

BEYOND THE BOUNDARY

Romancing
the Game

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So far unfortunately no one seems to have emerged as anywhere near firm favourites for the title. In spite of the fact that the WC is past the halfway mark. The thin dividing line between pretenders and contenders is blurred and hazy to say the least. For the moment all and sundry seem more occupied with immediate matters at hand, namely reaching the quarters, rather than displaying any serious statement of intent for the big prize. Even discounting the ambitions, and very little else of the minnows who are in any case on Haroon Lorgat's hit list, the big guns have not really exposed their barrels as yet.

As of this moment, most of the teams are at the existential phase of the competition; the I-think-therefore-I-am kind of mentality. There are teams that have won three times, there are ones who have won it twice, and three from the subcontinent who lifted the trophy once. And there are others such as England who have been at since eternity and are yet to be in the winners circle. The honourable mentions like the South Africans and New Zealand have not really made the grade. Never too close and consequently a fair distance away from the business district, as it were.

The format this year has also been of some consequence, two groups one supposedly of death and the other lopsided to the core. Since the first port of call is the quarterfinals, a litany of games bordering on the mediocrity have only been interspersed by a nominal handful which had sent any of anybody's pulses racing. There was a tied match, sure, but the excitement born out of that had more to do with incompetence of both sides rather than any tangible statement of intent by either of them to pull the proverbial trigger when it mattered. Not to be considered as serious contenders, unlike in the days of yore, Australia happens to be the one to have dropped the least points, just one; and that too because the rain gods bowled one wrong un too many.

The most notable feature of this year's entertainment is not so much who are the players on view, but rather who are not. Players who on their day, and those days were aplenty, were able to turn mere cricket matches into an art form. Australia wins my vote of sympathy in this regard. Minus the Adam Gilchrist, the Shane Warnes, the Glenn McGraths, the Matthew Haydens, this team is but a poor shadow of the side that swept all before them in 2007. Should the present team get close to the final, or even in it, the general picture would be that of a requiem rather than of celebration.

Popular choices could be made of Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka primarily because of being the hosts, and more because there are just too many of their fans who can drown out any voice of reason to the contrary. In any event, history is not on their side, because no host nation has ever won the Cup. In one fell swoop three teams for no fault of their own find themselves in this peculiar predicament. History, it is said, repeats itself, first as tragedy then as farce. Ergo, the not too distant future may throw up an unlikely candidate for the Big Apple. South Africa perhaps? A team that had stepped on the accelerator so many times in the past only to find they had run out of gas. Never too close and always so far. To the extent that it could uncharitably be said, it has become a habit.

The impossible and the improbable never can be discounted in cricket, especially when the crunch boils down to one single day of reckoning. There is a hunger in this West Indian side, incredulously so, after the recent turmoil in their ranks. But pride had always been the main motivating force for this side for as far back as one can care to remember. History may well beckon them with a gentle tap on the shoulder. If that be the case, so

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CONTORTIONIST'S DELIGHT: Sri Lanka magic spinner Muttiah Muralidaran is in the act of delivering a ball during practice in Pallekele yesterday, ahead of today's World Cup match against Zimbabwe.

PHOTO:
AFP

SRI LANKA V ZIMBABWE: PALLEKELE

Ms cause Zim headache

AFP, Pallekele

Zimbabwe captain Elton Chigumbura has pinpointed Muttiah Muralidaran and Lasith Malinga as a double danger when they meet Sri Lanka in the World Cup on Wednesday.

The African nation, who have never beaten Sri Lanka in four previous World Cup matches, need a win to stay in hunt for a quarterfinal place from Group A which is topped by New Zealand ahead of Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Australia.

Zimbabwe have two points from their win over Canada while they lost to New Zealand and Australia.

"It's a very important game as we only have two points. We'll be looking to play our best cricket against Sri Lanka and to do that we need to make a competitive score against their quality bowlers," said Chigumbura.

Chigumbura said Zimbabwe have a plan to tackle off-spinner Muralidaran, who has taken the most one-day wickets, and slinger Malinga who took a career-best 6-38, including a hat-trick, against Kenya.

