

THE BATTLE WITHIN

There couldn't have been a better final than this one. Here are two teams that made us sit at the edge of our seats and bite our nails out, in a stimulating contest at Auckland. These are the two teams that, prior to the game in Auckland, hadn't played an ODI since June 2013. In fact the final at Melbourne will be the first time in six years that Australia will host an ODI against the Black Caps. The rivalry is intense and with two of the most aggressive captains in world cricket, it's bound to have a thrilling finale. While Australia are definitely ahead courtesy of their home advantage; the following battles just go on to show how well balanced both these sides are.

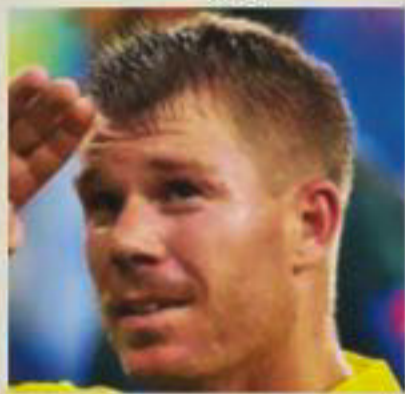
HEAD-TO-HEAD

McCULLUM (8)



They have batted in almost identical fashion these two. Their batting approach has followed the two extremes; they have either given their respective sides ferocious starts or have departed early. The start will be crucial in the World Cup final today at the enormous Melbourne Cricket Ground and the one who is successful might just do half the job for the team. McCullum has scored 328 runs so far at a staggering strike-rate of 191.81, the highest in the World Cup. Warner, on the other hand, has scored 300 runs at a strike-rate of 124. In terms of batting averages though, Warner's ahead 50 to 41.

WARNER (7)



GUPTILL (7)



They have been the go-to players for the respective sides at the top order in the World Cup. Both of them have top-scored for their respective sides and have played a number of crucial innings in the competition. Guptill's record-breaking 237 not out was easily his standout performance in the competition. On the other hand, it was Smith's ice-cool century against India that laid the platform for an emphatic Australian victory. Their batting techniques are similar in nature as well as they both prefer to play conventional strokes. While Guptill has scored 532 runs at an average 76, Smith has posted 346 runs at an average of 57.66.

SMITH (7)



ANDERSON (8)

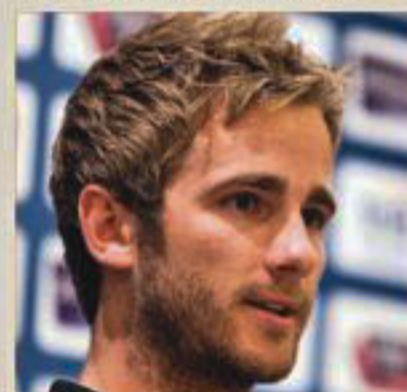


The game-changers; the finishers; the flamboyant stroke-makers; you can give them all the adjectives you want and you still won't be able to justify the roles played by Corey Anderson and Glenn Maxwell in this World Cup. These are the players who have relentlessly managed to change the tempo of the game. Maxwell has had one heck of a World Cup. Whenever he's out there, he just has one intention and that is to smack the ball outside the park; and as his statistics suggest—324 runs at a strike-rate of 182—so far he has been doing that with ease. While Anderson has a similar potential with the bat, it has been his breakthroughs with the ball that has helped the Black Caps. Aside from scoring more than 200 runs he has scalped 14 wickets.

MAXWELL (8)



WILLIAMSON (6)

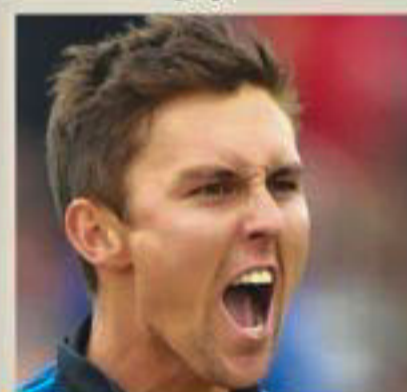


There's no doubt regarding the class in their batting, however they have both been struggling in terms of fitness. Williamson who was dealing with a stomach bug was sent back to the pavilion against Bangladesh for just one; his first single figure score since December 2013. He had an ordinary time with the bat after that. Clarke is having a tough time with the short-ball; he got out to that delivery twice in the last two matches. He hasn't batted up to his potential and is still recovering from a hamstring. While the hard-hitters have excelled in the World Cup so far, on a huge ground such as the MCG it will be the controlled stroke-play and the ability to punch those deliveries in to the gap that will matter most; and both these batsmen possess that skill.

CLARKE (6)



BOULT (7)



Left-arm bowlers have ruled the roost the last two months. Don't believe it? Go ahead and take a glance at the stats. With 21 wickets, at an average of 15.76, Boult is the highest wicket-taker of the tournament so far. The faster Mitchell Starc isn't far behind. He has taken 20 at a staggering average of 10.20. In a World Cup that has witnessed a series of double centuries and team scores more than 400, these bowlers have managed to keep their economy below 4.50. While Boult has given away 4.41 runs an over, Starc economy-rate, 3.65 is the least in the competition so far. The start that both these bowlers can provide in the final could well decide the Cup.

