

Sports

India, Australia brace for fiery Test at new Perth venue

Sharma and spin spearhead Ashwin ruled out of Perth Test

PERTH: The shiny new Perth Stadium is expected to conjure up nostalgia-tinged memories of its fiery predecessor, offering conditions a desperate Australia hope will spur a series-leveling victory over India in the second Test starting today. The 60,000-seat arena will host its first test after a rich 47-year run at the nearby WACA, located on the opposite bank of the Swan River, and the grassy drop-in wicket unveiled on Thursday has fueled anticipation of a pace bowler's paradise.

Recent results suggest that will be the case as ball has thoroughly dominated matches at the Burswood stadium this season, including Australia's tame dismissal for 152 in a heavy one-day international defeat to South Africa last month. Australia had enjoyed a stranglehold over opponents on the fast and bouncy WACA wicket, losing just four tests in the past two decades. Three of those defeats were to South Africa, who relished the pace-friendly conditions similar to their homeland.

India's famous 72-run victory in 2008 was their sole triumph at the WACA, halting a Ricky Ponting-led Australia's world-record equaling 16-match winning streak.

The tourists were humiliated by an innings and 37 runs four years later, the last time India played a test in Perth. After falling short by 31 runs in Adelaide, captain Tim Paine still has plenty of concerns about an inexperienced lineup, although Australia named an unchanged

side for the test with struggling opener Aaron Finch retaining his place. The absence of the suspended Steve Smith and David Warner was exposed in Adelaide, where Australia made modest scores of 235 and 291 against a disciplined Indian attack as Shaun Marsh and Travis Head were the only home batsmen to hit fifties.

HUGE CHALLENGE

Australia's woes extend to spearhead Mitchell Starc, who has been under the microscope having taken just 12 wickets in his past five tests, and his major control issues in India's second innings would not have improved his confidence. Paine, on a positive note, is fit to play after he appeared to injure his troubled right index finger on the final day in Adelaide. He said his team was wary of India's momentum after the visitors won their first ever series-opener in Australia. "They have a bit of a sniff of something special," Paine told reporters. "We know it's going to be a highly competitive test and a huge challenge for our whole group."

A confident India have been dealt a double injury blow, however, with batsman Rohit Sharma and spin spearhead Ravichandran Ashwin, who took 6-149 in Adelaide, ruled out on the eve of the Perth test.

In-form pace trio Mohammed Shami, Jasprit Bumrah and Ishant Sharma remain available as India strive for a maiden test series triumph in Australia. "I was pretty happy to see the pitch



PERTH: Australia's Aaron Finch (R) takes a catch during a training session in Perth yesterday, 2018, ahead of the second cricket Test match against India. — AFP

the way it is," India captain Virat Kohli said. "I hope that no more grass is taken off the pitch because that will mean the first three days will be, obviously, very lively and we, as a team, are happy with that." Even though the four-Test

series started in nail-biting fashion, ticket sales have reportedly been sluggish with just 20,000 spectators expected on a scorching opening day with temperatures set to hit 38 degrees Celsius. — Reuters

WI hope to end series drought against B'desh

SYLHET: West Indies captain Rovman Powell said yesterday his men were "upbeat and confident" of clinching the deciding one-day international against Bangladesh and sealing their first series win in four years.

The touring side won Tuesday's match in Dhaka by four wickets after losing the opener, levelling the three-match contest 1-1 and setting the stage for a series decider in Sylhet today.

The Caribbean side last won an ODI series in 2014 at home against Bangladesh and are desperate to end the drought. Since then, they have capitulated in 11 series, managing their best result with a draw against minnows Afghanistan last year.

"It is on the tip of everyone's tongue. West Indies haven't won an ODI series for quite some time. This is a grand opportunity to change it," Powell told reporters in Sylhet yesterday. "The guys are upbeat and confident of doing it tomorrow." They came close to defeating Bangladesh in July on home soil, suffering a 2-1 loss. In October, they went down to India 3-1. A win

would remove some sting from West Indies' humiliating drubbing by Bangladesh in the Test series in November and December, when the home side wrapped up both matches inside three days.

Powell said his side had to improve on their winning flair displayed in the second ODI. Opener Shai Hope hit a career best 146 off 144 balls not out, as West Indies toppled Bangladesh's 255-7 with two balls in hand to complete their first win in the tour. "We have to work on all three aspects of the game. One game doesn't change the fact that we are still not batting well as a team. We still need to work on our bowling and fielding," Powell said.

Pace bowler Oshane Thomas worked up some lively pace to leave Bangladeshi batsmen unsettled in both the games. "Bangladeshis don't like fast bowling. We are definitely looking to exploit it. Hopefully tomorrow we can do that," Powell said.

Bangladesh skipper Mashrafe Mortaza played down suggestions the hosts were rattled by Thomas' pace. "In both the matches, his economy rate was close to six. So there is no issue. If they think he is their best bowler we are relaxed," said Mashrafe. This will be first ever ODI hosted in Sylhet, in Bangladesh's northeast. The ground has hosted seven Twenty20 internationals and a Test. The West Indies will wrap up their tour of Bangladesh with three Twenty20 internationals. — AFP



SYLHET: West Indies cricketer Kemar Roach delivers a ball during a practice session ahead of the third One Day International (ODI) between Bangladesh and West Indies at the Sylhet International Cricket Stadium in Sylhet yesterday. — AFP

Pakistan captain calls on squad to play 'without fear' in SA

KARACHI: Pakistan skipper Sarfraz Ahmed yesterday urged his fellow teammates to play "without fear" during their tour of South Africa—a country where they have won only two Tests during their past five tours.

The Pakistani side is en route to South Africa to play three Tests, five one-day internationals and three Twenty20 internationals, with the first Test starting in Centurion on December 26. Pakistan head into the series after losing 2-1 to New Zealand in the United Arab Emirates last week. In the wake of the tough loss, Sarfraz said he still had high hopes of earning a good result against the Proteas.

"Conditions in South Africa are tough with bouncy and seaming pitches so anyone who plays without fear and with a big heart will succeed," Sarfraz told AFP. Pakistan's two wins out of 12 Tests in South Africa came in 1998 and 2007, having lost nine with just one draw. On their last tour in 2013, Pakistan were routed 3-0 and bowled out for their lowest Test score of 49 in the first Test in Johannesburg, with both senior batsmen Younis Khan and Misbah-ul-Haq in the line-up.

Now without the two stalwarts, Pakistan will look to Azhar Ali and Asad Shafiq to help guide the squad. "We need big innings from both Azhar and Shafiq and they are capable of doing that, so if we put good totals on board we have a good bowling attack to win the match," said Sarfraz, who also singled out recalled paceman Mohammad Amir as key to any success. — AFP