

## Sports

# Pakistan's Azhar questions New Zealand toughness ahead of clash

## Pakistan must win the match for a chance to reach semi-finals

**BIRMINGHAM:** Pakistan bowling coach Azhar Mahmood questioned New Zealand's ability to win the biggest matches ahead of today's World Cup clash in Birmingham. Kane Williamson's side are undefeated at the tournament in England and Wales, with five wins in six games, plus one no result.

In contrast, Pakistan must win the match at Edgbaston if they are to maintain a realistic chance of reaching the semi-finals after a poor start to the tournament in England and Wales. Mahmood, a former all-rounder who played in three World Cups for Pakistan, said New Zealand had a good record early in tournaments but often wilted under pressure at the business end. "New Zealand's history is such that they get their winning, winning and then when a crunch situation comes up, in the semi-final, or quarter-final, they don't do that well," Mahmood said yesterday. "It can happen to any team. Everyone has to have a bad day. Hopefully New Zealand have it tomorrow."

New Zealand, who have never won a World Cup, have reached the semi-finals six times and lost to Australia in the 2015 final in Melbourne. During the current tournament they have coped well in pressure situations, coming out on top against Bangladesh,

South Africa and the West Indies in tight finishes.

But Pakistan have a good record in matches between the two sides, winning six of their eight World Cup encounters, including semi-final victories in 1992 and in the 1999 edition, also in England.

Pakistan started their campaign slowly at the 1992 World Cup in Australia and New Zealand but beat New Zealand twice and went on to lift the trophy for the first and only time. "If you see the 1992 World Cup and this one, there are a few similarities," said Azhar. "But we're not thinking like that. Australia were in a similar situation in the 1999 World Cup (which they won).

"If they lost any games, they would have been out. We are in that situation now. But for us, every match is a final, that is how we are looking at it. We know that if we perform poorly anywhere, we could be out."

Mahmood praised in-form paceman Mohammad Amir, who has taken 15 wickets in five matches. "Amir has started pushing his lengths up a little, allowing himself to swing the ball," he said. "That has been key for us. It's very important for us that he gives us early breakthroughs and he has that ability. His skills and ability have always been exceptional." — AFP



**BIRMINGHAM:** Pakistan bowling coach Azhar Mahmood addresses media representatives at a press conference at Edgbaston in Birmingham, England yesterday on the eve of the ICC World Cup match between Pakistan and New Zealand. — AFP

## Afghan poster boy Rashid buckling under weight of expectations

**MANCHESTER:** No other spinner headed into the World Cup with a burden of expectation heavier than the one on Rashid Khan's shoulders but seven matches into the tournament and the poster boy of Afghan cricket is buckling under the weight.

His reputation, earned largely in franchise cricket, preceded him in England but success has eluded him in a tournament he was supposed to set alight. England is not exactly a spinner's paradise though.

South African old warhorse Imran Tahir and Bangladesh talisman Shakib Al Hasan are the only two spinners among the tournament's top 10 bowlers. Right-arm quick Gulbadin Naib is the highest placed Afghan with nine wickets from seven matches—all of which his team have lost to be rooted to the bottom of the standings.

With just four wickets from seven outings, Rashid, currently the top ranked Twenty20 bowler, is not even the best spinner in his team. Mohammad Nabi has seven from seven and Mujeeb Ur Rahman—another off-spinner—has five from five.

Batsmen initially treated Rashid with respect before Eoin Morgan destroyed him in Manchester where the leg-spinner's 9-0-110-0 went down as the worst figures in World Cup history. No bowler in the tournament has been hit for more sixes than the dozen he has conceded so far.

"He is not bowling (at the level) where I want him," captain Naib, who defended Rashid after the Manchester mauling saying it was a one-off day, said after Monday's loss to Bangladesh.

"But he is trying hard, he is giving his 100 percent." The 20-year-old endured another wicketless day at the Hampshire Bowl on Monday, even as Mujeeb got three while Shakib returned the tournament's best figures of 5-29 on the same slow track.

The closest he came to tasting success was when he trapped Shakib leg before. The batsman instantly reviewed it and eventually got the decision overturned with ball-tracker suggesting the delivery would have just sailed over the stumps.

