

Endless possibilities

MOHAMMAD ISAM

Lord's will shed history tonight when the hallowed turf will go under lights for the opening ICC Twenty20 World Championship opening match between England and the Netherlands.

It looks like a mismatch on paper as the hosts have some gifted individuals whereas the Dutch have little to bank on. Kevin Pietersen, Ravi Bopara and Dimitri Mascarenhas are big Twenty20 names but this is 'Twenty20' and even an ordinary three hours can see a massive upset happen on a big, historic night.

That's the beauty of Twenty20 cricket. Anyone can win with the swish of a blade. You just never know, a good spell from IPL hero Dirk Nannes or some big hitting from Ryan ten Doeschate could see a few red faces amongst the England ranks.

The just-concluded Indian Premier League gave a good example of Twenty20's randomness. Teams which claimed the two bottom places in the first IPL end up as one and two this year. Deccan Chargers, the eventual champions, made only a few changes in their setup. Even Royal Challengers Bangalore did little to discard their 'Test team' label and went with Rahul Dravid, Jacques Kallis, Mark Boucher and Anil Kumble. All four would be indispensable next year, barring retirements.

In fact this year's IPL cast off several clichés related to this shortest version. Apart from form, Twenty20 doesn't care



LEAP OF GLORY? Mashrafe Bin Mortaza and Bangladesh will look to leave their mark in a tournament where surprises could be commonplace.

who plays it. It could be Kumble or it could be a Kamran Khan out of nowhere.

But it is still a batsman's game, young or old. Runs flow from all directions and on smaller grounds in England, the batsman are eyeing the sixes and fours.

So what does a bowler do? He takes pace off the ball, bowls a bouncer and again, the IPL has shown that spin has a huge role to play. The spinners have in fact played a big part in this year's IPL and the side with left-arm spinners have held an edge.

As a cricketer's spectacle, Twenty20 is definitely the in-thing. Everyone watches it with varying degrees of fondness towards it. Some like it because it's fast, while others just love watching batsmen swing hard, hit or miss. And then there are those who think it's a mockery of this glorious game after the gimmicks played out in the IPL recently.

The Twenty20 World Championships could go a long way to bring back some respect to the format as it is presumably less colourful, less Bollywood and won't have commentators screaming out 'DLF Maximum'. It will be played in England, the home of cricket (and even Twenty20s), and it will be played by nations and not franchises. Cricket fans easily relate to India and Pakistan than the Daredevils or the Knight Riders.

England would probably win tonight's opener but Twenty20 has a bad reputation of taking cricket's age-old adage 'a game of glorious uncertainties' a bit too seriously.

2007 WC flashback

If the drama of the first ICC Twenty20 World Championship is anything to go by, this year's tournament has a lot to live up to.

Mohammad Isam takes a look back at some of the best moments that defined the first World Cup held in South Africa in 2007.

GAYLE FORCE

It took Chris Gayle only 51 deliveries of audacious strokeplay to make history as the first International Twenty20 centurion. It was a freakish mix of power and sweet timing, garnished by that flicked six of Makhaya Ntini. Alas, Gayle only played one more game, as the West Indies made no further than the first round.

COURTESY TAYLOR

When Brendan Taylor decided it was time to fulfil all his potential, and that left the Australians shell-shocked. Zimbabwe did the unthinkable, not that the Aussies never suffered at the hands of minnows but because of their own problems. But Taylor, coolly, struck 60 off 45 balls and with his flicked boundary, gave the Africans a victory over tournament favourites Australia, no less.

TIGERS ROAR

Twenty-four hours hadn't passed and it was time for another big gun to fall. Mohammad Ashraful and co dispatched West Indies from the tournament with brute force. Ashraful found Aftab Ahmed as an able ally then, both smashing half-centuries after Shakib Al Hasan wiped off the Windies' tail in no time. It was time for the Tigers to roar twice in one year after their success in the 50-over World Cup.

THE BOWL-OUT

Twenty20 is designed to amplify the drama and so when the high-profile India-Pakistan group game was tied, a bowl-out ensued. Virender Sehwag, Harbhajan Singh and Robin Uthappa struck where all Pakistan bowlers failed and India won 3-0. It wasn't the best of sights for cricket enthusiasts but at least it yielded a result.

BEST POWERPLAY

The first 38 runs in Bangladesh's innings against South Africa were all boundaries. Aftab Ahmed led the mayhem, clouting 32 from the first 12 balls he faced. Morne Morkel came in to bowl, and Aftab dismisses him with a crashing cover-drive that burned grass. Morkel's response was chilling, a fairly full delivery timed at 146.9 kmph: Aftab swung and missed, and the off-stump suffered.

