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### West Indies series to pose tough test to Team India

It has been a tumultuous three weeks since India's semi-final exit at the World Cup, with unpleasant non-cricketing issues hogging the headlines. It's time now to start focusing on the sport itself, starting with the Twenty20 International series against West Indies.

These three matches will be a stern examination of Virat and his team. I believe West Indies, the defending World T20 champions, begin favourites because they enjoy this format, they have power-hitters who relish smashing the ball out of the park, and because they believe they can compete with anyone on an equal footing.

Furthermore, with the exception of Bhuvneshwar Kumar and Ravindra Jadeja, India have an inexperienced bowling attack which will be seriously challenged by the formidable West Indian batting.

Having said that, I have always maintained that out of challenges arise opportunities. This is a great chance for the likes of Khaleel Ahmed, Deepak Chahar, Navdeep Saini, Krunal Pandya, Rahul Chahar and Washington Sundar to build on their impressive performances in the IPL and embrace the world stage. In many ways, this tour is the beginning of a new cycle.

Until a couple of months back, the focus was on the 50-over World Cup. Now, efforts get underway to identify the core group for the T20 World Cup in Australia in October-November next year. India have upwards of 20 T20Is lined up before that, and the build-up to that event starts in right earnest, especially considering we haven't won the tournament since the inaugural edition in 2007.

The return of Shikhar Dhawan from injury restores quality and firepower to the batting, which looks both settled and strong. I would love to see KL Rahul get a chance to extend his good form of the World Cup and bat at No. 4, and watch with keen interest how Rishabh Pant goes, now that he is a certainty across formats. Manish Pandey and Shreyas Iyer have broken open the doors to selection with a string of top performances, but unfortunate as it might seem, I feel they will still have to bide their time because I would prefer the extra bowling option for Virat to fall back on.

Ideally, two in the top seven must be able to contribute with the ball, and that's where Krunal and Jadeja come in. With both left-arm-spinning all-rounders capable of hitting a long ball, the batting won't suffer. But especially against West Indies, the insurance of the sixth bowler is imperative in this format.

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### **India dominate West Indies easily; younger players delight with their performances**

Like most cricket followers, I had anticipated a keen contest in the Twenty20 Internationals, but it was largely a one-sided affair as India lorded over West Indies in the three-match series. What this series reiterated is the ability of teams to adapt mentally and strategically to conditions. India did that far better than West Indies, who have found it difficult in recent times to adjust their game plans according to situations.

The pitches for all the three matches weren't exactly flat and conducive to stroke-making, which meant the Caribbeans had to rein in their natural instincts. In direct contrast to India, they lacked the wherewithal to embrace judiciousness, which explains the comprehensive 3-0 score line.

What gladdened me most was the success of India's younger, less experienced players, especially in the bowling department. The man of the match awards went to Navdeep Saini, Krunal Pandya and Deepak Chahar, which is testament to the Indian system that prepares players for the rigours and challenges of the international arena. Most hearteningly, these players believed in themselves and played to their strengths. Saini is an express pace bowler, and that's exactly how he bowled.

Chahar is a fabulous exponent of swing, and his success in the third game was built around swing. The older Pandya is street-smart and canny, capable of thinking on his feet. I would love to see him get more opportunities in 50-over cricket too because I believe he can slot in at the No. 6 position, and can offer a full complement of 10 overs.

It's not fair or wise to rely only on Jasprit Bumrah or Bhuvneshwar Kumar to do the job all the time. What this series has proved is that India have other weapons in their arsenal. But these players need to play more games so that they grow into their roles, become comfortable and therefore attain the consistency that they are capable of.

The other youngster who deserves plaudits is Rishabh Pant. You expect Rohit and Virat to score runs, but Pant learnt from his earlier mistakes and came up with a very mature knock in the final encounter. He still played his free-flowing game, but he played percentage cricket and cut out the risks, relying on his strong basics. That's what you want to see in youngsters – the willingness to learn, the desire to improve and the hunger to perform. These are all excellent auguries for Indian cricket as the focus gradually shifts to next year's T20 World Cup in Australia.



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### Senior players show value of adaptability, Kohli continues to impress with intent and intensity

Virat Kohli and Bhuvneshwar Kumar reiterated the value of experience and adaptability on a tricky surface in the second One-Day International, handing out excellent lessons that the youngsters can learn from. As has been the norm for so long now, Virat was truly outstanding on his way to a brilliant 42nd ODI hundred.