His frustration was evident too as Rashid remonstrated with team mates who put up another shabby fielding display marked by spilled catches, misfields and overthrows. Naib, who reckoned his team bled extra 30-40 runs on field, said he could sympathise with Rashid.

"I'm also disappointed with our fielding like him. There was an occasion when he was very angry with a fielder," Naib added. "If we do not field well, it upsets the bowlers. Rashid is one of those players, who is trying to do well in all three departments. But again, we gave away extra runs, and naturally he was very upset." — Reuters

## Lara admitted to Mumbai hospital

**MUMBAI:** West Indies batting legend Brian Lara was admitted to a hospital in Mumbai yesterday after complaining of chest pain, Indian media reports and sources said. The 50-year-old Trinidadian was rushed to hospital after he complained of discomfort during a promotional event, the Press Trust of India (PTI) news agency said, quoting a source close to the player.

"He is fine and will be discharged soon," the source told PTI. Lara was in Mumbai to take part in events organised by Star Sports, the official broadcasters of the ongoing cricket World Cup.

"He complained of chest pain and uneasiness this morning and was sent for a routine check-up. He is fine now," a source at the broadcaster, who asked not to be named, told AFP. One of the best batsmen of all time, Lara holds two world records—the highest Test score of 400 not out, and the highest first class knock of 501 that he scored in the English county championship in 1994. The former skipper retired in 2007 after a dismal West Indies campaign in the World Cup. —AFP

## Less crash, bang, wallop need of the hour for Windies, says Lloyd

**LONDON:** West Indies need to rethink their tactical approach and pace their innings better at the Cricket World Cup if they are to get the best out of a side full of talent, according to cricketing great Clive Lloyd.

West Indies are eighth in the standings after six matches having won just one game—a seven-wicket demolition of Pakistan in their opening match.

Jason Holder's side, however, could have been in a much stronger position heading into their next match against India in Manchester on Friday had they not lost to front-runners New Zealand narrowly or let Australia off the hook.

"West Indies could be one of the best teams around—they have the talent," Lloyd said in his column for the International Cricket Council.

"Ultimately, the difference has been that the West Indies just aren't settling in and making big scores (and) they're not putting the clinical finishing touches necessary to win games."

The Guyanese, who captained the West Indies to the first two World Cup titles in 1975 and 1979, said the five-run loss to New Zealand was the perfect illustration of his argument.

The West Indies had a blistering start, but suffered a top-order collapse and only a rearguard maiden century from all-rounder Carlos Brathwaite meant they got close to New Zealand's 291 for eight.

The approach was criticised by fast bowling great Michael Holding during his commentary of the New Zealand match, stating he felt the side lacked the ability to buckle down.



**MANCHESTER:** West Indies' Chris Gayle stretches during a training session at Old Trafford in Manchester, north-west England yesterday, ahead of their 2019 Cricket World Cup group stage match against India. — AFP

ity to buckle down.

Holding said that some of the top-order batsmen seemed to have the mentality that if they scored "80-odd" before they got out they had done their job and it was then up to the rest of the side to get the team home. Holding's fellow Jamaican Chris Gayle raced to 87 against New Zealand but was dismissed in the 24th over to leave his side at 152 for five. Lloyd added that if his former side had a player like New Zealand captain Kane Williamson, who scored 148 by accumulating runs and waiting for the bad ball he could put away, they would have won

more games in England. "Had the West Indies batsmen turned some of those 50s, 60s and 70s, 80s into hundreds they would have been in a better position in the points standing," Lloyd said, highlighting the fact that six West Indies players, besides Brathwaite, had passed 50 during the tournament. "Against New Zealand, they were well aware of the asking rate; all they had to do was knock it around. It wasn't about playing big shots.

"I just hope that they've learned from their mistakes and that they can rectify them because they are talented cricketers." — Reuters

## Banks ready to fill Folau void in Wallabies backline

**MELBOURNE:** Tom Banks has long been known for his blistering pace and the ACT Brumbies fullback is also showing a knack for timing as his strong run of form leaves him well placed to grab Israel Folau's vacant Wallabies jersey ahead of the Rugby World Cup in Japan.

