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Published 16.3.17

It was Test match cricket that you couldn't take your eyes off

It was predictable but still disappointing that a brilliant Test match in which two sides had to draw upon all their reserves of mental and physical toughness in an old fashioned dogfight that saw conflict, confrontation, skill and tension before a remarkable comeback from the home, was somewhat forgotten in the aftermath of the DRS controversy. That said, I could understand the talk, the speculation and the spin each expert gave on what transpired in Bangalore. After all, the captains involved are two of the most popular and revered figures in the game today. Hopefully, the incident is behind both teams and not still smouldering as they ready themselves for the third Test in Ranchi.

I was in Bangalore to witness the first three days of the Test and it was an engrossing game on a difficult pitch where batsmen could get runs if they punished the loose balls and capitalised on moments of good fortune. There was more than enough variable bounce to keep the quick bowlers interested and prodigious turn at times to enable the spinners to dominate. Both teams had their opportunities to seize the momentum but chasing 150 or more in the fourth innings was always going to be a demanding examination for the Australians particularly with Ashwin and Jadeja ready to restrict and then ultimately strangle as would an anaconda its prey.

Looking ahead, Australia are in Ranchi for the venue's debut Test without their strike bowler Mitchell Starc. The latter was struggling a bit in Bangalore and I reckon he may have influenced the outcome differently had he been fully fit. Patrick Cummins comes in to replace him, a young man destined for greatness if his body allows him to fulfil his potential. If India believe they can relax with his presence they will be making a grave mistake for this kid is quick, aggressive and capable of winning a match with his reverse swing. He is the chosen one and if anything, his inclusion might just have strengthened the bowling for Australia as he is somewhat unknown and capable of an ambush. His inclusion might just be the shot in the arm that Steve Smith needed after Bangalore.

India will feel much more confident coming into the Ranchi Test. They awoke from their slumber on the second day of the Bangalore Test after looking flat and jaded on the opening day. Ishant Sharma's spell on the second morning ignited the flame and his team-mates responded with technical skill, aggressive body language and by turning the volume dial up on the verbals. No matter what your take on these tactics was it was Test match cricket that you couldn't take your eyes off.

Predictably it was only a matter of time before the classy Indian batting line up revealed itself and the partnership between Cheteshwar Pujara and Ajinkya Rahane was the defining phase of the Test. It was always going to be difficult to bat on that wicket in the fourth innings, and Australia needed someone to play the innings of his career and/or luck to go their way. David Warner's marginal dismissal and Shaun Marsh's reluctance to use a referral could have altered the result, but it was always going to be an arduous chase.

Looking ahead, there are interesting prospects among the young batsmen on both sides. Peter Handscomb was the only batsman who looked assured in the second innings. He has the potential to be a long-term member of this young Australian side. His temperament oozes calmness and confidence even when wickets are falling around him. For India, I liked what I saw of Karun Nair in the first innings. He looked confident, assured and relaxed when he was batting. I look forward to seeing more of him in the next Test.

All eyes will be on the captains, with Virat Kohli so far not playing to his own lofty standards. He seems to be too focussed on the outcome and not the process right now which is understandable when you are the leader with enormous expectations on your team. Perhaps the victory will clear his mind and unleash the genius that India takes for granted. His adversary, Steve Smith, also looked out of sorts in Bangalore, playing the man and not the ball but such is his mental strength and ability to find a way that he will again hold the key to Australia's success.

The Australians have displayed enough skill and tactical nous in this series for the Indians to know that they won't keel over on a turning track. However, it would be naive to expect a flat track in Ranchi, and the visitors should brace themselves for another overcooked pitch. The real downside to a substandard surface is that it makes the toss a game-changer since the side batting last is at a severe disadvantage. Things will be no different at Ranchi if the wicket is similar to what we have seen so far in the series, and the toss winner might very well be the victor. (Gameplan)

Published 24.3.17

Under the circumstances, Australia achieving a draw is as good as a victory

The Ranchi match was as enthralling as the two games that preceded it and showcased why, even when a Test culminates in a draw, it is still the premier form of the game. Going to lunch on the final day, with four wickets down and the world's top ranked batsman perishing to the now familiar captains leave, India would have expected to close out the match as they have, so routinely achieved in recent times. Perhaps there was a hint of complacency and they may have relaxed a little in their attitude, allowing Shaun Marsh and Peter Handscomb a sliver of a chance to steer the team to a creditable draw. Under the circumstances, Australia achieving a draw will be seen as being as good as a victory.

