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The ladies may have lost the final but won a billion hearts

First up, congratulations to the Indian team for its wonderful run in the Women's World Cup. They may have lost a heart-stopping final to England by nine runs, but they won a billion hearts. And in the larger scheme of things, I think the awareness they have created is as important as the fact that Mithali Raj's side emerged runners-up in the tournament.

In my view, the stirring campaign of the women's team is not too dissimilar to the one launched by Kapil Dev's team of 1983 World Cup. From personal experience, my interest in cricket touched a new high after watching Kapil paaji lift the Cup at the Lord's balcony; I was just one of thousands of young kids, if not more, who felt that way. I think a similar revolution will be triggered by this march to the final. I run an academy in Hyderabad, and already in the last two weeks, lots of young girls have come with their parents, desirous of wanting to train there with dreams in their eyes and aspirations in their hearts.

That will be the everlasting legacy of this wonderful bunch of ladies who have done the nation proud. They deserve a lot of credit for taking up cricket despite possible opposition from maybe relatives and friends of their parents. Their parents and coaches deserve a lot of credit for allowing these ladies to pursue their dreams, by encouraging and supporting and nurturing them. They aren't the World Cup finalists by accident. What was most evident was their passion and pride in their performances. Unless you have pride in what you do, you can't be successful. There is much to learn from their lion-hearted approach and never-say-die attitude.

I have tracked Mithali's progress from when she was 10 years old. Her commitment and focus have been exemplary, and her work ethic definitely worth emulating. We trained at the same academy, and whenever I went there on a Saturday or a Sunday or a holiday, she would be there too, honing her batting, taking additional throw-downs, asking questions and always looking to improve and get better. She has been a wonderful role model for women's cricket, as has been Jhulan Goswami, the other senior star in the team. Harmanpreet Kaur has established herself as a superstar, and what was most pleasing was that it was a collective effort that drove India's campaign.

Since coming under the BCCI's umbrella, the women's team has had greater exposure and more opportunities, and the results are showing. I don't think this appearance in the final is an end in itself. It is just the beginning of what I am sure will be an exciting and successful chapter in women's cricket and, for that too, Mithali's team can take justifiable credit. They will be hurting at the loss, needless to say, but in my eyes and in the eyes of millions, they are true champions. (Gameplan)

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India have what it takes to repeat success of 2015 in Sri Lanka

India are back in the country where they kick-started their charge to the top of the Test rankings. It was in Sri Lanka, in August-September 2015, that they took their first steps towards ascending to the top. From the No. 7 spot on the Test charts, they embarked on a remarkable journey and while they have played most of their Test cricket in the last two years on home turf, that should take nothing away from the tremendous success they have had.

India's resolve was tested on their last tour of Sri Lanka, when they lost the Galle Test after dominating it for the first three days. It was a tremendous examination of their fortitude and resolve and India came through with flying colours, winning the remaining two matches on their way to a first Test series win in Sri Lanka in 22 years.

Between then and now, India have come a long way. What has been particularly pleasing is that their success over the last 24 months has been based around several individuals. Collectively, India have been on top of their game and, whenever they have been pushed to a corner, they have found a way to win the crucial moments. That is the hallmark of a champion side which India, under Virat Kohli, have now become.

As the No. 1 sides generally tend to do, India will look inwards rather than worry too much about the opposition. Of course, there will be plans in place for each member in the opposition ranks, but the greater focus will be on themselves, and how they can get better and improve even further with each passing game. In many ways, this tour is the start of an overseas run that will include Test series in South Africa, England and Australia leading up to the 2019 World Cup, so it is essential that India start the cycle well by playing to their true potential.

It is a bit of a shame that KL Rahul will miss the first Test through illness, but I am sure Abhinav Mukund and Shikhar Dhawan will look at it as another opportunity to re-establish their Test match credentials. More than anyone else, though, I will follow Kuldeep Yadav's progress with no little interest. He was impressive on debut against Australia on a relatively unresponsive surface, and is an exciting addition, given that he is a left-arm wrist spinner.

The biggest positive for me from the home series wins was that it wasn't fashioned just by the batsmen and the spinners. The fast bowlers had a huge influence with Umesh Yadav the standout performer. They may not necessarily get any assistance from the pitches in Sri Lanka, but I am confident that they will bowl their hearts out and procure the breakthroughs that can then allow the quality of R Ashwin, in his 50th Test, and Ravindra Jadeja to take over. Sri Lanka at home have been fairly difficult customers, but India have what it takes to replicate their success of 2015, of that I have very little doubt. (Gameplan)

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One of the big positives is how easily Pandya has taken to Test cricket

Neither the result, nor the manner in which it was achieved, came as a surprise to anybody. India were clearly the superior side going into the Test series against Sri Lanka, and played like the champions that they are in Galle on a flat track, their 304-run win on the fourth day another demonstration of their hunger and intent.

Several of the top performers from the last home season were again in the forefront. Cheteshwar Pujara and Virat Kohli both made hundreds, R Ashwin and Ravindra Jadeja were among the wickets. One has come to expect these players to stamp their authority time after time, but to me, the big positives were the runs accrued by Shikhar Dhawan and Abhinav Mukund, and the ease with which Hardik Pandya took to Test cricket.

Less than a fortnight back, neither Shikhar nor Abhinav would have realistically been expecting to open in Galle, but such is the unpredictability of life that here they were, thrown into the deep end. Shikhar was simply unbelievable in his most fluent innings of 190 since his debut 187 against Australia more than three years back. One of the things that stood out for me during IPL 2017 was the positive intent he showcased when he was with us at Sunrisers Hyderabad. He has since carried that intent to the international stage as well. If he can just fuse that positivity with consistency, Indian cricket will be the beneficiary because Shikhar is the kind of batsman who can take the game away from the opposition in just one session.

I am also very happy for Abhinav. He is a game trier and a very hard worker, and I can say from experience that making a comeback is far more difficult than making your debut. He didn't have a great first innings, but to bounce back from that, make crucial contributions in the field and then back it up with a gritty, polished 81 in the second innings shows his mettle. It means India now have a solid and extensive bench strength for the opening slot.

Before the start of the Test, I had backed Kuldeep Yadav to figure in the eleven but the team management went with Hardik instead in what is a futuristic move. India have plenty of Tests abroad coming up, and if by the time we travel to South Africa, Hardik has enough experience as a Test player under his belt, his medium-pace and power-packed batting built around solid basics will be massive assets. Hardik is also a livewire on the field, the kind of player who can make things happen. I don't see any reason why he can't be a successful Test all-rounder for a while to come. (Gameplan)

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Sri Lanka were outplayed India's solid batting display and depth

Despite a brave batting display in the second innings, Sri Lanka were so far behind on the first count that the outcome of the second Test was never in any doubt. Test matches are generally won and lost on the first innings in the sub-continent and, once India amassed another total in excess of 600 and packed the hosts off for 183, it was only a question of when, not whether.