"Sri Lanka's whole attack has match-winners with Murali and Malinga obviously the big names, they

are experienced and they know their conditions well and will use them to the best of their abilities.

"We have just got to make sure we play them properly and stop them getting wickets, especially in their first spells," said Chigumbura.

Sri Lanka know any upset would leave them in danger of missing out on the knockout phase.

The 1996 winners and 2007 runners-up have five points from four games and need a win to ensure they reach the quarterfinals. They face extra pressure because their last match is away against New Zealand in Mumbai.

Sri Lanka captain Kumar Sangakkara realises the importance of victory over Zimbabwe.

"Our focus is on the immediate game so it doesn't really matter where you finish up. You need to beat every single team to get into the final, and to win the World Cup," said Sangakkara, whose team lost to Pakistan and saw their match against Australia abandoned due to rain.

Sangakkara defended his batsmen, especially opener Tillakaratne Dilshan who was involved in a verbal stand-off with Australian pace bowler Shaun Tait where he lost his composure and his

wicket.

"In cricket you have instances where not everyone shines every day. You always get matches where certain people shine and some don't," said Sangakkara, who was 73 not out when the rain washed out the Australia match.

"I think batsmen go through certain phases. The most important thing at all times in high-performance situations is to maintain equilibrium, make sure that your emotions remain the same at all times.

"Dilshan has been our best performer over the last few years. He has won us so many games so we just want him to go out and we want him to be focused and keep his aggression," he said.

Sri Lanka are likely to bring in pace-man Dilhara Fernando for his first match in the World Cup.

SRI LANKA v ZIMBABWE

Matches: 46
Sri Lanka win: 38
Zimbabwe win: 7
No result: 1
First meeting: Feb 23, 1992, New Plymouth -- Sri Lanka won by 3 wickets
Last meeting: June 9, 2010, Harare -- Sri Lanka won by 9 wickets

Taking Irish inspiration

AFP, Pallekele

Zimbabwe captain Elton Chigumbura said his team would take inspiration from giant-killers Ireland in their World Cup Group A match against much-fancied Sri Lanka on Thursday.

Ireland upset England by three wickets in a Group B match last week, riding on a superlative, record-breaking hundred from Kevin O'Brien to chase down a mammoth 328-run target, a lesson Chigumbura believes other teams must learn.

"They [Ireland] always believed in themselves. We obviously believe in ourselves but there might be room to improve," said Chigumbura on Wednesday.

Ireland's victory was their second big upset following their three-wicket win against Pakistan in the 2007 World Cup, which forced the 1992 champions out of the event in

the West Indies.

The 24-year-old Zimbabwe captain believes his team has the capacity to follow in Ireland's footsteps.

"My team has been on that path. If you believe you can beat a bigger team, you can do that. It's up to every individual to have that same belief and that gives me motivation.

"When you see other teams who don't give up and end up winning, like Ireland did against England, that teaches you it isn't over until it's over. You can't take anyone lightly."

Chigumbura, who took over from Prosper Uteya in 2009, said batting was the key area of concern in a Zimbabwe side who still have an outside chance of making the quarterfinals.

"Our main emphasis is on our batting, we have been working on keeping our wickets. Our first 15 overs have been the most disappointing in all our games," said Chigumbura, whose team were 46-5 after 15 overs against New Zealand.

SL not at best
yet: Mahela

AFP, Pallekele

Sri Lanka are still to peak at the World Cup, vice-captain Mahela Jayawardene said on Wednesday, as the 1996 champions prepare to tackle Zimbabwe and book a quarterfinal spot.

Sri Lanka go into Thursday's game with five points from four games after wins over Kenya and Canada, a share of the points in a washed-out match against Australia and a narrow defeat at the hands of Pakistan.

Jayawardene believes that Sri Lanka's campaign has been energised by Lasith Malinga's belated entry into the tournament after the slingshot seamer missed the matches against Canada and Pakistan with a back injury.

