



Steven Smith continued to torment India, scoring his fifth century in seven games against India this summer, on a colossal stage as he scored 105 in the semifinal at SCG yesterday.

Clarke terms him as 'exceptional'

AGENCIES, Sydney

Australia captain Michael Clarke praised the "exceptional" Steven Smith after his side beat defending champions India by 95 runs on Thursday to set a World Cup final with New Zealand.

Steven Smith's 105 and his second-wicket stand of 182 with opener Aaron Finch (81) powered Australia to 328 for seven after Clarke won the toss.

"I feel really excited. Smithy was exceptional once again, and I was really proud of the execution of our bowlers," said Clarke after a convincing win at the Sydney Cricket Ground where the impressive Mitchell Starc took two for 28 in 8.5 overs and James Faulkner three for 59 in nine.

Sunday's final in Melbourne will give Australia the chance to avenge their one-wicket loss to New Zealand in a pool-phase thriller at Auckland's Eden Park last month.

"Losing to New Zealand really gave us a kick up the backside," said Clarke. "Mentally I think the guys are ready to walk into the final."

Australia were set back considerably by a rush of wickets at the hands of Tim Southee, Trent Boult and Daniel Vettori at Eden Park, and Clarke said the difficult hours during

and after that loss were the germination of a sense of purpose and direction that has carried the team through to the final with knockout victories over Pakistan and India.

These hard-fought results also followed a reshuffle of the team. Smith was moved up to No.3, where he again played a spinal innings against India, while Mitchell

The Export Leader

Johnson was moved back to first-change bowler, a perch from which he claimed the wickets of India's aces Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma to all but seal his side's progress. Clarke said all this had begun in Auckland.

But with India having an unbeaten run to the semifinals, Clarke said: "Huge congratulations to Mahendra Singh Dhoni and his team, I think they've competed really well in this World Cup."

"I'm pretty sure it won't be his last World Cup, he's got a lot of cricket left in him."

Finch finds it at right time

SYDNEY MORNING HERALD

It's not often Aaron Finch is being urged to get a move on. He is not Australia's Twenty20 captain and now a treasured and highly compensated asset of Indian Premier League franchise Mumbai Indians for nothing.

But circumstances -- namely his own indifferent form -- on Thursday dictated that Finch went about his business in another way in the World Cup semifinal.

The Victorian opener probably won't remember his 81 from 116 balls at the SCG as one of his finest outings. When measured alongside Steve Smith's hundred of physical beauty, Finch's innings was comparably a battle. An afternoon of toil rather than theatrics.

However, given his troubles of the past six weeks, it was one he would take. Out of sorts since his tournament-opening century against England 40 days earlier, there had been some speculation he could even lose his place in the XI for the semifinal. More than once it was mentioned that if not for being dropped in the first over against England at the MCG six weeks ago, he'd barely have a run to his name.

If there was a temptation for selectors to alter the top order and dump Finch it was sidestepped, with those picking the team unwilling to make such a key change at such a point in the World Cup.

Finch, searching for a way out of his rut, had gone to great lengths to find an answer during the week, knowing he was required to deliver at the sudden-death stage. There was extra time in the training nets, a session watched by trusted former teammate Andrew McDonald, even a chat with Brian Lara. The result wasn't a spectacular rediscovery of his best, but after 64 runs in his past five

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The Midas Smith

AFP, Sydney

Steve Smith was the player-of-the-match and the man of all the crucial moments as Australia downed defending champions India by 95 runs to reach the World Cup final on Thursday.

Smith slammed 105 off 93 balls for his first World Cup century and fourth ton in ODIs to continue his prolific batting form since his switch to No.3 in Australia's one-day team as his side piled up 328-7 at the SCG.

It was also his fifth century in seven games against India this season, taking his total to 921 runs.

In the field, his golden touch was also shining through.

Smith insisted on skipper Michael Clarke going after a review for a caught behind on Ajinkya Rahane (44) that was confirmed by 'Snicko' and given out.

He was fielding at extra cover at the time and it was his confidence that Rahane's bat had made contact even though wicketkeeper Brad Haddin, who took the catch, did not appeal.

Five overs later, he was responsible for a direct hit which ran out Ravindra Jadeja for 16 which left India on 208-6.

"We thought 300 was around par and we knew we had to bowl and field well and the boys did a terrific job tonight -- bring on Melbourne," Smith said as he looked ahead to Sunday's final against undefeated New Zealand.

"It's nice to contribute to a few wins, it was a pretty big stage tonight, the semifinal of a World Cup and I was just happy that we got over the line in the end."

"I am just really happy where everything is at the moment, I'm just looking forward to Melbourne now,

it's going to be one hell of a day."

Smith didn't hang about in the 'nervous' nineties while batting and tore to three figures with a six and four off successive balls from Mohammed Shami.