The more I see him, the more I admire his ability to retain his intent and intensity. When you have played for as long as Virat has, it is possible sometimes that your focus might flag. That's where Virat is special. Whenever he plays for the country, he is always switched on, and his intent manifests itself not just in boundaries, but also in rock-solid defence, in his strike-rotation, in the way he runs the first run really hard, and in how he runs not just his own runs but that of his partner's as well.

The one thing he is extremely good at is gauging the pace of the surface very early and then adapting his game accordingly. He is blessed with the gift of altering the speed of his bat-swing depending on the pace of the track, which isn't an easy thing to do because bat-swing is instinctive. That he is able to master his instincts and make adjustments on the fly is one of the main reasons for his sustained success across formats.

Another impressive performance came from the bat of Shreyas Iyer. It's never easy on one's comeback to the national side, but Shreyas built on his string of big scores for India 'A' with an eye-catching and mature half-century. It helped that he batted alongside Virat for a long time, and he will derive a lot of confidence from this outing. It is, however, essential that he has the security of knowing he will get a long run to establish himself in the Indian side.

Bhuvni was crafty as always, again bowling according to the demands of the surface and bringing his variations into play. Chasing a competitive total on a somewhat challenging surface, West Indies needed their experienced batsmen to set the tone but once again, Chris Gayle struggled for rhythm, just like Rohit had done at the start of the Indian innings. Evin Lewis was among the runs, but in Virat, he has an example to emulate – to not just be satisfied with 50s and 60s but kick on to stack up hundreds, thereby making the job of incoming batsmen easier.

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### **Biggest ever overseas win; pacers continue to deliver hard and fast**

India were overwhelming favourites heading into the first Test in Antigua, but even they must have been taken aback by the meekness with which West Indies capitulated on the fourth evening to hand them their biggest win on overseas soil. Few would have bargained for the one-sidedness of the contest after India lost three wickets for next to nothing on day one, but playing like the No. 1 Test side in the world, Virat Kohli's men hit back with a vengeance. It's never easy when you are playing only one format of the game internationally, as was evident from Cheteshwar Pujara's travails. That alone puts Ajinkya Rahane's twin efforts with the bat in perspective. He must have felt some pressure after not having scored a Test hundred for more than two years. Even though he had the backing of the selectors and the team management, the vice-captain would have been desperate to leave his mark, and his reaction upon reaching three-figures on Sunday showed just how much this century meant to him. Rahane hasn't entirely done justice to his massive potential. I am hoping this is the start of a new chapter in his career.

I was impressed with the way Hanuma Vihari approached his task. He batted freely without taking undue risks, and has looked like he belongs in Test cricket from the time he made his debut in England last year. By contrast, KL Rahul will be extremely disappointed with himself for having done all the hard work in both innings and then getting himself out. Rahul is a wonderful talent, but he must learn to translate starts into innings of greater substance - because it hasn't been a particularly rewarding run for him in Test matches for the last year and a half.

India's fast bowlers once again put on a show. Ishant was excellent throughout the game and Mohammed Shami troubled all batsmen, but the one who stood out was Jasprit Bumrah. In the past, the predominantly inswing bowler occasionally got the ball to straighten. It is a tribute to the work he has put in in the nets that now, he is able to take the ball away from the right-hander at will. His relentless attack of the stumps in the West Indies second innings was breathtakingly impactful.

I could sense anguish and dismay in the voices of Sir Viv Richards and Ian Bishop during commentary at West Indies' capitulation. For the team to pull itself out of the morass, the players must also feel the same emotions, because I do believe that the team has the ability to give a far better account of itself.



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### **Tour ends with success, confidence in bowlers but questions about our batsmen**

India rounded off a very successful tour of the US and the Caribbean with another solid performance in Jamaica, sweeping the Test series 2-0 and grabbing the early lead in the World Test Championship. There was so much to admire about the brand of cricket India played, and no one exemplified it better than Hanuma Vihari with the bat and Jasprit Bumrah with the ball.

I have followed Vihari's career closely, and I am convinced the years and years of first-class cricket have instilled in him the temperament and mind set to score runs consistently in Test cricket. Speaking from experience, I can say that batting at No. 6 is not an easy task, but Vihari has been at home, enhancing his reputation as a Test batsman with every outing. He is very calm and mature at the crease, looks to dominate the spinners with exemplary use of the feet, and is assured against fast bowling. I look forward to greater things from him.

