

Kohli weighs no less

AFP, New Delhi

Indian superstars Sachin Tendulkar, Virender Sehwag and Mahendra Singh Dhoni may hog the headlines, but youngster Virat Kohli is grabbing the attention.

At just 22 years old, middle-order batsman Kohli has become India's Mr. Consistency ever since making his one-day debut in Sri Lanka in 2008 as a replacement for the injured Sehwag.

He acquitted himself well in his debut series, scoring 159 runs in five matches with one half-century, but had to wait before cementing his place in the team.

There was no stage fright for the youngster when he made his World Cup debut against Bangladesh in Dhaka, hammering an unbeaten century off just 83 balls to set up his team's victory.

The day-night match will be remembered for Sehwag's blazing 175 off just 140 balls but Kohli matched his senior partner shot for shot.

"He [Kohli] is maturing every day. Once he threw his wicket away after getting a 30 or 40 and I advised him never to do that again. Since then, he has scored five one-day hundreds. He is a quick learner," said Sehwag.

Kohli's big moment came when he hammered a maiden one-day century, against Sri Lanka in 2009.

Fierce competition for batting places in the team has only brought the best out of Kohli in recent years as he realised he needed to be consistent to catch the eye in a side having plenty of superstars.

Consistency has now become the hallmark of Kohli's batting as he has scored three hundreds and four half-centuries in his last 12 one-dayers, including 54 and an unbeaten 87 in a recent tough away series in South Africa.

Kohli has already done well against good attacks, cracking a career-best 118 against Australia in Vishakhapatnam last year. In his very next match, against New Zealand in Guwahati, he made another hundred.

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(Top) England batsman Kevin Pietersen enjoys a light moment with former India spinner Anil Kumble during England's practice session while (down) India's master batsman Sachin Tendulkar arrives for their training session at The M Chinnaswamy Stadium in Bangalore yesterday. The two sides meet in a crucial Group B encounter of the World Cup in this stadium today.

PHOTO:
AFP

INDIA V ENGLAND: BANGALORE

Hosts plan spin-wise

AFP, Bangalore



India look set to beef up their spin options for their blockbuster clash against England on Sunday as both sides face the first major Test of their World Cup credentials.

India, strongly fancied to add a second World Cup trophy to their 1983 success, are expected to go into the day-night match with a second specialist spinner in addition to their clutch of part-timers.

Leg-spinner Piyush Chawla looks likely to join off-spinner Harbhajan Singh at the expense of paceman Shanthakumaran Sreesanth, who proved expensive in the win against co-hosts Bangladesh.

Chawla, on the same track that will be used for the England match, put in a strong showing against defending champions Australia in

a warm-up game, bagging four wickets in his team's victory.

But curator Narayan Raju said the pitch would not be as spin-friendly as it was for that game, adding: "We have been working on the wicket and it will not spin as much as it [did] during the warm-up game."

England go into the match concerned more about their bowling than batting form after successfully overhauling the Netherlands' big total of 292-6 in their opening match in Nagpur.

Captain Andrew Strauss and Jonathan Trott cracked impressive half-centuries, while Kevin Pietersen, Ian Bell, Paul Collingwood and Ravi Bopara also looked in good touch.

But it needed a rescue act from the batsmen after England proved shoddy in the field, with wayward fast bowling and dropped catches.

"Hopefully India will take us lightly after this performance. We generally raise our games against better sides," Strauss said.

INDIA v ENGLAND

Matches: 71

India win: 38

England win: 30

No result/Abandoned: 3

First meeting: July 13, 1974, Leeds --

England won by four wickets

Last meeting: Nov 26, 2008, Cuttack --

India won by six wickets

Bopara, unfazed by the nature of the wicket in Bangalore, said his team also had the spinners to trouble India on a slow turning track.

"If it is a spinning deck we have got our own spinners who can cause problems. A pitch that spins is going to cause trouble for any team. It is going to cause problems for India as well," said Bopara.

England must decide whether to recall left-arm slow bowler Michael Yardy in support of off-spinner Graeme Swann, whose return of 2-35 was a rare highlight during a forgettable bowling display against the Dutch.

India boast a huge array of batting firepower with Virender Sehwag and Virat Kohli hammering centuries to help their side post a mammoth 370-4 in their opening fixture against Bangladesh, enough for a convincing 87-run win.

Munaf Patel gave a textbook example of seam bowling on subcontinental pitches, maintaining a full length and good line on his way to 4-48 against Bangladesh.

England are not renowned for the way they play spin and former India all-rounder Ravi Shastri believes the significance of the match will extend beyond the result for co-hosts India.

"Victory against England will make it two-out-of-two and we would be almost certain to make it to the quarterfinals," Shastri said.

The match has endured a troubled build-up after it was switched from Kolkata's Eden Gardens because of unfinished renovation work.

About 3,000 police are set to be deployed following midweek violence when fans desperately scrambled for tickets.

Police baton-charged fans after thousands had queued overnight Wednesday outside the M. Chinnaswamy stadium in the vain hope of getting their hands on the ticket allocation of 7,000.

ICC slates ticket chaos

AFP, Bangalore

International Cricket Council (ICC) chief executive Haroon Lorgat on Saturday condemned the violent scenes amid the World Cup ticket fiasco which saw desperate fans baton-charged by police.

Lorgat, keen to rescue what has quickly become a public relations disaster, also apologised for a system that has left thousands of fans with no hope of seeing marquee matches.

The controversy over ticket distribution and availability, especially at Bangalore, where India play England on Sunday, as well as the April 2 final in Mumbai, has caused a rift between the world body and local organisers.

"What is unfortunate is that too few tickets go to the public as a general sale," admitted Lorgat.

"No matter what sort of capacity we provide, the truth is that we won't have enough seats for the demand that we have on our hands."