India's huge total was marked by a solid batting display that showcased the immense depth in the side, but the standout innings came from Cheteshwar Pujara and Ajinkya Rahane. Virat Kohli himself has identified these two as India's best Test batsmen and while some might say the skipper should also be in that category, the two centurions proved Virat right with their commitment and application.

The more I see Pujara, the more impressed I am. His hunger for runs is brilliant, and his work ethic outstanding. He only plays one form of the game for the country, and speaking from experience, I can assert that it is not very easy to find rhythm immediately. The fact that Pujara has been able to do that is credit to his preparation. Because he didn't get picked for the IPL, he went and played county cricket with Nottinghamshire; he looked the fittest I have seen him, and the hallmark of a champion player is to cash in when the going is good. In the last 15 Tests, he has made nearly 1600 runs, which is just phenomenal stuff. He reminds me a lot of Rahul Dravid, and is the fulcrum at No. 3 around which the Indian batting revolves.

Equally brilliant was Wriddhiman Saha, who like Pujara also only plays Test cricket. He does play in the IPL, but to fit back into the national side after long gaps is something he has mastered. On a turning track, his glovework was impeccable. I can't think of too many other keepers who would not have conceded a single bye in the second innings. His confidence is starting to manifest himself in the batting as well, and he is therefore a genuine all-rounder now like Ravichandran Ashwin and Ravindra Jadeja.

Jadeja, the man of the match in the second Test for his excellent all-round performance, must be kicking himself for having invited a one-Test suspension upon himself. This is entirely of his own making, and will perhaps be a lesson for the future. Given his form with the bat and ball, he would have fancied more runs and wickets in Pallekele. Instead, he has to now watch from the sidelines, and that is never a pleasant feeling, especially when one is fit and raring to go. His unavailability has opened the door for Kuldeep Yadav to return to the Test eleven, and I will watch how the left-arm wrist spinner goes with great interest. (Gameplan)

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India's biggest gain was the coming of age of Pandya

It was no great surprise to see India lord it over Sri Lanka in the Test series, though I must say that I expected a little bit more of a fight from a team that has such a proud record on home turf. Even at the start of these three matches, the biggest challenge for Virat Kohli's men was to look inwards rather than at the opposition. As the No. 1 side in the world and up against an inexperienced and injury-ridden Sri Lankan unit, their motivation was to keep improving and keep challenging themselves. I think after just 11 days of cricket in the series, India can look back on a job well done and allow themselves a pat on the back.

I was particularly delighted for Shikhar Dhawan, who wasn't even in the original party but walked away with the Man of the Series award. Shikhar when in full rhythm is a wonderful asset to have, and having married consistency with his flamboyance, he will be an entirely different player going forward.

The biggest gain, though, was the coming of age of Hardik Pandya. There had been some scepticism over whether he was all-rounder material, but he has dispelled those doubts emphatically. The manner in which he brought up his hundred while batting at No. 8 in the final Test was an eye-opener, and showed the maturity and intelligence of the young man, as well as his clean-striking abilities and his ability to read situations. I have said in the past too, that his inclusion is a futuristic investment. He is a great option to have as an attacking lower middle-order batsman, an electric presence in the field and has the ability to get wickets. I am confident that as he plays more and gets even more confidence, he can emerge as a match-winning all-rounder for a long time to come.

The other young man who caught my eye was Kuldeep Yadav. He was fascinating to watch in Dharamsala on his Test debut and, on another less than helpful surface, he again acquitted himself with no little credit. It can't be easy waiting behind Ravichandran Ashwin and Ravindra Jadeja, biding your time, but Kuldeep slotted in beautifully on his return, which is another wonderful sign of the work ethics of the youngster and the spirit within the team. He will, however, need to continue to be patient and aware that for the immediate future, he will be behind Ashwin and Jadeja in the pecking order.

The fast bowlers were impeccable and exciting, and the depth in the batting awesome. I truly believe this Indian team has everything necessary to become the modern-day Invincibles. (Gameplan)

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Won't be the worst idea for Virat to rest himself

The gulf in class between the two teams was amply reflected in India's thumping nine-wicket win in the first one-day International. Sri Lanka threatened to make a match of it for close to two hours but, once they collapsed dramatically to be bowled out for 216, it was always a matter of which Indian batsman would make hay. As it turned out, while newly appointed vice-captain Rohit Sharma missed out, Shikhar Dhawan continued his purple patch and Virat Kohli reaffirmed his status as chase master with another beautifully crafted unbeaten half-century.

Prior to the start of the series, Virat had spoken about surprises and experimentation and I hope with an eye on the World Cup, the Indian team does precisely that for the rest of the series. I would like to see some of the less established names given not just the opportunity but also the responsibility to make a name for themselves. It isn't just about them featuring in the playing eleven, but being in a position to make meaningful contributions under self-imposed pressure, if it comes to that, because the confidence that international runs and wickets bring is immeasurable, no matter what the quality of the opposition might be.

At some stage in this series, it won't be the worst idea for Virat to rest himself. That will allow Rohit to display his leadership skills, and it will also empower the batting unit to gather itself in the absence of the mercurial captain. Virat is the fulcrum around which the Indian batting revolves but India should not be over-dependent on him. If he sits out a couple of games, it will mean a promotion for the likes of KL Rahul and Kedar Jadhav, who will have to perform without the cushion of their talismanic No. 3.

Ideally, if Virat's place in the eleven is taken by a bowler, say Kuldeep Yadav, it will mean that including MS and Hardik Pandya, there will be six specialist batsmen. The onus will be on them to get the team over the line and if they do it in a couple of games, their self-belief will burgeon massively. In that scenario, the bowlers can also go about their business with emphasis on taking wickets rather than containing the flow of runs in the middle overs. India missed a glorious chance to take the odd risk on the limited-overs tour of the Caribbean, but they must not squander this opportunity to try out various options as they embark on the process of identifying the short list for the World Cup in 2019. If that means the odd setback, so be it, because eventually, it is the bigger picture that matters more. (Gameplan)

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India need to keep experimenting with the bigger picture in mind

Congratulations to Virat Kohli and his team for their fifth consecutive bilateral one-day series triumph, though the 3-0 scoreline with two games to play against Sri Lanka was expected long before the first ball was bowled.

India's bowlers have been brilliant all the way through with Jasprit Bumrah clearly the spearhead. To pick up 11 wickets from three outings is a tribute to his wonderful skill and versatility, though I feel for Bhuvneshwar Kumar, who has also bowled superbly without much luck. Axar Patel has taken his opportunities like any hungry man in waiting should and, overall, the bowling looks in pretty good hands, especially when you consider that some of the recent regulars do not figure in this squad of 15.

