

SPORT

Stage set for ultimate grudge match

AL-AMIN from London

An India-Pakistan match was once considered the mother of all battles on a cricketing plain, but for the last few years the rivalry has lost a lot of its gloss on the field, if not that overflowing emotion among the fans of the two sub-continental neighbours. It is also a battle that drew enormous interest in Bangladesh, where fans were distinctively divided into two camps, over the years. However, that has subsided to a great extent with the rise of the Tigers from pushover to contenders.

The India-Pakistan rivalry will take centre-stage at The Oval today, when they play for the ultimate glory in the Champions Trophy final. The final being played between the two teams is as surprising as Bangladesh's progress into the semifinals, where India defeated Pakistan by a massive nine wickets. Pakistan entered the tournament as the bottom-ranked side in the eight-team event and lost their opening group stage fixture against India by an enormous 124-run margin.

After long being an isolated nation, where teams do not travel since the 2009 terror attack on the Sri Lankan team bus, Pakistan have gone from bad to worse as far as their ODI fortunes are concerned. Their rivalry with India was also off-tracked following India's stance against bilateral series against its bitter neighbours.

But despite facing a lot of adversities on and off the field, Pakistan kept their one unique character intact – they are still the most unpredictable team in world cricket. They made a spectacular turn-around after that defeat against India, winning against South Africa and then beating Sri Lanka to set up a semifinal clash against hosts England. At Cardiff they disposed of England, the most impressive team



India captain Virat Kohli (R) and his Pakistan counterpart Sarfraz Ahmed both had their hands on the trophy in London yesterday, but only one will walk off with the glittering prize after today's ICC Champions Trophy final at The Oval.

PHOTO: AFP

in the event who were tipped to win the title, with a stunningly easy win.

India, who will look defend the title, also had a bumpy ride. They were surprised by Sri

Lanka in the group stage despite scoring 300-plus runs. However Virat Kohli's men were very ruthless and clinical against South Africa and Bangladesh.

India have set a lofty standard against Pakistan when it comes to clashes in ICC events. They will go into the final on the back of seven straight wins against their bitter rivals,

Kohli oozes calm

AL-AMIN from London

It is always a pleasure to attend a Virat Kohli press briefing. He is not only a spectator's delight with the bat but also an articulate speaker to a captivated audience.

Having already scored 8000 ODI runs at an average over 50, the top batsman in the world said that self belief was the key to his success.

"I have never believed in watching videos of anyone in the opposition camp. I prepare the best way I can. I believe in my abilities. I feel like I'm good enough technically to counter any bowler. I like to go by what I see. It doesn't really matter whether they have played them before or not," the Indian captain said yesterday.

Kohli is not only a complete modern cricketer, his clarity of thinking and execution out in the middle is

also amazing. He said pressure is something self-destructive and thinking about that in a big match situation is counter-productive.

"We haven't spoken about this game any differently. We have practiced the same way we practiced for the first game of the tournament. Even today's [Saturday's] practice was absolutely similar, not any drop of intensity or something extra. The more relaxed you are in this kind of situation, the more it helps to take better decisions when you are calm and play," he observed ahead of the final.

The biggest performer in a big match situation also believes that a positive mindset is the key to his success.

"After you reach this stage of this kind of tournament, you can't work on your technique. It's all about how you think about the game and how you prepare. You have to believe in yourself, no matter what. The ability to think otherwise in a difficult situation sets

you apart and helps pull the team through. That's something I visualize and work on," said an assertive Kohli.

He also does not seem to leave any grey areas when it comes to rooting for a teammate and said that he and the team would be backing Hardik Pandya in the final.

His observation about Pakistan was also pragmatic.

"I don't see any relevance of the first game here. Some teams start very confidently and then they fade away. Some teams might not have the best start but come back strongly, which Pakistan have done. Everyone knows they are a very talented team and they can beat anyone on their day. But at the same time we are neither too intimidated nor too arrogant. It's important to maintain a balance," he added.

Asked about the most important thing to avoid as a player, Kohli responded: "Biggest learning is to stay away from social media. Honestly, it may sound funny. But it's so important to stay away from those things. It's tough, but you have to make that sort of effort to stay in your zone, in good mind."



'Pak pacers no match for Kohli & Co'

Pti, New Delhi

Pakistan pacers have managed to subside the rivalry between en route to the Champions Trophy final but Gautam Gambhir does not see them posing any serious threat to Indian batsmen in the title clash on Sunday.

The Pakistan attack, comprising the likes of Mohammed Amir, Junaid Khan and Hasan Ali, has gone from strength to strength. They were exceptional against Sri Lanka and very impressive against England in the semifinal.

Gambhir is of the view that for Pakistani pacers to make an impact in London, help from the conditions is imperative.

"For years the India-Pakistan contest has been a battle between India's batting and Pakistan bowling. Earlier, it used to be Shoaib (Akhbar) and Umar Gul vs us and now Amir is their best bowler in the Champions Trophy. I don't see the conditions so far I won't see any threat for India," Gambhir told PTI in an interaction.

'Want to be the best here'

Afp, London

Pakistan pacesman Hasan Ali hopes the Champions Trophy final with arch-rivals India will see him continue to live the dream he had before the competition started.

The 23-year-old has been central to Pakistan's progress since a woeful 124-run defeat by India in their tournament opener at Edgbaston on June 4 and heads into Sunday's final at The Oval as the 2017 edition's leading wicket-taker with 10 at an average of just 17.20 apiece.

