



Despite a not-so-smooth journey in the World Cup so far, New Zealand skipper Kane Williamson was all smiles during a practise session on the eve of their blockbuster World Cup semifinal clash against an unbeaten India in Mumbai today. Meanwhile, India's star batter Virat Kohli, unlike Williamson, was a bit more serious and focused as the hosts look to extend their nine-match winning streak.

PHOTO: REUTERS

- India and New Zealand faced each other in 117 ODIs out of which the Men in Blue came out on top on 59 occasions, with the the Kiwis winning 50. Seven ODIs produced no results and one encounter ended in a tie.
- In World Cups, however, New Zealand have had the better of India on five encounters, while India have won on four occasions. The 2019 group-stage contest ended in a no result but the Kiwis knocked India out of the tournament with a win in the semifinals.
- India won 30 ODIs at home against New Zealand, who have eight wins to their name in ODIs in India. But the Kiwis edge India in meetings that took place in neutral venues as they won 16 matches against India's 15.
- India's Virat Kohli averages 56.59 against New Zealand having amassed 1528 runs in 30 innings. He has five centuries and nine fifties to his name in ODIs against the Kiwis.
- Kohli's record in the three World Cup semifinals is a dismal one as he has registered scores of nine, one, and one in the past three semis he has played in. On all three occasions, he was dismissed by left-arm pacers.
- India have taken the most number of wickets, 85, in this World Cup. They also have the best economy rate (4.5), best average (19.6), and the highest strike-rate (26.2) among all the teams in the tournament.

# India focused on ‘getting the job done’

AGENCIES

India men's cricket team haven't reached any of the last five finals in ICC white-ball World Cups, while New Zealand have never won one, despite reaching three finals in seven years. Something has to give when they meet at the 2023 World Cup semifinal in Mumbai today.

India versus New Zealand is a mouth-watering prospect as the first semifinal of the tournament throws up a repeat of the 2019 semi at Old Trafford in Manchester in which the Kiwis denied India in a nail-biting classic.

However, India captain Rohit Sharma insisted his side's record of big game defeats by New Zealand was "all in the past".

India's progression to this semifinal has been even more serene than it was in England four years ago, with Rohit Sharma's side winning all nine games and rarely even looking like being challenged on their path to the knockout stages.

History beckons for an India side who are looking for a first major tournament win in 12 years, and where better for this semifinal to be held than at the venue where India won their last World Cup back in 2011.

Tournament hosts India head into Wednesday's showpiece match at

opening batter Rohit's Wankhede Stadium home ground.

But four years ago a team featuring several of the same players, including Rohit and star batter Virat Kohli, were members of an India side that suffered an agonising 18-run defeat by New Zealand in a rain-affected World Cup semifinal spanning two days in Manchester.



New Zealand also defeated India in the inaugural 2021 World Test Championship final.

The build-up to Wednesday's game has seen much speculation about whether Rohit's men can go on to lift India's third World Cup or whether New Zealand, who gave India a run for their money before going down by four wickets in pool play, will prove their downfall once again.

Rohit, however, insisted his focus

was firmly on the here and now.

"That's the beauty of this team," he told a pre-match press conference on Tuesday.

"None of the guys were born when we won our first World Cup and then, when we won our second World Cup in 2011, half of the guys were not even playing the game."

He added: "This current crop of players is very much into what is happening today, what can happen tomorrow...The focus is on how they can get better as a player, what they can bring to the team, and the things they can improve."

Rohit said while a semifinal was a high-pressure situation, his side were always under intense scrutiny in cricket-crazy India.

"If you are an Indian cricketer, then whatever the format, whatever the tournament, there is always pressure. Because you hear the same voice from everywhere that we have to win the match tomorrow...So, I think in terms of pressure, it becomes mandatory for Indian cricketers," he added.

Before this World Cup, Rohit spoke about having "unfinished business", with the 36-year-old saying Wednesday: "Now it's just about business, the pure business of getting the job done for the team."

## ‘Hello, mic check’

AFP, Mumbai

New Zealand captain Kane Williamson proved as adept at facing tricky deliveries off the pitch as he is on it after a chaotic start to a Cricket World Cup semi-final press conference on Tuesday.

With New Zealand facing unbeaten hosts India in Wednesday's last-four clash in Mumbai, the star batsman was confronted by dozens of reporters at Wankhede Stadium eager to hear his views.

But the press conference started in unusual fashion with a question referencing the first recorded ascent of Mount Everest, the world's highest peak, in Nepal by New Zealand's Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing Norgay.

"On May 29, 1953, about 70 years back..." said a reporter.

But before he could finish his question, Williamson, who was born 37 years later in 1990, interjected "I remember", prompting a roar of laughter from the assembled journalists and broadcasters.

The press conference was then halted by a burst of screeching microphone feedback before a disembodied voice, came through a speaker saying: "Hello mic check, hello mic check, one, two three."

The reporter then finished his question, where he compared the ascent of Everest to the difficulty New Zealand, losing finalists in the last two World Cups, faced in trying to defeat an India side who have won all nine of their round-robin games.

Williamson, who knows India well from his time playing in the Indian Premier League, started to answer the question only to be interrupted again by more technical problems.

While officials took several minutes to resolve the issue, the 33-year-old Williamson played sound engineer, prompting further laughter by saying: "Hello, mic check, mic check, mic check."

