

'Following my instinct'

SPORTS REPORTER

Asia Cup T20 Dashing India batsman Virat Kohli has said that following his instincts and concentrating on his strengths has helped him get on top of his Twenty20 game. The 27-year-old batsman feels the exponential rise in his Twenty20 batting curve owes much to relieving himself of the mental shackles.

The current Test skipper of India averaged 34.52 at a strike rate of 130.44 in his first four years of Twenty20 cricket (2010-13) -- a commendable feat in itself -- but what he has achieved since is quite enviable. Kohli explained this transformation at a press conference in Mirpur yesterday, ahead of the opening match of the Asia Cup.

"In my early T20 playing days, my plan was to get myself in and get maybe 10 off 10 balls and then take off. I used to think too much about T20 cricket before saying maybe I don't have the kind of shots that other people have, the ability to hit big sixes so I used to try a lot more, you know, planning too much."

Since the start of 2014, Kohli has been scoring at a staggering average of 89.71 and a strike rate of 140. The Delhi-born batsman feels that the transformation began when he started concentrating on his strengths and letting go of things he was not at ease with.

"Now I just try to follow my instinct," Kohli said. "I have come to terms with the fact that I can't hit too many sixes, so I focus on boundaries. So I sort of moulded my game towards that and try to hit the ball into the gaps and get fours. I would rather hit fours than sixes and get the results."

We may never know the details of the mental and technical adjustments that have contributed to this transition, but Kohli's words, backed up by the jaw-dropping numbers, makes it obvious that a batsman with a decent technique does not need to re-engineer approach altogether, rather only needs to fine-tune things within his own confines to get the desired results in different formats -- something which many a batsman can learn from.



It was not confirmed if India's top batsman Virat Kohli (L) would walk along with inspirational Bangladesh captain Mashrafe Bin Mortaza for the toss of the Asia Cup opener at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium today. However, one thing is certain -- both men will definitely act as impact men for their respective teams.

Stage set for dramatic start

NAIMUL KARIM

Asia Cup T20 It's difficult to recall the last time Bangladesh entered a mega event without the 'underdog' tag. They did reach the final of the Asia Cup in 2012 and they also created history by making it to the quarterfinal of the World Cup in 2015.

However, on both those occasions, not many expected the Tigers to reach those landmarks.

Going by the public sentiment this time around, the Asia Cup 2016 is probably the first ever tournament in which the Tigers have as good a shot at the trophy as the other three nations. A few former cricketers, like Inzamam-ul-Haq have gone as far as deeming the hosts as the favourites of the tournament.

This vibe is something that has developed over the year 2015. Apart from making it to the quarters, they also scored major series victories against India, Pakistan and South Africa and with these wins there were certain mental barriers that were overcome.

However, as refreshing as this change in attitude may be, the fact remains that Bangladesh are still ranked 10th in T20I cricket. Going by the last few matches, the Tigers still have plenty to learn in this format.

The major problem for Bangladesh has been their batting. Their batsmen have not managed to carry on their knocks after getting a start and with Tamim Iqbal not in the side things are bound to be tricky.

The key player for the Tigers would be Mushfiqur Rahim. The cleanest hitter of the ball in the side and the most consistent performer,



PHOTOS: STAR

'Play with no fear'

SPORTS REPORTER

Asia Cup T20 Bangladesh captain Mashrafe Bin Mortaza has asked his teammates to take a leaf out of their performance from the 2015 World Cup and play 'fearless cricket' in the Asia Cup.

Speaking to reporters during the pre-match press conference yesterday, the captain stated that the biggest challenge for the hosts would be to tackle India's batsmen.

"India's batting order is a challenge for any team. In order to overcome that we have to bowl confidently and have no fear. At the moment, all we are thinking about is playing good cricket on the day. We may or may not be able to do our best tomorrow, but eventually we will get there," said Mashrafe.