It is the batting that has raised the odd eyebrow. India have won all three matches chasing, and it is noteworthy that these wins have been fashioned by Shikhar Dhawan, MS Dhoni (twice), Rohit Sharma and the skipper himself. Ideally, I would have liked to see some of the less experienced players come up with match-winning knocks under pressure.

It was good to see Virat switching the batting order around in the second game and allowing KL Rahul and Kedar Jadhav to bat ahead of him. The experiment didn't come off as India were undone by the googlies of Akila Dananjaya, but it is important that the move isn't shelved on the back of one bad evening. Unless Rahul and Kedar are given adequate opportunities to go out in pressure situations and perform, it will be difficult for them to derive any kind of confidence. And as we all know all too well, cricket is as much a confidence game as anything else.

With the series in the bag, I am sure India will continue to change things around and give the guys on the bench a go. I don't think Ajinkya Rahane needs to prove anything, but Manish Pandey, Kuldeep Yadav and Shardul Thakur will definitely be eagerly waiting to prove their mettle. If that means some of the in-form players need to be rested, then that's fine because these games are merely a means to an end, which is the 2019 World Cup.

India will face far stiffer challenges over the next few months with a series of limited-overs games at home. The reshuffle in the batting order, especially, that has been initiated in Sri Lanka must extend to these matches as well. The odd defeat should not immediately prompt a return to norm, which might look inviting in the short term but will most certainly not serve the long-term purpose. (Gameplan)

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Even at 36, MS's hunger and commitment are obvious

Those looking for a change in the script of the one-day International series might have been few and far between, and even they would have watched with admiration how ruthlessly India destroyed Sri Lanka in the fourth match in Colombo. Virat Kohli was sensational, Rohit Sharma continued his excellent run and the bowlers all impressed – Shardul Thakur particularly so on his debut – in another telling statement of intent from this Indian side.

It was a special day for one of the great servants of Indian cricket, and I am extremely happy that it was a day to savour for MS Dhoni. Manish Pandey had the best seat in the ground as he watched MS rebuild the Indian innings after a slight wobble. Pandey himself was impressive in extending his good run with the 'A' team in South Africa on his return to ODI cricket, but he will be the first to admit that he fed off the calmness and serenity of his partner who was playing his 300th ODI.

For so many years now, MS has been a wonderful inspiration to so many. Coming from somewhat unfashionable Bihar (as it was then), he has blazed a trail that many are now following. India's most successful captain is an admirable cricketer and an excellent human being, and while he might be 36, I strongly believe that he still has plenty to offer Indian cricket.

His hunger and commitment are obvious from his work ethic. Blessed with natural fitness, I have never seen MS spend much time at the gym. But I haven't seen him as lean as he is now and the fact that he is now a regular to the gym, shows that he is unwilling to take things for granted. He is physically at his fittest because he knows that eyes will be trained on him following his retirement from Test cricket, and he has also made adjustments to his batting in response to oppositions working out plans for him.

There is a pronounced shuffle now to the faster bowlers that has helped him open up new vistas for scoring, and that is the sign of someone willing to get out of his comfort zone even this late in his career. MS is a massive asset not just as batsman and wicketkeeper, but also as a great student of the game, an able guiding hand for Virat, and a mentor for this young Indian side. On the evidence of his work with the bat and the big gloves in this series, he can hold his own merely as a player too. India need him in their corner when they make a run for the World Cup in England, in 2019. (Gameplan)

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India's dominance is a tribute to their depth and hunger

No matter that Sri Lanka hardly turned up, all credit to Virat Kohli and his team for completing a commanding 5-0 whitewash in a land that has seldom been kind to travelling sides. Virat had repeatedly stressed that there was no chance of his team becoming complacent at any stage of the one-day series, and the skipper himself showcased the ruthless intent of a unit that, I am confident, has everything needed to become the best side in the world in all three formats.

That India continued to be so clearly dominant despite trying out various combinations and giving all 15 players in the squad a chance to play is tribute to the depth and the hunger in the squad. Nearly every player put his hand up and there were several heart-warming performances. As the quest to button down the winning combination leading in to the 2019 World Cup continues, I believe there are three specific areas that India must look at carefully.

The first is who the back-up wicketkeeper-batsman would be. If there were any doubts over MS Dhoni's efficacy, they have been comprehensively settled, but India must identify who the reserve stumper should be. In my view, it must a wicketkeeper-batsman – in that order – and the choice is between Dinesh Karthik, Rishabh Pant and Wriddhiman Saha. I am only leaving Parthiv Patel out because he is an opener, and India have a wealth of already established openers.

Next is who the finishing options in the batting line-up should be. There is Hardik Pandya who has shown what he is capable of. Who else will don the roles that MS, Raina and Yuvraj did for so many years? After an indifferent start, Kedar Jadhav finished strongly, while Manish Pandey did his cause no harm whatsoever.

I think the fast-bowling attack is pretty much settled – Shami, Umesh, Bhuvneshwar and Bumrah – but it is important to manage their workloads and rotate them so that they are fresh. There is a long road ahead and therefore fitness standards have to be maintained, something that the team management and the selectors too have repeatedly spoken about.

The third and, I feel, crucial area of focus is spin. On flat tracks in the Champions Trophy, India's spinners didn't make an impression in the middle overs. It was encouraging to see two wrist spinners in the playing eleven for the last ODI, because these bowlers can get the ball to turn and bounce on any surface. But where does that leave experienced and valuable assets like Ashwin and Jadeja? Fortunately, there are more than a dozen ODIs at home in the next few months, and they should provide answers to several of these questions above. (Gameplan)

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Sri Lanka need to take a leaf out of India's book

In an era of dominance at home, to win overseas is in itself a big feat. When you come away with victories in all nine international matches on foreign shores, it is just a fabulous accomplishment, therefore huge congratulations to Virat Kohli and his men.

The success of the Indian team is also a success of the systems and structures that have been put in place by the Board of Control for Cricket in India. There is emphasis not just on the first-class game but also on age-group cricket. The robust talent-spotting and nurturing process has had a massive role to play in India being such a formidable force in both Test cricket, where we are ranked number one, and in the limited-overs formats.

Sri Lanka will perhaps need to rethink their domestic structure which is essentially club-centric. I remember my battles with Sri Lanka with great fondness because the matches were fiercely competitive and the Sri Lankan players showed tremendous pride and commitment. To see the current team perform thus is a personal disappointment because I have been a big fan of the Sri Lankan way of playing the game.

The need of the hour is for Sri Lanka to identify a strong captain, someone in the mould of Arjuna Ranatunga who drove them to the World Cup title in 1996. Sourav Ganguly and John Wright oversaw a tricky phase for Indian cricket in 2000 by identifying a core group for the future and sticking with them, and then MS Dhoni and the selectors did likewise in 2011-12 after a host of established stars bid adieu to international cricket. Sri Lanka can take a leaf out of that book.