Bumrah, of course, has been a sight to behold for so long now. He is in complete command of his craft, and you can actually see him develop and improve each day. While he is the leader of the attack, it was wonderful to see Ishant maintain his consistency of the last few years, as well as put a price on his wicket. I am sure he must have been as delighted with his maiden half-century as a five-wicket haul. He and Shami are experienced pros, and form alongside Bumrah a pace attack as good as, if not better than, any going around in world cricket. -

There were lots of positives for India, but question marks hang over the batting. Cheteshwar Pujara must be disappointed at a modest start to a new season, but the greater concern is over KL Rahul. His ability is never under question, and he is no longer a newcomer to Test cricket. He has got numerous opportunities, but he has often flattered to deceive. India will look for more from him and Rishabh Pant, both with the bat and the gloves, in future.

One can't fault the effort of the West Indies bowlers, but the same can't be said of the batting, which lacked the skill and the temperament to grind it out. It's one thing to show disappointment after a poor stroke, but one must learn from past mistakes and come out the better for it. Unfortunately, throughout the four innings in the Test series, I saw little sign of that.

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### **A cracking batting line-up and strong bowling attack to take on South Africa**

Sunday will mark the start of a fresh home season of international cricket with a distinct slant towards Twenty20 and Test cricket. First up against a new-look South Africa is the three-match T20I series, which India will approach with great confidence and optimism. Their last outing was an unqualified success, away from home, against the formidable West Indies who are the defending Twenty20 World Cup champions. The ease with which India brushed them aside in Lauderhill and Providence was a tremendous achievement, and I expect an equally strong performance against Quinton de Kock's young South Africa side.

India boast a powerful and experienced batting line-up which gives them the edge straightaway, and the return of Hardik Pandya adds greater firepower to the batting and balance to the team. While Hardik will slot straightaway into the playing XI, I would also like to see Manish Pandey retain his place because against West Indies, he didn't get many opportunities to showcase his abilities.

With the next T20 World Cup a little over a year away, India will have to decide whether Shikhar Dhawan is still the preferred opening partner for Rohit Sharma going forward. Shikhar has been out of sorts in seven T20Is this year, and there are a lot of other batsmen capable of striking up a good alliance with Rohit at the top of the order. How long a rope the team management is willing to give him will make for interesting viewing.

This will be another examination of India's inexperienced bowling attack. On the evidence of what we saw against West Indies, Navdeep Saini is one for the future if handled carefully and given enough games. His pace is his X-factor, and he is capable of making an instant impact, while Deepak Chahar is a proven wicket-taker, especially in the Power Play because of his gift of getting the ball to move both ways in the air. Hardik's presence will allow India to play either a fourth seamer or a third spinner and have six full-fledged bowling options without compromising on batting strength. Both Krunal Pandya and Ravindra Jadeja will be in my starting XI for their versatility and quality.

South Africa are in the process of rebuilding, and it will be up to de Kock to shoulder the responsibility and shore up the batting department as they kick off their preparations for the World Cup. No South African side caves in meekly and I don't expect this lot to either, but all things being equal, I don't see them putting it past India if Virat's men play to their potential.



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### India win comfortably; South Africa's transition problems visible

No one likes a washout, not least young players from both sides looking to make a name for themselves, so it was good to have a full game in Mohali after the no-show in Dharamsala. Unfortunately, it wasn't a great outing for South Africa, in the throes of transition after the retirement of a host of legends, but it was a wonderful evening for India as they etched out a comfortable victory.

When you are in transition, it is imperative that the senior players stand up so that the youngsters can fly under the radar and ease themselves in. Quinton de Kock was his natural aggressive self despite the responsibility of the captaincy, but South Africa would have expected more from David Miller, not just an old hand but also familiar with conditions in Mohali, given his long association with Kings XI Punjab.

Miller batting deep would have helped South Africa get close to 170, par for the surface, but that should take no credit away from especially Deepak Chahar and Washington Sunder. Chahar was impeccable with his lengths with both old ball and new and used his variations excellently during his second spell, most notably the knuckle ball which got rid of Bhavuma. Sunder is not a big turner of the ball but he troubled the batsmen with the angles he created through the use of the crease, and with his height.

