

Test cricket's merry-go-round



SHAHEEN MAJID

The recently concluded Test series between world number 1 England and world number 2 South Africa shows that the longer form of the game is alive and kicking more strongly than it has for many a year. In the 80s, 90s and most of the 2000s, Test match cricket was a one-horse race with first the West Indies and then Australia head and shoulders above the rest of the world. Now, the position of "world's best team" has become a game of musical chairs -- the participants agile ballerinas, rather than the fat lady who sits down and refuses to get up.

Last year India had clawed their way to the top of Test cricket with a series of home victories and adequate performances abroad. That all came crashing down in spectacular fashion in England, when the home side completed a 4-0 whitewash with the ease of a man brushing a gnat off his silk shirt.

The fall of India was not surprising. India had long been considered tigers at home and lambs abroad. When they visited South Africa, the delight with which a drawn series result was

received by the Indian media revealed the basic, low level of expectation that even ardent supporters of the Indian side have for their team abroad.

By defeating India, England moved to the top of the rankings. In recent years, England had been one of the top sides, with an impressive series of wins at home. Abroad, their 3-1 win (all 3 wins being innings victories) in Australia was one of the greatest achievements of any English side in history. England, though nowhere near the great West Indies or Australian sides, had more potential than India to establish a long reign at the top.

That impression took a blow when the newly crowned world number 1 went crashing to a 0-3 series whitewash in neutral Dubai to sixth-rated Pakistan. And with a convincing 0-2 defeat to South Africa at home, England too has relinquished the top spot to their recent conquerors.

The uncertainty has been put back into the "glorious uncertainty" of cricket. When the world number 1 team can put up a performance like England did at the Oval -- losing by an innings while taking all of 2 wickets in the match -- what is not possible? Bangladesh -- so often in the middle of debates regarding the



The South Africans are all smiles after beating England 2-0 in the Test series and climbing to the top of the Test ranking. But will the smile prove to be short-lived like their predecessors?

PHOTO: AFP FILE

supposed imbalance of strength across teams -- have never had a triple century taken off them as England did that day, or India did

in Australia last winter. Test cricket is more competitive now than it was under Australian and West Indian rule.

What has led to this change? In a fairy tale, the answer would be all the teams have risen to the level of the two great dynasty

teams. In fact, it is closer to the truth to say that there is no team in the same league as the old maestros. Australia's descent from undisputed top team to one of 6 teams capable of owning the top spot came about with the departure of such greats as Justin Langer, Matthew Hayden, Damien Martyn, Adam Gilchrist, Shane Warne and Glenn McGrath within a couple of years of one another -- and even now, they remain about as good as any other team. It follows logically that the pre-2005 Australian team was a cut above the teams of today.

For fans however, the excitement that this edge of competition, and the "you never know" feeling that it elicits trumps the admiration inspired by the juggernaut dominance of the 80s' West Indies or 90s/2000s' Australia.

What of South Africa's prospects of a steady reign at the top? Their spin attack is not strong, but Imran Tahir has shown a knack for removing the lower order efficiently. A bigger problem might be that of finding a long term replacement for Mark Boucher. AB de Villiers did the job for them well in England, but the extra work may have had something to do with his relatively ordinary form with the bat.

And as Matt Prior's drop of Hashim Amla in the 3rd Test showed, keeping errors can be the difference between winning and losing.

South Africa have long held the unwanted label of being "chokers", and it is not an unfair one. They made the deciding passage at Lords an unnecessarily dramatic affair with the dubious tactic of trying to "buy" the last few wickets. Were it not for a pair of suicidal run outs -- the second coming at a critical time -- they may even have lost the match. In recent times, they have lost Test matches at home to the likes of India, Sri Lanka and even the West Indies -- something one would not expect from either England or Australia.

South Africa however, are a better bet for a long reign than either of their immediate predecessors. They are a stronger outfit away from home than either England or India. The pace bowling line-up of Steyn, Philander and Morkel is their greatest strength and with a batting line-up featuring Graeme Smith, Jacques Kallis, Amla and de Villiers, as well as the best slip cordon in the game, South Africa is the fastest lady to take the chair since the mid-2000 Australian side.

'Don't feel like No 1'

ANI, London

England's ODI skipper Alastair Cook has said that it doesn't even feel like he has a title to defend, because they don't really think they should be on top.

England was routed 5-0 by India only nine months ago, since then they have gone on an unbeaten 10-match winning streak.

Cook, hoping to ease the pressure on his players, said: "I don't think we feel as if we're No.1 in the one-day game. It is part of the long journey we set ourselves -- up to 2015 -- and we're a quarter of the way through that."

"When we got there as a Test side, it was through a lot of hard work and we thoroughly deserved to be there. This is a different situation for me. We're still a young side, with a lot more potential to come out of us."