STARC (8)

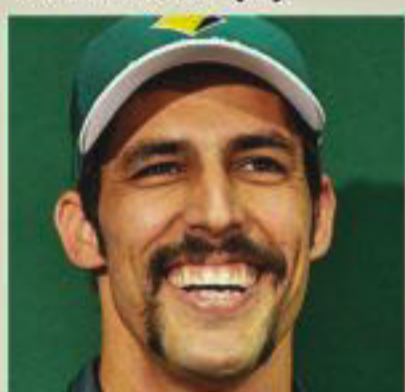


SOUTHEE (6)



On the whole they may not have been as effective as Boult or Starc, however as the various matches in the World Cup showed, they are no less dangerous. Both Tim Southee and Mitchell Johnson have the ability to win games solely based on their aggression. Southee displayed that against England when his figures of 7 for 33 demolished the 2019 World Cup hosts. Johnson on the other hand has terrorised batsmen with his bouncers. His impact was clearly visible against India when he toyed with both Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma. Both these pacers can do quite the damage with the bat as well; just ask Bangladesh and India and they will tell you all about their pinch-hitting.

JOHNSON (7)



MATT HENRY (5)



They are both 23; they are both fast-medium; and most importantly they are both wicket-takers. The funny thing though is that neither of them have managed to cement a place in the playing eleven as yet. The tall Hazlewood has played just four matches in the World Cup. Despite that he has proved how dangerous he can be with the new ball. Dubbed as the next Glenn McGrath, he has a smooth run-up and hits the deck hard which makes it difficult for batsmen to negotiate him. Henry on the other hand was New Zealand's highest wicket-taker in 2014 and despite that he initially didn't find a place in the main team. He was only drafted in after an injury. He has played just one World Cup game but with 19 wickets in 12 ODIs he has a lot to show for himself.

HAZLEWOOD (7)



RONCHI (6)



New Zealand and Australia's power-packed top order hasn't really allowed the veterans in the side to have much fun in the competition so far. By the time the ball arrived in their court the target was either knocking at their doors or they just didn't have as many overs to play. However, these two wicket-keeper batsmen, have generally kept their side's hopes high with some useful cameos. Ronchi's 170-odd against Sri Lanka is proof that he can hit a few with the long handle. Haddin was Australia's highest scorer in that thriller in Auckland and his defiant gave them some hope. As a result, Ronchi and Haddin will be expected to play the back-up roles for their respective sides. They are competing in terms of the number of dismissals as well with Haddin leading 14 to 13.

HADDIN (7)



ELLIOT (6)



They didn't have the best of starts these two. Prior to the defiant 84 against South Africa Elliott hadn't scored a half-century in the mega event. In fact his innings against the Proteas came about as a surprise to many. Shane Watson went through a struggle in the World Cup. He was dropped for a match and he himself had stated that he thought that that move was the end of his career. However, he came back with fighting half-centuries against Sri Lanka and Pakistan. That he can take a few blows for his team and still take them over the line was something that was proven against Pakistan when he stood tall despite a dangerous bowling spell from Wahab Riaz. They have both stood up for their team when they needed them most; can they do that again?

WATSON (6)



TAYLOR (5)



Ever since his brilliant 135 against England, Aaron Finch didn't have the best of times in the World Cup. While he did get starts he failed to carry on. He did however score a mini-comeback with his 81 against India in the last game. While that was a useful knock he played at a slower pace than usual; a sign which shows that he is working hard to make a comeback; and the MCG, where he plays domestic cricket, will be the perfect ground for that mission. On a similar note Ross Taylor too has been batting slower than usual. His only half-century came against Bangladesh and that came at a snail's pace. The good news though, was that Taylor looked good in the last game against South Africa and the final could well be his time to shine.

FINCH (6)

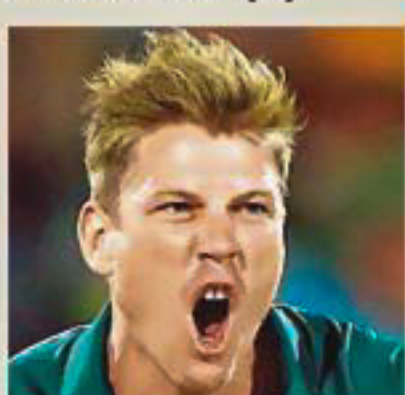


VETTORI (8)



In terms of cricketing techniques they may be diametrically opposite. Heck there's even a huge age-gap between the two; however, on the field they have a similar mantra. They give it their all both with the bat and the ball. The 36-year-old Vettori has taken 15 scalps and bowled at an economy-rate below four. But that's not just it. With the bat he has bailed New Zealand out twice down the end. Faulkner is no less. With the bat, he slogged India out of the game with his huge hits and also took three crucial wickets against them. He put in a similar performance against Sri Lanka in Sydney where his three-wicket haul, including scalps of Kumar Sangakkara and Tillakaratne Dilshan, restricted an energetic Sri Lanka.

