

VVS LAXMAN

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Spin, grit and spirit emerge winners against Mumbai Indians

What a game to start off Season 11 of the Indian Premier League! There was so much anticipation and hype in the build-up to the opening game that anything less than what we got at the Wankhede Stadium would have been an anti-climax. Chennai Super Kings' victory over defending champions Mumbai Indians typified what the Twenty20 format in general, and the IPL in particular, stand for.

A rookie leg-spinner came out of nowhere and hijacked the attention. Mayank Markande will remember this night for a long time, bowling to such established superstars as Ambati Rayudu and MS Dhoni and even hoodwinking the latter. But it was Dwayne Bravo's never-say-die spirit and Kedar Jadhav's grit under great physical discomfort that carried the night for Chennai. On their return after two years, the Super Kings pulled off one of the great coups in IPL history, thanks largely to the brilliance of Bravo whose six-hitting skills were a sight to behold. Also, for the first time, there was so much support for the visiting team in Mumbai, and I put that down entirely to the charismatic presence of MS.

We at Sunrisers Hyderabad have never been short of support at our base in Uppal. Our fans have stood by us through thick and thin, and been our unofficial 12th man, energetically driving us forward. We are thankful for their patronage, and as we gear up for our first game against Rajasthan Royals on Monday night, we will do our best to keep them happy and in good spirits.

Our preparations have been excellent despite the heavy rain in Hyderabad. We came away from the auction happy with our acquisitions, which make us a stronger, well-rounded side. Quite obviously, the loss of David Warner in unfortunate circumstances is a big blow, that is stating the obvious, but we feel that even so, we have the resources to mount a strong challenge. Kane Williamson is a wonderful batsman and an inspirational leader, and we are confident he will ensure a seamless transition.

The depth in our batting and the variety in our bowling means we have the luxury of playing different combinations depending on the conditions and the opposition without having to make compromises. Twenty20 cricket is all about momentum and getting on a roll. We have two matches in our backyard before we start travelling, and as a group, we would love to get two wins under our belt so that we can carry that positive energy with us when we hit the road.

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Depth in squad making its presence felt

The two wins that Sunrisers Hyderabad were looking for before we hit the road have come our way, though I must say that we almost made a meal of a regulation chase against Mumbai Indians on Thursday!

Right from the auction, I have reiterated the depth in our squad, and that is already beginning to make its presence felt. The bowling group has stood up remarkably well in our first two home games. The best part is their approach; they are always looking for wickets, and I feel there is no better dot ball than the one that has a W to go with it. There is experience, plenty of skill and versatility, and even when we lost Bhuvni to injury in our second match, Sandeep Sharma stepped up beautifully.

I am particularly delighted at how well Shikhar has been batting. The notable feature is his mindset. He is not trying to just accumulate but is intent on pouncing on the bowling. It's a mindset that has been a stunning feature in international cricket since the Champions Trophy last year, and it is great to see him continue in similar fashion. I expect him to continue to stack up the runs because I know how hard he has worked on his technique as well. He is a lot more balanced at the crease, which allows him to score freely on both sides of the wicket. He is a complete package now, on top of his game, and that is wonderful both for us at Sunrisers and for the national team.

Kane Williamson has led the team expertly, attacking constantly and setting excellent fields. It was also nice to see Deepak Hooda take responsibility during that collapse against Mumbai and guide the team home. We have invested a lot in him in the last two or three years, and to see that investment pay off is heart-warming for the Sunrisers family.

The continued success of Mayank Markande showcases the best of IPL, a tournament that allows relative unknowns to become overnight heroes. He is not even a regular member of his Punjab state side, yet the confidence with which he has bowled in his first two games is remarkable. Long may his run continue.

The first week of the IPL has thrown up entertaining cricket, as per norm, though it will be sad for the Chennai fans not to be able to see their favourite sons in action on their own turf for the rest of the season. I truly feel for them.

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Beating the home team, away from home

It's only been four days since our first ever win against Kolkata Knight Riders at the Eden Gardens, but so much has transpired subsequently that it almost seems like a lifetime. For Sunrisers Hyderabad to translate their home form into results away from Uppal was crucial, and I was proud of the way we went about our task against a strong team that is even more formidable in its own backyard.