"I feel in this side there are certain elements we can improve and there are people still finding their feet in certain roles, such as Craig Kieswetter at six and Ravi Bopara at four. The more experience they get, the better they'll be."

An eighth home series win on the trot will keep England on top, The Daily Mirror reports.

Dismissed

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"He (Anamul) was simply outstanding. Anamul made it clear that he is of a different calibre and why he was called into the national side. Another opener Liton Das also played brilliantly but as I said our middle order failed to show their potential otherwise the story would be different," observed Bashar.

Without mentioning any names, the national selector said that there are some players who can make it to the national side but everything would depend on how they progress in the next two to three years.

"There are some talented cricketers like we always see in the U19 sides all over the world but the main thing is that the players work hard to make it," said the former Bangladesh captain.

Five GMs

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It was said at the press conference arranged at the National Sports Council Auditorium yesterday.

162 countries have registered for the open phase of the men's competition this time while the women's section features 131 nations. Each team will play 11 rounds in Swiss League system.

Isner vs Berdych in final



AFP, Winston-salem

John Isner ousted top-seeded Jo-Wilfried Tsonga of France 6-4, 3-6, 7-6 (7/3) Friday to stay on track to retain his Winston-Salem ATP title.

Isner, seeded third in the US Open tune-up event, will face second-seeded Czech Tomas Berdych in Saturday's final.

Berdych defeated seventh-seeded American Sam Querrey 6-4, 6-3 in the semi-finals on Friday.

"I'm very, very happy to be back in the final," said Isner, who prefers one more day of tournament action to an early arrival on the practice courts of Flushing Meadows, where the US Open begins on Monday.

"I don't like getting to Grand Slams early. If I'm playing the week before, I want to do as well as I can. I'm playing the final match, so I'm very satisfied with that. I'm looking to defend my title. I did it this year in Newport, so maybe I can pull it off again."

Isner broke Tsonga once to take the opening set and the Frenchman broke Isner once to win the second frame and level the match.

Serving at 5-6 in the deciding third set Tsonga saved two match points -- the first with an ace up the middle -- but finally couldn't withstand the towering American, who belted 24 aces and wrapped up the victory in two hours and 13 minutes.

Berdych, who accepted a late wild card entry into the tournament, broke Querrey five times en route to victory in one hour and 39 minutes.

Querrey delivered 18 aces but also had five double faults.

"I don't think I necessarily needed to break him five times, but on the other hand, I lost my serve a couple of times. I was trying to get my chances," said Berdych, who is seeking a second title of 2012 after a victory in Montpellier.

In all the match featured eight breaks of serve. Berdych, ranked seventh in the world, had 18 break point chances against the big-serving American.

"It is unusual," Berdych said. "I can play with someone that is not serving as well as Sam and some of the other guys, and I'm struggling to break them for two, three sets, maybe he has service with more slice, spin. But somehow you play with a player and you have a feeling and you know a little bit how to read his serve and it just makes it all of a sudden much more easier."

Rain relief for follow-on

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"Hopefully, we will rectify a few mistakes we made in the first innings and look to stay a lot longer at the crease. It's a pretty simple formula: just occupy the crease."

"They are obviously good spinners and done well in India. They have a lot of fielders around the bat. We can't let that worry us too much and we have to just concentrate on our own game."

India struck in the day's second over when Yadav trapped Kruger van Wyk leg-before for no score and then Ojha had Doug Bracewell (17) stumped to reduce the tourists to 141-7.

Ashwin got a wicket with his third delivery when he held a low return catch to his left to dismiss Jeetan Patel (10) before removing Trent Boult and Chris Martin off successive balls.

SCOREBOARD

INDIA: First innings 438 (Pujara 159, Dhoni 73, Kohli 58; Patel 4-100, Boult 3-93)

NEW ZEALAND: First innings (over-

night 106-5) McCullum c Kohli b Ojha 22
Guptill c Kohli b Ashwin 2
Williams c Sehwa b Ojha 32
Taylor c Kohli b Ashwin 2
Flynn lbw b Ashwin 16
Franklin not out 43
van Wyk lbw b Yadav 0
Bracewell st Dhoni b Ojha 17
Patel c and b Ashwin 10
Boult c Gambhir b Ashwin 4
Martin b Ashwin 0
Extras: (lb 4, lb 7) 11

Total: (for all out in 61.3 overs) 159

Fall of wickets: 1-25, 2-29, 3-35, 4-55, 5-99, 6-111, 7-141, 8-153, 9-159, 10-159.

