

Sports

Kohli's India boast firepower to make World Cup charge

Wrist spinners to add variety to India's attack

NEW DELHI: India boast the game's undoubted superstar batsman in Virat Kohli but their bowling attack could hold the key to their hopes of World Cup glory. Despite their status as the game's global powerhouse, India have only won the showpiece tournament twice, in 1983 and 2011. But Kohli's men, second behind England in the one-day international rankings, will start the tournament in England and Wales among the favourites alongside the host nation and defending champions Australia.

For all the focus on captain Kohli, the number one batsman in the world in the 50-over format and Test cricket, the ability of India's seamers to exploit the conditions could be the most important factor. Jasprit Bumrah, the top-ranked ODI bowler in the world, leads the pace battery alongside Mohammed Shami, Bhuvneshwar Kumar and Hardik Pandya.

Wrist spinners Kuldeep Yadav and Yuzvendra Chahal add variety to India's attack. Former India skipper Rahul Dravid believes the tournament could be a high-scoring affair. "I believe, having experienced some of the conditions in England last year with the A-team tour, it would be a high-scoring World Cup," he told Star Sports.

"And in a high-scoring World Cup, having bowlers who can take wickets in the middle will be very important. I think India is lucky in that regard. People like (Jasprit) Bumrah, Kuldeep Yadav and Yuzvendra Chahal... (India have) got bowlers who can take wickets."

The 25-year-old Bumrah, with his ability to bowl yorkers at the death, has picked up 85 wickets in 49 ODI matches since making his international debut in January 2016. Yadav and Chahal did not have a great

Indian Premier League season but have played an important role in India's recent successes.

And former India batsman Sanjay Manjrekar told AFP that the spin twins could have a crucial role to play for India, who kick off their World Cup campaign against South Africa in Southampton on June 5.

"In T20 cricket if you don't have anything in the pitch for these spinners then the batsmen, by slogging them, have a tendency to get the better of these guys," he said. "In the 50-over World Cup, in the middle stages, that kind of pressure won't be there on these two guys."

KOHLI FACTOR

Kohli, 30, has scored more than 19,000 runs across all formats of the international game and shone during India's tour of England last year, despite defeats in the Test and ODI series for the visitors.

But the rest of the batting line-up appears far from settled, with Lokesh Rahul and all-rounder Vijay Shankar vying for the number four spot after Rohit Sharma, Shikhar Dhawan and Kohli in the top three positions.

Kedar Jadhav and M.S. Dhoni are expected to form the core of the middle order. "I don't think the Indian batting looks settled. Virat Kohli is the only guy that gets me very excited," said Manjrekar, who admitted Dhoni's IPL form had been good.

All-rounders Pandya and Shankar will also be crucial to India's chances of making the final four in the round-robin event. An attacking middle-order batsman, a medium-fast bowler and quick in the field, Pandya has the ability to turn games single-handedly.

The 25-year-old Pandya, who earlier this year was



HYDERABAD: In this file photo taken on March 01, 2019 Indian cricket team captain Virat Kohli (C) talks to his team members during a practice session ahead of the first one day international (ODI) cricket match between India and Australia at the Rajiv Gandhi International Cricket Stadium in Hyderabad. —AFP

suspended over sexist remarks on a TV chat show, is fresh from winning the IPL title with Mumbai Indians and keen to focus his energies on his first 50-over World

Cup. "There is no one even close to Hardik Pandya's talent with both bat and ball," former India opener Virender Sehwag told cricketnext website. — AFP

Olympic swim champion retires at 22 after missing doping tests

VILNIUS: Lithuanian swimmer Ruta Meilutyte announced her retirement yesterday at the age of 22 after missing three doping tests, ending a career in which she became Olympic and world champion.

Lithuania's swimming federation said earlier this month that Meilutyte faced a suspension of up to two years for missing three drug tests, meaning she would be ruled out of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.

"The swimmer took full responsibility for missing all tests," the federation said, adding that Meilutyte had failed to properly inform international anti-doping authorities about her whereabouts.

Lithuania's anti-doping chief Kristina Jagminiene described it as an "unfortunate mistake". Meilutyte, who has never failed a doping test, was a star of the 2012 London Games, where as a 15-year-old she won the 100 metres breaststroke event.