Given that Bhuvneshwar Kumar, India's most successful bowler, has taken six wickets so far, it will take something special to stop Hasan from finishing as the leading wicket-taker in a tournament featuring the world's top eight one-day international sides.

Hasan's achievement is all the more impressive given he only made his ODI debut in August last year.

"It's like a dream," Hasan told AFP on Friday. "I set a goal for myself during the West Indies series [in Guyana in April] and it was to become the best bowler in the Champions Trophy."

"I want to achieve that goal," added Hasan, whose 20 career ODIs have yielded a haul of 39 wickets at an average of 23.92 – impressive figures in a form of the game where the odds are often all in favour of batsmen making big scores.



The tournament's leading wicket-taker Hasan Ali will have to strike quickly if Pakistan are to stand a chance of dismantling India's thriving top-order in the Champions Trophy final today.

PHOTO: AFP

"Now when I knew that the best bowler will get a 'golden ball', I am determined to get that souvenir as it will be my first in my career."

Hasan's impressive array of skills were on show during Pakistan's dominant eight-wicket semi-final win in Cardiff on Wednesday against an England side previously unbeaten in the tournament.

Unfraid to go round the wicket, Hasan took three for 35 – all top-order wickets – against a powerful batting line-up as England slumped to 211 all out. The pick of his dismissals was when

Ben Stokes, fresh from his ODI best 102 not out in Australia in the group stage, was completely deceived by a slower ball that landed on a near yorker length and spooned a catch to mid-off.

"I will give the credit for my improvement to Azhar Mahmood, who has been working very hard with us bowlers," said Hasan, adding: "I have the much needed rhythm, so I will do my best to continue that."

"I am very positive about the final. The mistakes we made in the first game will not be repeated."

'Great chance to restore our pride'

Pti, Karachi

Former World Cup winning captain, Imran Khan said Pakistan has a golden opportunity in the Champions Trophy final to avenge their humiliating defeat to India in their first match of the tournament.

"I think we have got a great chance to restore our pride in the final because of the way we lost the first match to India," he said on "Samaa" television channel. "It was humiliating how badly we lost that match and we can turn things around now."

Imran, regarded as Pakistan's best captain after he led them to the 1992 World Cup title, said Pakistan needed to learn from the mistakes they made against India in that match.

Imran also advised Pakistan captain, Sarfraz Ahmed to avoid putting India in to bat first if he won the toss in the final.

"India have a very good batting line-up and if they put up a big total it will bring pressure on us. The strategy of fielding first against other teams has worked well for Sarfraz against other teams as the spinners throttled the opposition in the middle overs and Hasan Ali bowled really impressively," he said.

"Our real strength is our bowling and we must bat first if we win the toss. Our batting is



IMRAN KHAN

not that good, our bowling is better," he added.

Imran also praised the Sarfraz's captaincy.

"I am really impressed to see that Sarfraz has turned out to be such a bold captain," Imran said.

Imran's teammate and close ally, Javed Miandad also chimed in and said the final could prove to be the gateway for restoration of bilateral cricket series with India.

"I think we should put aside political issues and try to play more cricket. I want to see revival of bilateral cricket," the former captain said.

Miandad was not willing to pick a favorite for the final on Sunday.

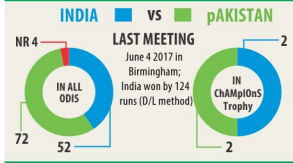
"If I speak fairly, then yes India at this time have a better team and more depth but I always believe that in a big match it is the moment that matters," he said.

"What is important is how many players you have in your team who are willing to put up their hands and perform on that day. I think Pakistan has some players who could be match winners."

Miandad said that each team had a 50 per cent chance of winning the final.

Former captain, Amir Sohail conceded that India, with their strong batting and strong bowling, were a better side pound for pound, but added that complacency could be their downfall.

HEAD TO HEAD



ROAD TO FINAL

PAKISTAN: GROUP STAGE
Lost to India by 124 runs (D/L method)
Beat South Africa by 19 runs (D/L method)
Beat Sri Lanka by 3 wickets

SEMIFINAL
Beat England by 8 wickets.

INDIA: Group Stage
Beat Pakistan by 124 runs (D/L method)
Lost to Sri Lanka by 7 wickets
Beat South Africa by 8 wickets (D/L method)

SEMIFINAL
Beat Bangladesh by 9 wickets.

TRIVIA

- Pakistan and India have met only once before in an ICC event final, in the 2007 World Twenty20. India won that game by five runs.
- India have won four of their last five ODIs against Pakistan, including a 124-run victory in the group stage of this tournament.
- India and Pakistan have met 15 times in ICC events, with India winning 13.
- Pakistan have reached a Champions Trophy final for the first time, while India have reached the final thrice before, winning two times.
- Pakistan have lost seven of their nine previous ODIs at The Oval, while India have alternated victory and defeat in their last six ODI outings.
- India have the best batting average in the tournament at 91.5, but Pakistan have taken the most wickets of any team with 31.
- India's top three – Shikhar Dhawan, Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli – have scored 81.4% of their team's runs in the tournament so far.
- Junaid Khan has dismissed Kohli thrice, conceding only two runs off 22 balls against India's talisman.
- With technology helping and gambling being legal in the UK, around Rs 2,000 crore is being wagered on today's final, according to estimates by the All India Gaming Federation.