Bowler	O	M	R	W
Zaheer	11	4	33	0
Yadav	8	0	24	1
Ojha	21	6	44	3
Ashwin	16.3	5	31	6
Sehwag	2	0	4	0
Raina	2	0	6	0
Tendulkar	1	0	6	0

NEW ZEALAND: 2nd innings

Guptill lbw b Ojha 16

McCullum not out 16

Williams not out 13

Extras: (lb 6) 6

Total: (for one wicket in 18 overs) 41

Fall of wicket: 1-26

Bowler	O	M	R	W
Ojha	9	4	13	1
Zaheer	5	2	4	0

PCB wants proof

ANI, Islamabad

The Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) has told wicketkeeper-batsman Zulqarnain Haider to provide proper evidence to back corruption allegations against Kamran Akmal and other unnamed players by August 31 or else be prepared to face disciplinary action.

A PCB spokesman said that the board had taken serious notice of the latest outburst by Haider on his Facebook page and in media interviews.

Haider, in his latest outburst, questioned the selection of Akmal in the national team for the coming series against Australia and the Twenty20 World Cup.

Haider had claimed that the International Cricket Council (ICC) had not cleared Akmal and the PCB had selected him despite doubts about his behaviour.

Haider threatened to make more startling revelations about other players in the team if Akmal did not produce the clearance certificate given to him by the ICC.

Booters start

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team will practice at the Military Museum at the same time while the White and the Yellow teams will have their practice sessions at the artificial turf at BFF premises at 7:30am and 4:00pm respectively. The Red and Green teams are lodged in the Abahani Club tent while the Yellow and White teams are lodged at the Mohammedan Club tent.

The teams will have seven days of practice before playing three matches each. The initial list of 81 players will be truncated to 30 to form the national side and the U-23 side.

Tigers back

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After the tournament in Trinidad & Tobago, the Bangladesh team is scheduled to reach Colombo on September 12.

Bangladesh will play two warm-up matches -- against Zimbabwe on September 15 at the Colts Cricket ground in Colombo and against Ireland on September 17 at the Moors Cricket ground in Colombo -- in Sri Lanka before the tournament proper.

The Tigers have been placed in Group D along with New Zealand and Pakistan. Bangladesh will take on New Zealand on September 21 before meeting Pakistan on September 25. Both matches will be played at the Pallekele International Cricket Stadium.

"I believe it's very much possible to reach the second round. We always play to win, so we will also try our best to beat New Zealand and Pakistan," hoped Razzak.

'Good time to be playing Aus'



REUTERS, Dubai

Pakistan coach Dav Whatmore believes his side will have the edge over Australia in the One-Day International and Twenty20 series in the United Arab Emirates as they are more familiar with conditions and the visitors are dealing with injuries and retirements.

The teams meet in three ODIs and three Twenty20s in Sharjah, Abu Dhabi and Dubai starting on Tuesday, with Australia recently losing their place at the top of the one-day rankings following a 4-0 series loss in England.

Pakistan are hosting Australia in the UAE due to ongoing concerns about security at home.

"They have had a retirement or two and an injury so I suppose the short answer would be yes," Whatmore told Reuters on Saturday when asked if it was a good time to be playing Australia.

"It could be they will try even harder after they lost pretty badly to England ... but conditions are more known to the Pakistan team so from that point of view we hold a bit of an edge."

Michael Clarke's side are fourth in the ODI rankings, with Pakistan two places behind them following a run of patchy form.

Pakistan tasted victory in the Asia Cup but that was followed by defeats in Test and ODI series in Sri Lanka and a shared

two-match Twenty20 series between the two sides.

Whatmore, a former Australia test batsman who has coached Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, said Pakistan's current crop of players had the potential for success.

"I honestly thought we were one ODI victory away from (it) being a very good tour in Sri Lanka," he said.

"From positions of strength we managed to snatch defeat and hand the game over. The Asia Cup was good so really it hasn't been as bad as some people may think."

"The talent is definitely there, we just need to be a little bit stronger and win the mental battle a bit more and the team will be very competitive and consistent. We're working on those sorts of things."

The series in the UAE is followed by the ICC World Twenty20 in Sri Lanka. Given Pakistan were runners-up in 2007, champions in 2009 and semi-finalists two years ago, Whatmore agreed there was an expectation they would once again be contenders.

"Those figures sound impressive so the pressure is on for us this time, particularly me," he said. "It's a challenge but I've always looked forward to these sorts of challenges."

"It is a volatile form of the game and all teams are paying due importance to the World Twenty20 so it will make for a good tournament but we would like to think we will be as good as we can be and if that is the case then I think we will be figuring somewhere."

Commentator KP irks ECB

ANI, London

Top officials of the England and Wales Cricket Board are angry over disgruntled batsman Kevin Pietersen's move to accept a commentary job during the Twenty20 World Cup, and will warn him before he leaves for Sri Lanka next month to choose his words carefully.

