

Sports

Powell powers West Indies to a T20 win over England

Blistering century laid the foundation for West Indies

BRIDGETOWN: Rovman Powell's blistering century laid the foundation for West Indies' 20-run win over England in the third Twenty20 international at Bridgetown on Wednesday as they went 2-1 up in a five-match series. The recalled Powell's 107 off just 53 balls, as well as his fourth-wicket stand of 122 with Nicholas Pooran (70), helped take the West Indies to an imposing 224-5 after stand-in England captain Moeen Ali won the toss.

"I know I can strike the ball well," said player-of-the-match Powell. "I had a problem against wrist spin and the last seven months I went away and have been working on that and opening up the off side. "Everything came out of the middle today." Tom Banton hit six sixes in a rapid 73 and Phil Salt 57 on his T20 international debut as England tried to chase down 225, with Moeen leading a new-look side after regular captain Eoin Morgan pulled his quad during the warm-up.

But they lost wickets before finishing on 204-9 in a remarkable match yielding over 400 runs. "A fantastic partnership took the game away from us but I'm proud of the way the boys batted at the end," said Moeen. Powell's impressive display of ball-striking, including four fours and 10 soaring sixes, saw the 28-year-old Jamaican

become only the third West Indies batsman after Evin Lewis and Chris Gayle, who have both performed the feat twice, to make a Twenty20 international hundred.

England's side featured three debutants in Salt, fellow batsman Harry Brook and paceman George Garton and, even more unusually, a trio of left-arm quicks in Garton, Reece Topley and Tymal Mills. Garton bowled opener Brandon King but was hammered repeatedly when he missed his length in an expensive return costing 57 runs. Powell, selected in place of Odean Smith in the only change to the West Indies XI, smashed his second ball for six but also played some 'touch' shots en route to three figures.

He reached his hundred off 51 balls and then promptly celebrated by heaving Topley out of the ground. But, attempting a repeat, he was caught at long-off. Banton gave England hope of an improbable win in a 39-ball innings that ended when he holed out off West Indies captain Kieron Pollard. Salt got the target down to 36 off a last over where he hit the first two legal deliveries for six before being bowled by Romario Shepherd. The series continues when the teams return to the Kensington Oval tomorrow. — AFP



BRIDGETOWN: Kieron Pollard (center) of West Indies celebrates the dismissal of Tom Banton of England during the 3rd T20I between West Indies and England at Kensington Oval, Bridgetown, Barbados, on January 26, 2022. — AFP

'Massive blow' for England as captain out of Six Nations

LONDON: England captain Owen Farrell has been ruled out of the entire Six Nations with an ankle injury, coach Eddie Jones said on Wednesday. It had been hoped Farrell would be fit for England's tournament opener in Scotland on February 5 as he recovered from an earlier ankle injury suffered against Australia in November.

But Jones confirmed Farrell, who plays at fly-half or centre, needs surgery on an injury sustained while training with Saracens last week. "Owen's had his operation, or was going to, so he'll be out of the Six Nations," Jones said at the virtual launch of the tournament. Saracens said in a separate statement the operation would take place later on Wednesday, with the Premiership club estimating a recovery period of eight to 10 weeks until Farrell returns.

Jones, reflecting on 100-cap veteran Farrell's absence from the Six Nations, said: "It's a massive blow for him personally, and for the team it's a blow. "But it's obviously an opportunity for other guys to step up into leadership roles, for other players to play for that 12 jumper. We see it more as an opportunity. "In today's rugby having your best team on the field is a rare occurrence. We're pretty used to it."

Ireland head coach Andy Farrell, Owen's father, added: "I am sure he is gutted to have another injury, everyone would be at this time of year, the Six Nations is massive to anyone. "But I have no doubt he has the appetite to come back better and stronger." British and Irish Lions flanker Courtney Lawes is in line to replace Farrell as captain after leading England to wins over Tonga and world champions South Africa in November.

Lawes has been ruled out of England's pre-tournament training camp this week with concussion suffered playing for Northampton Saints against Ulster recently, but he is expected to be fit for the Scotland clash. "Courtney is progressing nicely and we're still hopeful he'll be available for Scotland," said Jones. Gloucester winger Jonny May, however, is set to miss the tournament because of a knee injury. "Jonny's more likely than not going to have some surgery, but the details on that are a bit sketchy at the moment. He's more than likely to be out of the Six Nations," Jones said.