I had previously mentioned Handscomb as a player to watch out for and he proved just why in Ranchi. He is an accomplished player of the turning ball able to manipulate dangerous deliveries into gaps with quick wrists and precise, decisive footwork. His unflappable temperament enables him to navigate pressure with calmness and he already looks a future captain-in-waiting. This was a career-defining knock and one that he will always remember fondly as his career evolves.

It was equally if not a more important innings for Shaun, who constantly seems to be playing for a place in the team. There has never been any doubt about his talent but the jury has been out on his consistency under pressure. Australia desperately wants him to fulfil his God-given gifts and after being involved in one of our countries best ever partnerships this should be the springboard to ensuring he becomes a regular and not a replacement player.

All three Tests have been a stunning advertisement for Test cricket with neither India nor Australia not being able to dominate for longer than a few consecutive sessions. It has been akin to a Chess game with real life moving pieces involving tension, strategy, skill and sprinkling of controversy. India will feel they failed to capitalise on an opportunity to close out the match in Ranchi on the last day, but Australia, too, had their moments of dominance but couldn't convert these phases into a meaningful advantage. At 299 for four when they looked poised for a score well in excess of 500 which would have left India with only two options – a draw or a loss. However, India bounced back to restrict Australia to 451 and provide them a third option – an unlikely victory. There was also a point when India were more than 100 runs away from Australia's first innings total when Cheteshwar Pujara and Wriddhiman Saha came together for their magnificent partnership. Australia will need to be more ruthless in Dharamsala to inflict an against-the-odds series win.

Looking ahead, all eyes will be cast towards two match-winners both overdue to make an impact. Virat Kohli and David Warner will be primed to deliver in this defining match. It's a scenario that they both revel in, with everything to play for and the eyes of the cricket world cast towards them. It's in their DNA to take centre stage and steal the limelight but they both must put aside the disappointment of the previous three Tests and start afresh and play with clarity and focus in the decider.

Warner appears to be getting ahead of himself by rushing to get to 20 before he settles down and play with his usual composed and measured dominance. He is a player who galvanises and infuses confidence in the batting line-up with his attacking style but starting off against spin has thrown his rhythm out of kilter somewhat. He has not yet made the mental and technical adjustments necessary against spinners but he is a quick learner and I expect him to assume a leading role in the last instalment of this incredible series.

Kohli has fallen to uncharacteristically loose shots in this series while also misreading the line of the ball on two occasions. These are hints that he isn't quite switched on and I'm sure as a captain he has numerous thoughts and external issues invading his mind and robbing him of the unwavering focus he is renowned for. He needs to turn down the volume on everything he does and separate and cocoon himself somewhat from the distractions that are currently chipping away at him. This will be the sternest examination, both technically and mentally, of his Test match career and the cricket world eagerly awaits the outcome.

India's valiant effort in passing 600 was largely due to the efforts of Pujara who has emerged as a fantastic Test batsman. He is bankable, solid and calm, reminding me of Rahul Dravid who possessed these qualities and was so crucial to the balance of India's star-studded batting line ups in my time. He is the style of player that allows other batsmen to relax and play their natural game which results in potentially match-winning partnerships.

Ravindra Jadeja, too, has developed into a vital cog in the Indian line-up and a man Kohli regularly turns to when he needs to fast track the game. He has learnt how to bowl effectively, with guile and control, he is an agile and athletic fieldsman and to complete his repertoire a very effective lower order batsman. In fact, the lively fifty he scored gave his team enough time to push for a win.

Dharamsala is holding its debut Test and I hope the curator has been left alone to produce a pitch that doesn't make winning the toss the most important task the captains will be consigned to. Patrick Cummins' impressive performance in Ranchi and undoubted star power provides Steve Smith with the X factor and his freshness of mind and strength of body may hold the key to Australia stealing the Border Gavaskar Trophy. Whatever happens this has been a series that reminds us all why Test cricket is the pinnacle of our sport and for that we should be forever grateful. May the best team win.
(Gameplan)

Published 31.3.17

India have matured into a resilient, unified team unit

Dharamsala made a stunning debut as a Test venue over the four days of the final Test for the Border-Gavaskar Trophy. The ground's picture postcard setting, images of which went all over the world, was a wonderful tourism advertisement for India and I'd love to watch a game there someday. The pitch was the best of the series by a far margin, with bounce and carry for the pace bowlers, runs on offer with the slick outfield to batsman who put a price on their wicket and applied a disciplined approach whilst also encouraging the spin bowlers with enough turn and variable bounce. The toss of the coin thankfully didn't matter and India's constant pressure was rewarded with a hard fought victory to reclaim the Trophy.