Pietersen, who accepted the role as a studio analyst for the host broadcaster ESPN Star Sports in June, could end up talking directly about former England teammates during the three-week tournament.

The ECB central contract never forbids media work, as Jimmy Anderson and Stuart Broad have both accepted roles in the past, the Daily Express reports.

Pietersen, who is set to meet Test skipper Andrew Strauss tomorrow for the first time since the text affair that led to him being axed from the Test side, is hoping an apology will smooth his way back into the England set-up.

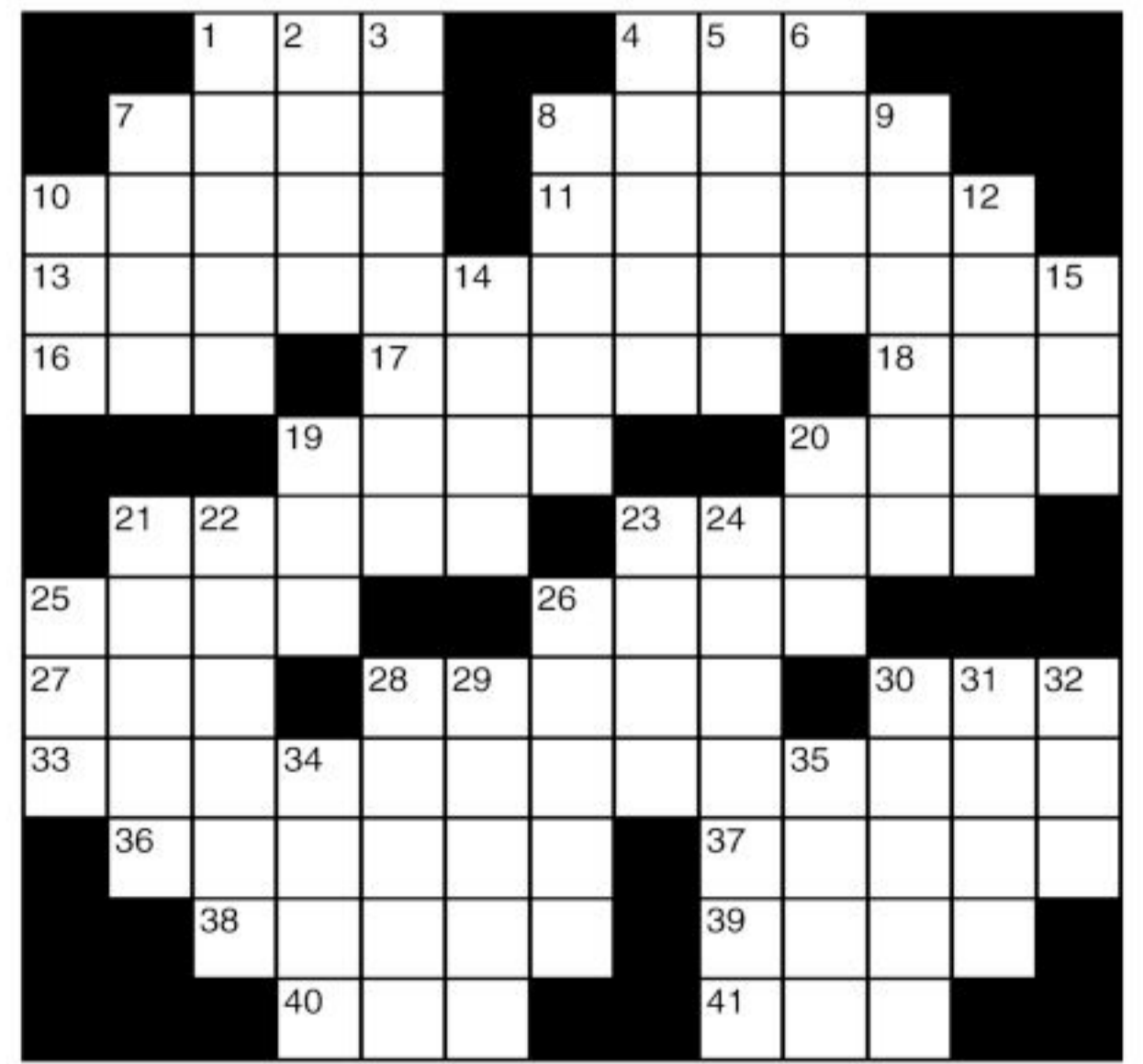
An ECB source yesterday conceded accepting the TV job was not the best way to go about it.

"There are provisions in his contract that prevent him making critical comments about England players and officials, so he is going to have to be very careful with what he says," said the source.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

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Yesterday's Cryptoquip: THE EDITOR IN CHIEF

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Today's Cryptoquip Clue: C equals T