'Courage'

It appeared Jones was planning to play the 30-year-old Farrell at inside centre, alongside fly-half Marcus Smith, one of English rugby union's rising stars, at Murrayfield. But Jones will now have to look again at his 10-12 pairing in the lead-up to the latest edition of the sport's oldest international fixture, with Henry Slade in line to take over the inside centre role.

"We've got other experienced backs - we may move Sladey in one spot from 13 to 12," Jones said. "It's important for any 10 in the world whether it's Marcus Smith or Finn Russell or whether it's (Romain) Ntamack for France that the 12 is a good communicator and takes some of the pressure away from the 10 in terms of giving good information and assisting in the defense role."

Smith has played just five Tests but Jones was impressed by the way the 22-year-old handled himself on England duty when his last-gasp penalty sealed a 27-26 win over the Springboks. "It was one of those games where we were going to have win it two or three times," said Jones. "He (Smith) showed a lot of courage, a lot of composure and a lot of skill and he's only going to get better during the Six Nations." — AFP

Olympic giants China face tough medal fight at home Games

BEIJING: China topped the medals table at its 2008 Summer Olympics but expectations are much lower for next month's Beijing Games as the country attempts to build a winter sports industry nearly from scratch. China did not appear at a Winter Olympics until 1980 at Lake Placid and has hardly sparkled since, winning one gold medal - in short track speed skating - at the last Games, in South Korea's Pyeongchang, in 2018. Cold weather sports have not historically been popular in the country, where the prohibitive cost and relative lack of infrastructure had kept the pool of athletes small.

But a huge government-led push to promote snow and ice activities and a soaring middle class looks set to yield some results when the Games begin on February 4, and home athletes always tend to overperform at their own Olympics. With foreign coaches drafted in to boost expertise, forecasters Gracenote expect China to win six golds at Beijing 2022 and enjoy its "best-ever Winter Olympics". Norway, who topped the medals table in 2018, are predicted to do so again, ahead of the Russians and Germany.

'Big crisis'

China set itself the goal of competing in all 109 events at Beijing 2022 - nearly double the number the country qualified for at Pyeongchang. The country has "no experience" in one-third of them, state media said. Underlining the challenge, winter sports official Ni Huizhong admitted to Xinhua news agency last year in unusually stark terms that the country had "clear weaknesses and disadvantages" and was facing "a big crisis" in some sports.

China will compete in at least 96 events in the Chinese capital. In some, such as men's ice hockey, avoiding embarrassment on home soil will count as

Nine-under Horschel grabs early lead at Torrey Pines

LOS ANGELES: Billy Horschel fired a nine-under-par 63 to snatch the early lead the PGA Tour's Farmers Insurance Open at Torrey Pines on Wednesday. Horschel reeled off nine birdies and nine pars in a flawless opening round at the picturesque southern California layout's North Course to lead by one shot from Michael Thompson on eight under.

The 35-year-old's brilliant round saw him grab the lead on the 520-yard par-five 17th hole, when he reached the green in two before two-putting for birdie. Horschel revealed after his round he had been close to withdrawing after struggling to overcome a shoulder problem. "I didn't know if I was even going to tee it up today when I woke up," the 2014 FedEx Cup champion said. "Even when I was hitting balls I still wasn't sure whether I was going to tee it up."

A low-scoring opening round saw Germany's Stephan Jaeger and Kevin Tway finish the day on seven under after posting 65s, while there was a welcome return to form for Rickie Fowler, whose form and rankings position nosedived during a 2021 season that included nine missed cuts. World number 101 Fowler, who also missed the cut at last week's American Express at La Quinta, was tied in fifth place with Doug Ghim, Italy's Francesco Molinari and world number one Jon Rahm on six under.

Fowler's bogey-free 66 on the North Course included six birdies. "Definitely pleased," Fowler said afterwards. "Did a good job of kind of focusing on the things that we're working on, being deliberate swing-wise and staying patient in there." Spanish star Rahm meanwhile, making a happy return to Torrey Pines, the scene of his maiden major victory at the US Open last year, had a more erratic opening round on the South Course.