Even though Sri Lanka had a limited pool to choose from, they invariably produced multiple world-class cricketers, and I was fortunate enough to play with and against such legends as Muttiah Muralitharan, Chaminda Vaas, Kumar Sangakkara and Mahela Jayawardene, all proud champions who were among the best in their respective disciplines.

Sri Lanka must not think about results for the time being, but identify players with both potential and integrity, pride, commitment, discipline and determination. Once that process is underway, it is essential to back these players and have patience, because you can't turn things around overnight. Sri Lanka have shown sporadic glimpses of their prowess, but for them to be consistent, the players must be encouraged and groomed with careful diligence. If Sri Lanka need more inspiration, they can look at where India were not too long ago when they lost successive overseas series in England and Australia 0-4. And then see where Team India is today. (Gameplan)

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Kuldeep, Chahal must play all matches vs Australia

Australia will reflect on the Chennai ODI and look at it as an opportunity lost, but if they are honest with themselves, they will also acknowledge that this was more a case of India winning the game than the Aussies losing it.

Agreed, after Nathan Coulter-Nile's triple strikes at the start of the contest left India in tatters, it appeared as if the home side was ripe for the taking, but two men still in the early stages of their careers put their hand up for India. Kedar Jadhav played his natural game, batting with confidence and abandon, while Hardik Pandya showcased both maturity and commonsense later on. In MS, Hardik had the perfect mentor and ally. The master and the pupil took the game away from Australia in contrasting fashion. Hardik reiterated why he is among the top all-rounders in world cricket at the moment, graduating from a steady start to an explosive finish in no time. MS, who has been in these situations a million times in the past, was at home working the ball around, and then turning on the power game at the death.

This was the 100th international fifty for MS, a staggering achievement considering he has largely batted at No. 5 and below in ODIs, and not higher than No. 6 in Test matches. That it came at Chepauk, where he is adored and worshipped, must have made even the normally stoic and composed MS somewhat misty-eyed, even though he has never been one for the records.

Rain at the break between innings threatened to ruin the contest but when play eventually resumed with Australia chasing 164 in 21 overs, India's bowlers were fairly outstanding. Of the lot, it was once again a pair of young men that stood out. Kuldeep Yadav and Yuzvendra Chahal weaved their magic in the middle overs with their different brands of wrist spin, and Australia's batsmen appeared completely clueless against them. Only Glenn Maxwell showed any touch and intent; the rest looked as if each ball was a venom-spitting cobra, which is not the most encouraging news considering this is just the start of the series.

I get the impression that Australia will be heavily dependent on David Warner, Steve Smith and Maxwell as the series unfolds. Even though the experienced Ravindra Jadeja has been called into the squad as replacement for Axar Patel, my firm belief is that Kuldeep and Chahal must play all the matches so that they enhance their learning and settle down within the framework of the team. Together, they form a unique and potent wrist-spinning wicket-taking act, and are surely destined for greater deeds, just like Hardik is. (Gameplan)

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India bowlers made up for a below-par batting display

Another evening, another venue, another comprehensive Indian win. The script remained unchanged for an eighth consecutive game as India opened up a 2-0 lead over Australia in the five-match ODI series. It wasn't the most overwhelming batting performance by the Indians at the Eden, but the bowlers more than made up with a command display.

Ajinkya Rahane batted beautifully and must be ruing the run-out that most possibly cost him a hundred, while Virat Kohli redressed a poor record this year against Australia with another sparkling compilation. The inconsistency of Manish Pandey and Kedar Jadhav is only a minor pinprick at this stage though if that continues, India will have tricky calls to make.

The bowling, though, was exhilarating. Bhuvneshwar Kumar and Jasprit Bumrah were brilliant with the new ball; Bhuvi's dismissal of David Warner almost Test match-like in its conceptualisation and execution. But it was the two wrist spinners who were again in the limelight for the hold they had over the Australian middle-order.

Yuzvendra Chahal is a genuine wicket-taker with a big heart, unafraid to flight the ball and take the batsmen on. That the leggie has a very good record even at the Chinnaswamy Stadium in Bangalore, the home of his IPL franchise, speaks for itself, because that is a ground that is never kind to bowlers.

As impressive as Chahal was, it was the other wrist spinner who wowed me. Kuldeep Yadav is a still very young man, and practises what continues to be a novelty – left-arm wrist spin. In my career, I only encountered a handful of this tribe, and they were always a handful. Especially if they have reasonable arm-speed, it is very hard to pick the seam on release and therefore to figure out which way the ball is going to turn, and more so if they are bowling from over the stumps. By the time you read if off the pitch, it can be too late.

Kuldeep's confidence is amazing. He didn't seem in very good rhythm, and then he turned up and picked up a hat-trick – only the third by an Indian in ODIs – which emphasises that not only is he skilled, he is also mentally tough. He will occasionally go for runs because wrist spinners can sometimes be off target but as he plays more, he will be more consistent and be able to hit the right length – four to six metres in front of the stumps – that will draw the batsman forward and therefore elicit mistakes. Kuldeep is an uncut diamond right now; with greater polish, he will be an even bigger threat. (Gameplan)

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A win sweetened by a return to the top of the rankings

The five-wicket win in Indore on Sunday must go down as one of India's sweeter wins in recent times. To me, there couldn't have been a better way for India to return to the top of the ICC ODI rankings as well, because for a long part of the first innings, they were seriously tested and they found a way to bounce back from a corner.

The hallmark of a champion side is how it reacts when things are not going its way. India were in a spot of bother both in Chennai, when they were reduced to 11 for 3, and then again in Indore when Australia's top-three had set a wonderful platform. On both occasions, India dug deep to not just get out of trouble but also transfer the pressure on to the opposition. There is an aura about this Indian team that is hard to miss. It reminds me of the aura that surrounded Australian teams in an era gone by. As an opposition, you always feel that the game can change quickly, so sometimes you are guilty of overreaching like Australia did with the bat on Sunday. And as the team which struts with the confidence that no situation is beyond it, all you need is one opening to come storming back, like India did once Steve Smith threw them a lifeline.

What is particularly heartening is that the Indian wins in this series haven't been fashioned only by the experienced hands. The newcomers have put their hand up, and that is encouraging ahead of the more demanding overseas challenges. To be a champion side, you must have the fire, the ruthlessness and contributions from all members of the unit. You must enjoy not just your success but that of your mates as well, and this Indian side has showcased all these facets. That's why I believe they are well on their way to being the modern-day invincibles.

