

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 subcontinental neighbours. It is also a battle that drew enormous interest in Bangladesh, where fans were distractively divided into two camps, over the years. However that has responded to a great extent with the rise of the Tigers from pushover to contendents.

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 them 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 tourists did not travel to 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 still are the most unpredictable team in world cricket. They will be the ones to prove that 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



PHOTO: AFP

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.

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 800 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 that I can counter any bowler. I like to go by what I see. It doesn't really matter whether you 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 you take better decisions when you are calm and play," he observed ahead of the final.

His observation about Pakistan was also pragmatic.

"I don't see any relevance of the first game. So, we will just move on. 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."

"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 want 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.

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'Pak pacers no match for Kohli & Co'

Pti, New Delhi

Pakistan pacers have managed to subdue the rival batsmen 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 of likes of Mohammed Amir, Junaid Khan and Hasan Ali, has gone from strength to strength. They were exceptional against Sri Lanka and England in the semifinal.

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

"For years the India-Pakistan contest has been a battle between India's batting and Pakistan's bowling. Earlier, it used to be Shoaib Akhtar and Umar Gul vs us and now Amir is their best bowler. Given the flat nature of wickets in the competition so far I don't see any threat for India," Gambhir told Pti in an interaction.

Pakistan paceman 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 impressive 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 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 internationals.

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 App 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 tournament."

"I want to achieve that goal," added Hasan, whose 20 career ODIs have yielded a total 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.

"Now when I know that the best bowler will take the wicket 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.

Unafraid 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, was in trouble with the bowler's 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."

'Want to be the best here'

Afp, London



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'Great chance to restore our pride'

Pti, Karachi



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

"I think we have 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," he added.

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 Hassan 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

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.

Imran Khan was not willing to pick a favorite for the final.

"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 have some players who could be match winners," Miandad said.

Former captain, Aamir 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.