith has 'recharged' his batteries with a quick trip to Dubai with his young family, to take a break from his long stint away from home. I feel the really exciting times have only just begun.

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**The challenge this year is to read the conditions correctly**

Rising Pune Supergiant and Kolkata Knight Riders may have arrived at their face-off with contrasting victories but a win is a win and, particularly in the IPL, analysing a win is irrelevant given the extended length of the tournament. What is important is that we put up a confident performance against Mumbai Indians under pressure, and even more importantly, exerted enough pressure on them to force a win.

By no means did we play a perfect game. It is undeniable that you want to win easy, and you want to win well but one of the challenges this year, far more so than in any other year, has been to correctly read the conditions, before, during, and at the end. Conditions have not been traditional this season – Bangalore, for example, is a low-scoring ground. Mumbai was very dry, with not a lot of dew, while Kolkata produced a seaming wicket, with quite a bit of pace and bounce.

Therefore, the key this year is to read the conditions and play accordingly. So even though people may have expected us to score more than we did against Mumbai, 160 on that pitch was a challenging total. The expectations of fans may be based on past years but this edition of the IPL has seen the world's best players struggle to score at the death. That means one of two things – either the bowling has been extremely good or the conditions aren't easy to score in, particularly when the ball gets old.

I feel the balanced competition is a good thing, instead of 190-200 every time. The best T20 games are often the low-scoring ones. When we take on the Kolkata Knight Riders, I'm sure the bowling will play a very important role and they will have to work out their best combination on our home ground. Of course, KKR are one of the tournament's most balanced sides, with all bases covered.

Our last few performances have contributed to the growing belief within the side, and confidence is high. If we win against KKR, we will have won four out of our last four games, which will be an invaluable boost at the business end of the tournament.

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### **I never over-evaluate performances**

At the start of the tournament, not many people would have predicted that Rising Pune Supergiant would find themselves in fourth place halfway through the tournament, but we aren't surprised. In fact, we feel we deserve this position. We've had a good run of late, and had a good chance to win in the last game against Kolkata Knight Riders, but KKR played well, and the dropped catches and the dew worked against us too.

Much seems to have been made of the dropped catches, but it was just one of those nights, when the fielding came under increased focus because the mistakes cost us runs. Uthappa played really well, and that gave the dropped catch huge importance.

However, I never over-evaluate performances, and am not a believer in the "you've got to catch 50 before you go home" school of coaching, so we will just make a few attitude adjustments. There's no fuss or anxiety, because we've done all the work, and on Saturday everything could stick.

The other big factor was the dew. We've been in Pune a while, but that was our first experience of dew, including our training sessions, and it was incredibly heavy dew. I mentioned conditions in my last column, and here we are, still learning about our home conditions! Not only was the dew unexpected, it also had a significant bearing on the wicket and the ball.

Consequently, we are better prepared for our game against Royal Challengers Bangalore. That's one side you can never take lightly, no matter what their current situation. You keep feeling as though an explosive performance is just round the corner, given the batting strength they possess. We certainly hope to shut them down for at least one more game, keeping in mind that they were in a similar position last year, and eventually powered into the final.

One of our major challenges this season has been the early loss of Ben Stokes and Mitchell Marsh through injury, emphasising the value of good all-rounders in a side. Given our situation, we have faced a dilemma about whether to choose bowling or batting options as our two overseas players. For our game against KKR, we used batting options because of Kolkata's strong bowling line-up, now we have to reassess for our next two opponents.

We are always looking to get the composition of our team right, but over the last three-four games, we've been more consistent, keeping in mind that we probably have more new players than other teams. We're still looking for the perfect combination for every game, and if that means some chopping and changing we'll do it, but it has to be change for good reason.

As it is, we haven't given away too many runs, especially in the middle overs, and all we have to do now is take care of the opening and death overs, preferably with pace. Our methods are perhaps more traditional than other teams, but we like to think we have consistency on our side, and aided by aggressive youngsters like Tripathi, and veteran warriors like Steve Smith and MS Dhoni, we feel our best is yet to come, just as long as we treat every upcoming match as the most important.

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### **We seem to be winning the key moments this year**

The division between the top four and the remaining teams on the points table is now fairly clear. And we have made it the top four with some fairly hard scrapping. The good thing is that we seem to be winning key moments this year, as opposed to last year, when six of our games went into the final over, and we lost all of them. This year, we've won them all, and that includes five of our last six games.