All great teams have two or three players competing for the same spot, which means there is no room for complacency. Fortunately for India, not only are they blessed with depth but there is also tremendous camaraderie within the group. The team management has been unafraid to make decisions – some will come off, some won't, but you must be proactive in making those decisions – and that's where I think Virat has led the way with his aggression and his positivity. To play two young spinners against Australia, to back Hardik to bat at No. 4, to be willing to take risks without being bogged down by the consequences are all admirable traits.

Amidst all this excitement, there is one calming influence both in the middle and, I am sure, in the dressing room too. MS Dhoni's role in India's surge just can't be exaggerated; he is just the mentor Virat needs as he grows and blossoms into a true leader of men. (Gameplan)

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I expected more from the Australian batting

It wasn't so much the score line or the margins of defeat as the manner in which Australia capitulated in the one-day International series that caught me by surprise. In my mind, India were always going to be the favourites, and more so because Australia's bowling attack looked extremely weak, but I must say I expected more from the Australian batting. Apart from Aaron Finch and David Warner, however, their batting never took off, with the biggest disappointment being Steve Smith.

Perhaps because he was not scoring big runs, Smith's captaincy also left a lot to be desired. Just like in the Test series in February-March, he was not proactive and let the game drift at key moments. To their credit, India seized those moments brilliantly, and were led extremely imaginatively by Virat Kohli. His ability to read situations and be a step ahead is a sign of growing maturity, and I expect Virat to be more positive and aggressive in his leadership as he goes deeper into his career.

Victory in Nagpur in the final game was another example of India's ability to think on their feet. The conditions dictated a definite slant towards spin, so Virat hardly used Hardik Pandya's pace and bowled out Kedar Jadhav. To their credit, the bowlers too responded brilliantly to justify the faith reposed in them by the captain.

Australia's 242 for 9, while probably still 20 or so below par, could have been tricky on a sluggish strip, but Ajinkya Rahane and Rohit Sharma batted as if on a belter. While Rohit took time to settle in, Ajinkya brought the confidence of three straight fifties into play, and immediately took the game away from the Aussies. And then when Rohit broke free, it was just a veritable treat.

I have been a huge admirer of Rohit's batting from the time I first saw him. While he doesn't like to be called 'talented', it is about time he reconciles to that label. He is at once a power-hitter and a touch player, both in the same knock, and even as he pulls off those massive hits down the ground or square on the on-side, he doesn't seem to hit the ball in anger. The captaincy of Mumbai Indians has helped him grow and embrace responsibility. I just hope he extends his consistency of white-ball cricket from the time he started opening to the Test format as well.

I expect the T20 games to be a lot closer and more keenly contested. Australia have five fresh faces who will bring in new energy and will be coming without any baggage. Having said that, they will be mindful that they were hammered 3-0 in the T20I series in Australia early last year. India have ticked two boxes out of three, and will be aiming for a sweep across formats when the T20s begin.(Gameplan)

Published 16.10.17

Warner seemed to help key the Aussies up in the T20

Australia were a lot more competitive in the T20 international series, though it was a bit of a shame that the series-decider in Hyderabad was abandoned without a ball being bowled, leaving the series all square.

The two matches that were possible would have given India an indication of where their 20-over cricket is at the moment. India were clinical in the first game in Ranchi, the wrist spinners complementing the pacers beautifully. Australia's batsmen were again found wanting and only managed 118 for 8 in 18.4 overs when the rain came down. I was as surprised as anyone that India had to chase down 48 in six overs for victory. I fail to understand the logic behind blindly using the DLS Method for T20 games as well, and strongly feel that a new system must be put in place for truncated games in the 20-over format. I also feel that when the second innings starts with reduced overs, chasing teams must also not have the luxury of having all ten wickets in hand. That's something for the administrators to think about.

The second game in Guwahati gave the Indian management plenty to think about, too. For starters, India must be a little more flexible about their playing 11. The pitch in Guwahati was soft and cried out for an extra fast-bowling option, which India had in the form of the experienced Ashish Nehra. By sticking to the same combination and not bringing Ashish in for maybe one of the wrist spinners, India probably sold themselves short. Also, not for the first time, the top-order was undone in a T20 game in conditions favourable to the bowlers. It happened against Sri Lanka in Pune a couple of years back, and against New Zealand in the World T20 in Nagpur last year.

While the temptation to go for broke from the start in a 20-over game is massive, you have to respect the conditions. Statistics reveal that teams lose 85% of the games when they lose three wickets in the Power Play; India were four down in the first six overs in Guwahati, and were always playing catch-up from then on. You don't always have to aim for 170 or 180. If the conditions are tricky, you look for 140-150, keep wickets in hand and then kick on at the end.

Australia looked a lot more keyed up for the T20 games, and I believe that came from having David Warner at the helm. Davey is a very positive leader who backs his players thoroughly, and isn't shy of shaking things up, like he did by sending Moises Henriques in at number three in Guwahati. Australia must seriously contemplate having Davey as the full-time limited-overs skipper so that it can relieve some of the burden from Steve Smith and allow him to focus on his batting alone. (Gameplan)

Published 24.10.17

A dependence on top 3 that India need to address

New Zealand's clinical chase of a fairly challenging 280 for 8 in Mumbai might have taken some people by surprise. But that has always been the lot of New Zealand cricket – they are often under-estimated and fly below the radar, though not for one moment am I suggesting that India took them lightly in the first ODI.

Among the many admirable traits in cricketers from New Zealand is their commitment to the team's cause and their impeccable work ethic. Having closely been associated with Kane Williamson and Trent Boult at Sunrisers Hyderabad, I have seen what they both bring to the table, whether they are in the playing 11 or not.

The big question ahead of this tour was how well New Zealand's batsmen would play the Indian wrist spinners. In the event, the decision to drop Tom Latham to the middle-order turned out to be a masterstroke. Latham is the next best player of spin in the Black Cap ranks after Williamson, and he played an innings of great maturity, skill and exemplary selection of shots. While the vastly more experienced Ross Taylor looked a little fidgety and restless during the match-turning 200-run stand, Latham chugged along merrily, hardly taking a risk and yet comfortably negating the threat of Kuldeep Yadav and Yuzvendra Chahal.

Given their all-round strength, I expect India to bounce back strongly in Pune, but there is a definite dependence on the top-three that they would like to address. While Shikhar Dhawan and Rohit Sharma were dismissed in not unfamiliar fashion by Boult, Virat Kohli took it upon himself to resurrect the innings. His 31st century was built brick by brick on a stifling Mumbai day, and it would have been even more special to him on his 200th appearance had it come in a winning cause.

However, he didn't find too much support in the middle-order. Dinesh Karthik, preferred to Manish Pandey, and Kedar Jadhav will look back on an opportunity lost. Given that there was so much time at their disposal when they came to the middle, they could have and should have kicked on to make a meaningful contribution. As they work towards the 2019 World Cup, India will be a little concerned that the middle-order isn't exactly firing on all cylinders, though with so much time left, there is no need to panic as yet.

