



All-rounder Ben Stokes (L) helps England top-order batsman Joe Root do some stretches. England will be hoping that some of Stokes's form can rub off on Root. Australia batsman Steve Smith (R) has his eyes set on the ball as he prepares for the semifinal tie against England today. He will be looking to get back amongst the runs as Aussies eye the World Cup final.

PHOTO: REUTERS/AFP

England face acid test against Australia

Four years of planning will be put on the line for England when they face holders Australia in a blockbuster Cricket World Cup semifinal at Edgbaston on Thursday.

England's woeful first-round exit at the 2015 edition prompted a complete rethink of their approach to one-day internationals for a side that had long placed Test success above all other considerations.

Australian coach Trevor Bayliss was drafted in with the aim of guiding their bid for a first World Cup title.

The transformation has been impressive, with England climbing to number one in the ODI rankings under the astute captaincy of Eoin Morgan.

Their rise to the summit has been based on dynamic run-scoring, with in-form openers Jason Roy and Jonny Bairstow leading the way.

It would be the first time since 2005 that a major England men's home match had emerged from behind a UK television paywall, with cricket having a chance to reconnect with a 'lost' audience in its birthplace.

Australia, however, have never lost any of their seven previous World Cup semi-finals -- although they did tie with South Africa at Edgbaston 20 years ago before advancing into the final on superior net run-rate.

They landed a psychological blow in the group stage

England, as well as finding a way to cope with Starc, will have to contain the run-scoring threat of a powerful Australian top order.

David Warner has scored 638 runs this tournament following the left-handed opener's return to international cricket after a 12-month ban for his role in a ball-tampering scandal in South Africa.

But paceman Liam Plunkett insisted England could rise to the occasion.



when they beat Ashes rivals England by 64 runs at Lord's last month.

Australia left-arm quicks Jason Behrendorff and Mitchell Starc shared nine wickets between them in a match where Australia captain Aaron Finch made 100 after surviving a testing opening from England's fast bowlers.

Roy, however, was missing with a torn hamstring and since his return, England have scored crucial wins over India and New Zealand that took them into the semi-finals.

- 'Different animal' - By contrast Australia, who have not won in any format at Edgbaston since the 2001 Ashes Test, suffered a surprise 10-run defeat by South Africa at Old Trafford in their final group game.

"We're a different sort of animal compared to our last teams," he said. "We've played well for the past four years, we're ranked number one."

"We feel on our day we can beat anyone in the world."

The five-time world champions, will pitch late call-up Peter Handscomb straight into Thursday's match after fellow batsman Usman Khawaja suffered a tournament-ending hamstring injury against South Africa.

Australia coach Justin Langer led his squad on a barefoot walkabout around Edgbaston on Monday before they shared stories on the outfield in a so-called "bonding circle".

"Haydos (Matthew Hayden) and I used to do it as a bit of a ritual before every Test match," former Australia opener Langer explained.

"If you go back 12 months there wasn't much to be relaxed and chilled about in Australian cricket, was there? We went through a major crisis in our cricket. It didn't just affect our cricket, it affected our country."

"We've got to work hard on being more humble in what we do and being focused on playing good cricket." But despite the coach's new-age talk, Australia's Nathan Lyon tried to put pressure on England in typically acerbic style.

"It's all on them," the off-spinner said. "It's their World Cup to lose if you ask me."

FACTS

Australia skipper Aaron Finch has scored 1253 runs -- most by any batsmen in the current Australia World Cup squad -- in the 26 matches he played against England.

Aaron Finch has also scored the most number of hundreds among the players in the current Australian side against England. The right-hander has so far smashed seven hundreds against England.

England skipper Eoin Morgan has amassed 1819 runs -- most by any players in the two sides' current squads -- in the 52 matches he played against Australia.

England batsman Jason Roy's career best ODI score of 180 off 151 balls came against Australia in January last year in Melbourne. This remains the highest individual score by any player in the two sides.

Australia left-arm quick Mitchell Starc has scalped 25 wickets -- most by any bowlers in the current Australian side -- in the 15 matches he played against England.

England spinner Adil Rashid has taken 35 wickets -- most by any player in the two sides' current squads -- in the 20 matches he played against Australia.

