

Williamson back on track

STAR DESK REPORT

New Zealand batting mainstay Kane Williamson showed that class is permanent after having undergone an extended lean patch in the red-ball format.

Prior to striking an unbeaten 200 against Pakistan in Karachi on Thursday after batting for a little less than 10 hours, the 32-year old had only scored a single half-century in 10 innings, spanned over nearly two years, following his 238 not out against Pakistan in Christchurch in 2021.

Williamson, relieved from the burden of Test captaincy, hit 21 fours in his rock-solid 395-ball knock. He celebrated his 200 in his characteristically low-key manner as he took off his helmet and raised his bat. New Zealand then wasted no time to declare at 612 for nine, with a first-innings lead of 174 on the fourth day's evening session.

The classy right-hander took his double-ton tally to five, the highest among New Zealand batters, one more than his compatriot Brendon McCullum. Only 12 players in history have struck more double centuries than Williamson.



Composed and eyes on the ball at all times, New Zealand's seasoned campaigner Kane Williamson exhibited a Test batting masterclass as he combined with Ish Sodhi to stitch a 329-ball 154-run stand for the seventh wicket in their first innings against Pakistan in Karachi on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

Prodigies snatch Razib's thunder

SPORTS REPORTER

GM Enamul Hossain Razib clinched his sixth title in the National Chess Championship but youngsters like the prodigious Manon Reja Neer, Tahsin Tajwar Zia and Fahad Rahman demanded attention by defeating superior opponents, including Grand Masters.

Razib secured 11 points from 13 matches and was crowned for a sixth time, but the country's youngest GM suffered a loss to 12-year-old Neer, who showed the result was no fluke by stunning six-time champion GM Reefat Bin Sattar.

17-year-old FM Tahsin Tajwar, playing in his fourth national championship, also defeated Bin Sattar before drawing against GM Niaz Murshed and GM Ziaur Rahman. Tajwar finished fifth with eight points but the St Joseph student was seemingly unsatisfied with his overall performance.

"Everything was going well but I played a bit badly in the middle. I would have felt better if I did a bit better," the promising FM said, adding that his ultimate target was to become a GM like his father, Ziaur Rahman.

"Playing against GMs is always challenging, but I don't feel as much fear when I play against them now, but, to be honest, there is some nervousness working inside me," added the 10th grader, who had previously beaten Iranian and Vietnamese GMs in rapid and blitz competitions abroad and drawn GMs in standard/classic chess competition.

Neer, a seventh grader, was so upset after losing the 13th and final match against FM Khandokar Aminul Islam that he was unwilling to speak to journalists.

Waiting outside the room, his mother, Moumin Reja, said: "Neer can't play well



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

with black pieces and he could not play well in his last game. The achievements against the two GMs was possible because he played with white pieces."

"Neer needs to work on the problems he faced when playing with black pieces but we can't provide him with a dedicated coach due to financial constraints," Moumin said, adding that Neer got the training from Razib.

It was the third time that Neer took part in the national championship, producing his ever-best result by finishing sixth. He had finished 10th in his first appearance in 2019 at the age of only nine. He finished 13th in the last edition.

Razib, who equalled Reefat Bin Sattar with a sixth title, joint for second-most in the national chess championship, praised

both Tahsin and Neer for their consistent showings.

"Obviously the performance from the junior players is really good," Razib said. "Tahsin has been performing really well for a good period and now Neer is playing well."

"I think they need more international tournaments in the coming days to mature. They are undoubtedly talented players, but how far they can go depends on how many international tournaments they play," said Razib.

Razib also explained the reason he lost to Neer. "At one stage, I had two options to move but I preferred the second option. But it was a poor choice and I could not come back," said Razib, who once trained Neer at the Elegant Chess Academy as well as federation.

"The championship was much more competitive. There were four Grandmasters and two international masters. There was a two-way race between me and Fahad, who dropped point in the penultimate round and that gave me the lead. Otherwise, I might have had to play a title-deciding play-off match against Fahad," added Razib, who has now lifted the title four times in his past five attempts.