With the Brumbies the only Australian team to make the Super Rugby playoffs, the 25-year-old Queenslander has had the perfect stage to impress Wallabies coach Michael Cheika with his rivals for the number 15 shirt left on the sidelines.

A couple of Banks line-breaks helped set up two of the Brumbies' tries in their 38-13 quarter-final win over the Sharks in Canberra over the weekend and he will look to sustain his strong form against the Jaguares in Buenos Aires on Friday.

A win over the Argentine side would secure the Dan McKellar-coached Brumbies their first final since 2013 and a shot at their first championship since the last of their two titles in 2004. Banks has every reason to believe he can play a meaningful part in Buenos Aires, having proved himself something of a road warrior this season.

He has scored a try in seven of the Brumbies' last eight matches outside of Australia, including one in the 20-15 defeat by the Jaguares in April, the last time the teams met. Banks has plenty of fans among past Wallabies players and media pundits, including former Australia and Brumbies outside back Joe Roff, who rates him the "complete" package.

But Banks, who made his test debut last year, is reluctant to look too far ahead. "You've probably got to put (the World Cup) aside," he said. "It's in a lot of people's minds at the moment but my sole focus at the moment is definitely the Brumbies and inadvertently if we can do really well as a team and get deep into the finals that will really help our World Cup chances."

Folau was Cheika's go-to fullback for most of his 73 tests but the dual international was sacked last month for a controversial social media post and has launched legal proceedings against Rugby Australia.

Melbourne Rebels captain Dane Haylett-Petty and



Israel Folau

New South Wales Waratahs utility back Kurtley Beale are also in the running for the Wallabies number 15 jersey and both have experience wearing it.

But with their teams eliminated from Super Rugby, neither have another chance to stake their claim before Cheika picks his squad for the abridged Rugby Championship. The Wallabies won only four of their 13 tests last year, their worst season in decades, and their prospects of winning a third World Cup in Japan seem gloomy.

However, Banks says Cheika need only look to the Australian capital to find players ready to bring a winning mindset into Wallabies camp. "It's been a really good journey for me, my time down here in Canberra has been really enjoyable," said Banks, who joined the Brumbies in 2017 after managing only two appearances in two seasons for the Queensland Reds. "I think the culture down here is the best team culture I've been a part of. They probably bring the best out of players." — Reuters

## Shakib keeps flag flying for World Cup all-rounders

**MANCHESTER:** All-rounder Shakib Al Hasan is a rare talent who could command a place in the Bangladesh team as either a batsman or a bowler in an age of increasing specialisation in cricket.

The 32-year-old has others for company at the World Cup, including West Indies captain Jason Holder and England's Ben Stokes. But today's all-rounders do not have the same profile as they did during a golden era in the 1980s when England's Ian Botham, Pakistan's Imran Khan, Kapil Dev of India and New Zealander Richard Hadlee vied for top-dog status in the global game.

Shakib, the world's top-rated all-rounder in one-day internationals, inspired Bangladesh to a convincing win over Afghanistan with his five wickets and 51 runs on Monday, matching Yuvraj Singh's feat for India at the 2011 World Cup.

Shakib has scored 476 runs with two centuries and three fifties in six games in England and Wales and has also picked up 10 wickets.

Stokes and New Zealand's Colin de Grandhomme have also caught the eye during the round-robin phase but Shakib, a left-arm spinner and left-handed batsman, has been the standout all-rounder.

Former West Indies paceman Ian Bishop said such players remained sought after. "Everyone wants an Imran Khan (the current Pakistan prime minister who led his team to a 1992 World Cup triumph) or Shakib Al Hasan but they don't fall out of the trees," he said.

"Every team wants one of those (all-rounders). You don't go out and buy those. The core of the team is always built around the specialist but the all-rounder still has its place. If you look at New Zealand and Colin de Grandhomme chipping in, England have a number of guys who are specialist bowlers but they can also bat and that is what makes them such a strong unit."

India have unearthed Hardik Pandya as a genuine all-rounder to follow in Kapil's footsteps but he is yet to fire fully at the World Cup. England star Stokes made his presence felt in a losing cause against Sri Lanka when he hit an unbeaten 82 and bowled five overs for just 16 runs. —AFP