India's 280 was perhaps 30 too few given the conditions on offer. New Zealand were in a spot when Williamson fell cheaply, but Latham in particular and Taylor executed their game plan to perfection. India have to do all the running from here on as they chase another series victory.(Gameplan)

Published 27.10.17

Stage set for a brilliant finale in Kanpur

Retribution was swift and decisive as India bounced back from a rare defeat in Mumbai in clinical fashion in the second ODI in Pune. It wasn't just the fact that India won by six wickets that was impressive. Their strategies and game plans, executed wonderfully well by the bowlers with Bhuvneshwar Kumar and Jasprit Bumrah in the forefront, were particularly eye-catching.

Having worked with Bhuvni at close quarters for a few years now, I can assert that it is no accident that he has reached the lofty heights he occupies today, as one of the finest white-ball bowlers in world cricket. When he was not in the Indian team through the early parts of 2016, he worked hard on improving his skills and adding to his repertoire of variations. He was always a wonderful swing bowler, but by the time he came to IPL 2016, he had become a couple of yards quicker without compromising on his swing. He has loads of confidence and self-belief, and is like a sponge when it comes to learning. Once he figures out a particular ball, he won't rest till he gets it right, which is why he has such control over his yorker, the knuckle ball and other myriad slower deliveries at the death. His dismissal of Martin Guptill was particularly heart-warming, almost Test match-like in both conception and execution.

Bumrah is the polar opposite of Bhuvni in that he was always a wonderful bowler at the death but was a little expensive at the top. And where Bhuvni has worked on his finishing skills, Bumrah has become a lot more proficient with the new ball. Having added the ball that shapes away from the right-hander, or at least holds its line, he has started to ask difficult questions with the new ball. B&B have emerged as the fast-bowling pair to beat in global white-ball cricket.

I thought Virat also captained the side beautifully, proactive and always looking to squeeze New Zealand dry. Even when Tom Latham was beginning to look dangerous, he kept six men in the 30-yard circle and cut off the singles. In Mumbai, Latham and Ross Taylor had used the sweep shot with telling results. India made a tactical change by bringing in the faster, flatter Axar Patel instead of the slower, more loopy Kuldeep Yadav. Virat also employed Kedar Jadhav's off-spin generously, having not bowled him at Mumbai. And the lines in Pune were a lot more outside off, compared to the first game when the spinners bowled far too straight.

A target of 231 was never going to test India. Shikhar Dhawan played with characteristic gusto and Dinesh Karthik made the most of his surprise promotion to No. 4 with a fluent half-century, thus setting the stage for a brilliant finale in Kanpur. (Gameplan)

Published 31.10.17

More a case of New Zealand losing than India winning

The series-decider in Kanpur has to be the most intense and competitive game of the Indian season thus far, New Zealand pushing India all the way until falling just short. It was New Zealand's game to win going into the last four overs of a steep chase, and as well as Jasprit Bumrah and Bhuvneshwar Kumar bowled at the death, it was more a case of New Zealand losing than India winning.

Exactly 365 days earlier, New Zealand had been spun out for next to nothing by Amit Mishra in the final one-day International in Visakhapatnam with the series level 2-2. When India piled up 337 on the back of splendid centuries from Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli, an encore might have loomed, given score board pressure. But the way Colin Munro and Kane Williamson set the tone for the chase was wonderful to watch. Munro played his natural game, providing the thrust with robust strokeplay, while Kane showed signs of returning to his best as Bhuvni had a rare off-day.

Yuzvendra Chahal provided the first twist by getting rid of both set batsmen. Showing a big heart on a track that wasn't responsive to bowlers, he was not afraid to lure the batsmen into big strokes by giving the ball plenty of air, getting excellent drift and dip, as well as turn and bounce. He was putting a lot of body into his action and bowling to get wickets, which is an excellent sign for India going forward.

New Zealand regained the initiative through young guns Tom Latham and Henry Nicholls, and should have sealed the deal. But Bhuvni showed the stuff of champions by producing a beauty to get rid of Nicholls, while Latham's run out settled the scales emphatically in India's favour. Bumrah was once again outstanding, his control over his yorkers and slower balls under great pressure nothing short of sensational.

That said, I do think Virat ought be a little more inventive as a captain. For instance, he could have taken Bhuvni off after three overs when he had gone for plenty and brought on Chahal to disrupt the rhythm of the batsmen and change up the pace. Set templates don't always work, and I feel Virat the skipper will be better off for this experience.

The captain and his deputy were mesmerized with the bat. I feel there is no more pleasing sight on a cricket field than Rohit in full flight. Hats off to him for admitting before the game that he had a technical issue, and, while his head was still falling over, he played close to his body and with a very straight bat. And when he gives himself time before exploding without hitting a shot in anger, we all know what Rohit is capable of. (Gameplan)

Published 3.11.17

So happy to see Ashish go out with a smile

The retiring Ashish Nehra received the perfect going-away gift from his team-mates as India swatted a very feeble challenge at the Kotla, registering their first win in six Twenty20 Internationals against New Zealand. It was another powerful all-round performance by the home side, set up by the brilliance of the batsmen and rounded off by wonderful execution of plans by the bowlers with Yuzvendra Chahal and Axar Patel in the forefront.

Given that dew was always going to be a factor, Kane Williamson won an excellent toss. Shikhar Dhawan and Rohit Sharma negated that advantage through contrasting methods. One of the more noticeable changes in Shikhar since the Champions Trophy in June is in his mindset. He no longer plays within himself, and is determined to express himself as an impact player at the top of the order. He is a much under-rated T20 player, and on Wednesday in front of his home fans, he showed how destructive he can be even in the 20-over game when he decides to embrace his free-flowing avatar.

Rohit was a little subdued at the start but accelerated effortlessly once he got into his 30s with a flurry of boundaries. He and Shikhar complemented, rather competed, with each other to take the game away from a New Zealand outfit that uncharacteristically put down catches. Virat's cameo then gave India a 20-run cushion to counter the fast gathering dew.

India's bowling was clinical, the intent aggressive. Virat had at least one slip in place for nearly the entire New Zealand innings, while the two spinners bowled beautifully despite the wet ball. Chahal is growing in stature with every outing, and Axar impressed with his use of the crease and his variations of pace. New Zealand will find the going difficult if they don't find a way around them, and also if Trent Boult and Tim Southee don't make early inroads into the Indian batting.