He then added: "I think I know the question, I'll give the answer shortly. It might be the only question, I'll answer it five different ways."

Even though Williamson was in a very relaxed mood, he admitted the Kiwis expect to be outnumbered in the gallery for the blockbuster clash.

When a reporter told Williamson during a pre-match press conference on Tuesday that the capacity of the Wankhede is 33,108 and "33 [thousand] of them will be in blue (India's colour)," he jokingly replied: "There'll be more than that."

## Jude out of Malta, Macedonia clashes

AFP, London

Jude Bellingham has been ruled out of England's final Euro 2024 qualifiers against Malta and North Macedonia, the Football Association announced on Tuesday.

Chelsea defender Levi Colwill has also been withdrawn from Gareth Southgate's squad, meaning five players are missing from the initial group announced for the match at Wembley on November 17 and the away fixture three days later.

Midfielder Bellingham, 20, who has scored 13 goals so far in a stunning debut season for Real Madrid, and Colwill both have shoulder issues.

"Jude Bellingham and Levi Colwill will play no part in England's forthcoming UEFA Euro 2024 qualifiers against Malta and North Macedonia," the FA said in a statement.

"The pair arrived at St George's Park for assessments on Monday but will now return to their clubs to continue their rehabilitation."



# Mirpur solution ‘not impossible’

### Will BCB stick to ostrich policy?

MAZHAR UDDIN from Kolkata

In the aftermath of Bangladesh's debacle in the ICC World Cup, the importance of having sporting pitches at home arrived in full force in the midst of discussions.

Despite having the opportunity to play on batting-friendly wickets throughout the apex event in India, Bangladesh's inability to meet the modern-day requirements of scoring big as the Tigers had to wait till their last match, against Australia, to post a 300-plus total. Stand-in skipper Najmul Hossain Shanto remarked after the game that it had a lot to do with their lack of the know-how of scoring big.

On the bowling front, Bangladesh pacers were thoroughly disappointing despite arriving into the tournament with an abundance of promise. Surprisingly, if not on equal terms, India quicks have been a cut above the rest, garnering heaps of praise from greats of the bygone era.

And thus, coming to the forefront once again is the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium in Mirpur, which continues to stage an overwhelming majority of local and international matches, baffling



experts and fans alike -- if not the decision makers in Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB).

India is arguably the best example of how building sporting pitches throughout a nation can completely alter its cricketing culture, as their long-term strategy is currently reaping benefits on the international scene.

Historically, India had been renowned for creating rank turners that catered to the spinners against the visiting sides. However, since

2012, under the leadership of former BCCI chief curator Daljit Singh, the focus was replaced with the goal of creating sporting tracks for the greater good.

Chief curator of Kolkata's Eden Gardens stadium, Sujan Mukherjee, told The Daily Star yesterday, "Look, there was a time when not many quality pacers popped up from India, but now India have one of the best fast-bowling units in the world. The youngsters are enjoying bowling on grassy surfaces and we are getting

new fast bowlers.

"Playing on good wickets resulted in players getting that exposure to improve their game. So, the wicket plays a vital role behind the development of a player. Yes, hard work, dedication and skills are there but if you don't play in sporting pitches, you won't be able to become a good cricketer."

Sujan has been working with the Cricket Association of Bengal (CAB) for the past ten years and is the person in charge behind producing sporting tracks in the ongoing World Cup. Ahead of the second semi-final between South Africa and Australia, he was busy preparing the Kolkata pitch and explained how Mirpur surface can attain similar nature.

"The most important thing is



the soil; it has to be good. We have installed the Bermuda grass and it has to be deep-rooted and made sure it sticks to the soil properly, so that the pitch could hold the grass.

"What I observed about the Mirpur pitch is that it starts to crack and open up after some time. It doesn't matter whether it's a black soil or red soil, the most important thing is how you maintain it and whether it has the ability to hold properly.

"You need to search and find out the appropriate soil, and the curator needs to look around for that. Change the entire soil of the square [if needed]. It doesn't take more than eight to ten weeks to change the entire soil and then you have to give some fertilizers and medicines. It's nothing impossible as you need that urge to improve," he said.

The players have to feel safe wherever they play, and the pitch gives them the freedom to do so, according to the former cricket player who participated in the Dhaka Premier League in the middle of the 1980s.

While there have been claims of club administrators and board members interfering with the type of pitches they want in local and international series in Bangladesh,

Sujan stated that curators in India never receive such orders, allowing them to work freely.

"We don't get any instructions from the board on how to prepare pitches, not even in domestic cricket, because the main thing is that we need to produce sporting pitches. I've been working for ten years now, supervising four venues in Kolkata, but I've never received any directives from the board.

"Even the Kolkata Knight Riders, whose home ground this is, never asked me to do so. I have the freedom to prepare the pitches, and no one comes in and tells me to modify the nature of the surface. Batters can play their strokes because the ball comes on to the bat nicely, seamers can bowl fast and get good bounce, and spinners can also get purchase on this wicket because it's a competitive wicket," he said.

It will be interesting to see if BCB finally recognizes the importance of preparing sporting pitches at home in order to achieve the desired results on the international stage, especially after the World Cup debacle, or if they will continue to look for scapegoats without digging deep to find a solution.