Once again, it was the bowlers who set the tone, after which the calm and intelligent Kane Williamson masterminded the chase. When things got a little tricky towards the end, we could fall back on the experience and familiarity with the conditions of Shakib and Yusuf Pathan, both formerly of KKR.

Manish Pandey has had a quiet time with the bat, but he reiterated his value with two spectacular catches. Not only at Sunrisers but across franchises, there is tremendous emphasis on fielding and catching. Within teams, players compete with each other in setting standards, and it is no accident that India are one of the best fielding sides in world cricket.

Next up for us, on Thursday, are Kings XI Punjab, in their own Mohali den. They have already showed what a balanced team they are, and while we are brimful of confidence after three straight wins, we know we will be in for a scrap.

Punjab gave Chris Gayle his first game of the season in their last encounter against Chennai Super Kings, and what an innings the big man played! In fact, that match produced two glorious knocks, MS making light of a back injury to nearly nudge his team over the line. Each time one of these legends fires, it is a master class for the youngsters in the changing room and those watching on TV. There is so much to learn from and admire about the way they go about their jobs.

The batting stars of the tournament thus far have been proven IPL performers – Gayle, MS, Sanju Samson, Andre Russell, Shikhar, Rohit, AB and Virat. The newcomers, especially from overseas, have found the going slightly difficult on unfamiliar pitches, but I am sure it is only a matter of time before they find their bearing.

So many sixes have been struck this tournament, mainly off fast bowlers, that it is mind-boggling. The margin for error for the quick is miniscule. By contrast, spinners, and especially wrist-spinners, have had great success, even with short balls. That is not a new trend in T20 cricket; every year, the IPL serves to highlight the importance of wicket-taking wrist-spinners, which is great news for the sport.

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Proud of the team, will perform to potential

The topsy-turvy nature of the IPL has reared its head. After three excellent wins, suddenly we have lost two matches in a row, but I feel there is no reason to start panicking within the Sunrisers Hyderabad set-up.

While the disappointment of losing a close game will always linger, I feel proud of the way the team fought back from a difficult position against Chennai Super Kings. We lost three wickets in the Power Play while chasing 183. To bounce back and only lose by four runs was a top effort. Unsurprisingly, the revival was masterminded by our excellent captain, who once again showed what a class act he is. Kane Williamson's intelligence and character were on full view, and I am sure his inspirational batting will rub off on the rest of the group. Yusuf Pathan produced the kind of innings he is known for, showing that he is still more than capable of changing the course of a game within a few deliveries.

We could of course do with more runs from the other batsmen, and the management group has the utmost confidence that they will start firing very soon and will play an important role as the tournament goes deeper. We are now headed into the middle period, which to me is the most crucial phase. If we can string together a couple of wins and make a move up the table, we won't have to play with the pressure of qualification hanging over our heads towards the end of the league phase.

There are a few areas in which we can improve, most notably bowling at set batsmen going after us. We allowed Chris Gayle to pull away in Mohali, and Ambati Rayudu likewise on Sunday. All that is needed is a little tweak here and there, because the quality in our bowling is all too obvious. It was unfortunate that Bhuvni started to develop back spasms after his second over, bowled his third in great pain and could not complete his quota. He is our spearhead and it was a big blow that he couldn't send down his final over, but we are not looking for excuses. Several people have also come up to me and said we were at the receiving end of some questionable umpiring calls, but that is part and parcel of the game, I have no complaints.

Next up for us are Mumbai Indians on Wednesday. Our plan is simple – perform to our potential and get back on the winning trail.

Published on 4.5.18

Beating the home team, away from home

Midway through the league phase, Sunrisers Hyderabad have six wins from eight matches, which is as good a start as we could have hoped for. Historically, eight wins have been sufficient for teams to make it to the playoffs, but from our point of view, it is important that we look to improve from one game to another and not merely be happy with qualification.