It was brilliant to see the support and warmth Ashish received from the Delhi crowd, as well as his mates in the team. The celebration of his career was spontaneous, and when Virat and Shikhar hoisted him on their shoulders, it showcased the immense respect the group has for the eternal team man. Ashish and Zaheer Khan are the two smartest bowlers I have played with, skilful but also capable of out-thinking batsmen. Ashish, like Zak, is also a great mentor and I feel that in retirement too, he has plenty to offer Indian cricket. For a fast bowler to bounce back from even one surgery is difficult. For Ashish to do it 12 times iterates that when you have the commitment and self-belief, nothing is impossible. The one thing that characterised Ashish's 20-year career was his passion for the sport, and I can't say how happy I am to see him go out with a smile, and with the love and respect of so many. (Gameplan)

Published 9.11.17

An exciting finish to a fortnight of wonderful cricket

New Zealand once again displayed their competitiveness in white-ball cricket on Indian shores, but India had just that little bit extra as they pulled off an excellent win in the final Twenty20 game on Tuesday. Even though it was only an eight-over game in Thiruvananthapuram, it was an exciting finish to two weeks of wonderful cricket. That we got a game in the Kerala capital after so much rain was tribute to the tireless efforts of the ground staff, and just reward for a patient packed house.

New Zealand's desperation had shown in Rajkot when they bounced back strongly after the mauling in New Delhi. Their body language was positive, exemplified first by Colin Munro and then by the entire fielding unit with Trent Boult leading the way. Munro justified his elevation above Kane Williamson by making a bruising hundred and batting out the 20 overs, while Trent's early blows derailed an Indian batting unit heavily dependent on the top three.

But credit to India for holding their nerve in the decider, like they had done in the final one-dayer in Kanpur too. India are beginning to stack up a reputation for being able to handle pressure extremely well, and that is a welcome sign for a team looking to become number one in all formats. It gladdens me no end to see the bowling group in operation. Jasprit Bumrah is bowling with heart and head, like the No. 1 T20 bowler in the world should, while Bhuvneshwar Kumar is now a wily customer who fuses skill and experience beautifully.

The one that impresses me each time I see him bowl is Yuzvendra Chahal. He has both the craft and the brains, and was brilliant on Tuesday. His line, well outside off, made it difficult for New Zealand's right-handers to play the big shots across the line, especially with Virat Kohli setting fields to him similar to what he does when the two play for Royal Challengers Bangalore.

India, however, must revisit their approach to T20 cricket. The team is too reliant on the top three, which is not ideal in modern-day 20-over cricket. India must identify and persist with personnel in the middle-order so that they grow into their roles. It will be a work in progress for a while, but India must show some patience, keeping the larger picture in mind.

There also needs to be clarity on MS Dhoni's role in the T20 side. There is no doubt that he brings immense value as a wicketkeeper and as a mentor/guide to Virat on the field. I feel if India do stick with MS, he must bat at number four because he then gets a greater chance to maximise his skills. To see him bat at number seven in an eight-over game was a little sad, to say the least. (Gameplan)

Published 6.6.17

Global events seem to bring out the best in Yuvraj

Not unexpectedly, India completed a dominant, comprehensive victory over Pakistan, putting in a near-flawless performance. The powerful batting line-up effortlessly flexed its muscles, and the bowlers then replicated their strong form of the warm-up games. So much so, that not even the various rain interruptions affected their rhythm, which is the sign of a confident side that takes such irritants in its stride.

The top four were all among the runs, and impressively so, but I was particularly delighted with the touch Yuvraj Singh showed. It was his first hit in nearly three weeks but there was no sign of rust or uncertainty. There is something about these global events that bring the best out of him and it was no surprise that he straightaway slipped into top gear.

When Yuvi walked in, India were already in a good position but there was still some work left to translate that into an impregnable one. Yuvi immediately found his range, treating the bowling with a disdain that was a throwback to the days of vintage Yuvi. Even as Virat Kohli laboured a little for timing, Yuvi took the pressure off him with a sustained onslaught. The strokes he played, the areas he targeted and the positions he got into seemed to suggest that he was coming off a prolonged net session, such was his assurance and authority.

Yuvi is at his best when he is playing his natural, free-flowing game. There were no signs of self-doubt or hesitancy as he set about the bowling, reiterating the value of experience on the big stage. Even during the IPL, when we worked together at Sunrisers Hyderabad, the one thing that stood out was his positive mindset. He carried that same sense of freedom with him to this game, and that is a wonderful sign for India going forward. Yuvi provides that X-factor every team so desperately requires and, as we have seen in the past, when he gets off to a start, he invariably has an excellent tournament.

The other aspect that caught my eye was the flexibility India are happy to embrace. To promote Hardik Pandya ahead of MS Dhoni was a master stroke, both in conception and execution, because Hardik is capable of teeing off from the get-go. He didn't disappoint, applying the finishing touches in exemplary fashion.

India pride themselves, and rightly so, on being one of the best fielding sides in the world, so they will have been disappointed with their efforts on Sunday. You can rest assured that they will come out a different fielding unit against Sri Lanka in their next game. (Gameplan)

Published 10.6.17

The way Lanka crafted the chase stood out for me

With runs on the board and given the form their bowlers have shown in England thus far, it appeared at the halfway stage as if India already had one foot in the semi-finals of the Champions Trophy. The beauty of cricket, however, lies in the fact that it is not played on paper. Sri Lanka mounted a brilliant chase of a difficult target of 322, seemingly seeking inspiration from the manner in which Pakistan had pulled the rug from under top-ranked South Africa's feet the previous day.

As much as the chase itself, it was the manner in which it was crafted that stood out for me. There was no panic even though India had the upper hand in the first 10 overs. Once Hardik Pandya and Ravindra Jadeja came on to bowl, Danushka Gunathilaka and Kusal Mendis pounced on them, hitting boundaries at will on an excellent batting surface to relentlessly put India under pressure.

Sri Lanka's skill-sets were impressive, but their temperament and character too rose to the surface. Their attitude was positive without being reckless, and their fearlessness was quite something to see. While it was the second-wicket pair of Gunathilaka and Mendis that set the tone, every subsequent batsman who came to the middle looked as if he was already set sitting in the dressing-room itself.

Kusal Perera played a gem and Asela Gunaratne's cameo finished things off, but both fed off the unflappability of Angelo Mathews, who didn't bat like he had been out of international cricket for seven months. It wasn't as if India bowled poorly, and their fielding was a vast improvement on the game against Pakistan. But Virat Kohli was a little lost for options once Pandya and Jadeja went for plenty, a fact reiterated by the fact that he brought himself and Kedar Jadhav on to bowl.

I feel, with qualification on the line now and given how South Africa struggled against Pakistan's spinners, the time is ripe for R Ashwin to return to the XI, in place of Jadhav. Ashwin and Jadeja in tandem will be quite a handful for the South Africans; equally, with the batting ticking over smoothly, India can go in one batsman light without it impacting their balance or firepower too much.