She also won the gold at the world championships in Barcelona a year later. "I am ready to start a new chapter of my life. Thank you all who supported me on this road", she said in a statement. Meilutyte said she wanted to return to her studies and "experience simple things, to grow, to better understand myself and the world". Last year, Meilutyte admitted she was suffering from depression. During her swimming career, she won 20 gold medals in top international competitions, according to Lithuania's



Ruta Meilutyte

swimming federation.

Her last event was the World Championships in China last December where she failed to qualify for the finals. — AFP

Indian runner Gomathi failed dope test after winning Asian title

NEW DELHI: Indian runner Gomathi Marimuthu failed a dope test immediately after winning the Asian 800 metres title last month and has been suspended, the national governing body said yesterday. The 30-year-old tested positive for anabolic steroids after her win at the Asian championships in Doha last month, a spokesman for the Athletics Federation of India told AFP.

"She has been provisionally suspended until her 'B' sample is tested after which she faces a maximum ban of four years," the official added. "India will lose the gold if the second sample also returns positive."

The International Association of Athletics Federations' athletics integrity unit reported failed tests by Gomathi and Bahrain's long distance runner Eunice Jepkiri Kirwa on social media late Tuesday.

The statement on Twitter said Gomathi had tested positive for norandrosterone, a type of anabolic steroid. Gomathi, who hails from the southern state of Tamil Nadu, surprised observers with her winning time of 2min 27secs at the Asian championships where India won three gold, seven silver and seven bronze medals.

Gomathi told Indian media she was "shocked" by the failed test and would seek analysis of the B sample. Media reports said however that Gomathi may

have failed a test at a domestic meeting in March but the national doping watchdog did not immediately report the result to the Indian federation.

Meanwhile, Bahrain's Olympic women's marathon silver medallist Eunice Kirwa has been provisionally suspended after failing a doping test, the Athletics Integrity Unit (AIU) said in a statement. Kenyan-born Kirwa, who switched allegiance to Bahrain in 2013 and finished second at the Rio Olympics in 2016, tested positive for erythropoietin (EPO), a banned blood-boosting hormone that improves endurance.

"The AIU confirms (a) provisional suspension against... Bahraini long-distance runner Eunice Jepkiri Kirwa... for a violation of the IAAF's (International Association of Athletics Federations') Anti-Doping Rules," AIU said in a statement.

Kirwa becomes the second women's marathon podium finisher at Rio to test positive for the same substance after Kenyan gold medallist Jemima Sumgong, who was suspended for four years by her country's anti-doping agency (ADAK) in 2017. Sumgong's ban was doubled to eight years by the AIU after the IAAF found her guilty of providing false information while defending herself against the initial sanction but was allowed to keep her gold medal as she tested positive in April 2017. — Agencies



Gomathi Marimuthu

S Africa confront World Cup demons

JOHANNESBURG: For South Africans, there is no escape from the reality of the country's bitter history of painful failure in World Cup knockout games. "People will highlight the baggage-it's like a big mirror that is always in front of you," said South African captain Faf du Plessis before departing for England.

England was the scene of South Africa's most spectacular implosion, 20 years ago, when the World Cup was last played there. With the scores tied in a semi-final against Australia at Edgbaston, Lance Klusener and last man Allan Donald were involved in a near-farcical run-out that enabled Australia to go through to the final.

South Africa have reached the semi-finals in four of their seven World Cup campaigns but have yet to reach a final. They have won only one of seven knockout matches, against Sri Lanka in the quarter-finals in 2015.

That rare victory was followed by a dramatic semi-final against New Zealand in Auckland, which ended with South African-born New Zealander Grant Elliott hitting Dale Steyn for a winning six off the penultimate ball.

Despite the frustrating history, Du Plessis believes the past has no relevance, other than providing a lesson that his team should trust their ability and play without a fear of failure if they reach the semi-finals this time.

"In previous World Cups, we wanted to do 'Superman' things. We thought we had to be more special, we had to do something more than we usually do, and we did not do what was good enough before," Du Plessis said.

