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England will have to raise their game to beat Virat & Co.

India have got off to the start they wanted on their England tour, winning the T20 series with authority. Even in the match they lost, they fought hard till the last over. This confidence and momentum will surely be carried into the ODI series. The way this Indian team is shaping up in the shorter version, even England will have to raise their game in order to stop Virat and his boys. This team looks like it could win in any condition in the shorter format of the game.

I have been travelling to England every year for the last 20-22 years and have not seen a summer like this. It is very, very hot and the typical moist English condition is a far cry from what it usually is. It is more like playing in India at the moment. The wickets are hard and batting friendly: the spinners are sure to enjoy bowling on these tracks. The challenge for England this series will be to handle the Indian spinners and this will be the decisive factor. England in England is always a strong opposition but this Indian team is a force to reckon with.

Both the sides have a strong batting line-up though I believe India, with all their potential and being led by an aggressive Virat Kohli, are a step higher. The Indian bowling looks much stronger than its English counterpart. The consistent game time given to Umesh will help his confidence as there is no real substitute for pace and the spin of Kuldeep and Chahal will control this fragile English middle-order. It was really surprising not to see Kuldeep play the third T20.

One has to speak about Hardik Pandya, Lokesh Rahul and Rohit Sharma. The day Rohit performs he makes others just watch. The range of shots this man has is amazing and in the shorter formats he is no doubt one of India's biggest match-winners, along with Kohli. It is good to see Virat keeping faith in Rahul. He is a player for the future and, if confidence is kept in him, he will develop into a giant of a player. Hardik needs special mention. He is improving by leaps and bounds and is someone who changes the entire dynamic of the team composition with his batting and bowling. He is a fearless cricketer.

We are just at the start of a long tour and the way India has begun we could be set for a glorious 'Indian Summer' if the England bowling does not improve. (Gameplan)

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Root's confidence rubbed off on the others while India lost steam

England bounced back strongly in the ODI series and by the end of the shortest and shorter versions of the game it's one-all. After having lost the last game of the three-match T20 series and then the first ODI, England turned it around based on a more planned approach in countering the strong Indian batting and the guile of their bowlers, especially the spinners.

Eoin Morgan needs a mention, not only for his batting effort in the third ODI but for winning the toss at Lord's and Headingley and taking the right call. At Lord's he opted to bat first realising there was a possibility the pitch would slow down. Being a local boy, he got it right. At Headingley, he invited India to bat first understanding that whatever moisture was in the pitch would settle down to make batting easier during the chase. A captain sets the tone for a team and I think Morgan did exactly that on both occasions.

Joe Root's coming to the party helped in a big way. He not only propped up the English middle-order but showed his teammates how to go about handling the wrist spin of Kuldeep and Chahal. Judging the length, using the feet to smother the spin, and rotating the strike helped the England innings never to choke. Root's confidence rubbed off on to the others and that is why it is so important to have someone in the middle-order who can control the game and allow others to play around him. The English bowling picked itself up, Rashid standing out with his control and variation. Moeen Ali's liking for Indian batters continued and both he and Rashid allowed England to get a grip of the game in the middle-overs.

If England had the Root effect, India lost steam in the last two games. It was not clear why Umesh and Rahul were not included in the third ODI. Bhuvneshwar was coming out of an injury and did not look 100 percent, but Umesh already looked in good rhythm. Siddharth Kaul was also in good form except for the Lord's game. Rahul is a must for Virat in the middle-order which needs a bit of strengthening. It's important that the management gives an extended run to the No. 4 so that he can play with a bit of freedom and not worry about his place.

As long as Virat was at the crease at both Lord's and Headingley, India looked in control but once he left the batting could not keep up the pace. The Indian spinners created havoc in South Africa but the pacers will also have to pick up wickets in overseas conditions. It can't be spinners all the time. Bumrah's injury is a setback but it's important the others stand up as well. The longest part of the series will begin soon and it's important that all contribute. (Gameplan)

Virat and Co. will be raring to after a good break

India start the most awaited phase of their tour of England and Virat Kohli and his boys will be raring to go in the five-match Test series after a good break. I am sure that the break and the practice match have provided Virat and the team management enough time to review their thoughts about the composition of the team for the first Test.

Much has been spoken about the spin combination for India. It will be important to see what combination India will play with. There has been lot of rain in Birmingham over the last two days and this will influence the conditions a lot. It will also be not easy to let Ravichandran Ashwin go especially after the way the England batters played Kuldeep Yadav in the last few games. Ashwin is an honest trier, a fighter to the core, and someone who has more than 300 Test wickets in his kitty will be tough to ignore.

India won the last Test in South Africa but the attack here will be different due to injury issues of Jasprit Bumrah and Bhuvneshwar Kumar and the other fast bowlers will have to stand up in their absence. Umesh Yadav will be a certainty as he has looked the best of the lot so far in this campaign. He has bowled with pace and control and is in good rhythm. Ishant Sharma is also experienced and knows exactly what the team expects of him. Having spent some time playing County cricket, Ishant will be match-ready in English conditions.

