

Powerplay: When is the right time?

AFP, New Delhi

The batting Powerplay code is yet to be cracked by World Cup captains, most of whom have burned their fingers already by making the wrong calls.

The batting Powerplay allows just three fielders outside the 30-yard circle for a chunk of five overs and offers players an opportunity to go for big hits.

But the point of contention is what time is best to take it as the wrong call at the wrong time can play into the hands of the fielding side.

As England showed against India in the tied match at Bangalore, it can upset a team's rhythm by tempting batsmen to take one risk too many.

England were cruising at 280-2 when they opted for the batting Powerplay in the 43rd over and ended up losing four wickets for 25 runs in the following five overs to throw the game wide open.

"We got ourselves in a position at 41 or 42 overs where we just needed to have a good Powerplay and we were there," England captain Andrew Strauss said. "But these Powerplays can affect you both ways and unfortunately it affected us in the negative way. In the end, we did pretty well to scramble a tie out of it."

The batting Powerplay was introduced to jazz up the 50-over game after critics said it had become too predictable, especially in the middle overs.

The scope to use it ranges from the 11th to the 46 over which leaves the batting captain with a lot to ponder.

Should it be kept aside till the end of the innings? Should it be unleashed when two well-set batsmen are going strong?

India's former captain Sunil Gavaskar says it should be taken when a batting pair is going strong.

"While there is a school of thought that the batting Powerplay can bring the bowling side back in the frame, the fact remains that it is best utilised when two well set batsmen are at the crease," he wrote in a column.

"The crucial aspect is not to try and hit every ball into the crowd and give them some catching experience but to take advantage of the field restrictions and double or treble the rate of scoring from the present in those overs."

Australian captain Ricky Ponting talked of the predicament skippers face over the timing of the Powerplays.

"It's a tough question when you're chasing runs. It all depends on how your top order starts," he said.

"If you lose early wickets, it's always tough to take the Powerplay early because what the Powerplay generally brings is a couple of wickets."

New Zealand captain Daniel Vettori said it will be some time before the concept is mastered.

"Some days you will do well in power plays, some days poorly. It's really hard to get a consistent feel on it. Three of the last four games we have been great with the ball and in one of them we were really poor."



AN INNINGS TO BEHOLD: Ireland batsman Kevin O'Brien hits one of his six sixes on way to scoring a 50-ball 100 during their World Cup Group B match against England in Bangalore yesterday. It was the quickest century in World Cup history surpassing Australia's Matthew Hayden's 66-ball ton against South Africa at St Kitts in 2007.

MU bleed at Bridge

AFP, London



Frank Lampard breathed fresh life into the Premier League title race as the Chelsea midfielder's controversial late penalty clinched a 2-1 victory over leaders Manchester United on Tuesday.

Lampard's dramatic winner came after referee Martin Atkinson ruled that United defender Chris Smalling had brought down Chelsea substitute Yuri Zhirkov with 10 minutes to go at Stamford Bridge.

It was a hammer blow for United, who suffered just their second league defeat this season despite taking the lead through Wayne Rooney's first-half strike.

Brazilian defender David Luiz equalised with his first goal for Chelsea soon after half-time and Lampard sealed the points before captain Nemanja Vidic was sent off for a second booking in stoppage time.

While fourth-place Chelsea's hopes of retaining the title are still slender as they trail United by 12 points, their win has done a massive favour to second-place Arsenal.

The Gunners can close to within one point of Sir Alex Ferguson's team if they win their game in hand.

Ferguson had kept faith with the players that won emphatically at Wigan on Saturday, which meant he sent out an unchanged United team for the first time in 165 games, and they dominated in the first half.

Ashley Cole, hit by revelations that he accidentally shot a student with an air-rifle at Chelsea's training ground, was greeted with shouts of "shoot" from both sets of fans whenever he got anywhere near United's penalty area.

Nicolas Anelka took that advice as he flashed wide from long range.

Chelsea midfielder Ramires was lucky to escape with just a booking for an ugly two-footed lunge on Michael Carrick and that brutal assault sparked United into life.

Ferguson's side, who last won at Chelsea back in 2002, threatened for the first time when Patrice Evra's low cross narrowly eluded Rooney and should have taken the

lead moments later.