"Lasith coming back into the team has given us a few more options in our bowling attack which is great," said Jayawardene, of Malinga who took a career-best 6-38 against Kenya.

Malinga also took his second World Cup hat-trick during that match.

"I think we can still improve on our batting, try to bat for longer periods and make sure we build partnerships. Even on the field there is always room to improve.

"We are a very hard-side when it comes to fielding. We just have to keep and make the most of half-chances."

Jayawardene also warned his team not to underestimate Zimbabwe who still have an outside chance of making the last eight.

Sri Lanka face a potentially tough last match against New Zealand in Mumbai so they can ill afford any upsets against the African nation.

"We rank Zimbabwe with any other team. I think they are a very good all-round side and we know they can be a surprise package so we are not taking anything lightly," Jayawardene said on Wednesday.

Sri Lanka won their first match against Canada by 310 runs before going down to Pakistan by a narrow 11-run margin.

They also beat Kenya by nine wickets before their match against Australia was abandoned due to rain.

Jayawardene said Sri Lanka need to be on their toes to win their last two matches.

"We just want to concentrate on our performances. That's in our control and we will execute a game plan because we know every team is dangerous and have quality players," said Jayawardene, who hit a century against Canada.

Gloves off,
jokes on

AFP, Pallekele

There was no escape for Kamran Akmal on Wednesday as his calamitous performance in the World Cup defeat against New Zealand sparked a glut of jokes.

Here AFP Sport presents three of the best gloveman gags doing the rounds on the Internet:

- Behind every successful batsman there is Kamran Akmal.

- What do Kamran and Michael Jackson have in common? They both wear gloves for no reason.

- Kamran Akmal's favourite pickup line? "Can I drop you somewhere?"



WICKET-SPECTATOR: New Zealand batsman Jamie How (L) plays down the leg side during their win over Pakistan at Pallekele on Monday while Pakistan wicketkeeper Kamran Akmal is doing what he seemingly does best; watching the ball go by.

PHOTO:
AFP

Akmal in, Akmal out?

AFP, Pallekele

Pakistan captain Shahid Afridi admitted on Wednesday that calamity-hit wicketkeeper Kamran Akmal could be replaced behind the stumps by younger brother Umar at the World Cup.

Kamran has come under fire from fans, media and a host of former players for his sloppy glovework which allowed Ross Taylor to escape on nought and eight to smash a breath-taking 131 in New Zealand's 110-run win on Tuesday.

"Keeping with Umar is very much an option and we might try it in the next game [against Zimbabwe on Monday]," Afridi told GEO TV in Pakistan, of the same option which team used against South Africa in a one-dayer last year.

He also defended Kamran's hard work. "If you see Kamran train, he puts in a lot of hard work. I don't know why luck deserted him. He is also upset about his performance and he realizes it too."

Asked how "luck" seems to have deserted him so often in the last four years, Afridi smiled and said: "I can't give an exact answer to that. My job is to back him, to support him and hopefully he will do his best."

Coach Waqar Younis also hinted that Kamran is on borrowed time, but that a

decision on his future behind the stumps could be delayed until after the World Cup.

"I think maybe after the World Cup we can think about it but now we are in the middle of the tournament and I don't think we can make such a change and panic. We should not."

Kamran Akmal has endured a roller-coaster international career.

He was first dropped in 2008 for the Asian Cup and again in 2010 when he missed five chances against Australia in Sydney.

The 28-year-old also needed clearance from the Pakistan Cricket Board's integrity committee before being allowed to take part in the World Cup.

Afridi, meanwhile, urged his team to learn the lessons of the defeat against New Zealand which knocked his side off top spot in Group A having won their three previous matches.

"There were quite a few lessons to be learned from the defeat, especially those chances we gave to Taylor and when you give such chances to a player like him he makes you pay," said Afridi, whose team were bowled out for 192.

Afridi said his bowlers were poor in the death overs when New Zealand plundered 139 runs off the last 10 overs.

"I think the way we started with the ball was good, but then the missed chances maybe demoralised the bowlers and they were very poor in the end," said Afridi.