

**GAUTAM GAMBHIR**

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The pace of the cricket is unrelenting. England had not even got their pulse back before they were already in a contest with Ireland. That was more of a prelude to the Ashes which has produced a memorable first Test match at Edgbaston. I am not sure if we can place India vs West Indies contest in the same category.

I am not a big fan of playing top-class cricket at makeshift venues like the one at Lauderhill in the US. The wicket is patchy here, at least that was the case in the first game. It was settling in the second one when the weather gate-crashed and robbed us of a full game. The region has lightning threats due to which the players and the crowd were asked to evacuate the arena. The uncovered stands pose high risk from lightning strikes. The drainage system is a work in progress and so are the broadcast facilities. It clearly is not the A grade venue in the Trump land.

Rohit Sharma is batting as if there is a GPS on his bat with location settings filtered for that white cricket ball. Such flawless has been his display that even a coaching manual is looking like a grey market “first copy”. I think this is the moment when Rohit needs someone in his ears conveying the importance of this form. He needs to convert this into big and consistent scores. Then, he needs to carry this batting form into Test cricket. I’d go on to say that if someone like a Rahul Dravid or Sachin Tendulkar mentor him for a few months, we may get a completely polished, ready Test batsman. Sometimes Rohit just seems bored in Test cricket, a few words of advice by these legends may transform that. If things start rolling for Rohit just imagine India’s Test line up with Pujara at number three, Virat at 4 and Rohit at number 5.

With India leading the T20 International series 2-0, there is a good chance that we may see some more changes in today’s game at Guyana. I will be particularly concentrating on Rishabh Pant. He has this huge opportunity to fill in the shoes of MS Dhoni. It won’t be easy but even if Pant is safe without being flamboyant, he would have done the job well. I am all for youth and its expression but beyond everything they need to be responsible too. I don’t know where the patient-quotient of the selectors lies with him but they surely want him to get his consistency going. And, so do we.

It is a good start for Navdeep Saini’s white ball career. He is a rare breed of fast bowler who bowls at 150 KMPH. I just hope he understands the value of the opportunity that he has got. I don’t want to put pressure on him by making lofty predictions but he surely has all the right ingredients. He has this back of the length deliveries which I feel will be more useful in Test matches. Let’s see if he gets a consistent run for India and more importantly how he values this.

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Indian cricket team in the land of burgundy caps use to invoke thrill and romance. The lyrical batting of Lara and Hooper, the intimidation of Sir Viv, hostility of the Fab Four fast bowlers, the ugly effectiveness of Chanderpaul and some ready advice from the stands were all part of the package. This cricketing chapter had it all that can turn you into a cricket fan. Therefore it is a tad disappointing to see what is on offer. The batting department has always showed promise but has lacked consistency. Their fast bowlers don't inspire much either. More than adulation, West Indies cricket leaves you sad and somewhat angry. The scene is then complete with empty stands. Whatever little you get is Diaspora of Indian fans hopping over from the US, the true blue West Indian fan is lost somewhere.

But why only the West Indies, I feel the overall standards of the game are not up there. Yes, we had a fantastic World Cup final at Lord's. But where is the quality of cricket that we used to see in the 80s, the 90s and even for good number of years after the turn of the century. South Africa have just lost Dale Steyn in Test cricket. And if you look at the South African bowling cupboard, I don't think they are craving to keep it secured as there isn't much quality there. We all miss the likes of Donald, Pollock, McMillan, Ntini, DeVilliers et al. Similarly Pakistan had the likes of Akram, Waqar, Shoaib, Aaquid and two world class spinners in Saqlain Mushtaq and Mushtaq Ahmed. The overall standards especially in bowling are suffering and looks like we don't have a plan to resolve this.

India has pocketed the T20 series against the West Indies and are favourites to do the same in ODIs and Test matches too. It is not their fault if West Indies don't get their act together. If India win, it is an away series win for Virat Kohli and his team which is what you play the game for. But if I know Virat well enough I am certain he would like more challenge.

If I put myself in the WI camp the first thing I would do is to make fast, bouncy wickets. This holds good for all three formats. Yes India have more than decent pace attack which can blow away the hoists but if they have any chance against the tourists it is on good fast wickets. In the fear of Indian fast bowlers they are making batting pitches which is exactly what India wants. India on the other hand have a little bit of a headache to give everyone a game. Shreyas Iyer was scheduled to bat at number four in the previous game which got rained off. He will get another chance in Trinidad. I have spent time with him in Delhi Capitals' dressing room. He has the setup and the works to succeed at this level. I just hope he gets a consistent run rather than a truncated one. Amongst the bowlers, I would like to see Mohammad Shami let loose on the opposition. He is redeeming himself like a champion in white ball cricket.