We were especially delighted at the manner in which we pulled off low-scoring thrillers in our last three games before a little break. Those wins, set up by a young bowling group, were even more creditable because they came without Bhuvi. One of our retained players and among the best in the world, Bhuvi is clearly our spearhead but in his absence, the manner in which Siddarth Kaul, Sandeep Sharma and Basil Thampi stood up was heart-warming.

That they achieved what they did under tremendous pressure is huge credit to them. Even the most skilled players can crumble under pressure, but showing great courage and fortitude, this young trio took it upon themselves to drive the team home.

I am also very impressed with the character shown by Rashid. After going for plenty of runs in two successive games, the way he has bounced back has been amazing. He is only a young kid, and to recover as magnificently as he has speaks volumes of his mental strength and resolve to go with tremendous skills.

Our fielding too has been outstanding. The boys understand that fielding is in their control, and the way they have committed themselves on the park is tribute to their spirit. Half-chances have been taken, run-outs fashioned out of nowhere, the one percenters cashed in. We obviously expect more from the batting group and I am confident it is just a matter of time; to be fair to them, they have hardly had a taste of a belter this season.

The success of the Indian players has been the talking point of this season. Seniors like MS and Rayudu have stormed the imagination, as have exciting youngsters like Shreyas Iyer, Prithvi Shaw and Rishabh Pant. Shreyas has remained unaffected by the cares of captaincy after taking over from Gautam, Prithvi is a powerhouse and Rishabh has evolved since his India debut 15 months back. He is no longer a one-dimensional, on-side player. He is also a lot more mature and balanced, which is a great sign for the future.

The beauty of the IPL is the opportunity it provides young Indians in being able to interact with the best in the world from close quarters for two months at a stretch. Nothing, therefore, pleases you more than when you see the next generation making the most of this golden chance.

Published on 13.5.18

Fusing skills and calm, to garner wins

To find ourselves in the play-offs with three matches remaining is a wonderful achievement for Sunrisers Hyderabad, especially considering the massive jolt we received just before the start of the season when we lost David Warner, our captain.

While we are delighted with the results, of course, what has pleased me even more is the attitude and the commitment of the squad. Not just the 11 players out in the middle, the entire group takes so much pride in donning the Sunrisers jersey. Twenty20 cricket is a high-pressure format, and the pressures are magnified manifold in the IPL. The way the team has responded as a tight-knit group is the reason we find ourselves at the top of the table.

Our bowling group has hogged the limelight, and rightly so, because they have fused skills and calmness under pressure quite superbly. The hallmark of a good side is that when one department is slightly misfiring, the other should lift itself as compensation. Our batting was a little off the boil in admittedly difficult conditions in the middle of the tournament, and the bowling bailed us out by defending sub-par scores. When the bowling was put under pressure by the precocious Rishabh Pant the other night, the two most experienced batsmen in the team put their hand up to secure a sixth successive win.

To me, Kane Williamson has been the most consistent batsman in the tournament. He has shown that if you back your strengths and have the belief, you can succeed in any format. Kane's preparation, like Shikhar's, is both precise and exemplary. These two hit the most balls in the nets, and it was great to see them chase down a big total against Delhi Daredevils in clinical fashion. At no stage did we in the dugout feel tense, which is a sign of the confidence in our ranks. We will guard against that turning into complacency, because momentum can shift very quickly in this format. We are determined to maintain our intensity till the final game.

The congestion in the middle of the table is great for the tournament, which to me has been the most competitive to date. Even though a record number of catches have been shelled, the quality of cricket has been remarkably high, and I expect the remaining matches to be as thrilling, what with so much at stake. Batsmen like KL Rahul, the explosive Rishabh and Jos Buttler have been awesome entertainers. I am sure new heroes will emerge over the next week as the qualification race reaches its climax.

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A game away from the perfect game, with both ball and bat

It's been a veritable run-fest in the last two games involving Sunrisers Hyderabad. Unfortunately, we have been at the receiving end in both matches. If there is any consolation, it is that we were undone by some exceptional batting from the opposition batsmen, while our own batsmen didn't do their confidence any harm at all.

Against Chennai Super Kings, Ambati Rayudu subjected us to a masterclass, playing proper cricketing strokes on his way to a brilliant hundred. I have always had a lot of time for Rayudu, and this is easily the best I have seen him bat. It's wonderful that he is back in the Indian ODI team after a long break, and I foresee bigger things for him going forward.

