

Strauss not too fond of drama



EYES WIDE OPEN: Yes, England skipper Andrew Strauss needs to have his eyes wide open to marshal his side in their quarterfinal clash against Sri Lanka today.

PHOTO: AFP

SPORTS REPORTER from Colombo

Is there an end to this England drama? Struggle against one Associate nation, defeat to another, tied game with India, tight wins over South Africa and West Indies and of course, defeat at the hands of Bangladesh. Amidst all that, there have been injuries aplenty, a player with-

drawal and the team's best batsman coming in. This is England's 2011 World Cup campaign in a nutshell.

Curiously, England and Sri Lanka met in an anti-climatic quarterfinal in Faisalabad in 1996. But given the stakes, the possibility of this being Murali's last game and England's erratic tendencies, only broken dish antennas (Sanath Jayasuriya's massive six off Richard Illingworth landed on one) and rain (it was very cloudy last eve-

ning) can be expected to add more spice to this encounter.

Though Andrew Strauss is not a man for such histrionics, the England skipper will be taking the positive as the morsel from the last month.

"We weren't expecting to create high drama. We were expecting to play good cricket and qualify for the quarterfinals. I think it's been great that our games have been close, for the spectators. Not been too great for us," said Strauss yesterday at the R Premadasa Stadium.

"We would have wanted to win easier than we have done but we take a lot of confidence from beating the major sides. We tied with India and beat South Africa and West Indies. That holds us in good stead for this game," he said, adding that there is still more 'drama' left in his side's knockout game against Sri Lanka.

"We don't know what drama is about to unfold but the likelihood is, as we saw in the India-Australia game, it is going to be a tough game. It can fluctuate on a couple of key performances. So we have to make sure we're the guys that put up those performances," he explained.

He was also not too keen on calling themselves contenders for the trophy, England's roller-coaster ride certainly giving him enough reason to be cautious.

"Whenever we've looked too far in the future, we've come crashing down in a huge heap. All we can do is try our best to win the game.

I know the guys are immensely excited, we had a long time leading up to this time with little else to do other than imagining how we are going to win this one," he said.

"We've shown that we can stick together in great encounters, but you never know what this game is going to throw at you so you have to adapt to whatever comes your way," he added.

What these close matches have brought out for England have been new match-winners like Strauss himself, Jonathan Trott, Luke Wright and even James Tredwell. Strauss believed that the rise in the number of match-winners is a good sign.

"We haven't really been relying on Plan A. We have to chop and change, Ravi bowled quite a few overs in the last game when he hadn't really bowled much.

"It gives me a lot of belief that you don't have to look at the same 2-3 players to deliver for you. I think we all know that to win the World Cup, you need performances from all eleven over the course of the tournament.

"At this stage, there is nothing to lose. You've got to go out there and

win a game. That sort of mindset certainly helps. I'm very confident we'll be able to replicate that tomorrow," said Strauss.

The last time these two sides met in a World Cup game, it was another classic with the Lankans coming out on top by two runs. But overall, it has been England who have a 6-2 advantage over Sri Lanka.

It is silly to think that England would give a hoot to form or history in their bid to play in the semi-finals for the first time since 1992.



PHOTO: AFP

IN CASE IT GETS TOO CLOSE: Sri Lanka skipper and wicketkeeper Kumar Sangakkara tests his bowling skills during a practice session at the Premadasa Stadium in Colombo on Wednesday, ahead of the quarterfinal clash against England today.

Yuvi living the dream

AP, Ahmedabad



Every day for a year, Indian batsman Yuvraj Singh has dream about starting in a victory over three-time defending champion Australia at the World Cup.

Yuvraj, who anchored a five-wicket quarterfinal win Thursday with an unbeaten 57 and took two wickets, said he was desperate to be at the crease when India won.

He ended up hitting the winning runs. "I have been thinking about beating Australia in this World Cup for one year," Yuvraj said.

"Honestly, I thought about this 365 days of the year, probably because they are three-time champions." The left-handed batsman, who picked up his fourth man-of-the-match award for the tournament, figured in an unbroken sixth-wicket stand of 74 with Suresh Raina to ensure a semifinal clash with Pakistan.

"This is a moment we live for, this is what I have dreamed of as a cricketer since playing as a young kid," an emotional Yuvraj said after his century in the last group match against the West Indies. He said he needs some rest, so the dreams are likely to continue.

"This match has taken a lot out of our systems mentally and physically. There were some tough moments and it was a combined team effort that really saw us through," he said.