The other positive sign is that, notwithstanding Ben Stokes' extraordinary century against Gujarat on Monday, we are getting our wins based not on the amazing form of one or two players, but on the fact that different players at different times are doing good to great things. We're a team that has to use all its players, we have to work pretty hard to compete with the top sides, and we're doing that, which from a coaching point of view is very pleasing.

That's no reason to get ahead of ourselves. This is an important stage of our campaign, we knew the latter part of the tournament would be difficult, players are getting a little tired from the constant cycle of travel and play, and we still have some very tough matches ahead.

The way we've won several close games illustrates how small the margin of difference in a season can be. The difference can lie in one ball or a dropped catch or a boundary six, and we know just how fickle it is. At this point last year, we were frustrated and demoralised, but the tight wins have certainly built a stronger team this year. This is because no matter how much work goes into building a team, ultimately winning is what brings a team together, the sharing of happy experiences accelerates relationships. We have remained measured in both our wins and losses, but we obviously enjoy good performances as much as anyone else.

The composure and resilience we showed against Gujarat, both while bowling and then batting, produced a match that was a great advertisement for T20 cricket — it had drama, mistakes, a huge display of skills, pressure, an outstanding century, the works. Can we pull off a repeat against Kolkata Knight Riders? Well, they're one of the best sides in this tournament, at least on paper, and we will treat them with all the respect they deserve.

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**We are perfectly happy to be sliding in under the radar**

The other day, somebody pointed out to me that Pune seem to be handling pace better than spin this year, which got me thinking about whether that analysis applies to other teams as well. I would think it does, because the quality of spin this year has been very high, with the leg spinners in particular doing well. A lot of the teams have struggled against spin, and though I know the current opinion is a little more biased in favour of pacers, the spinners have played a key part in this tournament. Some of the tracks we have played on have been a bit slower, which has made it easier to score off the pace bowlers. I suppose we are simply being a little more conservative against spin.

We have had a relatively quiet rise to third position on the points table, and while I am aware that RPS probably doesn't draw as much attention as some other teams, we are perfectly happy to slide in under the radar, comfortable with not being one of the favourites. We know our limitations, but we play to our strengths, and while each game is a big challenge, our bowling attack has finally come together very well, which is a plus, since the challenge was to find the right combination quickly.

The other thing that is very pleasing from a coach's point of view is that our top order batsmen have graduated from scores of 30s and 40s to 90s and 100s, and this has been a development that has crept in, in the last couple of games. This was one area in which we needed to improve, and our players are getting better at it.

Looking at the big picture, as a coach, I'm obviously focused on getting to the final as a franchise for the first time, but there are always sub plots, such as losing and replacing players, and I do not want us getting ahead of ourselves, so the players' job is to stay grounded and focus on the next game.

We have beaten Sunrisers Hyderabad once in this tournament, with MS Dhoni coming through with a very special innings. We will need something similar against them again, because they are a beautifully balanced side which, despite popular perception, is not a one-man band at all. They may depend heavily on David Warner, thanks to his captaincy as well as his extraordinary batting, but even if we do get him cheaply, the likes of Kane Williamson, Shikhar Dhawan, and Yuvraj Singh will be waiting for us.

Their bowling is very good, too, and Rashid Khan has been an excellent addition. They will be disappointed to not have availed the services of Mustafizur Rahman, who was their form bowler last year. That would have been a formidable pairing. Nonetheless, Bhuvneshwar Kumar has done a great job, aided by a couple of young seamers. So I anticipate yet another challenging encounter.

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### **We need to keep doing the things we've been doing well**

Given Rising Pune Supergiant's steadily rising graph over the last few weeks, managing expectations has now become something we have to deal with almost daily. From the beginning, I have been stressing that every game is important but now every game is a must win, with no time left to catch up later. These do or die situations sort of reminds me of putting in golf, which is hard because it promises better scores. Similarly, these last few games promise greater rewards, so it makes sense that they will be the toughest we face.

From the coaching point of view, I have had to deal with some amount of anxiety and performance pressure within the team, and in situations like these, it becomes important to keep concentrating on the processes, doing the things we've been doing well, and not getting carried away. It is also necessary to not bother too much about what happens in the other matches, even though sometimes you hope things go your way. Nevertheless, at the business end of a tournament, you concentrate on things that you can influence and how other teams play is not one of them.

It helps that we have a team comprising some outstanding players, so that bonding has been an organic process, not something I've had to specifically encourage. In any case, the biggest thing that helps team unity is winning games, especially close games. Winning gives you a sense of purpose and forms emotional attachments with the team and the players, so that you achieve greater things. No matter how many team dinners or events or functions you organise, nothing accelerates team bonding faster than winning games and playing well together.