At the Chinnaswamy on Thursday in our last match, AB de Villiers and Moeen Ali put on an exhibition. Agreed, our bowling could have been better, but Royal Challengers Bangalore had to win to stay alive, and they went out and played fearlessly. The combination of a good pitch, the aggressive mindset of the batsmen, short boundaries, and the fact that Basil Thampi was playing after a bit of a break all contributed to RCB's massive score, but I don't think we need to be too downcast.

We also replied in kind with Kane Williamson showing the way. The more I watch Kane, the more I admire his approach and his cricketing acumen. Like Rayudu, KL Rahul and Virat, he tends to rely on conventional strokeplay. These men have shown that if you identify your strengths, believe in them and play with intelligence, you can be successful in T20 cricket without seeking recourse to the unorthodox. They are also great examples of making a good thing count. Once they strike form, they show a consistency that separates the very good from the good, and that's why they are there in the run-making charts.

I feel we are just one game away from the perfect game with both ball and bat. It was nice to see Manish Pandey strike the ball beautifully and, as we head into the playoffs, we couldn't be more delighted. Agreed, to carry some positive momentum will be nice, and that's what we will target ahead of our final league tie against Kolkata Knight Riders.

With four matches left in the league phase, two qualification spots are still up for grabs, which reiterates the competitiveness and the intensity of this year's IPL. We might be through, but I will watch the final league weekend with keen interest, like always.

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Hunger, desire and calmness under pressure will mark the winners

The most intense and eagerly contested Indian Premier League to date finally has its play-off candidates. The third qualifier wasn't identified till the penultimate day of the tournament, and the table was formalised only after the last of the 56 league games, which is testimony to the quality of cricket and the even spread of talent among the eight sides.

While there have been a few scores in excess of 200, a majority of the games have witnessed an equal contest between bat and ball, helped by pitches that have given the bowlers some assistance. Wrist-spinners in particular have had a wonderful time, but there has been reward for variety and versatility. It is also very heartening to see young Indian talent come to the fore because, after all, that is one of the objectives of the IPL. At the same time, men like Kane Williamson and MS Dhoni have reiterated the virtues of experience and composure, and it is no surprise that it is teams headed by these two giants that top the qualification race.

Whatever has happened till now, however, will hold little meaning over the final week of the competition. It now all boils down to hunger and desire, but also calmness under pressure coupled with an attacking mindset. In a knockout situation, it isn't merely about the skills you possess, but also how you react under pressure. The stakes have gotten massive all of a sudden, starting from Tuesday when we take on Chennai Super Kings in Qualifier 1.

Ideally, Sunrisers Hyderabad would have loved to have gone into the play-offs with greater momentum, but we won't be unduly perturbed with three consecutive losses. We know the areas we need to improve in but, as we have stressed throughout the season, our focus has been on the processes rather than the outcome. We will take the positives from our campaign which netted us nine wins and the top position on the table.

While it is nice that the reward for our consistency is two bites at the cherry in our bid to make the final, we won't dwell too much on it. We will reflect on what we did well when we won those nine matches, and attempt to replicate them against Chennai, who are a formidable team, but far from invincible. Personally, I am excited at what lies ahead over the next week.

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Heading for Eden with a clean slate

Qualifier 1 of the IPL was a real humdinger that went down to the last over, and while it was disappointing to be on the wrong side of the result, Sunrisers Hyderabad can take great pride in the fight we put up against a formidable Chennai Super Kings side.

It didn't help that we lost our captain and most consistent batsman of the tournament, Kane Williamson, as well as Shakib Al Hasan to catches down the leg-side. As a team, when two key batsmen get out in such fashion, it is easy to start feeling that the rub of the green isn't going your way, but our campaign has been characterised by a positive approach and attitude. Yusuf Pathan first, and then Carlos Brathwaite in grand fashion, showcased those virtues though, at the break, we felt that 139 was about 20-25 runs too few.

