

The 'singing' Robin

Cricket

THE GUARDIAN

India won the sixth one-day international, one of the most scintillating ever seen in this country, by two wickets with two deliveries to spare at the last joyful gasp.

As youngster Robin Uthappa completed a mammoth run chase by drilling an off-drive past the dive of a despairing mid-off and on to the boundary, the air horns and whistles of the Indian contingent in the crowd began their cacophony.

It had been brilliant stuff, entertainment of the highest class and it has kept alive to the last match at Lord's on Saturday a series that, when England took a 3-1 lead at Old Trafford, had appeared all but over.

Uthappa's finale, 47 from 33 balls, saw India overhaul England's 316 for six, an innings that itself had in its middle period appeared destined for mediocrity. At 137 for five with fewer than 20 overs remaining and little but novices to see out time, the recovery was little short of remarkable. Owais Shah made an

unbeaten 107 from 95 balls at No6 and showed why he has been earmarked as central to England's plans for the next World Cup.

No England cricketer has reached three figures in a one-day international from such a low place in the batting order. In the process he added 106 for the sixth wicket with Luke Wright, the debutant from Sussex who justified his inclusion as replacement for Andrew Flintoff and Ravi Bopara by making 50 from 39 balls with a six and seven fours, and then an unbroken seventh-wicket stand of 73 from 34 balls with Dimitri Mascarenhas -- whose pyrotechnics as the innings reached its end would not have disgraced Sydney Harbour bridge on New Year's Eve.

The Indian response was brutal, with Sachin Tendulkar, the eventual man of the match, and Sourav Ganguly adding 150 for the first wicket inside 23 overs, a partnership that placed India in a position from which they ought to have been able to go on and take the match comfortably. Instead they began to implode as Paul Collingwood finally found things that worked, first as Ganguly slapped a fierce catch to

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Kevin Pietersen at cover for 53 and then, three overs later, when Tendulkar, crippled by cramp and about to receive Ganguly as a runner, stepped away to leg and belted Panesar like a tracer to extra-cover where Collingwood had positioned himself. Tendulkar trudged from The Oval for the final time having made 94 from 81 balls, with 16 fours and a six, something truly memorable to mark his genius and the fifth time in his last 16 innings in all cricket that he has reached the nineties without going on to make a hundred.

England chipped away: Yuvraj Singh to Mascarenhas' sharp return catch; Rahul Dravid victim of a bit of inspiration from Collingwood that saw Shah's off-breaks given a chance; and for Mascarenhas once more, a collector's item with Gautam Gambhir caught as easy as you like by Panesar on the long-on boundary.

Uthappa and Mahendra Singh Dhoni began the acceleration, though, adding 60 for the sixth wicket in seven overs before Dhoni

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Dravid awaits a cracker

Cricket

AFP, London

India captain Rahul Dravid is targeting a series victory after his side levelled the seven-match NatWest series 3-3 at The Oval on Wednesday.

A week ago, India were 3-1 down, but Dravid insists his side were never downhearted. "We still felt we could win," he said.

"At 3-3, we knew we'd lost a couple of close games that could have gone the other way."

The sixth match was the most enthralling of a compelling series -- which ends at Lord's on Saturday -- with England battling back from a poor start to post 316-6.

India then seemed to be cruising as Sachin Tendulkar and Sourav Ganguly put on 150 for the first wicket, only for the momentum to tip back England's way after a series of wickets.

Robin Uthappa, though, kept his nerve amid the chaos, scoring an unbeaten 47 to win the game with two balls to spare.

"We got a bit of the rub of the green, but we have shown a lot of resilience after a long tour," Dravid went on. "It should be a cracker of a game at Lord's."

He had particular words of praise for his much-decorated opening duo.

"When you're chasing 320 you need to get off to a good start," Dravid said. "They got 150 which makes a big difference -- especially on a slow wicket when you know it'll get harder to play shots."

"Definitely we were worried when we lost a few wickets in the middle."

"But that happens. Even after a good start you're still chasing 6.5 runs an over."

"It's not easy for a new batsman on a slow wicket so you have to get runs when the ball is hard."

Paul Collingwood habitually speaks of "taking the positives", but

on this occasion they were clearly there to be taken.

To reach 316 having been 137-5 was a remarkable effort, and the England captain paid tribute to the contributions of Owais Shah, who hit a maiden one-day international century, debutant Luke Wright, who scored 50, and Dimitri Mascarenhas, who blasted five sixes of the final over.

"We were put under a lot of pressure, but I was delighted by the way we fought back," he said.

"Owais put in a swashbuckling effort to change the momentum of the game."

The pendulum shifted straight back with India's opening partnership, but England again dug deep.

"We were pegged back by the start they had," Collingwood said. "I can't fault any of the lads for the effort they put in."

"When games are that tight, you've got to look at misfields and ask if we were bowling in the right areas."

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"The thought of retirement has not crossed my mind," Tendulkar told PTI. "I am still enjoying the game very much and want to play for as long as I can. Cricket means a lot to me."

Tendulkar's clarification finally put an end to the speculation about him retiring from one-day cricket after India's home engagements against Pakistan and Australia later this season. Sources close to Tendulkar had said he was inclined to announce his retirement on this tour of England but was persuaded by friends to do so at home.

Tendulkar, along with Sourav Ganguly and Rahul Dravid, had opted out of the ICC World Twenty20 and he had told the Times of the toll one-day cricket was taking on his body. "I enjoy every moment I have on a cricket field, but the recovery times between games these days are difficult, especially for one-day internationals, and that's my major concern."