His ton was the second fastest against defending champions India at a World Cup after an 84-ball 100 by Sri Lanka's Mahela Jayawardene at the 2011 final in Mumbai.

Smith, who started out in the tournament batting at number five, has not looked back since he took over at number three when Shane Watson was dropped in the pool game against Afghanistan in Perth and has since returned to bat lower in the Australian order.

Smith reeled off 95 against the Afghans, 72 against Sri Lanka and 65 versus Pakistan before going on with his first World Cup ton.

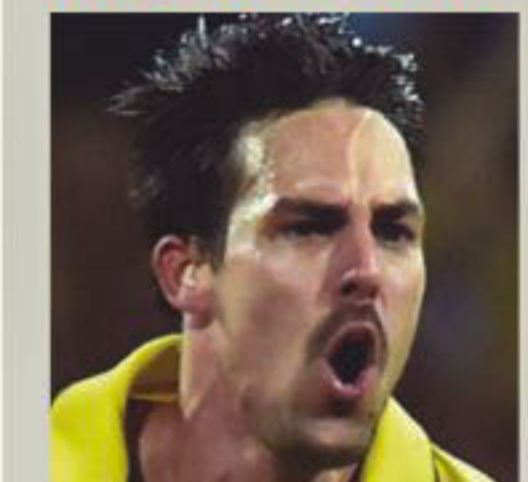


Aaron Finch laid the platform for Australia's innings against India with a solid 81 runs at the SCG yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

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MITCHELL JOHNSON

After smacking 27 off just nine deliveries Mitchell Johnson came back with the ball to further terrorise the Indians. After Australia lost a few quick wickets they didn't seem like they were going to reach 300. But Johnson's cameo brought them back. It was see ball and hit ball. Johnson whacked fours off his first three balls. He then struck another four, before smashing a six off the penultimate ball. When the Indian team came out to bat, Johnson was there as well. He began his first spell in the 6th over, conceding only six runs. In his fourth over, he tempted Virat Kohli short ball and had him caught behind and then bowled Rohit Sharma in his next over with a ferocious delivery. He may not have picked up any more wickets after that, but his stellar bowling display helped Australia to clinch a massive victory.

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WORLD CUP COCKTAIL

Two of the key cricket attendance milestones reached at the MCG could be trumped by Sunday's World Cup final.

Australia's inability to reach the finals in 1992, the preceding time they co-hosted the tournament, proved no impediment to drawing a crowd of 87,182 for the final between Pakistan and England.

The other most notable record achieved at the MCG came 15 months ago when the first day of the Boxing Day Test attracted 91,112, the biggest recorded crowd for a day of Test cricket.

Harnden predicted the first qualifier for the final, New Zealand, would attract support beyond their travelling and expat fans, because of the distinct passion they have demonstrated throughout the tournament.

Harnden said the mood of the crowds across the MCG's four group matches - Australia-England, South Africa-India, Sri Lanka-Bangladesh and the India-Bangladesh quarter-final had fortified his hopes that "Sunday is going to be one of the great experiences in sport".

South Africa and India drew 86,876, an astonishing (and deafening) turnout for non-Australian teams during the group stage of the tournament.

Man cuts tongue after Oz's innings

A cricket crazy youth in Tamil Nadu cut his tongue on Thursday seeking the 'intervention of gods' to make India win the World Cup semifinal match against Australia.

Sudhakar of Ponneri in Vellore district, who closely follows cricket, was sad after Australia amassed 328 runs batting first against India in the semifinal.

Desperation drove the youth to act in a reckless manner and he cut his tongue with a knife at his residence, the Jolarpet police said.

On his hearing Sudhakar's cries, his relatives and neighbours came to his rescue. They rushed him to Adukkamparai government general hospital.

The police said they had not registered a

Boult's girlfriend using him as an incentive

Sharing her boyfriend with the rest of the nation is something Gert Smith is still getting used to but she is "ecstatic" about why.

The 24-year-old Primary School teacher has suddenly been thrust into the limelight as the partner of the Cricket World Cup's top wicket taker, Black Cap Trent Boult.

Being thrust into the limelight is new for Smith. Her class of year 5 and 6 at Fairhaven School in Te Puke had only just found out she liked cricket.

Smith was able to harness the class's enthusiasm for their newfound "celebrity" girlfriend with a behaviour chart.



"They get tokens for good behaviour which represent dollars. I have told them that when they earn \$100, Trent will come and visit."

Smith - whose real name is Alexandra met the Tauranga bowler two years ago in a Hamilton bar when she was out with her cousin, fellow Tauranga cricketer Daniel Flynn, himself a former Black Cap and now captain of the Northern Districts.

World Cup Final breaks 28-year jinx

Sunday's World Cup final between Australia and New Zealand will be the first title clash without an Asian team since 1987.

The last final without an Asian challenger was played in 1987 when