"The rush for the tickets is an indication of the popularity of the 50-over format and the passion fans, especially in India, have for the game of cricket," he added.

Fans in Bangalore, many of whom had queued overnight in the hope of securing one of 7,000 tickets for the India-England game, were baton-charged by police at Bangalore's M Chinnaswamy Stadium on Thursday.

"Those are scenes that we would not like to see. None of us would like to see that," Lorgat said.

The choice of Mumbai for the final has been controversial as the Wankhede Stadium only has a 33,000 capacity with 20,000 tickets going to clubs linked to the Mumbai Cricket Association and 8,500 to the ICC.

The remaining tickets, around 4,000, will be sold to the general public.

But Lorgat tried to reassure fans that reserved tickets not taken up by sponsors or guests for the semifinals and the final would be offered to the public.

TENDULKAR V PIETERSEN

A mouth-watering prospect

AFP, Bangalore



Sachin Tendulkar and Kevin Pietersen are poised for a heavyweight World Cup clash of superstars on Sunday when India and England go head-to-head.

Tendulkar is the world's leading scorer in both Test (14,692 runs) and one-day (17,657) cricket, while Pietersen is relishing his new role at the top of the order.

"He [Tendulkar] has been one of the mammoths of world cricket over the last two decades," said England captain Andrew Strauss.

"The fact he's been able to do it for so long and so consistently is a great testament to him and his preparation.

"There aren't many nega-

tive words you can say about the guy. He's an absolute legend. But at the moment our job is not to build up the Indian players, our job is to beat them."

Pietersen opened against the Netherlands and scored 39 as his team successfully chased a 293-run target.

"I think this is the sort of match that brings out the best in him [Pietersen]. Opening the batting is giving him a fresh outlook on his one-day cricket and we hope he'll transfer all that into big runs," said Strauss.

"He's performed well in the sub-continent before and he obviously knows this

wicket well, because he's played IPL [Indian Premier League] here. In the big matches and big tournaments, generally we see the best of Pietersen."

Pietersen has scored 3,556 runs in 111 one-day internationals with seven hundreds and 21 half-centuries.

"I don't think it's time to take the pressure off him. It's a World Cup and we all need to stand up and perform. He knows that as well as anyone else," added the England captain.

"We know what he can bring to our side when he does perform because he's a match-winning player and

one that other sides fear. I'm very confident he's going to put in some telling performances over the course of this World Cup."

Strauss said his team planned to gatecrash crowd favourites India's party by playing "smart" cricket in the Group B day-night clash.

"We'd love to spoil an India party here in Bangalore," said Strauss.

"It would be potentially a huge lift for us and would send out a pretty strong marker to other sides, but we've got to do it first, concentrate on the process of doing it."

England's last tour of India in 2008 ended in fail-

ure as they lost five successive one-dayers under Pietersen, but Strauss said his side had been playing good cricket of late.

"We've played well against them in England, but not in India. But we've evolved quite a lot as a side over the last 12 to 24 months and we just need to play good, smart cricket," said Strauss.

"Perhaps there's more pressure on India than us in this game. If we can play good, smart cricket and put them under pressure, we hope that pressure will come to the fore at some stage and allow us to get over the line."

Ravi stands by Ricky

PTI, Melbourne

Reprimanded and criticised for damaging a TV set inside the dressing room during a World Cup match at Ahmedabad, Australian skipper Ricky Ponting found a sympathiser in player-turned-commentator Ravi Shastri, who said such incidents are not new in international cricket.

"Everyone's human and the dressing-room has been the only place you can vent your feelings. You take out your frustrations and then it's over," he said.

Shastri defended Ponting over the incident, saying public disclosure of the matter represented a gross invasion of a player's right to privacy.



A fanatic India supporter paints his hair in Indian colours as he wears a miniature World Cup for a cap.

PHOTO: AFP

Public ballots for tickets

CRICINFO, Bangalore

The International Cricket Council (ICC) has decided to set up a public ballot system for ticket sales for the semifinals and final of the World Cup. The ballot opens on February 28 and closes on March 6, and the application form can be downloaded from cwc2011ballot.kyzoonga.com.

The tickets were initially meant to go on sale on February 21 but the website selling them, Kyzoonga.com, crashed due to heavy traffic, forcing the ICC to take up an alternative measure.

"It was most unfortunate and no blame should be directed at Kyzoonga, the ICC's official ticketing partner,"

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SPORTS POLL

WEEKLY QUESTION

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Dhoni warns England

If Veeru hits, you're in trouble

AFP, Bangalore



England will have problems if hard-hitting Indian opener Virender Sehwag bats through the innings in Sunday's World Cup clash, skipper Mahendra Singh Dhoni said.

Sehwag, fit to play the day-night game after suffering a rib injury on Friday during a practice session, said ahead of the tournament he would like to bat the entire 50 overs.

The opener narrowly missed his pre-tournament aim in the opening match against Bangladesh in Dhaka when he got out in the 48th over, but not before giving his team a blazing start.

Sehwag hammered an explosive 175 off just 140 balls to set up his team's 87-run victory.

"If he [Sehwag] bats 50 overs I don't have

problem with that, but definitely the opposition will have problems," said Dhoni.

"But his most important role is to bat aggressively and give us a good start and momentum from which the middle order can capitalise."

The Indian captain said his side were well-equipped to cope with the pressure in the high-profile match.

"It was in 2004 when I made my debut and I have never played a series when we're not under pressure, whether it's the pressure of winning the game or playing against a strong opponent," said Dhoni.

"Most of the guys are used to it."

Dhoni said his team had prepared well for Sunday's clash as every game was important in the tournament.

"For us, each game is important. We prepare likewise for every game, Bangladesh, England, Australia or Ireland."

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