As for the Indian batting, Murali Vijay along with KL Rahul should be vying for the opening slot followed by Cheteshwar Pujara, Virat, and Ajinkya Rahane. India will have to get the opening combination spot-on right from the first Test as that's a very important slot in overseas conditions. Virat will be keen to stamp his authority in English conditions and his form will be crucial for his team.

England must be feeling better about things with the rains having shown up. It must have been the hottest summer for them and at times the temperature seemed more like they are in India. With rain returning, the moist weather should return and that will ensure movement in the air. This should be a great contest between Virat and Jimmy Anderson as the Virat of 2018 is vastly different to the one in 2014.

Anderson and Stuart Broad, along with Ben Stokes, Moeen Ali, and Adil Rashid will have to be at their best. The quicks will want the ball to swing. If it does not, they could find the going tough against this quality Indian batting line-up. (Gameplan)

Virat's challenge will be to instil confidence and mental strength

The first Test of the India-England series was another bright example of why the original version of the game continues to be the ultimate test for any cricketer. It was a humdinger of a battle with the pendulum swinging this way and that every now and again. Ultimately, the team that held its nerves and delivered when it mattered came out on top.

Virat Kohli's conviction and determination to grind in difficult situations, his selection of shots, and ability to dominate the bowlers in every sphere of the game is extraordinary. He is rightly the No. 1 batsman in the world. He may not have been at his fluent best at Birmingham but his attitude of not giving up stands tall. This is also an example of batsmanship: Even if it's not your day, you still make the runs. It's a huge statement that the other batsmen in the team need to stand up. I personally believe that this batting line-up has the ability to score runs in these conditions. Virat, the leader, has a job on hand. He will have to get this team going. The confidence needs to be brought back: It's more in the mind and that will be his challenge on this tour.

The positive thing for India is the bowling. All the bowlers did a grand job, especially Ashwin. He has added a lot more variety to his repertoire and will continue to be a massive threat to the opposition. I remember talking about Ashwin in my preview to this series and I am happy with the way he has presented himself. He is conscious about the need to succeed overseas and has improved immensely since the time his spot was challenged by younger players. He will continue to bother England right through the series.

The selection of Ollie Pope, a right-hander, by the England selectors is a strategy to counter the off-spin of Ashwin. India need to think about a second spinner at Lord's. It's been very hot and history shows it spins at Lord's and, as far as I'm concerned, Kuldeep Yadav would be the right choice. At no stage, however, should India compromise on the five-bowler option. England will be without Ben Stokes for the second Test but the inclusion of Chris Woakes and his all-round ability will balance the side.

Taking the series into context, this game at Lord's is a massive one. One-down, and India will have to find a way to fight back. There is no doubt that England will be greatly challenged if the Indian batting gets going, and if it does that could be the turnaround the visitors are looking for. It's not over yet! (Gameplan)

It will be tough, but not impossible, for India to fight back

The India-England series is at the midway stage and the third match will really test India's resilience. Virat and his boys have had a tough time, especially at Lord's, countering the swing bowling but they need to remember that in South Africa they came back strongly to win the third Test. They are 2-0 down but there are still three matches to go, which is lot of cricket and I bet you that, if rain does not take three days away, all the games will have results. So amidst the chaos all is not lost yet.

Much has been spoken about the capability of the Indian batters to battle in difficult times but at Lord's it was the supreme ability of Anderson and company which got the better of them. What hurt the Indian fans, however, was the lack of a fight rather than the loss. I believe this team is better than it stands now.

Can the Indians fight back? Well, that is the big question. The worry is, have they succumbed to the fact that it will be tough. Yes, it will be tough but not impossible. The mind has to believe that. A lot is said about Kohli's influence but he alone will not win matches. Tendulkar did not. India played sensationally well in that era because the players around him scored as much. Vijay, Pujara, Rahane, Rahul, and Dhawan have to believe; they have done it earlier in difficult situations and only that belief can help themselves to change the mental frame they are in now.

India will need a good start at the top which has not happened yet. Whether a Dhawan instead of Vijay will help them to counter-attack is another question but whoever is entrusted with the job will need to stand tall and that will provide respite to the middle-order to take the fight back to England. For Dhawan, who has a chance to play, the big booming cover drives have to be put away. He needs mental discipline to play other shots which he is capable of and much more on the back foot. Will India play Karun Nair as the sixth batsman? That could be a good option.

The bowling looks in good shape with Bumrah coming in. Shami has been the best on show and Ishant has to find his first Test form at the earliest. But Virat has to find a way to get the field right. Too many easy singles have been given away, especially off good deliveries, in the point region. He can't afford that.

England will be even more bolstered by the return of Stokes. I think he will play and his inclusion will not only add more variation to the English bowling but will also add depth to their batting. Trent Bridge is a venue where the ball swings, a venue very close to Broad and Anderson's heart. So a full pronged pace attack could be the way forward for England. Suddenly the English team, whose record has not been very good of late, looks strong. Still, India has a chance. It's not over yet. (Gameplan)

30.8.18

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

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.

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 Khetarama (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.