We have great confidence in our bowling, and like the consummate professional that he is, Bhuvni once again led the way. Fully recovered from the mid-season injury, he got the ball to swing. Our only chance was to take wickets, and after Bhuvni provided the breakthrough, the rest chipped in to dent Chennai's chase.

However, Chennai's batting has been like our bowling. Where we have found means to defend low totals, they have unearthed different batting heroes, and this time, it was the turn of the experienced Faf du Plessis to put his hand up. Chennai have tended to take the game deep and refused to blink in adversity, trusting themselves to get the job done. Faf symbolised that and played a brilliant knock under the circumstances.

I know we have now lost four games in a row, but in a knockout situation, that doesn't mean anything. We start Qualifier 2 against Kolkata Knight Riders with a clean slate, knowing that it will be a huge challenge but also excited at the prospect. Kolkata recovered from a series of early jolts on an initially damp surface to comfortably get the better of Rajasthan Royals. They have a bunch of dangerous ball-strikers and, not for the first time, Dinesh Karthik rallied them around. Shubman Gill batted beautifully and Andre Russell provided the final flourish, but Rajasthan seemed to have the chase under control through Ajinkya and Sanju Samson.

With 50 needed off five overs and a bunch of wickets in hand, the chasing side wins more often than not but Kolkata kept their nerve and kept picking up wickets, reiterating that there is no better dot-ball than the one that comes with a 'W'. Both our seasons now hinge on what happens at the Eden on Friday.

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Nadal overwhelming favourite for men's, and open season at the women's

The start of the tennis summer for viewers worldwide is at Paris. This year's French Open has an overwhelming favourite in the men's circuit and an even field in the women's. There was some shadow of doubt over clay's all-time great Rafael Nadal when he came to Paris last year to reclaim his territory. The fact that he had been deprived of the title in 2015 and 2016 made one doubt whether he would be able to make it an unbelievable, mind-boggling tenth win.

This time, things are same and yet they are different. The similarity is that Nadal, recently recrowned world No. 1, comes in with a fabulous record on the clay circuit this year. Once again he only lost one match, to Dominic Thiem, and once again he only dropped two sets outside of that one loss. Nadal looks more formidable and really is an overwhelming favourite.

He is looking fit, confident and ready for a remarkable 11th title, even with a couple of former champions lurking in the shadows. Novak Djokovic is back in business, he is looking better and better, and was extremely impressive through the clay season. Stanislas Wawrinka, though, is not the player he was in 2015 and would really need some more time before his knee fully heals.

In fact, the only two players who look in great touch at the moment, in good enough touch to at least win a set off the great Spaniard, are Alexander 'Sascha' Zverev and Thiem. The latter was impressive last year till he was blown away by Nadal in the semi-finals. Zverev looked great in the Rome Masters and is being hailed as a player to look out for, with his great form on clay. I think Nadal was helped just a little by rain in the finals. Zverev is learning from past mistakes and I think these next few months will show that he is a very special player. However, the next year would give us an inkling of whether he has what it takes to win Grand Slams; he seems to have the game and as a fellow German I certainly am excited by his talent.

Looking across at the women's side, the most amazing story is Serena Williams' return to the court barely a year after having her baby. This is testimony to her incredible fitness and talent, and she will definitely be a favourite among crowds. She should have returned with the seeding that she had before she withdrew from the circuit. This was the most natural thing to do on the women's circuit – the officials certainly have not taken a great call here. Serena does have her work cut out for her in the form of top seed Simona Halep, defending champion Jelena Ostapenko, Garbine Muguruza and the ever-dangerous Maria Sharapova.

The field is rather open with any of these women needing just one good fortnight to win the tournament. Ostapenko was unseeded last year and went on to win. Since then she has consolidated her position and has impressed me enough to know that she is not a one tournament wonder. I also hope Halep goes the distance here. She deserves to be a Grand Slam champion and this is her favourite surface. It's open season for the women's side – predictions are hard to make.

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Top seeds going strong in the women's tournament, no surprises in the men's

The French Open is a little more magical than other years this time. I have never seen such teeming crowds at Roland Garros and the weather has also been brilliant. Tournament director Guy Forget is particularly pleased because the weather has been great through the day with thunderstorms every evening. Thank God it's not the other way around.