THE HATTRICK

Bangladesh were in the thick of things, but this time they were in the receiving end of a Brett Lee hat-trick early in the Super Eights. Shakib was first to go, caught behind before Lee bowled Mashrafe Bin Mortaza with a lethal off-stump yorker.

Amidst a crescendo of noise, Lee bolted in

thudded into the pad and Lee went up in appeal, there was only one outcome.

MISBAH'S CUP

A late bloomer by Pakistani standards, the genial Misbahul Haq always remained in the shadows of greats Mohammad Yousuf and Inzamamul Haq until empty spots in the middle-order showed up. Employing all the shots in the book, this university graduate almost won the first round India game, smashed a match-winning 66 against Australia and played that, now infamous, scoop against India in the final. In between, his delectable wristwork and straight drives won many admirers.

THE SHUTOUT

India really needed to win this Super Eights game against comfortably placed South Africa. But at the end of the night, India made it into the semifinals while the hosts bowed out yet another display of 'choking'. In one of the best games of the tournament, Rohit Sharma held the Indian innings together before the bowlers and fielders strangled (read choked) the Proteas to a standstill.

SIXES KING

By the time the fifth six of the over landed in the crowd at midwicket, Stuart Broad had a glazed look in his eyes. Yuvraj Singh administered the knockout punch, leaning back and hitting the final delivery with pristine power over wide mid-on for another mammoth six. With that, Yuvraj became the face of Twenty20 cricket.

INDIA WINS

Having won a bowl-out and six sixes in one over, India just had to win the darn tournament. They did it in style, first crushing Australia with spin and gusto and then knocking over Pakistan in the final.

Two moments define these two epic encounters: First the eccentric Sreesanth hustling the life out of Matthew Hayden and eventually smashing the big man's stumps and finally, the scoop that never was. Misbah almost won it for Pakistan but it only found Sreesanth at short fine-leg, waiting, catching and eventually, hanging on. India became the first Twenty20 world champions.



As Pakistan's Misbahul Haq sinks to his knees in disbelief, the Indian team rush to congratulate each other on winning the World T20 Cup at the Wanderers in South Africa in 2007. An electric see-saw final between the sworn enemies ended with the Indians capping a dramatic last over victory courtesy Misbah's scoop that never was.

a full delivery and Alok Kapali had shuffled across the crease. The pace of the ball beat his attempted flick and the moment the ball

Team profiles

PAKISTAN

If Pakistan are to better last edition's performance, they would build on the experience and versatility of their senior players. The likes of Shahid Afridi, Misbahul Haq and Shoaib Malik would be influential under captain Younus Khan, who would lead a predominantly young side. Their only weakness would be the lack of Twenty20 matches under their belt.

The skipper would have pacemen Umar Gul and Sohail Tanvir, the duo becoming more important after Shoaib Akhtar's absence.

If the seniors click, Pakistan would be a title contender.

Look out for: Misbahul Haq

SRILANKA

Kumar Sangakkara would want first assignment as full-time captain to be a success and he would have no short of potential in his 15-man squad.

Slinger Lasith Malinga is back from a knee injury but his IPL form suggests he's back to full fitness and firing in those fast yorkers. His Mumbai teammate Sanath Jayasuriya and the likes of Tillekaratne Dilshan and the returning Chamara Silva will be key to Lanka's batting success.

Concern would be on the recent

form of Mahela Jayawardene and Ajantha Mendis as the islanders would look to break their big tournament voodoo.

Look out for: Lasith Malinga

BANGLADESH

Much would be expected from an improving Tigers side who made it to the second round last time around. But like the 2007 edition, the Bangladesh team would not just look to Mohammad Ashraful.

The likes of Shakib Al Hasan and Mashrafe Bin Mortaza are expected to stand up, especially in a Twenty20 tournament with help from Tamim Iqbal, Rokibul Hasan and Abdur Razzak, who returns from a long ICC suspension.

Apart from Mashrafe and Syed Rasel, the pace attack looks thin. But the Tigers would again look to be the surprise team in the competition and ruffle a few feathers in the second round.

Look out for: Shakib Al Hasan

SOUTH AFRICA

Last edition's hosts are one of the tournament favourites without doubt and that could also come back to bite them. The perennial 'chokers' tag could be dispensed if Graeme Smith can inspire his men to their first World Twenty20 glory.

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Bangladesh and ODI's top all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan has been the most impressive Tigers' player in the warm-ups. He may well prove to be the straw that stirs the drink.