

NEW ZEALAND V SRI LANKA

KIWIS, *best prepared ever*

AFP, Christchurch

Upbeat Brendon McCullum believes the New Zealand side he leads into the World Cup opener against Sri Lanka in Christchurch on Saturday is the best prepared Kiwi team he has known.

The 33-year-old, heading into his fourth World Cup, is not prepared to pick a tournament winner but he has no doubt New Zealand will be in the mix at the end despite their world ranking of six.

After winning four of their past five ODI series, the feeling of hope that previous New Zealand teams clung to has been replaced by belief, he said.

"It's the best prepared team, all round team, we tick most boxes," he said Friday as the team headed out to their final practice at the Hagley Oval before cricket's 44-day glamour tournament begins.

"The style of play is something we're comfortable with. We've had different personnel come in and out over the last little while but the game plan has always remained the same.

"Overall we've got a nice mix of youth and experience. It's a team I'm really comfortable taking into a World Cup and we give ourselves a good chance."

Heading into the tournament New Zealand have comfortably won series against Sri Lanka and Pakistan in the past six weeks and beaten highly-rated South Africa in a warm-up game this week.

They have shown they can win both defending and chasing a target, although McCullum conceded they had not faced Sri Lankan ace Lasith Malinga who is poised to return after a lengthy injury layoff.

"He makes a significant difference to

their bowling line up, predominantly more at the back end of the game in terms of his death bowling," he said.

"He's a phenomenal death bowler and he's going to be a factor which we will have to overcome if we're going to succeed in this game.

"But if we can head into those final overs with a nice platform then hopefully we can put him under a bit of pressure. But certainly Sri Lanka is a stronger team for Lasith Malinga's involvement."

New Zealand's batting order appears solid, particularly with the high-scoring Kane Williamson and Ross Taylor at three and four if the big-hitting approach of openers McCullum and Martin Gupthill does not pay off.

The only selection difficulty is choosing three from a pace attack of five talented bowlers including Tim Southee, Trent Boult, Kyle Mills, Mitchell

McClenaghan and Adam Milne.

McCullum said the balance of the squad gave him a confidence he had not experienced at previous World Cups.

"You always hoped things would work out well but did you genuinely believe it? Maybe, maybe not. But, we believe [this] is a good cricket team and we believe we have a chance in this World Cup.

But he tempered his enthusiasm saying he was loath to pick the eventual winner in a tournament that could well be decided by one piece of individual brilliance.

"I guess that's the major fear. When you're dominating a game and you're in a position of authority and one of those match winners comes out and takes the game away from you.

"It could be any one of the eight top nations."

AUSTRALIA V ENGLAND

It all started at MCG

AFP, Melbourne

England's swing king James Anderson began his international career as a 20-year-old at the Melbourne Cricket Ground and starts out on his fourth World Cup campaign at the same venue on Saturday.

Anderson, who is just four short of beating Ian Botham's England Test record of 383 wickets, will be his team's star man as they set out against the odds to land their first World Cup title.

Much depends on the 32-year-old Lancastrian to inspire his country with his masterful swing bowling and end their one-day torment against Australia.

Anderson confessed to being grateful of just playing for his country back in 2002 when he appeared for England for the first time at the MCG.

"The 20-year-old version of me was that I was just happy to be there and enjoying the occasion," he recalled Friday.

"I guess the abuse at the time was a bit of a shock, and tomorrow it won't be.

"I know now that you just have to enjoy occasions like these, to play at the MCG in front of a full house against Australia in a World Cup is something every player dreams of and we're all so excited about tomorrow, can't wait."

While England are not among the pundits' main contenders to win the World Cup

final at the MCG on March 29, Anderson remains the eternal optimist that England can indeed land the big one this time.

"Obviously, the last few World Cups have been very unsuccessful from our point of view, but this time there is a real difference in the belief that we've got," he said.

"I think there is a genuine belief that we can surprise a few teams. We feel confident that we can beat anyone if we play our best.

"In a tournament like this it's all about qualifying for the quarter-finals and you're three matches away from winning the World Cup.

