

AUSTRALIA

VS

INDIA



Slump? What Slump, says Smith

AFP, Sydney

Former Australia skipper Steve Smith dismissed talk of a form slump but credited a more positive attitude after his century against India in Sydney Friday.

The 31-year-old reached three figures in a Test for the first time since 2019, smacking 131 for his 27th ton to help steer Australia to a first innings 338.

He bounced back after failing to reach double figures in the opening two Tests, which sparked a flurry of concern about his form among pundits and the media.

But Smith said he was never worried, pointing out that he hit pulsating back-to-back centuries in the limited-overs series against India late last year.

"I read a lot of things and plenty of people said I was out of form so it was nice to come back into form, if that's what you want to call it," he said. "I mean, it was only about three or four weeks ago that I

scored two hundreds at the SCG. So yeah, it kind of just makes me laugh sometimes when people say that kind of thing. I missed out in the first two Tests obviously and came back today and scored some runs and helped I guess put us in a decent position."

Smith struggled against the spin of Ravi Ashwin in Adelaide and Melbourne and admitted he made some adjustments to his game, which helped him build his near-flawless score.

"I decided to be a bit more positive. I think early on I hit him (Ashwin) over his head, sort of just put a bit of pressure on him," he said.

"So, yeah, it was a concerted effort to do that and I was happy with the way I played him."

Smith, who averages more than 60, faced 226 balls and hit 16 boundaries in his patient knock, surviving only an ambitious lbw review on 41.

'Sir' Jadeja's golden arm lights up SCG

REUTERS, Sydney

Ravindra Jadeja emerged as India's man with the golden arm on Friday, claiming four Australia wickets and then producing a moment of sheer brilliance to prove why he is considered one of the best fielders in contemporary cricket.

The all-rounder was the pick of the Indian bowlers, claiming 4-62 with his crafty left-arm spin to help restrict Australia to 338 in the third test at the Sydney Cricket Ground.

The highlight of Jadeja's performance, however, was his rocket throw which ended Steve Smith's stellar knock of 131.

The gun fielder sprinted from deep square leg chasing an inside edge, ran past the ball to pick it up with his throwing arm, and broke the stumps with a diving Smith short of his ground.

"Seemingly impossible that only Jadeja the fielder could have made possible," former test batsman Sanjay Manjrekar

tweeted. "Not just the accuracy of the throw but the sheer speed of the throw was the key to that run out. Absolutely brilliant!"

The video of "Sir Jadeja", as the all-rounder is fondly known on social media, went viral and the 32-year-old, known for his athleticism, rated it as probably the best run-out he had effected in his career.

"I will rewind-and-play this run-out in my mind," Jadeja said after outshining India's specialist spinner Ravichandran Ashwin, who went wicketless on the second day at the SCG. "This is one of my best, a direct hit from outside the 30-yard circle... this run-out is the kind of moment that stays in your mind."

Jadeja dismissed Marnus Labuschagne, whose 91 was second only to Smith's century, and Matthew Wade with quicker deliveries and sent back tailenders Pat Cummins and Nathan Lyon with yorker-length balls



Plans afoot to maintain robust age-level pipeline



MAZHAR UDDIN



There is a rich tradition of age-level cricket in Bangladesh with many stars rising out of the system, such as Shakib Al Hasan, Mushfiqur Rahim, Mehedi Hasan Miraz, all of whom went on to represent the Tigers at the world stage with distinction.

With the young Tigers setting a new benchmark by winning the ICC Under-19 World Cup in 2020, the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) is now giving paramount importance to the age-level circuit to create a strong pipeline of players for the national side.

As part of a long-term plan the BCB's game development committee had almost formed an under-21 side made up of those cricketers, but progress was halted due to the pandemic since March last year.

Although the regular talent hunt programmes of the age-level groups have been suspended since the Covid-19 outbreak in the country, the game development committee kept things rolling by arranging a virtual talent hunt programme where youngsters could send their bowling, batting, and fielding videos to the board from which the selectors could shortlist the candidates.

Currently, the under-15 national camp is going on at BKSP where all players and the coaching staff are kept inside a bio-secure bubble.