We will need to play out of skins against Delhi Daredevils, who are not only coming off a win, but handed us one of our heaviest defeats the last time we played them. They played a near perfect game then and, though everyone knows fortunes can change, the first game we played against them was one of our toughest, so much so that it affected our net run rate, and the game against them is currently our hardest challenge.

Simply put, if we win two games, we will be first or second. That's a fact, so I encourage the team to deal in certainties instead of worrying about things we can't control such as the results of every game. Of course, we're interested in them, because they eventually have a bearing on our fortune, but the focus is firmly on winning everything in sight. We've had a good few days of practise and recuperation in Delhi after a long run, and all we're looking at now is beating Delhi Daredevils and Kings XI.

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**We were desperate to do well and pressure brought out the best in us**

It has been a strange sort of week. We played well and then had a week off and a lot of things happened during that week so it was very hard for us to not get caught up in the other teams' results because many of those results would have helped us qualify. Since qualification is the first step in any campaign, we couldn't help but be connected to those results. As the week progressed, though, we realised that it was all looking destined to be a last-day performance that would get us through; in the sense that if we won, we would place second and if we didn't, we would go home.

The result of Mumbai Indians versus Kolkata Knight Riders was a big one because it gave us the chance to be second. Other teams playing well, Kings XI Punjab in particular, meant that our match against them was a tough one to prepare for because we would ideally have liked to have qualified and then go for second spot, rather than have it all on the line.

However, what the pressure did was bring out the best in the players and they were desperate to do well and though the general feeling was that we had done well enough to qualify, our net run rate obviously suffered in comparison to most of the other teams. In such a situation, the certainty that we needed an outright win helped us focus and play well.

On the day, though, anything can happen and prior to the game there was a fair bit of anxiety among us concerning the likes of Maxwell and Guptill and Marsh and Morgan. Plus, Punjab were coming into the match with plenty of confidence and a winning momentum behind them and we had to be really determined about our approach. We knew we needed to do the basics well and being back at home was important. The home ground this year has really been an added advantage.

The mood in the camp now is one of delight at having got through to the qualifiers. It's time to reflect on some outstanding individual performances and indulge in the excitement of a big final coming up. At the start of any major tournament, there are plenty of dreams floating around but, on the ground, the realisation that every other team is at least as good as you tends to hit you pretty hard!

Though this side has played incredibly well, the others have been brilliant too. In the end, we have depended on performances by different players on different occasions, and every contribution has emphasised our 'group mentality'. Jaydev Unadkat has bowled incredibly well out of nowhere, with strong contributions from Shardul Thakur and Imran Tahir, and the big guns like Stokes, Smith and Dhoni. All in all, it has been a thoroughly enjoyable time, and hopefully, we can carry this sense of enjoyment into the final stretch.

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### **In T20s, DL method favours team batting second too much**

I've said this before and been criticised for it, but the Duckworth-Lewis method just isn't suited for a Twenty20 game. I say this again, of course, in the context of Wednesday's match (which turned into Thursday's match) between Kolkata Knight Riders and Sunrisers Hyderabad. The DL method is satisfactory for 100 overs, but in a 40-over game, it simply favours the team batting second too much.

In a situation like Wednesday night, even though there's been a small increase in runs required and there's pressure on the team batting second owing to a reduction in the number of overs, they still have all wickets in hand which means they can play without risk. Even losing three wickets in approximately one over doesn't really hamper them; they know they can just keep going because they have plenty of batting resources to fall back on. The whole scenario just isn't ideal and definitely needs a bit of tweaking.

A couple of alternatives have been suggested over the years, but without understanding their workings in depth, it's hard to come up with a solution. I don't like being just a pessimist and saying something is not working, without trying to find an alternative. One of the ideas floating around is to introduce 'wicket pressure', so if you have a small chase, then you also have fewer wickets to play with. In effect, that means you only have five wickets, for example, for a six-over chase. With low-scoring games on difficult pitches, whenever the overs are reduced, the team batting second will always have an edge because they stand a far lower chance of being bowled out, so they can stay a lot more relaxed.

Relaxed is also the word I'd use for the Rising Pune Supergiant at the moment, though there's plenty of excitement at the prospect of our maiden final appearance. Despite all the challenges we've faced, there have been standouts such as the bowling of Washington Sundar. His natural skill sets, which we liked when we first saw him, have merely been enhanced in big-match conditions and his fearlessness in the face of attack has been a joy to watch. Honestly, though he's a highly effective Twenty20 bowler, we were slightly nervous about how one so young would deal with the spotlight but all worries on that score have been laid to rest.