CONDITIONS

Unfortunately, there is some degree of rain on the radar in Birmingham and clouds are expected to be present through the course of the game. As for the pitch, one can expect a good surface for batting.

But the stakes for hosts England are higher than simply the winning of a match that would see them into a final against either India or New Zealand at Lord's on Sunday.

Satellite subscription host broadcaster Sky has said it will allow the final to be shown on free-to-air television in Britain -- but only if England are involved in the showpiece match.

MR EFFICIENT

When the oil is lite, LIFE IS A DELIGHT

KING'S

It was New Zealand right-arm quick Matt Henry, who had started the rot at the top of a formidable Indian batting line up after their semifinal resumed on the reserve day at Old Trafford in Manchester yesterday. Henry removed the dangerous Rohit Sharma in second over of the innings with a teasing good length delivery that moved slightly away from the right-hander, inducing a faint edge of his bat before being taken by Tom Latham behind the stumps. Henry then scalped the wicket of KL Rahul in the very first delivery of his next over before removing Dinesh Karthik in the 10th over, leaving India reeling on four for 24. Henry ended up with match-winning figures of three for 37.

Embrace WC dream: Morgan

England captain Eoin Morgan has urged his side to embrace their World Cup dreams as they prepare for Thursday's blockbuster semi-final against old rivals Australia.

Morgan can lead England to their first World Cup final since 1992 if they beat the holders at Edgbaston.

Advancing to Sunday's title match at Lord's would be the culmination of four years' hard work for Morgan and his squad after their dismal performance at the 2015 edition.

On the eve of the crunch clash, Morgan issued a passionate plea for his players to take pride in their achievements so far and to relish their moment in the spotlight rather than be weighed down by pressure.

"Sometimes I'm guilty of it, you can lose sight of the position you're in and the fact you're living your dream," Morgan told reporters on Wednesday.

"I think it's possible to play with a smile on your face tomorrow."

Asked if the World Cup hosts were feeling excited, nervous or simply focused on the task at hand, Morgan added: "All of those things. But I think excitement



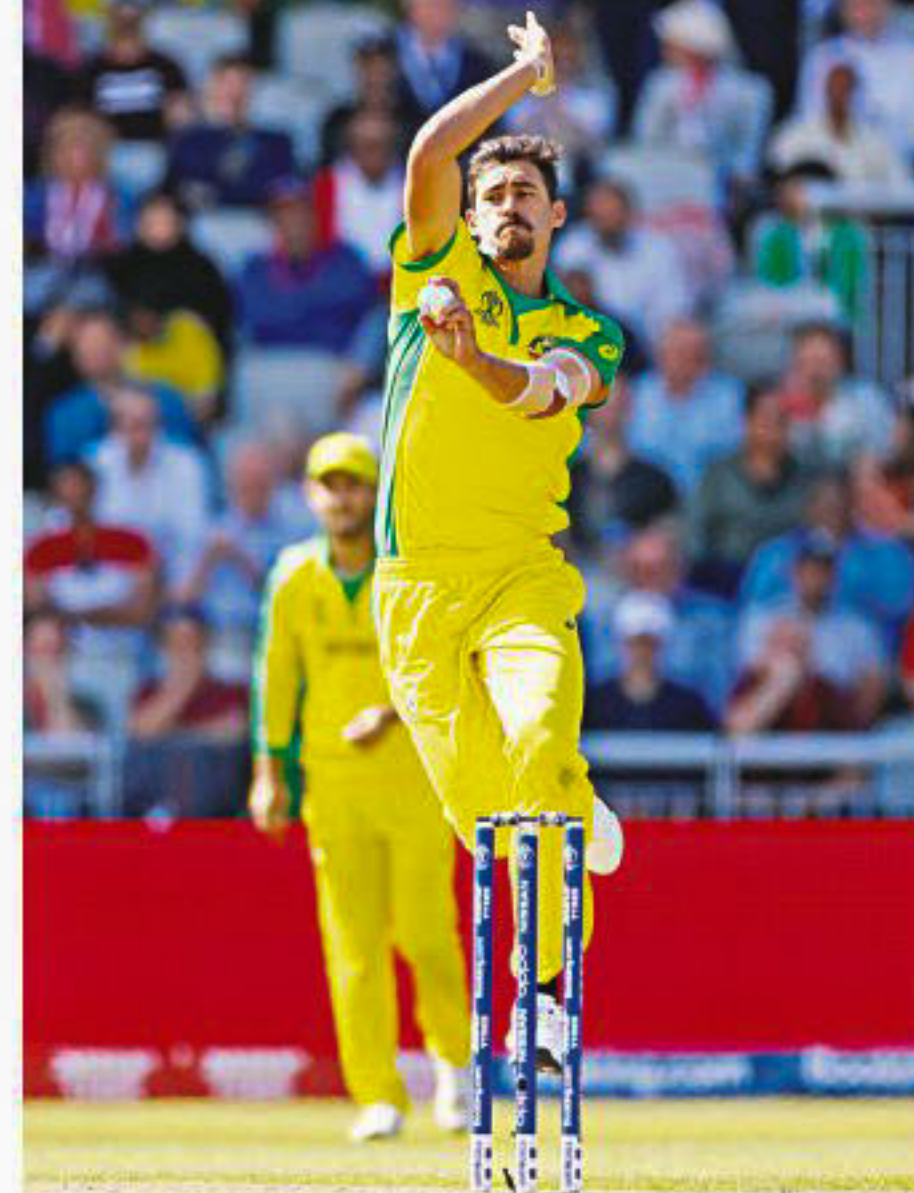
probably should be the dominant one.