Yuvraj said he had decided to play shots along the ground to be cautious in his innings, but was worried when India slipped to 187-5 with captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni's dismissal. "When Dhoni fell, I had a bit of a shock to be honest, because him and me together get the team through at times like these," he said.

"But I knew Suresh and (Harbhajan Singh) were still there. I told Suresh that if we could get a 30-40 partnership, we could take the game to the end."

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'India's bowling still a concern'

PTI, New Delhi

Former skipper Sunil Gavaskar believes India's bowling is still a concern and captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni will have to add some sting to their attack ahead of World Cup semifinal clash against Pakistan.

"Bowling is still a concern. Zaheer Khan is bowling well but there is still some sting missing in the second new-ball bowler. Munaf Patel is trying but he has just not been able to get any success," Gavaskar told ESPN STAR Sports.

Ricky stands his ground

AFP, Ahmedabad



Australia captain Ricky Ponting said he would be continuing as an international cricketer despite the champions' exit from the World Cup at the hands of India on Thursday.

"Didn't I answer that question the other day? Nothing's changed," said Ponting after the five-wicket defeat by the co-hosts in the quarter-finals.

Ponting made 104 -- his first international hundred in 13 months -- in Australia's total of 260 for six.

But it wasn't enough, as India finished on 261 for five with an unbeaten 57 from Yuvraj Singh seeing his team to victory with 14 balls to spare.

However, despite having now presided over the end of Australia's 12-year run as World Cup champions and an Ashes defeat, Ponting still said talk of the end of an era was misplaced.

"It's a bit premature to say it was the end of an era for Australian cricket, it was a pretty good game tonight," he insisted.

"I didn't think we were far away from winning a game against a very good Indian team on their home soil. I think it's a bit too early to say it's the

end of an era."

The 36-year-old Ponting, who has also been under intense pressure for his controversial behaviour at the World Cup, on Wednesday denied reports he planned to retire from the international scene at the end of World Cup and finish his career at an English county.

"That's completely false," Ponting said Wednesday. "I've never even thought about or contemplated retiring at the end of this World Cup. I'm enjoying my cricket as much as ever.

"You'll hopefully see me playing a lot in the next few years."

Ponting, who has been captain for nine years, was under pressure even before the World Cup, having earned the dubious distinction of becoming the only Australian skipper of the modern era to fail to win the Ashes three times.

He did himself few favours in India, taking a reprimand from the International Cricket Council after smashing a dressing-room TV in a fit of fury after being run out during Australia's win over Zimbabwe.

He was also criticised for angrily throwing the ball to the ground after colliding with teammate Steven Smith during their victory against Canada, and for failing to walk in Saturday's

defeat by Pakistan.

There was a fresh flashpoint on Thursday when, with India's Gautam Gambhir -- who eventually made 50 -- on nought, Ponting said he was unsure about a catch which, when referred, was shown by replays to have bounced well in front of him.

The retirement rumour came a day after a report in the Sydney Morning Herald, in which an unnamed Cricket Australia official was quoted as saying that Ponting faced a challenge at board level to retain the captaincy.

Ponting said if he was asked to step aside as leader to make way for Michael Clarke, it would not be an issue.

Punter's money on India

AFP, Ahmedabad

Australia captain Ricky Ponting predicted India would beat Pakistan when the arch-rivals meet in the World Cup semifinals after seeing the co-hosts end his team's 12-year run as champions.

Ponting made his first international century in over a year when Australia batted but it wasn't enough as India, thanks to an unbeaten 57 from Yuvraj Singh, won by five wickets after finishing on 261 for five with 14 balls to spare.

"If you look at their attacks, they're quite similar," said Ponting, who in Australia's preceding final group match saw Pakistan end the titleholders' 34-match unbeaten streak at the World Cup.

"Pakistan played the quicks against us, (Abdul Razzaq and (Umar) Gul and (Wahab) Riaz played that game as well and he's done a pretty good job for them. They used a lot of their spin.

"How do I compare the bowling attacks? It's pretty hard to say, but I think India will beat Pakistan in the semifinal."

Ponting added of the March 30 clash in Mohali: "We all know how fierce a rivalry it is between Pakistan and India so I'm sure that's going to be a very entertaining semifinal."

"India have a got a great chance now. Their batting is very powerful and they bat quite deep."



PHOTO: AFP

Australian captain Ricky Ponting ponders what went wrong during the quarterfinal defeat against India in Ahmedabad on Thursday.

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