12-time national champion GM Ziaur Rahman also praised the juniors.

"It was nice to see the juniors perform better than in the last few editions. We have seen junior players go AWOL in the past with inconsistent performance. The junior players have to focus on their game and the federation should also take care of them," said Zia.

Cummins just ensures 'the buses are on time'

REUTERS, Melbourne

Australia captain Pat Cummins hailed team mates Mitchell Starc and Cameron Green for their courage under fire after the injured duo played through pain to help the side complete a series-sealing victory over South Africa on Thursday.

Paceman Starc snapped a tendon in the middle finger of his bowling hand during a fielding mishap on day one of the second test in Melbourne but bowled a full load and took a wicket on day four as Australia won by a thumping innings and 182 runs.

All rounder Green retired hurt after his index finger was broken by an Anrich Nortje delivery but returned to the crease on day three to score an unbeaten 51, adding to his five-wicket haul earlier.

"It's probably a good time to mention all the incredible achievements this week. Starc with a finger that's going to put him out for a few weeks, to have the bravery to go out and do that," Cummins told reporters.

"Cameron Green, the same, 'guts-ing' it out for us. We saw Steve Smith and Davey (Warner) on day two in 38 degrees - gutsy, gutsy innings."



The Boxing Day test triumph gave Australia an unassailable 2-0 lead ahead of the third and final match in Sydney, while shoring up top spot in the World Test Championship. It also capped an exceptional year for Australia in Test cricket, with Cummins's side winning seven out of 10 matches, including a series win in Pakistan.

"Yeah, probably the best Test team I've played in, just in terms of how well settled everyone is, how well everyone knows their gameplan," he said.

"In terms of captaining I don't feel like I have to do much at all. Everyone looks after themselves. You just kind of make sure the buses are on time - which the team manager does."

"It's just in a really sweet spot at the moment. We know it's not going to stay like this forever. But I think we can just all kind of sit back and appreciate the place that we are in at the moment because it's really special. We're having a hell of a lot of fun as well doing it together with some of our best mates."



Global football audience of the recently concluded Qatar World Cup perhaps missed seeing Erling Haaland more than the Norwegian goal-scoring sensation missed being at the greatest show on earth. "Watching other people score to win games at the World Cup triggered, motivated and irritated me," Haaland told reporters on Wednesday following Manchester City's 3-1 win at Leeds United, in a game where his two second-half strikes made the 22-year-old the fastest player to reach 20 goals in Premier League history.

'Pele will always be our king'

AFP, Santos

On a visit to the Pele Museum in Brazil's seaside city of Santos, Sergio Murillo Junior says he's sad to see the football legend's health deteriorate, but adds "I am proud of the legacy he left us."

For the 53-year-old lawyer, Pele is above all "an example of perseverance and resilience, for all generations."

The museum in Santos is full of memorabilia from the man dubbed "The King": jerseys and cleats he wore, balls from key matches, and numerous trophies -- including the honorary FIFA Golden Ball he received in 2014.

Pele, 82, is battling worsening cancer as well as kidney and heart problems at a Sao Paulo hospital 80 kilometers (50 miles) inland.

Flores Araujo Hermes, an 82-year-old Peruvian tourist, told AFP he remembered seeing the football legend play in Lima like it was yesterday.



"Chest, shot and goal! Magnificent!" he recalled, sports commentator-style.

"It was the best. People keep comparing him to others, but no one has surpassed him yet," Hermes added.

While known globally as the only player in history to have led his country to three World Cup wins (1958, 1962 and 1970), Pele also had great success with his Santos team, including back-to-back Intercontinental Cup wins in 1962 and 1963.

Born in the neighboring state of Minas Gerais, Pele spent almost all of his career at Santos FC, before a few final seasons in the 1970s with the New York Cosmos.

Santos FC's jerseys this season will feature a golden crown above the club's crest, a tribute to the team's eternal number 10.

"Pele will always be our king, the great king of football," said Murillo Junior.