As good as India's batting order may be, they will however, be concerned regarding MS Dhoni's injury. The possible absence of Dhoni though, according to Mashrafe, would not make much of a difference to Bangladesh's main focus.

"He has been a tremendous player for India. Dhoni is a very good player and captain. But I don't think it will bother their batting order as much because it's very strong. We have a plan for everyone, not only Dhoni," said Mashrafe.

During the ICC Under-19 World Cup, the pacers managed to extract plenty of bounce and movement from the Mirpur track early in the morning. Mashrafe though does not expect the wicket to behave in a similar way for the Asia Cup matches, all of which begin at 7:30 pm.

"Obviously in the morning of those under-19 matches there was a bit of dew in the winter. But I don't think there will be as much help in the T20s for the pacers. We have to depend more on our variations," he said.

Mashrafe hopes that the Asia Cup can give the Tigers the momentum they require ahead of the ICC World Twenty20.

"To be honest, we have been struggling in this format. But this is a new tournament and hopefully we can improve our rankings from here on," he said.



Tigers coach Chandika Hathurusingha (R) will have to choose between Imrul Kayes and young Mohammad Mithun to open the innings along with Soumya Sarkar against India today.

PHOTO: STAR

Dhoni a doubt for opener

SPORTS REPORTER

Whether India captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni will take the field against Bangladesh in the Asia Cup T20 opener today remains an uncertainty as he is nursing back spasms which he suffered during training on Monday.

The skipper was present at the tournament's official photoshoot with the captains of the other sides but he missed out on India's training session at the Khan Shaheb Osman Ali Stadium yesterday. He also refrained from speaking at the pre-tournament press conference, opting to send his deputy Virat Kohli instead.

Dhoni does not usually train too hard before match days, opting to play a little football and practise in the nets while avoiding drills, but his absence may have been a precautionary measure, so he may turn up at the match after all.

Meanwhile, Parthiv Patel, who has not played for India since 2012, flew in yesterday afternoon as cover for the skipper.

Josh admits to dissent

AFP, Christchurch

Australian fast bowler Josh Hazlewood pleaded guilty to dissent Tuesday following a profanity-laced confrontation with the umpires in the second Test against New Zealand, an Australian team spokesman said.

Tempers flared after a Hazlewood lbw appeal for the wicket of Kane Williamson was turned down. Hazlewood was heard to use a swear word as players angrily converged on the umpires.

The team spokesman said there was no immediate word on a penalty for Hazlewood.

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INFO ZONE

BANGLADESH			INDIA		
M	W	L	M	W	L
10	1	9	10	9	1
IN ALL T20IS					
M	W	L	M	W	L
2	0	2	2	2	0

Last meeting in T20Is: Dhaka, 28 March, 2014, where Bangladesh lost by 8 wickets.

KEY PLAYERS

MUSHFIQUR RAHIM	Average	VIRAT KOHLI
19.34	50.62	
39	31	
619	1215	
50	90*	
116.57	136.51	
1	12	
0	0	

A cautionary note

SAKEB SUBHAN

Asia Cup T20 Bangladesh's unprecedented success in 2015 and their prolonged focus on T20 cricket has raised hopes of a special performance in the Asia Cup T20, which will kick off in earnest when Bangladesh take on India in Mirpur today. But the fans will do well to temper their hopes; the successes came in 50-over cricket but the Tigers are from the finished article in Twenty20s. Even if they were, the large role luck plays in deciding winners -- there have been five different winners in five editions of the World Twenty20 and rarely have pre-tournament favourites won -- works against the form book.

Bangladesh's T20 record is woeful and their ODI renaissance since the 2012 Asia Cup has not found an echo in T20 cricket. Perhaps that is why Bangladesh have focused on T20 cricket ahead of the Asia Cup T20 and the World Twenty20 like no other Test-playing country has over the past three months. They have played just four actual matches in that period (the four-match series against Zimbabwe in January which yielded an underwhelming 2-2 draw), but that was followed by a trio of specialised, lengthy T20I training camps in Khulna, Chittagong and Dhaka.