South Africa will go into this World Cup without the burden of

being among the favourites, despite having won all five of the one-day international series they have played in the past year.

DESTRUCTIVE POWER

In a tournament expected to be dominated by batsmen, it is South Africa's bowlers who will carry the country's hopes-provided they are fully fit. Kagiso Rabada, Steyn and Lungi Ngidi are a potentially potent pace trio who will be backed by the leg-spin of Imran Tahir, the leading wicket-taker in this year's Indian Premier League.

Du Plessis said this quartet were a crucial part of his team's 'Plan A', even though it means South Africa could have a long tail as none of the specialist bowlers is a reliable batsman. It will put a big responsibility on the top six in the batting order, although there will be a batting all-rounder, either Andile Phehlukwayo or Dwaine Pretorius, at number seven.

South Africa will also be without their former star batsman and talisman AB de Villiers, who retired from international cricket last year after a stunning career. The team's approach might have to change, however, if one or more of the bowlers is injured, with all three fast bowlers having recent injury concerns.

Ngidi missed the IPL because of a side strain, while both Rabada and Steyn returned early from India because of back and shoulder injuries. Steyn had yet to bowl at full pace when the team left home and is a doubt for the tournament's first match against England at The Oval on May 30.

Opening batsman Quinton de Kock will be a key player with his ability to score quickly from the start of an innings, while fellow left-handers David Miller and JP Duminy can unleash destructive power if they have been provided with a solid foundation.

Du Plessis and two of Hashim Amla, Aiden Markram and Rassie van der Dussen will be expected to provide stability. "It's a long, long tournament," said Du Plessis. "It's not about how you get to the semi-finals, you just have to get there and then any team can win." — AFP

Bangladesh aim to break new ground at W Cup

DHAKA: Bangladesh have set their sights on capping a remarkable rise by reaching the World Cup semi-finals for the first time. Mashrafe Mortaza's arrival in England confident of making the last four on the back of impressive form that marks them as a serious threat to the established order.

Bangladesh showed they can compete with cricket's elite nations when they advanced to the Champions Trophy semi-finals two years ago from a strong group featuring England, Australia and New Zealand.

Significantly for their hopes in this edition of the World Cup, that memorable campaign came in England. It was also further proof of their emergence following a maiden World Cup quarter-final berth in 2015.

Bangladesh's group stage win against England four years ago proved to be a catalyst for the side, boosting their belief and triggering a sustained spell of success. Between April 2015 and October 2016, Bangladesh won five one-day international series in a row against Pakistan, India, South Africa, Zimbabwe and Afghanistan.

All of those series were played at home but it was still a huge sign of progress for a Bangladesh team considered as international whipping boys not so long ago. The series wins helped Bangladesh climb the rankings, earning them automatic qualification for the Champions Trophy and the World Cup.

They maintained that consistency with 13 wins from their 20 one-day internationals in 2018 and are currently ranked seventh. Bangladesh will carry plenty of experience into the tournament in the form of captain Mashrafe, vice-captain Shakib Al Hasan, Tamim Iqbal and Mushfiqur Rahim.

'NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE'

The solid performances in recent years, combined with the presence of the veterans, has created expectations of success for Bangladesh that were unheard of in the team's five previous World Cups dating back to 1999.

Mashrafe says a semi-final place is their goal, but he admits it will be tough to get that far given the round-robin nature of the first stage of the 10-team tournament. "At the moment I think going to the semi-finals will be big challenge, but nothing is impossible," Mashrafe said before leaving Dhaka for England.

"Of course it is possible, difficult though. In the past a win over one big team in the group stage might have been enough, it would have made a comeback difficult for them. But here we have nine games.

"Those who are expecting to play in the semi-finals they will have plenty of opportunities to come back. We have to be careful about it." While Bangladesh's biggest strength is their team unity, they have weaknesses that might hurt them on the big occasion. In an era when sides often chase down targets well in excess of 300 runs with ease, Bangladesh may lack enough big hitters to do that. So far, Bangladesh have successfully chased a 300-plus target only twice, against low-ranked Zimbabwe and Scotland, a record Mashrafe concedes they must improve on in this World Cup. — AFP