India will be disappointed, but they need not be disheartened. Shikhar Dhawan was outstanding and Rohit Sharma continued to bat sublimely, and it was great to see MS Dhoni build explosively on a cautious start. The loss to an inspired Sri Lanka is but a blip. I am confident India will come to the party on Sunday against South Africa, in what is now a virtual quarter final. (Gameplan)

Published 13.6.17

India were switched on and charged up against SA

After the somewhat dispiriting loss against Sri Lanka, India faced a test of character and nerve, as much as one of skill, in their virtual quarter-final against South Africa. Just how well Virat Kohli and his boys would bounce back from the defeat in the previous game was a matter of as much interest as how soon the South Africans would succumb to the pressure that is an inevitable companion of theirs in global events.

In the event, it didn't take long for either of those issues to be addressed. India came out fully switched on and charged up. The intensity showed in their body language, in their discipline with the ball through Bhuvneshwar Kumar and Jasprit Bumrah first up, in the alacrity with which they attacked the ball in the field, and then in their clinical chase of a modest target as they took their appointed place in the semi-final.

I thought Virat handled his bowlers beautifully, and they responded in some style. The pressure created at the top by the new-ball duo drove South Africa into a corner and, once they were pushed on the back foot, they responded in characteristic fashion – with panic. For a team that plays brilliant cricket in bilateral series, South Africa have yet to crack the tournament puzzle and their capitulation didn't come as any great surprise though it must be said that their poor decision-making was in a way forced by the succession of dot balls and maiden overs that India's bowlers strung together.

What was surprising, however, was that it was their more experienced batsmen that buckled under the heat of battle. The run-outs of AB de Villiers and David Miller were both avoidable and comical as South Africa allowed nerves to get the better of them. In direct contrast, with their own future in the competition hanging in the balance, India played like cornered tigers, always staying positive, and quickly understanding that this wasn't a surface where you could blast batsmen out but instead had to prey on their patience and get them to make mistakes.

After the bowlers and the fielders had combined for a fabulous show, Shikhar Dhawan took over and played with a fluency that these global events instil in him. Virat struggled a little at the start for timing but gritted his way through that tricky period and then finished with a flourish, rounding off a brilliant day out for the Indian team. By the end, defeat against Sri Lanka in the last game appeared a mere blip. Bangladesh await them in the semi-final at Edgbaston; look out for a revitalised, rejuvenated Team India. (Gameplan)

Published 17.6.17

Fifth bowler the only weak link in the side

There were many obvious and expected heroes during India's comprehensive drubbing of Bangladesh but it is the one surprise hero who, to me, is the talking point. Kedar Jadhav broke the game wide open with his strikes in the middle of the innings, in the process making sure that Bangladesh didn't score the 310 or 320 that they appeared on course for. Kedar's burst reaffirmed the notion that nothing works better than wickets in the middle stages of an innings but it also raises a big and troublesome question over India's fifth bowler.

Despite the early damage done by Bhuvneshwar and the disciplines maintained by both Bhuvneshwar and Bumrah, Bangladesh put the flatness of the Edgbaston deck in perspective through Tamim Iqbal and Mushfiqur Rahim. Almost as a gamble, Virat turned to Kedar, and the move worked wonders. Kedar came on in the 28th over, bowled six overs on the trot and picked up 2 for 22. Between overs 28 and 40, Bangladesh only added 55 runs for the loss of three wickets which made it practically impossible for the lower-order batsmen to tee off at the end against two of the best death bowlers in white-ball cricket currently.

Kedar is a street-smart bowler. Short of stature, he delivers the ball with a round-arm action so that it skids on to the batsman. His length is neither full enough nor short enough for batsmen to get underneath the ball or play off the back foot with any authority, which is why he stacks up dot-balls quickly. He has shown his bowling nous in the past, against New Zealand and England and he once again bailed the team out, reiterating the significance of picking up wickets in the 25-40 over period.

India will hope Hardik Pandya raises his bowling, because to me, the fifth bowler is the only potential weak link in the side. Otherwise, as they displayed on Thursday, India are a powerful force perennially on the upsurge. Shikhar's form is a huge factor in India's charge, while Rohit continued to bat with characteristic elegance and subliminal touch. Virat's cover-driving was of the highest order; to see him get on top of the ball with a big stride even when Bangladesh bowled wide at him was simply awesome. This was easily his best innings of the tournament, and will keep him in excellent space ahead of the much anticipated final against Pakistan.

It's the finale the Champions Trophy deserves. India vs Pakistan in the final of a 50-over ICC tournament for the first time is the perfect climax to a tournament full of twists and turns. (Gameplan)

Published 20.6.17

Pakistan showed they are made of champion stuff

In Pakistan's wonderful march to the Champions Trophy title lay a most valuable lesson. If you want something badly enough and if you have the skills, the determination, the intent, and the mindset to go out there and get it, then nothing is impossible.

Two weeks ago, Pakistan's campaign appeared in tatters. A crushing defeat against India in their opening match was in keeping with their status as the No. 8 team in one-day international cricket. The road ahead was arduous and full of massive obstacles. How they would respond would be a true test of their character.

In the event, they showed that they are made of champion stuff, no less. On the morning of the final, I had a chat with Mickey Arthur, and the Pakistan coach told me that the team had been hurting badly after that loss to India. There was disappointment, yes, but there the overwhelming emotion was hurt because the players realised they had let themselves down. Mickey's message to them was simple: "We can't go lower than this. Forget about the outcome, just go and play fearlessly, enjoy yourself and give it your best shot."

That advice has worked wonders. Fearlessness, especially when pushed to a corner, has been one of the hallmarks of Pakistan cricket. That trait was exemplified by Fakhar Zaman, thrown into the deep end just one match into the tournament and rising to the top in spectacular fashion. His fierce assault in the first 10 overs not just allowed Azhar Ali at the other end to play himself in, it also inspired the experienced hands in the middle order. If his inclusion at the expense of Ahmed Shehzad wasn't a master stroke, then very few are.

Pakistan were also well served by their bowlers, and Hasan Ali in particular. As we have repeatedly stressed, the key to winning 50-over games is wickets in the middle overs, and Hasan did that consistently well. Pakistan were the only team to get reverse-swing going the whole tournament, and Sarfraz Ahmed made the most of that, bringing Mohammad Amir and Junaid Khan back to pick up wickets alongside Hasan, whose lengths in the middle stages and at the death were just what the conditions and the game situation demanded.

I thought Sarfraz's captaincy was brilliant, and he showed that he wasn't averse to making bold decisions. Imad Wasim and Mohammad Hafeez triggered the bowling turnaround against South Africa, while Sarfraz and Amir shaped the batting comeback against Sri Lanka. Once all the pieces fell in place, Pakistan were unstoppable, like they had been at the 1992 World Cup. They needed this title more than India wanted it. India were outstanding all tournament long but in the game that mattered, they were relegated to second best. (Gameplan)