There have not been too many surprises on the men's side. Rafael Nadal had a testing time in the first round but it's been smooth sailing thereafter. He is looking fit and on course to make a strong defence of his title.

I am particularly interested in Sascha Zverev's progress. The young German had two testing matches in the first week and fortunately has a day's break now before his next match. This would be an advantage for him because his opponent has no break thanks to the deferment of his match.

Dominic Thiem is also making steady and focussed progress through the draw. He looks very good for the next week and is still among the top four contenders.

The other player who I am watching keenly is Novak Djokovic. I can see some of the athleticism and groundstrokes that made him the champion just two years ago. I know several experts doubt this hunger and commitment. However, I know the former champion and he would not be back here unless he is hungry for it. He is improving with every game and does not look too far from his best.

Progressing well and below the radar is Juan Martin Del Porto. The Argentine is looking strong and is particularly ominous when the courts are dry.

On the women's side, I am amazed to see that Simona Halep is scheduled to play her next match on Court 18. It's rare to see the top seed being consigned to the outer courts. Simona is a player whose time has come and she is ready for the role of Grand Slam champion.

Elina Svitolina is the other player I was excited by and I was really surprised to see her lose to an unseeded player. Caroline Wozniacki is looking good and seems to have discovered a way to work her game on clay. I reckon this is going to be a good year for her. Maria Sharapova is also looking steady and consistent.

And finally there is Serena Williams. She is in good touch and will get fitter and stronger with every passing game since she has been away from the courts for a fair amount of time. Her next opponent is the German player Julia Goerges.

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Women's championship draws towards an unpredictable finish

The good news from the French Open is that the women's side had a stability and form that ensured the best players made it deep into the tournament without too many upsets. I liked the quality of tennis played through the second week, and the fact that the stars of the draw, ranging from the top seed to other Grand Slam champions, ensured that fans were excited and invested.

Both semi-finals went more or less according to script. The all-American semi-final between Madison Keys and Sloane Stephens was one sided but I thought it was still an important step in the development of Keys. Her strong serving and power-hitting seemed a little too intense against Stephens, who had all the answers on Thursday. Stephens, on the other hand, modified her game beautifully to suit the needs of clay. She was ballerina-like on the court and seemed to be exactly where the ball was without missing a step or even needing to slide. It was a pleasure watching her grace which complemented the heavy hitting of her compatriot. But I expect Keys to do well on the grass circuit, so watch out for her!

The all-European final between Garbine Muguruza and Simona Halep saw the latter come through without much effort. The problem for Muguruza was the one she has often encountered in her career: she does not have a good defence once her attacking game is not working. She is unbeatable when her groundstrokes and serve are working but when they are not, she does not have a B Game. Simona was more assured and looked at ease once again as she used her efficient defence game to nullify Muguruza's groundstrokes.

Looking ahead at Saturday's final, other than the Americans in the house, the crowd is going to overwhelmingly support Halep. She was so close to the championship here last year and has made it to other finals as well. Both the top seed and Stephens have similar games in that they have excellent footwork and also a strong defence game.

Notably, Stephens has never lost a final and that's some record! Stephens was always a player to watch out for as she came through the junior circuit and now looks like she has come into her own. I am not one to sit on the fence and, though Halep is the favourite, Stephens' finals record makes me reluctant to predict the champion. (Gameplan)

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I will Nadal to win, even at 75 percent!

The men's final echoes what happened in Madrid with the greatest phenomenon on clay taking on the only player to have beaten him on that surface this year.

If Rafael Nadal wins the French for the eleventh time it would be facile to call it an achievement, this is history, perhaps fantasy and definitely never to be repeated ever again - not on clay, not in any other Grand Slam.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves since there is a final to be played on Sunday and Dominic Thiem has done enough in the last couple of years to establish himself as an accomplished clay court player. The Austrian looked very assured against Alexander Zverev as well as Cecchinato. The quarterfinal between Zverev and Thiem foretells the future as I see both these players as future champions.