The 2-1 scoreline would be bitterly disappointing for the Australians, and they will rue the many significant moments throughout the series where they were on the cusp of controlling the state of play only to let it slip away with lapses of concentration and perhaps not being able to recognise the crucial times to seize the moment. They had a golden opportunity at 144 for one at lunch on day one to close India out of the game but faltered and lost 5 quick wickets to hand the ascendancy back to India who then assumed control and chartered the course of the match with hard-nosed Test match cricket .

Credit must be given to the selectors and Indian management for taking a risk and going into a deciding Test going with five bowlers especially so with a captain on debut. It looked like the decision might backfire once Australia won the toss, ensuring that India would bat fourth and not have the preferred route of exploiting a wearing wicket with trio of tweekers. However, the chinaman Kuldeep Yadav bowled what was the defining spell of the Test and ultimately the series on the first afternoon. The Australian batsmen scrambled to find a method to counter his unusual action and many variations without ever having the benefit of laying eyes on him before and were ambushed by his accuracy and arsenal of weapons at his disposal. He was extremely impressive and provided Rahane with an aggressive wicket-taking option that allowed the other bowlers to relax in the knowledge that they wouldn't have to burden the heavy workload that a four pronged attack would normally take on. He was the X-Factor that India had been lacking and he seems destined for a long and successful career.

Australia will look back on this series as one where many players enhanced their reputations while the team continued to evolve and improve but they will also know they missed a golden opportunity to cause a huge upset and go home unexpected victors. Steve Smith was again outstanding, scoring prodigiously with a technique no kid should try and emulate but they should copy his blueprint on scoring runs achieved by backing your own style, unquenchable appetite to keep on scoring runs with precise placement and a stillness of the head, unwavering concentration and love of the battle. If only he could have coaxed one or two more centuries from the rest of the batting group he would have been carrying the trophy back on Qantas with him.

Much has been said of David Warner who by his own lofty expectations would have been disappointed with his overall run tally but he can't always be the go-to man and Australia need to find other regular run-getters. Each top order batsman showed glimpses of form but many a start was not capitalised on with the exception of Glenn Maxwell who may have begun the journey to fulfil his god-given talents. The bowling attack was heroic and achieved more than expected and would have benefited greatly by having a fifth bowler to ease the workload, particularly with 4 Tests in a short period of time. Australia may need to address this imbalance if they are to summit to the top of the world rankings.

The Indian team has matured into a resilient, unified team unit. At the start of the season, it would have been implausible to believe that India could win a series with Virat Kohli contributing just 45 runs. However, the void was filled most notably by KL Rahul who has a technique capable of being successful on any given surface and a temperament ideal for the long form of the game. His six half centuries gave the team enormous confidence and a platform to launch large totals that gave the Indian attack the luxury of setting attacking fields. Pujara was the batsman that held the innings together in the mould of Rahul Dravid and his love of creating huge hundreds had a massive impact in the overall result as it allowed the other batsman the freedom to play their natural games.

Ravindra Jadeja, too, has been extremely impressive through the series and was for me the difference between the two teams. He has a smart cricket brain and is able to find the right balance between niggling the opposition players but then being able to switch on the focus when needed. He leads in both actions and attitude and appears to be the heartbeat of the team. His bowling complements Ravichandran Ashwin nicely and his ability to score quick runs in the lower order demoralises opponents much in the same way Gilchrist did for Australia on a regular basis.

It's been a wonderful, intense series, which has been dotted with some face-offs between the two teams. I've got to say my well documented tussles with Sourav Ganguly seem pretty tame compared to recent incidents! On a more serious note, Kohli will in time regret his utterances about his future relations with the Australians. Mistakes were made on both sides, but once Smith apologised, perhaps it would have been wiser to let the simmering issues dissipate by moving on and let the fantastic cricket take centre stage. Kohli's influence and brand are constantly growing in stature, and he would be well advised to take a more statesmanlike approach in the future for he is a role model to billions and his cricket talents should be what he is remembered for.

This series was an enthralling advertisement for Test cricket. Both sides should be applauded for providing tough, combative cricket. The ebb and flow of the sessions and the oscillating fortunes of the teams proved that one does not need matches where thousands of runs are scored. It was a hard-fought series, and in the end India were deserving winners. This is a win they will savour. (Gameplan)