"We're really keen on getting off to a good start tomorrow and hopefully everything will take care of itself after that."

Anderson realises the huge responsibility he carries for England in the tournament.

"My job is to start well with the new ball, quite often bowl in the power play and at the death as well," he said.

"In the last three weeks I've bowled reasonably well up front, got wickets and kept the runs down, but the game can turn really quickly.

"You have to make the most of being in form and getting the little rubs of the green."

Anderson has the ability to swing the new ball both ways with no apparent change in action and along with his impeccable control against both right and left-handers it makes him a handful, especially in favourable conditions.



Brendon McCullum (L) and Ross Taylor will hope to exchange similar high-fives at Christchurch where a confident New Zealand line-up will take on Sri Lanka in the World Cup opener today.

PHOTO: STAR FILE

'Bring back the fighting spirit'

AFP, Christchurch

Sri Lanka captain Angelo Mathews has demanded an immediate end to the losing habit that has infected his side in the lead up to Saturday's World Cup opener against New Zealand in Christchurch.

The "fighting spirit" was not there he said Friday as he reviewed a disappointing build up to cricket's premier ODI tournament.

Despite leading a side stacked with high performers, Mathews has seen his side crash to a 4-2 series defeat against New Zealand last month and then lose two World Cup warm-up games against South Africa and Zimbabwe.

They were performances far removed from previous Sri Lankan sides that won the 1996 World Cup and were runners up in the last two tournaments in 2007 and 2011.

"In the recent past, especially in New Zealand, we've found ways of losing games more than winning games and I think our late middle

order haven't produced good results for us," he said.

"We had a couple of bad practice matches as well, but we're not too concerned [about them] because we gave guys opportunities and we tried out a few things."

Whether batting first or second against New Zealand, Sri Lanka made a flying start through stars such as Mahela Jayawardene, Kumar Sangakkara and Tillakaratne Dilshan but once they were removed the wickets fell cheaply.

Mathews believed the biggest lesson Sri Lanka have learned is they need to change their approach and not the players.

"It's the fighting spirit that we've got to bring into it. When you lose a few games you tend to be a bit more down and you've got to fight hard," he said.

"It's going to be a fresh series for us, it's going to be the start of the World Cup.

"We've put everything under the carpet and we're just going to go out there and be positive."

An added motivation to lift their game is to produce a fitting farewell to Sangakkara and Jayawardene, the 37-year-old batting kingpins who have indicated this World Cup is their last outing on the ODI stage.

"The amount of service they have rendered to our team has been invaluable. They've performed to the best of their ability and just want to win all the time so it will be a fitting farewell if we can do it for them."

Sangakkara needs 12 more runs to overtake Australian Ricky Ponting as the second most prolific ODI batsman behind India's master Sachin Tendulkar. Jayawardene is fifth on the all-time list.

Sri Lanka have been buoyed by the return of Lasith Malinga, their strike bowler who has a history of tormenting New Zealand at the top of the innings and at the death.

He has been sidelined by an ankle injury for nearly six months but Mathews confirmed he would play on Saturday although the rest of the line up has not been settled.

5 facts

The ODI head-to-head record between these teams reads 41 wins for New Zealand and 40 for Sri Lanka (one tie)

The Black Caps have won six of their last nine completed meetings with Sri Lanka, after losing 10 of the preceding 11 clashes to produce a result

Ross Taylor needs 87 runs to become the fourth player after Stephen Fleming, Nathan Astle and Brendon McCullum to score 5,000 ODI runs for New Zealand

Kumar Sangakkara (13,693) needs 12 runs to pass Ricky Ponting (13,704) as the second highest ODI run-scorer

Sangakkara (991) and Mahela Jayawardene (975) are close to joining Sanath Jayasuriya and Aravinda de Silva in scoring 1,000 World Cup runs for Sri Lanka. In total 13 players from various nations have achieved this feat so far



PHOTO: STAR FILE

A fit Lasith Malinga will be a blessing for Sri Lanka during their World Cup opener against New Zealand at Christchurch today. The Lions will hope that the pacer can fire in those inswinging yorkers and give them the first bite of the cherry.

The Daily Star

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