**GAUTAM GAMBHIR**

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It is not surprising that some of the pre-Test match hype has been devoted to the waist size, height and weight size of Rakheem Cornwall. With a weight of around 140 kgs and a height of 6 feet 6 inches it is not at all surprising that he is getting due attention. I first heard of him from Sunil Narine when I was with KKR. I think we were chatting about spin bowlers in the West Indies when Sunil mentioned Rakheem to me. I haven't seen much of the big man but little evidence suggests promise especially with the ball in hand. He is said to have good control over his off-spin.

Those who know Rakheem well claim that he is a hardworking guy. He is quite severe on himself in a gym. One of his senior team-mates went on to say: "A lot of people make fun of him because of his size, but I can tell you he can be a beast in the gym. He lifts a lot of weight, and I'm sure that if he puts his mind, he can be an Olympic weightlifter. He does a lot of running on the treadmill." At least the guy is hungry for success. Let's see if he gets to show his skills in the Test match.

Indian batsmen too will have to show good skills as the elements are vastly different in Test cricket in West Indies. To start with the decision of the hosts to stick to Duke's cricket ball is a good one. Earlier West Indies use to play with Kookaburra brand of cricket balls. Duke's cricket balls are manufactured in the UK. They present stricter challenge for the batsmen as compared to the Kookaburra brand. When West Indies beat England in the recent home series the wickets were a lot juicier. I hope it continues to be that way for this contest as well.

Given these elements, India should go with KL Rahul and Mayank Agarwal to open the innings. I won't risk Hanuman Vihari's career at the top of the innings. He is a middle-order bat and should be tried there. Pujara is at three, Virat is at number four and I would play Rohit Sharma at number five. Rohit is the key for me. Like I said earlier if we can have Rohit firing in Test cricket and at that slot then oppositions should watch out. Rishabh Pant is my first choice as wicket-keeper followed by Ravinder Jadeja and three fast bowlers. But if the wicket is dry then I would play R Ashwin and Jadeja both.

Trust me , it is not going to be easy for India as was the case in white ball cricket. With better bowling conditions and World Test Championship now officially rolling out for India the heat will be on the visitors.

**GAUTAM GAMBHIR**

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Frankly speaking I am yet to get over the final, few moments of the third Ashes Test match or more precisely “The Ben Stokes Test Match”. With a platinum class hundred at Headingley, this was second time within two months that Big Ben has pulled off magic in crisis. People are still trying to define his innings in the World Cup finals and here we are discussing his Test hundred. Let me also say that following this game at Headingley if Test cricket has renewed its lease, it is largely due to Ben Stokes followed by ECB’s courage to play on good, testing wickets.

India and West Indies will be in a battle today. As always I will be keenly observing the quality of the track. I hope it is not as flat as the one in the first Test match. It is a no-brainer that for Test cricket to survive the onslaught of T20s, alternate content options for entertainment and faster/instantaneous lifestyles of fans, it will have to jazz it up. I am a die-hard traditionalist but Test cricket needs to appeal to the millennial population for its survival. Away from the facade of marketing the real core needs to be addressed. A good pitch also needs a standard brand of cricket balls to be used around the world. I can understand the commercial compulsions of this but it is strange to be in a common competition with variable apparatus. May be ICC can list out standard parameters for a cricket ball to be used in Test cricket and float a tender for the manufacturers. Whoever meets them at a desired cost can be the “bowling partner of the ICC”.

A spinner like R Ashwin will be thrilled if he gets a cricket ball with a healthy seam of SG or Duke’s brand. Correction: R Ashwin will be thrilled if gets a game whatever be the brand of the ball. Sitting far away from the action I can’t say much except that I was disappointed seeing him left out in the first game. I was somewhat dejected at Rohit Sharma’s exclusion too but I guess now there is no chance for him in Jamaica. Both Ajinkya Rahane and Hanuma Vihari have sealed the spots for the time being. I was happy to see Ishant Sharma amongst wickets. He is a very good team-man and an honest trier. His attitude is a captain’s delight. I hope he can repeat the same in the second game too and prosper into a consistent spearhead of India’s bowling unit.

West Indies batting let them down in the first game. It is understandable given that this is a young side. But I agree with a few former West Indian greats when they say that sometimes their approach looks casual. It is good that the great Brian Lara is in their ears now. This may make a difference.