India's senior hands showed South Africa the way with their approach during the modest chase. Rohit Sharma played a couple of extraordinary pulls while it was great to see the return of a free-flowing Shikhar Dhawan. I am sure the team management would have had a chat with him before the series about the approach they would like from him, and they must have been delighted with what he produced.

The standout batsman was Virat Kohli. Once again, he saw through a chase effortlessly. His use of the feet against the quick bowlers was exemplary, as was his balance. He played stunning strokes through the off-side, including an extra-cover drive for six, but the shot of the match was the flick off Kagiso Rabada to a full ball on his pads. With a combination of wrist and bottom-hand, he sent the ball soaring over the long square boundary, a testament to his complete command over his craft.

The true test of a team's character is in how it bounces back from adversity. South Africa may not be able to win this T20 series, but they have all the running to do in Bengaluru.

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### **India takes some surprising calls and loses; seems to be part of formalizing strategies**

Virat Kohli's choice to bat first in the third T20I at a venue with a reputation of being a good chasing ground came as a surprise to many. But I have no issues with that, especially given the Indian team's desire to challenge itself and step out of its comfort zone in the extended build-up to the T20 World Cup next year.

Defeat at the Chinnaswamy Stadium is a setback, but nothing more than that, as the team sets about formalizing its game plans and strategies. It has been obvious for a while now that India have identified aggressive batting as the way to go forward in T20s, especially given the depth that sees Washington Sundar come in at No. 9 and Deepak Chahar at No. 10. Yet, the sustained success of any unit lies in its adaptability and situational awareness, and I think that's a lesson the Indian middle-order would have learnt.

Like in 50-over cricket, India look to their top three to do the bulk of the heavy lifting in T20s too. As a result, the middle-order is sometimes light on chances, which is why when you get them, you must make the most of the opportunities. Unfortunately, that didn't happen on Sunday night, which is why from 63 for one, India could only manage 134.

Rishabh Pant has been under the microscope for some time. He is at his best when playing free-flowing cricket, but currently, he appears somewhat confused, not sure if he should attempt his strokes from the get-go after criticism of his shot-selection in recent times. He is trying to add new dimensions by looking for ways to rotate strike, and when that doesn't happen, he has attempted low percentage strokes that have led to his downfall. I feel given his current mindset, he will be better off at No. 5 or 6, where he can come and express himself from the first ball, and Shreyas Iyer should bat at No. 4. Once he rediscovers his confidence, Rishabh will be an entirely different batsman altogether.

South Africa came up with a vastly improved display, especially with the ball. Beuran Hendricks and Bjorn Fortuin were brilliant, picking up wickets at regular intervals, and the visitors will take heart from having tamed a strong Indian batting line-up on their own turf. Skipper Quinton de Kock precluded any artificial excitement by batting through till the end and taking his team home, positive developments for a young team in the rebuilding phase.



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### **India needs to focus on high-quality cricket; top order needs to step up**

The start of a new home season is always exciting, but because India have only played three Tests at home in the last 21 months, the sense of anticipation will be more pronounced when they take on South Africa in a three-match series. Having made a cracking start to their World Test Championship campaign by picking up the full complement of points in the Caribbean, this is a great chance for Virat Kohli's boys to gain further momentum, though from the team's point of view, the target will be to play high-quality cricket which will automatically bring the desired results.

There will be a lot of focus on the top-order, which didn't exactly fire in the West Indies. Mayank Agarwal showed glimpses of his potential but didn't kick on to make big scores, something he will look to rectify over the next three weeks. But of greater interest will be how Rohit Sharma takes to opening the batting in Tests.

Rohit is a very experienced and mature player, and has tasted great success as opener in white-ball action. Test cricket will place different demands, but while he must have his plans in place, it is essential for him not to veer too much from his natural game. He will realise the value of starting his new avatar as an opener at home, where it is easier to front up to the new-ball, and I expect big things of him. I also expect Cheteshwar Pujara to rediscover run-making ways because he and Virat form the fulcrum of the Indian batting in the five-day game.

With Wriddhiman Saha back to full fitness and given recent form, it's no surprise that he is back in the eleven ahead of Rishabh Pant. Especially on Indian pitches, the better keeper must don the gloves. I believe Pant should be released to play for Delhi in the Vijay Hazare Trophy because there is nothing better for confidence than a bucketful of runs.