To provide another dampener, dashing opener Tamim Iqbal will miss the tournament as he is on paternity leave. Considering that much of a team's success in T20s hinges on the start the openers provide, Tamim will be missed sorely. He also seems to have found a new T20 actumen, as evidenced by his success in the

Pakistan Super League (PSL).

Making his absence an even bigger concern is the new and as yet untested opening combination. Soumya Sarkar has been a revelation in 2015 in ODIs, but his form has since seen a sharp slide. He has struggled in domestic cricket ever since the South Africa series last year. His form as a T20 opener in the Zimbabwe series did not inspire confidence -- his all-or-nothing style of either hitting the ball to the fence or missing it completely is more suited to a number five or six who has only two overs to bat. His partner is tipped to be Mohammad Mithun, who is as yet untested in the format; he faced just one ball in his two T20Is against Sri Lanka and West Indies. The third option is Imrul Kayes who, while having a stellar Bangladesh Premier League 2015, has not done much in this format at international level.

A look at their more experienced Asia Cup T20 opponents may be instructive. India open with Shikhar Dhawan and Rohit Sharma with Virat Kohli at three -- their best limited-overs batsmen. The same goes for Pakistan's Ahmed Shehzad and Mohammad Hafeez. The excitement surrounding the Tigers notwithstanding, they do not have batsmen of that quality at numbers one and two. It may well be a throwback to a time when all hop rests on Shikib Al Hasan and Mushfiqur Rahim in the middle order.

Even with the large role luck plays, recent records and quality of opposition suggests that the Tigers are not likely to have much joy today. If they do, an improvement has to come from the batting department, and one can hope that the effect the T20 camps had on Tamim is contagious.

Aussies almost on top

AFP, Christchurch

Joe Burns and Usman Khawaja had Australia in sight of victory and the top Test ranking on Tuesday after an absorbing fourth day marked by stubborn resistance from New Zealand and umpire abuse by the tourists.

With Burns on 27 and Khawaja 19, Australia were 70 for 1 at stumps in the second Test in Christchurch, requiring a further 131 to sweep the series 2-0 and return to world number one.

Jackson Bird, with his first five-wicket Test haul, and James Pattinson combined to end the New Zealand second innings at 335, giving Australia a 201-run target.

David Warner, who has struggled on New Zealand surfaces, was the Australian wicket to fall, caught behind for 22.

Burns offered chances but luck was on his side. On 19, he pulled Matt Henry through square leg where Wagner was unable to hold a difficult chance. On 23, an inside edge off Henry sailed close to off stump.

Khawaja, however, looked untroubled and effortlessly moved to 19 off 23 deliveries. Although New Zealand had their backs to the wall, all-rounder Corey Anderson said they see hope in a fragile Australian tail.

"We're going to have to come up with some interesting fields and give it a real crack," he said.

"We managed to run through the tail pretty quickly in the first innings after they'd put on about 400 for the first six wickets."

SCORES IN BRIEF
NEW ZEALAND: First innings 370
AUSTRALIA: First innings 505
NEW ZEALAND: Second innings 335 (Latham 39, Williamson 97, McCullum 25, Anderson 40, Watling 46, Henry 66; Pattinson 4-77, Bird 5-59)
AUSTRALIA: Second innings 70 (Burns 27 not out, Khawaja 19 not out; Wagner 1-13)

Kohli bats for Amir

SPORTS REPORTER

India top order batsman Virat Kohli has said that he was happy to see Pakistan pacer Mohammad Amir return to international cricket.

Speaking to reporters yesterday, Kohli said: "I was really happy to see Amir. He realised his mistake and has come back. He was always a world class bowler. I agree that if he had played in the last five years I think he would have been in the world's top two to three bowlers, the amount of talent he has."

"He has pace, swings it both ways and has a good slower delivery. He has worked hard and come this far and that takes a lot of courage," added Kohli.