

Lehmann waits for a run-fest

REUTERS, Melbourne

Australia coach Darren Lehmann believes the Sydney Cricket Ground pitch will produce a high-scoring World Cup semifinal against India on Thursday.

"I think the Sydney pitch will be very similar to the one we used in the game against Sri Lanka more than a fortnight ago when almost 700 runs were scored, so I think this will be another high-scoring affair," Lehmann wrote in a column.

Australia won the March 8 pool game against Sri Lanka convincingly, setting a mammoth 376-9 for their opponents to chase before bowling them out in a 64-run victory.

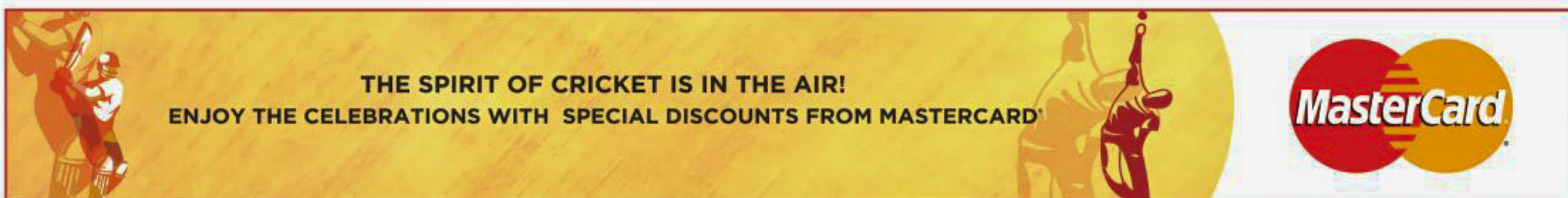
The SCG has traditionally offered something for spinners, but paceman Josh Hazlewood said the pitch served up for Australia's match against Sri Lanka had offered little variation either way.

Australia will hope for a green tinge on the SCG wicket to give their pacemen as much help as possible against India's formidable batting lineup.



Aussie speedster Mitchell Starc (R) smiles as a young fan waves during a team training session at the Sydney Cricket Ground yesterday, ahead of their semifinal against India on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP



'India are no pushovers'

AFP, Sydney

Australia opener Aaron Finch expects India will be formidable rivals in Thursday's World Cup semifinal in Sydney despite being well-beaten by the hosts ahead of the tournament.

India lost the four-Test series 2-0 and failed to make the final of the tri-series that also featured England, but Mahendra Singh Dhoni's men have since made a remarkable comeback with seven straight World Cup wins.

Finch said Australia were unlikely to have a psychological edge at the Sydney Cricket ground due to their recent results against India.

"I don't think so, guys move on pretty quick from that kind of stuff," Finch said on Tuesday.

"We played some really good cricket against India earlier in the summer. Now they have played beautifully throughout this World Cup. Unbeaten so far, the team has grown in confidence.

"But when you look down our team, we match up quite well." Finch, who is struggling for runs despite scoring a century

The Export Leader



in the first match against England, said the semifinal will be the "biggest game" he will have played in.

"It's going to be huge. It's obviously going to be my biggest game. I can't put it any other way," the 28-year-old Victorian said.

"It's a huge opportunity to be able to show off our skills as a team. I think we've played some great cricket over the last two years.

"There's no reason why we are not going to go into this game confident. I think we've got every right to be."

Finch was unsure if the SCG wicket will be as spin-friendly as expected and give India the early advantage.

"I have not had too much of a look at it," he said. "The last time we played here it looked like the wicket would spin quite a bit but it did not. It played really true.

"It's hard to tell since there are still two days out from the game. The wicket can change quite a bit over here in two days."

The hard-hitting opening batsman is likely to retain his place in the side despite a lean trot since making 135 against England.

In Australia's subsequent World Cup fixtures, Finch scored 14, 4, 24, 20 and 2 after the match against Bangladesh was washed out without a ball being bowled in Brisbane.

Finch said he had a net session with close friend and former Victoria teammate Andrew McDonald and spoken to Australian batting coach Michael Di Venuto in a bid to get back to his best form.

"I'm feeling good and hitting the ball nicely, that's all I can ask," he said.

Seeking SCG inspiration

AFP, Sydney

India star Virat Kohli returns to the scene of one of his most memorable Test innings hoping to rediscover batting form for Thursday's World Cup semifinal against Australia in Sydney.

It was at the Sydney Cricket Ground in January that Kohli, captaining India after the shock retirement of skipper Mahendra Singh Dhoni from the longer format, hit 147 and 46 to lead his team to a creditable draw.

It was his fourth century in the four-Test series and prevented Australia from making it 3-0 after the hosts had piled up a mammoth 572 for seven in their first innings.

Kohli's form dipped alarmingly in the subsequent tri-series that also featured England, with scores of nine, four, three and eight as India failed to make the final and ended the bilateral tour without a win.

But the elegant right-hander justified Dhoni's assessment of his vice-captain being a big-match player by striking a match-winning 107 in their World Cup opener against archrivals Pakistan in Adelaide on February 15.