FAULKNER (6)



New Zealand fans turned up in numbers during the Black Caps' final nets session at the Melbourne Cricket Ground yesterday, ahead of their dream World Cup final against Australia today.

PHOTO: AFP

Azhar set for Pakistan's ODI captaincy

INTERNET

Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) has finally decided to change all the heads as well as the leader of Pakistan cricket team. According to latest update, star batsman Azhar Ali is being named as new skipper of Pakistan team while wicket-keeper-cum-batsman Sarfraz Ahmed will be his vice-captain.

On the other hand PCB also decided to continue to lead the side in the lone twenty20 against Bangladesh in the absence of skipper Shahid Afridi.

Pakistan star batsman Younis Khan is also expected to be dropped from one-day side. Saeed Ajmal, Junaid Khan and Mohammad Hafeez are expected to make a comeback in the side.

Umar Gul, Shoaib Malik and Kamran Akmal are not expected to be part of the team for upcoming series against Bangladesh.

Pakistan play two Tests, three ODIs and one twenty20 international in Bangladesh tour, which begins next month.

Kiwis flock to MCG to cheer on Black Caps

AGENCIES, Melbourne

Kiwi fans daubed in black came out in droves on Saturday to support New Zealand on the eve of their team's first World Cup final, against fierce rivals Australia in Melbourne.

Fans gathered around the nets outside the vast Melbourne Cricket Ground arena to get a glimpse of their heroes training under cool cloudy skies.

Sunday will perhaps be the biggest occasion between two neighbours who share a rich sporting and cultural rivalry. Not since the 1980s has cricket held such bilateral importance in trans-Tasman relations.

"It will be interesting if six runs are needed off the last ball, that's the scenario we all hope will happen," says ex-fast bowler Rodney Hogg. Hogg is, of course, referring to the infamous "underarm" incident at the MCG in 1981.

According to government statistics there are about 650,000 New Zealand citizens living in Australia, which is around 15 per cent of the population of New Zealand.

The huge diaspora of Kiwis residing in Australia means there is passionate support for their rugby and cricket teams whenever they cross the Tasman to take on the greater-resourced 'big brother'.

There was a brisk trade inside the merchandising tent outside the ground with supporters, predominantly New Zealanders, snapping up playing shirts, flags and caps for Sunday's final which is expected to draw an 80,000-90,000 crowd.

Australia, bidding for a fifth title, remain resolutely confident of another success in a World Cup final, particularly at home, and Melbourne's Herald Sun newspaper Saturday ran a triumph list piece headlined:

"New Zealand won't win and here's why".

But Kiwi journalist Dylan Cleaver got his own back in the Sydney Daily Telegraph, contrasting levels of support for Australia and New Zealand's semifinal wins in Sydney and Auckland respectively.

"If there had been more than one Australian to 10 Indians in the crowd I'm sure there would have been a few signs of life in the place," he wrote.

"Things got a bit rowdy here at Eden Park on Tuesday when Grant Elliott hit a six to win off the penultimate ball [against South Africa]. The crowd went nuts. People looked like they cared."

But the same page saw one of the paper's regular columnists, Richard Hinds, deliver several jibes as well.



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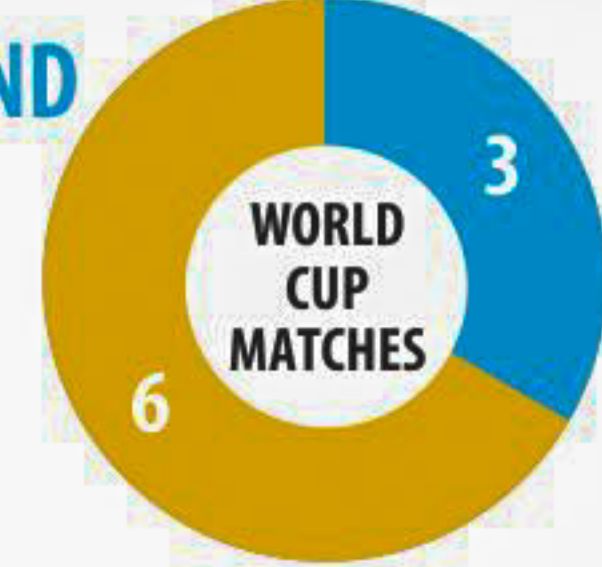
INFO ZONE

WORLD CUP FINAL

AUSTRALIA v NEW ZEALAND

HEAD TO HEAD LAST MEETING

28 February 2015 at Eden Park, Auckland:
New Zealand won by 1 wicket.



KEY PLAYERS

THE TWO VETERANS



MICHAEL CLARKE

244
7907
78.81
57
4.98
130, 5/35
10

MATCHES
RUNS
S/R
WICKETS
ECONOMY
BEST FIGURES
LAST MATCH

DANIEL VETTORI



294
2244
83.29
305
4.12
83, 5/7
0/46, 7*

*The numbers in parentheses indicate The Daily Star's ratings, out of ten, of these players for this tournament so far. Averaging these numbers, Australia (6.72) just edge New Zealand (6.54). While the numbers are close, home advantage may play a role in tilting it more towards Australia today while the toss could also be a vital factor in deciding the outcome.