While Jasprit Bumrah's absence through a stress fracture is a big blow, India's attack in recent times hasn't depended on any one individual. Ishant Sharma and Mohammed Shami can be a handful even on Indian surfaces, while I can't wait to see R Ashwin back in action. The offie is a proven and pedigreed performer. My only concern is that because he hasn't played Test cricket for a while, he shouldn't be over-anxious for wickets. Otherwise, he and Ravindra Jadeja are as good a spin combine as any in the world.

The T20 series showed that there is no such thing as a weak, meek South African outfit. They will scrap till the last ball, but if India play like they can, then it will be hard to look beyond them.

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### **Record 11th series win at home; complete team performance delights**

As much as the fact that they have completed a record 11th series victory at home, what must delight India is that their display in the two Tests against South Africa have been a complete team performance. Every player has weighed in significantly, which is exactly what a side on top of the charts will expect.

India's top-order was short on runs in the Caribbean, but the new opening pair of Rohit Sharma and Mayank Agarwal acquitted itself in spectacular fashion. In his first Test as an opener, Rohit produced two sublime centuries in Visakhapatnam, while it was great to see Agarwal translate his maiden century into a doubleton, and then back it up with another hundred in Pune.

After a lull by his standards, Virat Kohli thundered back among the big runs with a monumental double-hundred, another telling statement of his hunger and his fitness, while the rest of the batting unit more than held its own. In India, when the hosts win the toss and pile up a mountain of runs, it is difficult for even the more experienced sides to hold their own. South Africa, short on that commodity following the retirement of a slew of superstars, was completely blown away.

For the first time, we were exposed to the toothlessness of the South African bowling attack. Kagiso Rabada showcased his class in patches, but otherwise, there was a distinct lack of penetration, as evidenced by both the tall totals and the rate at which India piled them up.

One of the reasons for India's excellent run over the last 18 months has been their incisiveness with the ball. On good Test pitches with no great help for the bowlers, the Indian attack was sensational. Ravichandran Ashwin reiterated why he is the best spinner in the country, his control and mastery awe-inspiring, while Ravindra Jadeja's shift in mindset from restrictive to wicket-taking is very obvious. The fast bowling group hustled the batsmen on slowish surfaces, which is a credit to their skills and fitness.

Personally, I am very happy for Wriddhiman Saha, who was coming off a long injury lay-off. His commitment is second to none, and the catches he snaffled in Pune were little short of breathtaking.

Though the series is in the bag, I expect no let-off from the Indians. Test Championship points are on offer, of course. But the world's No. 1 team doesn't need those extra incentives as it seeks to extend its unquestioned dominance.



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### Collective performance drives innings and series victory for India

Ruthless and unyielding, India flexed their muscles to brush South Africa aside in the third Test, thus capping their record 11th successive series win at home with their first clean sweep against the Proteas. Hearteningly, this innings victory too was driven by a collective performance, though Rohit Sharma was clearly at the forefront.

Batting with the maturity that experience brings with it, Rohit showcased impeccable judgement in the first session when an inspired Kagiso Rabada was making the most of assistance from the surface. With the ball jaggging around, Rohit left balls outside off repeatedly, refusing to play unless he needed to. Because there was swing too, he desisted from driving even when the ball was full, relying more on strokes off the back foot to score. Not only did he come with a clear game plan, he also showed the discipline to stick to it, which to me was a huge tick in the box. Once he got his eye in and the pitch eased out a touch, he was back dotting the landscape with conventional free-flowing Rohit strokes. That he kicked on to score his maiden double-ton was further proof of his desire to not be satisfied easily.

His partner in a match-sealing fourth-wicket stand was Ajinkya Rahane, who produced his most fluent Test knock in India. Rahane has always delivered when the chips are down, and it was no surprise to see him bring his 'A' game when India were 39 for 3. His mindset and footwork against spin, which has troubled him in the past, was exemplary.

Contrary to expectations, pace more than spin got the job done for the hosts after they amassed close to 500. It was terrific to watch Mohammed Shami and Umesh Yadav not just pick up wickets, but also in the manner in which they did so. The ball of the match was the one with which Umesh got Quinton de Kock in the first innings. De Kock plays the short deliveries well, but he had no answer to the snorter that took his glove after rearing up from a length.

I was delighted that Shahbaz Nadeem made his debut, just reward for years of unsung toil in first-class cricket. It was a bonus that the debut came at his home ground, and the fact that he looked entirely at home in Test cricket bears testimony to the depth and robustness of the Indian domestic structure. There's a lesson in that for South Africa, battered and bruised as they are.