Kohli followed that with 46 against mighty South Africa at the Melbourne Cricket Ground in the next match, helping the defending champions to the second of seven straight wins in

KOHLI VS AUS (ODIs)

Played: 17
Runs: 620
Average: 51.66
Centuries: 3



BEST IN INDIA

Oct 20, 2010 Visakhapatnam, 118
Oct 16, 2013 Jaipur, 100*
Oct 30, 2013 Nagpur, 115*

BEST IN AUSTRALIA

Feb 05, 2012 Melbourne, 31
Feb 12, 2012 Adelaide, 18
Feb 26, 2012 Sydney, 21

the tournament so far.

But as India cruised along, Kohli found runs hard to come by,

making identical scores of 33 against the United Arab Emirates and the West Indies, an unbeaten 44 versus Ireland, 38 against Zimbabwe and three in the quarterfinal against Bangladesh.

The 26-year-old's lack of batting touch came to the fore against Bangladesh when he chased an away-swing by the fired-up Rubel Hossain and was caught behind by Mushfiqur Rahim.

As India prepare for the semifinal against the tournament co-hosts, Kohli will be expected to live up to his reputation as one of the most dominant batsmen of his generation.

Skipper Dhoni was confident a match-winning innings from his

star batsman was around the corner.

"I don't think he has batted badly," Dhoni said, pleading with fans to tone down their expectations every time Kohli goes out to bat.

"No one can score a century every time. But he is such a good player that people expect him to do it in every innings.

"He is a dominant batsman who likes playing shots. A big one is just around the corner because big players always score in big games."

Kohli, who made his one-day debut in 2008, has already hit an astonishing 22 centuries in the shorter format, one of only eight batsmen in the world to achieve the feat.



MR. EFFICIENT



COREY ANDERSON

Amidst all the praise for Brendon McCullum and Grant Elliott and Trent Boult, the performance of one crucial New Zealand all-rounder is likely warrant less notice. But make no mistake; Corey Anderson is playing as big a part as anyone in New Zealand's fairytale journey in this World Cup. The 24-year-old all-rounder, who made a buzz scoring the fastest ODI century against West Indies on the first day of 2014, has played some crucial knocks with the bat in this World Cup apart from taking vital wickets. Yesterday he went for a few runs, but dismissed three important players of South Africa — Rilee Rossouw, Faf du Plessis and David Miller — before playing a timely knock of 58, which set New Zealand on their way to a first-ever final berth. With 14 wickets and 231 runs to his name, Anderson will be one of the key contenders for the player-of-the-tournament award, regardless of the outcome in the final.

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WORLD CUP COCKTAIL

Waqar Younis warned Tuesday that cricket could die out in Pakistan if rival teams continue to boycott the country where international tours have not taken place since 2009.

"The biggest hurt is that we are not able to stage international matches," Pakistan head coach Waqar said.

"I fear the game might die out as we lack talent at junior level and it's tough to indulge kids in cricket. It's a very important aspect, we have to bring international cricket back and the government has to help in this regard."

"If we want to save Pakistan cricket we have to lift our domestic game because there was a big difference in standards at the World Cup. We were well behind other teams.

"We can't delay it, we need power-hitters like there are in other teams and players who can score 300-plus runs," said Waqar, whose team only crossed the 300-mark just once in seven games at the World Cup -- against the amateurs of the United Arab Emirates.

"Cricket is changing fast and we have to keep pace with that, if not we will be left far behind."

Waqar stressed Pakistan needed good batsmen.

"Bowling has never been our problem. But it's the batting where we have been struggling for a long time now and after Misbah-ul-Haq and Younis Khan -- whenever he quits -- we will have a big vacuum."

Johnson ready to sledge

Fast bowler Mitchell Johnson says he is considering taking on the role of Australia's Sledge-in-Chief for Thursday's World Cup semi-final against India at the Sydney Cricket Ground.

Outspoken opener David Warner has been on his best behaviour at the World Cup after getting into hot water over a series of spats with the Indian side during the test series over the New Year.

"I heard Davy said he wasn't going to get involved in all that stuff," paceman

Johnson said.

"Someone's got to do it and I might put my hand up. It's part of the game and what happened the other day with Shane (Watson) and Wahab (Riaz) was exceptional.

"I thought it was great entertainment and I think you're going to see more entertainment in this game."

India get added incentive for WC win

India will go into the semifinal against Australia at the Sydney Cricket Ground on Thursday, hoping to secure passage into the finals to face New Zealand who qualified after beating South Africa. While the Indian team is certainly hoping to secure a victory in what will be a tense encounter



between two of cricket's heavyweights.

Now, a saree trader from Indore has stepped in and given the team an added incentive, alongside the World Cup itself, for winning the trophy for the second time on the trot.

The saree trader has made two sarees worth a whopping 65000 rupees each as a gift for the team should they win the Cup. The saree is adorned with the colors of India and multiple World Cups, even featuring the Indian team's sponsor logo to make it as authentic as their jersey.

So the Indians will be going into the match hoping to not only secure passage into the final, but MS Dhoni especially, will be hoping to return to India with a gift for his wife in the form of the special saree.

-COMPILED