"Everyone is excited to play this semi-final. The fact that through the group stages getting to this stage looked unlikely, or was called into question, makes it even more exciting for us."

Morgan's side have established a proud recent record against Australia, winning 10 of the last 11 one-day internationals between the old rivals prior to this tournament.

That counted for nothing in the group stages, when Australia claimed a 64-run win at Lord's that left England's hopes of top-four finish in doubt.

KEY BATTLES



MITCHELL STARC

MORGAN V FINCH

Eoin Morgan assured home fans and pundits that England would not buckle under pressure after wobbling in the league stage.

Morgan stayed true to his word, masterminding victories over India and New Zealand and is now two wins away from making history.

Aaron Finch has let his bat do the talking, taking Australia to their sixth semi-final in seven tournaments.

The opener amassed 507 runs, with two hundreds and three fifties, as the five-time champions won seven of their nine league games to finish second in the 10-team group table.



JOFRA ARCHER

BAIRSTOW V WARNER

England's Jonny Bairstow was the key man in England's revival at the end of the group phase, hitting two dominant centuries to haul the hosts into the semi-finals.

The opener hit 111 in the match against India and then smashed another century against New Zealand. Reunited with opening partner Jason Roy, Bairstow threatens to be a thorn in Australia's side at Edgbaston.

Left-handed David Warner was Bairstow's teammate for Sunrisers Hyderabad in the 2019 Indian Premier League and the pair were prolific.

Since then, Warner has returned to international cricket in triumph following a ball-tampering incident that saw him banned for 12 months.

He has hit three hundreds and three fifties at the World Cup to stack up 638 runs in nine matches, leading Australia's charge.

STARC V ARCHER

Need for speed Mitchell Starc has been a lethal weapon for Australia at the World Cup, claiming 26 wickets with a strike rate of 19.2.

The left-armed's ability to strike early and stem the flow of runs will be crucial against an English top-order that has returned to top form.

Jofra Archer, 24, has combined with senior paceman Chris Woakes to give the home side a lethal new-ball pair that Australia will be wary of.

Archer remains the go-to man in England's search for an early wicket -- the Barbados-born paceman has claimed 17 wickets in nine matches.

INFO ZONE

HEAD TO HEAD IN WORLD CUP		
AUSTRALIA		ENGLAND
6	WON	2
2	LOSS	6
0	TIE	0
0	NR	0

HEAD TO HEAD IN ODIS		
AUSTRALIA		ENGLAND
82	WON	61
61	LOSS	82
2	TIE	2
3	NR	3

LAST MEETING
June 25 2019 at Lord's in London. Australia won by 64 runs.

KEY PLAYERS

AUSTRALIA		ENGLAND
DAVID WARNER	BAT AVE	JASON ROY
46.12	42.58	
95.58	BAT STRIKE RATE	107.05
20	50S	17
17	100S	9
179	HS	180
4981	RUNS	3279
122	LAST MATCH	60