After three birdies on the front nine to reach the



SCHIPHOL: Dutch Olympian athletes arrive at Schiphol airport to take a flight to Beijing ahead of the 2022 Winter Olympics. — AFP

a small win. China has had to be creative in its search to grow its small pool of winter sports athletes, including scouring martial arts schools of Buddhist monasteries.

Authorities also sent a group of teenagers with zero experience - including a former gymnast and a sprinter - to Norway in 2018 for a crash course in ski jumping in the hope of producing 2022 competitors. China has also turned to naturalised athletes, including California natives Eileen Gu - who looks set to be the face of the Games-and ice skater Beverly Zhu. With an eye on the future, the country is on course to open 5,000 winter sports schools by 2025 and has set up massive training bases for athletes offering wind tunnels and virtual reality simulators.

Prestige

Of China's 13 Winter Olympic golds, 10 have come in short track speed skating. Wu Dajing won 500m gold in 2018 and will defend his title in Beijing, while there are also hopes in the relay events. Pairs figure skaters Sui Wenjing and Han Cong will hope to go one better than their

Pyeongchang silver, while US-born freestyle skier Gu, just 18, is hotly tipped for gold. They are under pressure from the very top, with President Xi Jinping urging athletes to "struggle bravely and strive for success".

But medals will only be one part of what China hopes to reap from the Games. It sees an opportunity to demonstrate its sophistication and prowess, even as the COVID-19 pandemic and diplomatic boycotts from a handful of countries over human rights concerns cast a shadow. "By hosting the 2008 Summer Olympics (also in Beijing), China impressively demonstrated its economic development to the world," Jung Woo Lee, sport policy researcher at the University of Edinburgh, told AFP.

"(Now) China wants to display its cultural and technological merits to international audiences," Lee said, noting that Winter Olympics are "more exclusive competitions where the power of more advanced and affluent Western nations prevails". "The staging of the Winter Olympics in their capital city can symbolically mean that China is no longer lagging behind Western democracies in terms of its international privilege," Lee said. — AFP

Benzema's cash seized by France

VERSAILLES: French bailiffs have seized 230,000 euros (\$260,000) from Real Madrid striker Karim Benzema over his conviction last year for complicity in a bid to blackmail former France team-mate Mathieu Valbuena with a sex tape, a source familiar with the case said yesterday. A court ordered Benzema in November to pay a fine, damages and legal costs for pressuring Valbuena to pay off his blackmailers, as well as handing him a one-year suspended jail sentence.

Benzema "implicated himself personally, through subterfuge and lies, to convince his teammate to submit to the blackmail", the court in Paris suburb Versailles said at the time. Benzema has appealed the ruling, which came in the same year he made a stunning return to France's national squad after being dropped in 2015 over the blackmail allegations.

The 34-year-old has scored nine times for France since being recalled by manager Didier Deschamps for the Euro 2020 finals-delayed by a year due to the coronavirus pandemic-making him the fifth-highest scorer in the history of Les Bleus. Benzema's performances have helped rehabilitate him in the eyes of many French fans and coach Didier Deschamps, and the seizure of his cash comes less than two weeks after he won France Football magazine's player of the year award.

Valbuena's lawyers turned to the bailiffs to recover the cash from Benzema after he did not pay up voluntarily. A source close to the case said the Real Madrid star's account had been partially frozen since Friday. Benzema's own lawyers want the money held in escrow while his appeal is heard. "This is the logical consequence of the decision for immediate payment. We asked for an amicable agreement on payment, which was never reached," said Valbuena's lawyer Paul-Albert Iweins. — AFP



CALIFORNIA: Billy Horschel hits his tee shot on the 17th hole during the first round of The Farmers Insurance Open at Torrey Pines Golf Course on January 26, 2022. — AFP

turn at three under, Rahm posted three birdies and two bogeys in five holes down the stretch to struggle to four under. But a superb eagle three on the par-five 18th - reaching the green in two before curling in an awkward 12-foot put - left him just three off the lead. Rahm was pleased at being able to salvage a low score despite the occasional wayward shot.

"I put myself in really good positions, and the few times I was off, for the most part I was able to give myself a chance to save the hole," Rahm said. "Nothing was really bad, I feel like everything was feeling good, everything was coming out and feeling the way it should and it showed in the score." A group of 22 players were a further shot behind Rahm, Fowler, Ghim and Molinari on five under. Former world number one Dustin Johnson was in a group of seven players on four under after opening with a 68. — AFP