

Sourav Ganguly

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The Indian batting finally came to the party

India staged a forceful and decisive comeback at Trent Bridge which has really opened up the series and the pressure is fully back on England to live up to the challenge. It was the mindset which stood out with which India came out to confront England and that really caught Root and company unaware. This series has really livened up and is now poised for a dramatic finish.

The openers laid the foundation in the first innings, maybe not with a hundred-run partnership, but they survived the new ball, didn't let the English bowlers make early inroads, put runs on the board and sent a message to the dressing-room that if you want you can stay put. That actually created the difference for the entire Test. It was a blessing for India that they lost the toss and England put them in and Virat Kohli should keep this in mind. Twice during the series I felt he came with a mindset to field first and that, at times, is not good in test cricket.

The Indian batting, which is their biggest strength, finally came to the party and Dhawan, Rahul, Pujara, and Rahane showed their mettle. For Dhawan, this knock should be a huge boost for him when he plays Tests away. There were no booming cover-drives — which he completely needs to forget in away conditions as his repertoire off the back foot is also very good. Add to this the ever-evolving, indomitable Kohli and you will see his counterpart with raised eyebrows, worried all the time.

Trent Bridge was supposed to have been a happy hunting ground for Anderson and Broad but it was the other way around. The way Bumrah, Pandya and Ishant bowled, it was indeed a treat for the connoisseurs of fast bowling. The length was outstanding as it was pitched up all the time. Bumrah is such a great addition to the side, continuing to show that if you can bring the ball back in to the right hander you will always be a threat.

The fourth Test will not only be a battle between bat and ball but there will be a bigger mental battle. India, with Kohli leading the way, have stepped away from the edge of a series loss and they will be obviously buoyant but at the same time shouldn't over do it. India will really believe that, if they have done it once, they can do it again, and this England side is beatable.

For India, if Ashwin gets through the fitness test then I don't think there will be any change in the XI. But England will have some thinking to do. Their middle-order has looked brittle against genuine good bowling. Root is batting high-up at No. 3 and if he gets dislodged early, England will be under pressure. England needs Jennings to rest and Vince to play. Also Pope is too high at No. 4 and Bairstow, if fit, needs to be pushed. There is a case for Moeen Ali as well in his current form

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Series lost, but Virat and his boys still have a lot to play for

India go into the fifth Test with the series already decided. Still, Virat and his boys have a lot to play for because 3-2 sounds better than 4-1 and India needs to fight for that. They had their moments in the three matches they lost but I am sure they will understand that having moments and finishing things off are two different things.

The biggest challenge for Virat and his boys at The Oval will be to start afresh. They have nothing to lose: I know that's easier said than done but professional athletes have to find a way to do this. There has been a lot of criticism but that is part and parcel of professional sport and as athletes it's important to create a zone and re-assess yourself.

It is common for everyone to find a reason for the loss, scrutinise the performance of individual players and create their own elevens but it's important for Virat to step aside and have a closer look himself, and I particularly mention the word 'himself', as to what the best possible eleven is. Yes, Moeen Ali bowled better than Ashwin in the fourth Test but that does not make Moeen ultimately a better bowler than Ashwin. It is important for Virat to ensure, first, that Ashwin is fully fit and then decide between him and Jadeja as to who the better option is.

The Oval is a different pitch; it will have lot of bounce but it is important for Virat to assess how much rough will be created. What Virat needs to have a look at is his team's batting. I think it is important to have a change at the top and give Prithvi Shaw a go. He is young, not battle-scarred, and had a good India A tour of England. Both KL Rahul and Shikhar Dhawan are not in the best of form and it will not be a bad idea to have a change at the top.

I am a big believer of playing five bowlers and the Indian bowling unit has been exceptional this series. However, maybe Virat can think about a four-bowler option to see how the bowling unit reacts to such situations and whether this could be a possibility in the future. A lot of good teams in world cricket have succeeded with this formula. It will also give Hunama Vihari an opportunity. Good things have been said about him of late and this will also help to strengthen the squad's batting depth.

For England, Chris Woakes will come in for Rashid Ali and I don't see any other change. Jonny Bairstow has not looked fit considering the way he batted in the last Test. If fit, he could be an option at No. 3 with Joe Root at No. 4. It will protect England's best batsman against the new ball to an extent.

Finally, it will be the last Test for one of the greats of English cricket – Alistair Cook. To get 12000+ runs as an opener in seaming and pacy conditions is remarkable. He will be leaving at the right time and will have no regrets as there are very few who have had such a career. He was not only a fantastic batsman but also a perfect gentleman.

15.9.18

The security and hospitality in Pakistan was unreal

I remember every time I used to take strike in an ODI game, the biggest challenge for me was to concentrate despite the crowd screaming at the top of their voice. I would always argue with Sachin, asking him to at times please play the first ball because sometimes it got deafening. A game in India, whatever the format, was like a festival. I have played in the era of day games and day-night games and as a player what one felt on the morning of the game was both nerves and enormous happiness. Happiness because when you saw the thousands of fans flocking to the grounds, the interest and passion of so many just touched you. You said to yourself, this is what you play for and this is what makes the team and the sport number one in the country. And they came bearing Indian flags and wearing India shirts.

It was not just the match days. When the Indian team landed in the city, most often we were received at the airport, and from there till the hotel there would be overjoyed eyes and faces on both sides of the street. The reception at the hotel, the housekeeping personnel, the room service guys: you can't imagine the hospitality. Housekeeping would be so enthusiastic in their efforts that we had to sometimes ask not to be disturbed for the next 3-4 hours. And if you had scored a 100 in the last game, the chef would walk a mile to get you cobra meat, if you so wished. This madness is pretty much in the sub-continent.

The Indian team visited Sri Lanka very often during my time and the madness in Sri Lanka was much the same! Sri Lanka was very hot and humid and the likes of Jayasuriya, Mahela, Sangakkara, and Aravinda D'Silva were devastating in their own backyard. But the atmosphere in grounds like the SSC and Kettarama (now Premadasa), the sound of the drums and saxophones would never allow for a dull moment. If you were batting on 70 or 80 and the heat was starting to sap you, the drums and a bottle of Powerade would get you back on track.

In Sri Lanka, another big name was that of Percy Abeysekara, who must be the most popular fan in the world. He not only danced for the entire 6-7 hours of a game but also had a song for every cricketer on the field. He made sure that the Sri Lankan batsmen were encouraged, and if any of the Indian batsmen got set, he would shout out: 'Eh, Tendulkar and Ganguly, please get out, it's very hot. Your parents will feel sad if you fall sick.' It was a polite way of saying: I want Sri Lanka to win. The reason for this politeness was because Percy would bring his family the next day to meet Tendulkar and Ganguly!

One of my most memorable trips was the tour of Pakistan in 2004. India won there for the first time in 50 years. The security and hospitality was unreal. We had gone to Peshawar to play an ODI and from the hotel to the ground the sight of Pathans standing on the roads wearing white sherwanis to welcome the Indian team was unbelievable. Pakistan is a dry, rugged country and it reminded me of those Texas movies in Hollywood. The stadiums in Lahore and Karachi were chock-a-block, thousands of Indians had crossed the Wagah border to watch the series-deciding final ODI in Lahore

which India won. And the street food was to die for: the famous sneak-away dinner in Lahore will always stay in my memory.

Gameplan