Normally, the selectors pick players from national age-level competitions that take place each year across the country, but things are different this time. Four age-level selectors -- Hasibul Hossain, Ehsanul Haque, Sajjad Ahmed, and Hannan Sarkar -- are busy moving from one division to another scouting age-level talent.

Ehsanul, who looks after the under-17 group, is currently in Khulna alongside Sajjadul where they are observing the shortlisted cricketers in a match-scenario training camp.

"You know things are different this time around obviously, for the pandemic. As we couldn't arrange the national competitions due to health safety reasons, we are trying to continue our process in a limited way. But it is a challenge as we had to ensure the safety of the cricketers, which is our biggest priority at the moment."

"As you know we did arrange a virtual talent hunt where the youngsters sent their videos to us and from there, we tried to shortlist a few of them. Obviously, it's tough to select players through those videos and not in person but the BCB's game development committee is trying its best to keep things going," Ehsanul told The Daily Star yesterday.

With the under-15 and -17 groups already having started their proceedings, the selectors are also looking forward to starting the under-19 camp from this month as part of the preparation for the ICC Under-19 World Cup next year.

"Although many of our plans were suspended due to the pandemic, we do have back-up plans for the under-19 team. We are working to prepare the next under-19 batch but at the moment health safety is our main concern. We are hoping things will change in the near future so that we can resume our full-fledged training camps of all age-level groups in the coming days," Ehsanul added.

End of the line in sight for Abahani?

ANISUR RAHMAN



Playing for one club for 18 years is without a doubt a sign of a player's great loyalty, which is repaid by the club year after year by offering contracts despite the kind of service they will get.

It may sound strange in the professional football era, but it has been happening at traditional giants Abahani, who have retained the services of 40-year-old midfielder Pranotosh Kumar Das, perhaps the last active player of his generation.

It is not just Das. The country's most successful club also have 36-year-old Wali Faisal, 35-year-old Nasiruddin Chowdhury, 34-year-old Mamun Mia, 32-year-old Mamunul Islam and 32-year-old Atiqur Rahman Meshu. One trophy has already slipped from their grasp after a loss to new force Bashundhara Kings in the semifinal of the Federation Cup on Thursday.

Since Bashundhara Kings' emergence, six-time professional league champions



Abahani have failed to lift a trophy after winning the 2018 Federation Cup and are no doubt going to face big challenges in the league and Independence Cup this season.

In Thursday's semifinal, Abahani took the lead against the run of play but failed to keep the lead after Bashundhara made two quality substitutions, who provided the final passes on two occasions. Meanwhile, Abahani had to bring on midfielder Mamunul Islam to replace injured center-back Masih Saighani. Mamunul was later replaced by winger Jewel Rana.

Retaining players does provide teams with an edge as they can benefit from better

understanding and combination among the players, but Abahani have been doing it for years, refusing to bring any new players to the squad unless someone else departs.

Consequently, Abahani's bench is now a place full of unknown faces and little quality to actually replace players in the first team. It was evident on Thursday night that a strong bench had pushed Bashundhara Kings to the final while a weaker bench pushed Abahani to suffer a defeat.

Of their 26 local players, the Abahani management has astonishingly signed five goalkeepers and some others who allegedly do not have the quality to represent a club of their stature. It has also been learnt that at least three young players have been signed upon requests from two former footballers and a club official's son.

Having seen the poor present condition, two former Abahani footballers expressed their frustration. "If the threat of losing your place in the squad is there, then players try to give their best but I haven't seen that seriousness among the Abahani

players although they played better against Kings compared to their previous match," said Firoz Mahmud Titu, who played as a defender for Abahani from 1999 to 2001.

"If you ask me about the standard of the local and foreign players as well as professional aspects, I would place Bashundhara ahead of Abahani," said former national captain Zahid Hasan Emily, who represented Abahani in the first two professional football leagues, adding that Abahani should sign at least 10 players to strengthen the bench next season.

Bashundhara have been in practice for three months with the participation of their foreign players while Abahani only had a seven-week preparation due to 'unfit foreign players' joining training after December 10, a month after training. There were whispers that the Abahani management did not want to bring the foreigners earlier in a bid to save on expenses, raising questions about whether Abahani, like traditional rivals Mohammedan SC, is walking toward its end?