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HOOT, NOT UTHAPPA! India's Robin Uthappa (C) gets a pat from a jubilant cricket fan while a cameraman desperately tries to focus his camera on the young right-hander moments after he hit the winning runs against England in the absorbing sixth one-day international at The Oval in London on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Tendulkar denies reports

CRICINFO, undated

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Aussies under pressure

AFP, Sydney

Australian paceman Brett Lee, who missed the one-day World Cup with an ankle injury, is ready to make up for lost time at the World Twenty20 championship in South Africa.

"We aren't the most experienced team and there will be a bit of pressure on us, but we have to try and get into the game as quickly as possible and think on our feet, and learn as soon as we possibly can," Lee said.

"Twenty20 is a game we don't really have a lot of experience in and it's going to be a major challenge for us."

"It's the team that works out what's going on quicker than their opponents that will take out the championship."

Lee stressed he wouldn't be backing off the pace for a more conservative approach in a bid to be more economical.

"I think if you've got a guy who can bowl genuine pace it's an advantage."

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tions and most of the current squad haven't even played the game at domestic level.

"The games we've played over the past few years have been treated as good, fun, light-hearted contests," said skipper Ricky Ponting before the team's departure for South Africa.

"That was one of the good things

about the game, I thought. I think you play your best cricket when you are out there having a bit of fun."

However, Ponting, whose departure for the tournament has been delayed because of 'family reasons', said the prospect of adding to Australia's already bulging

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ARE WE READY? Australia fast bowler Brett Lee (L) and all-rounder Andrew Symonds share a light moment while attending a press conference in Johannesburg yesterday.

Shakib in shortlist

SPORTS REPORTER

Injured all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan was shortlisted along with four others for the Emerging Players prize for the ICC Cricket Awards.

Along with 20-year-old Shakib, England opener Ravi Bopara, Australian fast bowler Shauna Tait and New Zealand opener Ross Taylor were also named in the final four.

Shakib, who is struggling with a finger injury, had a brilliant first year to international cricket which included a few stellar performances both with bat and ball.

Australian captain Ricky Ponting could become the first player to win the Sir Garfield Sobers Trophy twice after he was shortlisted with three other players for the ICC's major prize.

Ponting will compete with Kevin Pietersen, Mohammad Yousuf and Shivnarine Chanderpaul for the Cricketer of the Year award, which will be announced in Johannesburg on Monday.

The four players were selected from an extended list of 12, while the nominations for the Test Player of the Year and ODI Player of the Year have also been cut to four. Ponting is the only man with a chance of winning all three titles, SEE PAGE 22 COL 6

ASIA CUP HOCKEY South Korea drub Bangladesh 8-0

SPORTS REPORTER

South Korea entered the semifinal of the 7th Asia Cup hockey tournament from Pool B with a 8-0 thrashing of Bangladesh in Chennai yesterday but mighty Pakistan were eliminated after Japan finished second in Pool B.

Captain Yamabori Takahiko slotted a hattrick in Japan's 8-0 victory over bottom-table Singapore on the final day of the group stage, which destroyed any hopes that Pakistan had of entering the last four. Only a Japanese defeat would have let three-time champions Pakistan -- who collected seven

points -- into the last four.

Malaysia topped the table with ten points while Japan tallied nine.

Japan, who stunned Pakistan 3-1 in the group, now meet Pool B champions and holders India in the semifinal while Malaysia take on two-time winners Korea.

India, who had 12 points with all four wins, were pitted against whipping boys of the tournament Thailand in their last group match lastnight.

China also had a slim chance of making it to the semis as they started their last match against Sri Lanka.

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AFP, Paris

"Everyone thought it was a Mickey Mouse game, just a bit of fun really."

Those words could have been said when Australia played New Zealand in the first international Twenty20 staged in Auckland in February 2005.

But they weren't.

In fact, former Test batsman Doug Walters uttered them in 1971 when the first one-day international was played between the Aussies and England in Melbourne in January 1971.

That brief encounter, quickly arranged after the rain-hit third Test had been abandoned without a ball being bowled, was greeted with stone-faced contempt by the traditionalists who were prepared to issue a speedy death certificate on the limited overs format.

But instead the match, won by Australia, like so many since, attracted 45,000 fans, swelled the coffers and sparked a revolution in the game that split the sport, generated nine World Cups and is still going strong.

When England played India at The Oval on Wednesday, it was the

2,619th one-day international to take place.

Many in the game believe that Twenty20, which stages its inaugural world championship from Sept 11-24 in South Africa, can enjoy a similarly promising, and money-spinning future.

That's despite another generation of doubters pouring scorn on its brief, bish-bash philosophy which encourages fans to enjoy their beer and burgers and don hard hats to resist the showers of sixes smashed to all parts of the ground in the unashamedly pro-batsmen game.

"Any World Cup is a big stage, a World Cup is a World Cup. The World Twenty20 is a high-prestige event and we will give everything," promised India vice-captain Yuvraj Singh.

"You have less time to settle in Twenty20 cricket and you need to play your shots earlier. But you can't just go out there and slog, it's a format in which you still need to play good cricket and you need to think about how to get a good score. You need to work really hard in a short time."

Australian vice-captain Adam Gilchrist said he believes all teams will take the tournament seriously but hopes that the aim of winning won't overshadow the enjoyment factor.