Nani's cross gave Rooney a clear sight of goal, but his woefully mistimed header sailed wide of the target.

However, Rooney, cleared to play after dodging an FA ban for his elbow on Wigan's James McCarthy, showed why he remains United's most dangerous force as he opened the scoring in the 30th minute.

Taking Nani's short pass in his stride, Rooney turned towards the penalty area and, with Branislav Ivanovic backing off, he had time and space to unleash a powerful low strike that arched into the bottom corner of Petr Cech's net.

Van der Sar almost gifted Chelsea an immediate equaliser when he fumbled Lampard's venomous free-kick, but he recovered to block Ivanovic's attempt from the rebound and Vidic alertly cleared off the line.

The Blues drew level from virtually their first decent delivery of the match in the 54th minute.

Michael Essien floated over a teasing cross that Ivanovic flicked onto Luiz and he blasted a half-volley past van der Sar.

The goal seemed to bring out the street fighter in Luiz and he was booked for a bone-crunching tackle on Rooney before enraging Ferguson with a cynical body-check on the same player.

Rooney should have restored United's lead in the 64th minute when Nani's pass sent him sprinting clear of the Chelsea defence but he curled wide.

Ryan Giggs came on to make his 606th league appearance for United -- equalling Sir Bobby Charlton's record -- and he made an instant impression as his chipped pass put Rooney through to fire straight at Cech. Another substitute, Chelsea's Zhirkov, had the decisive impact, however.

Drogba and Lampard worked the ball towards Zhirkov and he stumbled under the slightest of touches from Smalling, prompting Atkinson to award a penalty.

Lampard slammed the 80th minute spot-kick past Van der Sar and then Vidic deflected Zhirkov's shot onto a post before the Serbian defender saw red for tugging back Ramires.

The slinger being modest

AFP, Colombo



History-making Lasith Malinga played down his landmark second World Cup hattrick, insisting that his famous four wickets in four balls against South Africa in 2007 was a greater achievement.

The 27-year-old seamer's trademark collection of yorkers and toe-crushers helped him to a career-best 6-38 as Sri Lanka beat Kenya by nine wickets on Tuesday to put his team back on top of World Cup Group A.

His next target will be to repeat the feat against defending champions Australia on Saturday.

"I rate my performance in 2007 better than this because at that stage South Africa were virtually winning the game and I was able to get the hattrick and brought Sri Lanka back into the game," said Malinga of the match which South Africa won by one wicket.

Four years ago, his hattrick victims were Shaun Pollock, Andrew Hall and Jacques Kallis with Makhaya Ntini the fourth to fall.

On Tuesday, he trapped Tanmay Mishra (0) lbw with the last ball of his seventh over.

At the start of his next, he bowled Peter Ongondo and Shem Ngoche in successive balls to complete his

hattrick, finishing the innings at 142, by bowling Elijah Otieno (0) to complete a four-wicket burst off six balls.

"But again achieving a hattrick is big and also the fact that I ended up with six wickets in a World Cup game, that gives lot of satisfaction," said Malinga, whose previous best of 5-34 came against Pakistan last year.

"Whenever the captain hands me the ball I am prepared to be at the service of my team and I do my utmost to contribute to the team's effort and I am happy that I was able to do this well," said Malinga.

"Australia is another game. Their tactics, their players are not new to me. I'll bowl what I think I should bowl at that time."

The Sri Lankan seamer, with the distinct slinky action, admitted that sitting out of the first two matches of the World Cup with a back strain had been disappointing.

"I was rather upset that I was not able to play, but I was quite happy when the team was performing well, winning the first match and coming quite close to beating Pakistan," he said.

"It gave me a lot of heart to overcome my injury and get back. Hopefully I will be able to overcome the Australian challenge as well," said Malinga, who added he learnt to bowl yorkers by watching Pakistan greats Waqar Younis and Wasim Akram.

"I have learnt a lot from my coaches, mainly from Champaka Ramanayke and by watching people like Waqar and Wasim but I have three deliveries other than my yorkers, so I want to use them more in future games."

Malinga, who now has 120 wickets in 78 matches, told the Sinhalese-language Divaina newspaper that the R Premadasa Stadium pitch required a bowler to think about his approach and variation.

