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India captain Harmanpreet Kaur and her Australian counterpart Meg Lanning pose for photos in front of the ICC Women's T20 World Cup on the eve of their final at the MCG yesterday. PHOTO: ICC

Australia eye fifth crown in front of mammoth crowd

AFP, *Melbourne*

Australian captain Meg Lanning says her team are "pumped" for their defence of the women's Twenty20 World Cup against India on Sunday with hopes high that more than 90,000 fans will cram the cavernous Melbourne Cricket Ground.

They go into the final as favourites, courtesy of being the sport's dominant side, winning four of the six tournaments so far, in contrast to Harmanpreet Kaur's India, who are in their first decider.

But with large numbers of Indian fans expected in the 100,000-capacity arena, there will be little in the way of home advantage.

Organisers have set their sights on beating the official world attendance record for a women's sporting fixture on Sunday, to coincide with International Women's Day.

That was set at the 1999 football World Cup final, when 90,185 watched the United States beat China at the Rose Bowl in California.

While widely accepted as the benchmark, an estimated 110,000 are said to have attended the Mexico-Denmark women's World Cup Championships final in 1971, but it was not a sanctioned event.

Pop superstar Katy Perry, who this week revealed she is pregnant, has been recruited to help get punters through the turnstiles, performing before and after the game.

As of Friday, more than 75,000 tickets had been sold for a match that marks the culmination of a 17-day, 10-team, tournament that has proved both entertaining and competitive.

"It seems like it has sort of fallen into place a little bit, and Sunday is going to be massive," said Lanning ahead of Australia playing their sixth successive final.

"So hopefully there is 90,000 people there. Everything's been done that could possibly be done, and we're just really pumped we get to be out in the middle and play in front of everyone."

The final will be a repeat of the tournament opener, when India upset Australia by 17 runs after leg-spinner Poonam Yadav ran riot.

It made every game afterwards a virtual must-win for Lanning's team, and they rose to the task despite tournament-ending injuries to Tayla Vlaeminck and Ellyse Perry.

After beating Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, they edged New Zealand before overcoming South Africa in a nerve-shredding semifinal.

"It's been a hard road, certainly not smooth, but we've given ourselves a chance," said Lanning, who is wary of the threat posed by India.

> We're not coming here just to put on a show, we're coming here to win... We are match and battle-hardened, all our games have been cut-throat, must-win clashes and have all been close. We've had to deal with that pressure, needed to stand up when you are under the pump.
>
> **MEG LANNING**
> AUSTRALIA CAPTAIN

> Everybody knows there is going to be a lot of noise in the stadium and they will keep an eye on each one of us. We just need to enjoy this moment instead of thinking about what can trouble us, because it's a big moment... I just want the trophy, nothing else.
>
> **HARMANPREET KAUR**
> INDIA CAPTAIN

"They're a class side, they've been playing excellent cricket through the tournament."

A lot of love

India went through the group phase as the only unbeaten side, on the back of quality spin bowling and the exploits of teenage batting prodigy Shafali Verma.

After upsetting Australia, they beat Bangladesh, New Zealand and then Sri Lanka before automatically making the final as Group A winners after their semifinal against England was washed out.

"Rather than thinking about what is going to trouble us, it's only about being there, enjoying the moment and giving our best," said Kaur. "One thing we have to keep in mind, Sunday is a fresh day, a fresh start. We have to start from ball one."

Like Lanning, she is relishing the chance to be part of a match that has the potential to take women's cricket to another level.

A standard to live up to

NABID YEASIN

It was a fitting end to Mashrafe Bin Mortaza's reign as captain and the inspirational leader, who did a lot of head-scratching over the years while trying to find the perfect opening partner alongside automatic pick Tamim Iqbal, was glad to see Liton Das and Tamim break numerous records during Bangladesh's 123-run win against Zimbabwe in the third ODI in Sylhet on Friday.

292 of the 322 runs made by the Tigers were courtesy of the Tamim-Liton opening duo. The stand featured a total of 22 fours and 12 maximums but it was not merely a product of just boundaries. While the duo made a majority of runs -- 160 -- from boundaries, the remaining 132 -- of which six were extras -- were made by sneaking quick singles and doubles.

For a Bangladesh team that has struggled over the years to find the perfect opening combination, Friday's game could be showcased as the perfect example of opening batting. It included almost every aspect that a batting partnership should contain and so it was not a surprise to see them notch the third-best opening wicket partnership and the sixth-best in terms of runs for any wicket in one-day cricket history.

While the flurry of boundaries fuelled the scoring rate, it was the frequent running between wickets and rotation of strike that never let the scoring rate take a sudden nosedive -- as was the case many a time before. Bangladesh had often seen bright starts turn bleak by trying to find boundaries or by losing wickets. That, however, was not the case on Friday as Tamim, doing his bit as the senior player out in the middle, calmed Liton down when the duo went through a rare rough patch in the game.

"When I was on 80, the bowlers were having a good time. Neither I nor Tamim bhai were being able to take singles. So Tamim bhai motivated me by saying that we could overcome this if we spent a bit more time on the pitch," Liton said of how Tamim motivated him to not throw his wicket away after the game.

Liton rarely fails when it comes to making a cricket connoisseur applaud his stroke-making with the willow, but over the years the major problem for the exquisite right-hander has been his consistency. The 25-year-old's ability has never been in doubt, but he has often failed to convert starts into big scores by throwing his wicket away while trying to do a little more than required.

It is also true that Liton rode his luck a number of times in Friday's game too. He was dropped thrice after his century and was also once rendered not-out after being caught off an eventual no-ball that looked to be below waist-high.