Halep ready for 'challenging' QUARANTINE

REUTERS, Mumbai

Simona Halep finds the prospect of 14 days of quarantine ahead of the Australian Open daunting but the world number two believes the experience of playing at bio-secure tournaments last year will help her get through it.

The 29-year-old Wimbledon champion had an eventful 2020 season in which she ran up a 17-match winning streak, skipped the U.S. Open over health fears but then contracted the coronavirus.

The start to her 2021 campaign will involve the long journey to Australia in mid-January before two weeks in quarantine ahead of the start of the year's first Grand Slam on Feb. 8.

"I know that it will be hard mentally, but I feel like my experiences in bubbles in 2020 will help me know a little more what to expect," Halep told Reuters, adding she was grateful for the five-hour window to train every day during quarantine.

"I am also less stressed because I know that they have COVID so well under control in Australia and that once we are out of quarantine, we will be free!"

"This year in lockdown has meant that we are all a lot more used to spending time inside than we used to be."



Halep's last competitive match was at the French Open in early October and she will hope to get some matches under her belt in a WTA 500 event at Melbourne Park to warm up for the hardcourt Grand Slam.

With the Asian swing, including the season-ending WTA Finals, cancelled in 2020 due to the pandemic, it was a long pre-season but Halep said she had enjoyed being at home and let her body and mind recover from a stressful year.

"I worked a lot on my fitness," Halep said in an email interview. "I have to take care of my body now more than ever so lots of strengthening exercises and speed work, and from the beginning of December we really stepped up the work on court."

"Lots of drills and repetition and now finally I am playing sets against other Romanian girls, getting ready for the first matches in Australia."

Halep had skipped the hardcourt swing in the United States due to concerns over the pandemic and her worst fears were realised when she contracted the virus in October.

"I didn't get too sick with it thankfully but, of course, as a professional athlete, I was worried about my lungs so we did lots of tests and everything was great," the 2018 French Open winner said.

Shepherd misses BD tour

REUTERS

Fast-bowling all-rounder Romario Shepherd has tested positive for Covid-19 and has been replaced with Keon Harding in the West Indies one-day squad for their Bangladesh tour later this month, Cricket West Indies (CWI) has said.

"Shepherd will remain in Guyana where he is undergoing a period of isolation that unfortunately will extend beyond the team's travel period," the CWI said in a statement.

West Indies are sending a depleted contingent after 10 players, including test captain Jason Holder and limited-overs skipper Kieron Pollard, pulled out of the tour over COVID-19 concerns.

Fast bowler Harding, who is yet to make his West Indies debut, was among the reserve players during West Indies' tour of England last year.

The CWI said all other members of the touring party have returned negative results in their final pre-travel COVID-19 tests and would reach Bangladesh in two batches by Sunday.



PASSION FOR CRICKET

With his left leg supported by a crutch, Tanvir Hasan, a 14-year-old teen, plays a shot that would certainly mesmerise any stranger unknown to his abilities. Even with one leg, Tanvir stands out for his batting ability among his friends with whom he regularly plays cricket just outside the Shaheed Chandu Stadium in Bogura. Tanvir's disadvantage could not stop him from excelling in the sport he loves

PHOTO: MOSTAFA SHABUJ

SA call up two uncapped seamers for Pak tour

REUTERS, Cape Town

South Africa have included uncapped seamers Daryn Dupavillon and Otniel Baartman in an extended 21-man test squad for their first return to Pakistan for 14 years later this month.

South Africa will play tests in Karachi and Rawalpindi, starting on Jan. 26 and also welcome back fast bowler Kagiso Rabada and all-rounder Dwaine Pretorius, as well as spinners Tabraiz Shamsi and George Linde.

"Considering that the conditions that will be faced are largely unknown to the South African team, we wanted to strengthen the attack with the skill sets that Tabraiz Shamsi and George Linde have to offer, while giving players like Daryn Dupavillon and Otniel Baartman an opportunity after making strong cases in recent seasons," convener of selectors Victor Mpsitang said in a media release from Cricket South Africa on Friday.