Sundar and other young players like him from the various franchises form an exciting pool of new talent, who attack before they learn to defend, and I think that's how the game has changed. Traditionally, you were taught to defend first and then attack, but now, you are encouraged to attack first, and that is what excites me. The boys are excited too, and waiting to see who we take on in the final. We just hope to enjoy ourselves as much as we have done thus far.

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**Next year, the IPL may not have a defending champion!**

Over the years, the IPL has taught me an important lesson: the more relaxed you stay and the better you manage expectations, the greater your chances of success. So yes, the final will be a tough game but our preparations are the same as they have always been. We know there will be turning points – in a one-off game, anything can happen at any moment, which in itself is a huge challenge.

However, practising more, getting more uptight, and doing things differently is just not my style. So we've been very relaxed, just like in the semi-final where what really mattered was the opportunity – that was what we were most excited about. That's the general mood in the camp right now, so we will have one training session on the eve of the game but that's pretty much it.

Right now, we're committed to putting on our best performance, with no thought of what might or might not happen next year. I've been asked a few times about what happens if we win and if there's no Pune team next year. Will the next IPL then have no defending champion? I think that's a nice discussion point, but only after the final! All I can say for now is that, if it is our last time in these colours, we want to make the occasion a memorable one.

You could also look at the final as a celebration of what this team has achieved so far, instead of a farewell. It is also a testimony to the excitement and fun we've experienced playing as a group. We've seen different heroes emerge in various crisis situations, and we would like to think we can win the final to bring this fantastic journey to a close.

It has been immensely satisfying to build this team up from scratch, taking on sides that have been working together for far longer than us, and what we have sometimes missed in terms of skill we have made up for by soaking up the pressure and not allowing ourselves to get bogged down. Don't get me wrong – our team still has some of the world's best players – but what I believe we have done well is an equitable utilisation of resources.

Mumbai have built up a fantastic team over the years, and their strategy and coaching this year have been excellent but we had got the better of them not too long ago, and we are playing on a pitch that is not entirely unfamiliar to us. In fact, it holds happy memories, because this is where we beat Sunrisers Hyderabad by six wickets last month. Therefore, we face not one but two known devils! No surprise that we can't wait for the game to begin.

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### **Proud of Pune, and sad we won't be around next year**

Despite the heartbreaking end, I have to say how proud I am of Pune. I've said it before, but for a young franchise to make it so deep into a big competition is highly satisfying from a coaching point of view. The way we played our bowlers in particular, showed how well we read the conditions. I think everybody thought this year would be batter dominated, but the bowlers had their say, with lots of scores around 150-160.

At the start of the season, I had stressed the importance of reading the conditions and, because we read them better than the rest, we were effective and competitive though we weren't star-studded or as packed with resources, especially toward the end of the tournament, as some other teams.

There certainly is an element of sadness that this successful franchise, with so much time going into building relationships and players, will not come back next year. I have no doubt that if this unit were to be together next year, we'd be one of the stronger sides of the tournament. However, while there is an element of frustration, we knew all along that this would be a two-year project.

One of my takeaways from this year's IPL is the impressive performances by a few young players, such as Jasprit Bumrah, who is developing into a world class fast bowler, his skill and pace right up there with the best. Hardik Pandya is a wonderful athlete, a livewire on the field, and Rashid Khan was simply outstanding for Sunrisers Hyderabad. The young Delhi batsmen and Axar Patel for Kings XI Punjab have similarly been joys to watch.

In fact, a lot of the top players were shut down this year, which enabled youth to flourish. Corrections were made quickly and each team had a better understanding of what T20 is all about, since there's a lot more of it played these days. Players are adjusting on their feet a lot quicker, teams can sum up conditions quicker, and they know how to execute strategy in those conditions.

The other interesting aspect was that the Indian players stumbled out of a long home season, and you didn't see too many dominant performances by Indians this year. Though the bowling started to get better later on, injuries and fatigue benched quite a few players. And with the 50-over Champions Trophy coming up in England in a week, vast adjustments will need to be made, not merely in terms of playing conditions, but also the length of time spent on the field, particularly for national teams with a larger component of players in the IPL. Teams will be match-fit and pressure-fit, but the shortness of the tournament means that they have to hit the ground running.

Personally, I look forward to another IPL opportunity next year because I learn so much each year and coaching a side is a wonderful way to stay involved in the game. While the idea of coaching a national side is appealing, the sheer amount of cricket played now means I won't have enough time to spend with my kids. So I'm grateful to stay involved through Twenty20, though I remain passionate about the Black Caps and will help out whenever I can.