While Liton's 143-ball 176 -- the highest individual score by a Bangladeshi -- might have seen some close calls, it was still commendable. And unlike Liton, Tamim, who was a bit less aggressive and more composed, smashed seven boundaries and six maximums but still managed to bat at a strike-rate of 117.43 during his unbeaten ton.

Such an opening batting display coming against a 12th ranked ODI side with a number of missed opportunities might indicate that there are still a few improvements to be made in the approach, but if the duo can replicate half of what they did at the Sylhet International Stadium on Friday, it can be assumed that much of the concerns regarding the opening slot could be put to an end.

And the Tigers will not have to wait long to see if they can do it as the Tigers face Pakistan away in Karachi in a one-off ODI come April 1.

Liton Das had plenty of reasons to celebrate on Friday as he not only scored a century, but recorded the highest individual score by a Bangladeshi during a record 292-run opening stand with Tamim Iqbal. PHOTO: STAR FILE

Coronavirus sees PSG game postponed

AFP, *Paris*

Paris Saint-Germain's Ligue 1 game at Strasbourg on Saturday has been postponed following an order from the Bas-Rhin authorities in the face of coronavirus fears, the French football league (LFP) announced on Friday.

It is the first French league match to be postponed because of the new coronavirus.

The decision was made after a number of people tested positive for COVID-19 in the Haut-Rhin region, which neighbours the Bas-Rhin region where Strasbourg is located.

"The arrival of 26,000 at the Stade de la Meinau, a quarter of which would come from the Haut-Rhin region, is likely to promote the spread of COVID-19," local authorities said in a statement.

On Friday, the French health ministry said that the number of infections in the country had jumped by 154 to 577, with two more deaths bringing the total toll to nine.

Proteas sweep series despite Labuschagne century

AFP, *Potchefstroom*

Australia's Marnus Labuschagne hit a maiden one-day international century on returning to his South African roots - but could not prevent South Africa from completing a series clean sweep in the third and final one-day clash at Senwes Park on Saturday.

Applauded by a large group of his South African family, Labuschagne made 108 in an Australian total of 254 for seven after they were sent in to bat.

South Africa were always ahead of the required rate and coasted to a six-wicket win with 4.3 overs to spare. Man of the match Jon-Jon Smuts (84), Kyle Verreynne (50) and man of the series Heinrich Klaasen (68 not out) made half-centuries.

Klaasen hit 242 runs in the series and was dismissed once. "It's been a fantastic couple of weeks for me," he said.

It was South Africa's third successive ODI series win against Australia and their 11th win in 12 matches against them, going back to September 2016.

"It's been disappointing but credit to South Africa, they put us under pressure with bat and ball," said Australian captain Aaron Finch.

It was a bitter-sweet day for Labuschagne, who was born in Klerksdorp, 50km away, and started school in Potchefstroom before his family moved to Australia when he was nine years old.

He said it was "very special" to score a century so close to the town where he was born.

"It was amazing. I have 50 of my family members out there from all over South Africa."

Less than an hour's drive from the town where he was born, Australia's Marnus Labuschagne made a sensational return with a century, albeit in a losing cause, in the third ODI in front of 50 family members and friends in Potchefstroom yesterday. PHOTO: TWITTER

Reserve days a 'no brainer', says Starc

AGENCIES, *Melbourne*

Mitchell Starc says it's "a no-brainer" for reserve days to be introduced for all knockout games at world cricket events, with the men's T20 World Cup this year at risk of being hijacked by rain like the women's tournament was this week.

Australia's rain-reduced semi-final win that set up a dream women's T20 World Cup final against India has somewhat glossed over the fact that England were knocked out of the tournament when their semi-final was completely washed out.

Despite there being a two-day break between the semi-finals and the final, no reserve days were scheduled in the case of rain, meaning England were sent home despite a ball not being bowled.

Starc said the fact the rain eased for long enough to allow the Australians to qualify for what looks set to be a record-breaking final at the MCG shouldn't mask the need for a rule change."I'm sure if both games were washed out, everyone would be barking mad at the ICC for no reserve days," Starc said before he flew home from Australia's tour of South Africa to watch wife Alyssa Healy play in the final.

"In my opinion, it's a no-brainer. Considering it's a double header, there's obviously no downside for either team with turnaround for time between finals.There are currently no reserve days scheduled for the semifinals of the men's T20 World Cup later this year and Starc is unsure if the International Cricket Council will adapt in the seven months before the tournament begins and make a change.

"I only heard the other day that it's the same (rules) for ours," he said. "It's not for me to change the rules. It's up to the ICC. "If that's the way they go for our World Cup, I think it needs to be looked at for World Cups and all world events going forward."

Archer unlikely for IPL

AGENCIES, *London*

England fast bowler Jofra Archer is unlikely to play for Rajasthan Royals in this year's Indian Premier League as he continues his recovery from an elbow injury.

England say Archer is "progressing as expected" following a scan on a stress fracture sustained in South Africa. The 24-year-old will have another scan in April before returning for Sussex in the County Championship in May.

The 2020 IPL season runs from 29 March to 24 May.

On signing a contract extension with Sussex on Thursday, Archer said he was "making good progress" with the injury and had his "fingers crossed" about playing in the IPL.

England said on Saturday that Archer's "focus will be playing for England" when the three-Test series against West Indies begins on 4 June and that he will play for Sussex to "ensure his preparation is optimal for Test cricket".

Archer, who is missing the current tour of Sri Lanka, will start a "back-to-bowling" programme near the end of March.