"The pitch we played was not a fast one. So I decided that I should bowl yorkers. My prediction proved right," he said.

He added: "I was fit to play against Pakistan. But considering the future matches it was a team decision that I sit it out."

Sri Lanka skipper Kumar Sangakkara commended his front line bowler saying he did a great demolition job.

"Lasith as usual, the champion that he is, the ball reversing, he did a great job for us."

Wasim Akram, meanwhile, was delighted that he had been a role model for Malinga.

"I take this as a compliment from the most destructive bowler in the world today," Wasim told AFP.

"Malinga is intelligent, awkward and that's what makes him one of the most difficult bowlers to face."

Aussies readying for Lasith

AFP, Colombo



Australia all-rounder Steve Smith on Wednesday hailed history-maker Lasith Malinga as "brilliant" as the defending champions drew up plans to counter the Sri Lankan slinger at the World Cup.

Malinga's trademark collection of yorkers and toe-crushers helped him to a career-best 6-38, including a second World Cup hattrick, as the home side routed Kenya by nine wickets on Tuesday.

On Saturday, it'll be Australia's turn to face Malinga, who is now fully recovered from the back strain which kept him out of the first two matches at the tournament.

"Malinga was brilliant," said Smith. "The pitch [at R Premadasa Stadium] varied a bit and helped swing the ball. Sri Lanka are going to be a good challenge for us."

Australia, who defeated Sri Lanka in the 2007 final, and are bidding for a fourth

successful World Cup, have looked impressive so far, seeing off Zimbabwe by 91 runs and enjoying a seven-wicket win over New Zealand.

"For us, the big challenge is to play against Sri Lanka here. They play really well in these conditions."

Sri Lanka defeated Australia away from home in November and 21-year-old leg-break bowler Smith is hoping to slam the brakes on Kumar Sangakkara's free-scoring batsmen.

"When I come in, I expect Sri Lanka to come hard at me. I just have to make sure I take wickets, keep the runs down and break partnerships," said Smith.

One of the most promising Australian spinners since the Shane Warne era, Smith said playing in the World Cup on sub-continent pitches was a good learning experience.

"After Warnie [Shane Warne], there haven't been any leggies [leg-spinners]. It's a big challenge for me

and a big learning curve. Everyday I'm learning something at the nets.

"I like to be a genuine all-rounder, not just a spinner. These playing conditions have been good for me," he said, when asked how he plans to improve his one-day batting average of 25 and bowling average of 28.

"Batting at seven is tough. When you come in at the end you have to hit boundaries and push the scores up. It doesn't do too much to change the average. But I'm trying to be good at bat and ball."

The Sydney-born Smith has played 17 ODIs and has taken 18 wickets.



SLC angry at allegation

AFP, Colombo



Sri Lanka's cricket authorities on Tuesday angrily denied allegations of match-fixing made against two of their players in their World Cup defeat to Pakistan.

State television channel ITN speculated over whether Mahela Jayawardene and Thilan Samaraweera may have "changed the game" by getting out cheaply.

The station added a local businessman had placed an 18,000-dollar bet on Sri Lanka losing the game.

Sri Lanka, who are one of the favourites to win the tournament, fell short of Pakistan's total of 277-7 by 11 runs on Saturday, leaving thousands at a packed R Premadasa stadium in Colombo devastated.

"It is with deep regret that we note that a leading television channel in a special programme, namely 'Wimasuma', has stated that Sri Lanka has lost against Pakistan due to two of our leading players not

getting runs in that game," Sri Lanka Cricket (SLC) said in a statement.

"Further, they added that the two players had failed intentionally, thereby implying that our players might have been involved in match-fixing," said SLC.

"SLC strongly condemns the bona fides [sic] of this anchor who hosted the programme carrying a story that is baseless and thereby demoralising our players during the ongoing World Cup."

"SLC will take up the matter with the relevant authorities of this channel, based on the fact that this channel has brought great distress to two of our cricketers who have served the country with honour and dignity," it added.

Jayawardene contributed two runs and Samaraweera one to Sri Lanka's total of 266-9.

Jayawardene was considering legal action against the station for implying he was guilty of corruption, the BBC said.

The player's manager told AFP on Tuesday that they were not commenting because "a formal process has been initiated".



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