The three five-setters that Zverev played before reaching the last eight made the young German run out of gas when he went up against Thiem. However, full marks to Thiem for finishing the match in clinical style and making the semi-finals once again. He was equally assured against Cecchinato and

the big plus is that he has not been tired out by long matches before what will be the toughest challenge of his career.

Nadal is still playing at only seventy-five per cent efficiency and that still is good enough for him to beat tough opponents like Juan Martin Del Potro. There were moments against Diego Schwartzman where unforced errors did creep in but he managed to find a way back.

So what would Thiem have to do to beat this colossus of clay? He would simply have to remember what worked for him in Madrid this year and try to replicate it. If Nadal gives him opportunities he should be confident enough to go for the kill. There will be moments when Nadal's serve wavers and Thiem should be brave enough to go for his shots. Del Potro did have those moments in the semi-finals but he was not able to make the most of them.

However, there is no denying that Nadal, on clay at Roland Garros, on Centre Court, in the final, is tennis' greatest challenge. I would back him to win, even at seventy-five per cent efficiency.

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Nadal makes it hard to imagine Roland Garros beyond him

Undecimo. The world is learning Spanish thanks to Rafael Nadal. The eleventh title was a bit predictable thanks to the ease with which the defending champion went through the tournament. However, I was a little disappointed at the way the final went, and had expected a more challenging one for the great Spaniard. One would have expected a four-setter, if not a five-setter considering his opponent, Dominic Thiem, had defeated Nadal a few weeks ago.

The match started with much promise, as Thiem seemed equal to the task of matching Nadal stroke-for-stroke. However, from the time Nadal had a couple of break points which the young Austrian staved off, it was clear that he was playing catch-up, with Nadal setting the pace. Whenever Thiem looked like he might be closing in on Nadal's serve, the latter simply upped his game a notch to quell the danger. That was what was so remarkable about Nadal's win – it was clinical, effortless and he was at best pushed by Thiem; he was never threatened.

This means that the last six Grand Slams have been divided equally between Nadal and Roger Federer, aged 32 and 36, respectively. Where is the next generation? Why are they not winning the big tournaments?

There are two parts of this story. The first part is that we are seeing two of the greatest, if not the two greatest players ever, playing the game at the moment. Fifty years from now we would be speaking about this era and how incredibly remarkable Nadal was to have won 11 French Open titles and how Federer won 20 Grand Slams at the same time. These are two exceptional and unparalleled individuals and I think it would be hard to expect these records to be rewritten any time soon. All of us, fans, experts and their contemporaries should feel special to watch this dominance, this era, up close and personal. For two players to dominate a sport for nearly 15 years so completely is really quite unprecedented.

The other part is that like many others I, too, am a little concerned by the fact that Thiem, Alexander Zverev and Nicholas Kyrgios have not challenged these greats enough. Thiem is 24 years old and the others are roughly his age. They need to prove that it's their time in the sun and that they are ready to take over the mantle from these two great as also from Novak Djokovic and Andy Murray.

But let none of this take anything away from the great champion. His excellence and his humility are exceptional and it's inspiring to see how committed he is to the game. I was amazed to hear him talk about life beyond Roland Garros at the post-match press conference. That he can imagine a time when he is not champion at Roland Garros is amazing – that's becoming hard to imagine for the rest of us!

The women's side had a very different story with Simona Halep winning her maiden Grand Slam title. I had mentioned Sloane Stephens' blemishless record in finals, so it was no surprise to see her fly off the blocks with her great serves and excellent footwork. In contrast, Halep seemed afraid, tentative and unsure for the first set. The crowds were rooting for her, but one could sense that they could see the Romanian losing once again. However, Halep is a champion and she rediscovered her game just before it was too late. She played a high-risk braver game, going for her shots and managed to outgun the American in the second set. It took just 20 minutes for Halep to show that she has an aggressive all-court game, one that makes you despair that this was only her first Grand Slam title. I am glad she has got that first win out of the way, and I now hope she will win a few more because she is a wonderful champion and deserves more silverware.

As for Stephens, she was magnificent through the tournament and is young enough and quick enough to make a mark in future tournaments. She has already one Grand Slam under her belt and I expect a few more. In the women's side of the game at least, the future has arrived.