

Babar and Co take on charged-up USA

AGENCIES

Ahead of their T20 World Cup opener against co-hosts USA at the Grand Prairie Stadium in Dallas today, Pakistan captain Babar Azam did not hesitate to state their aim in the mega event.

"We are here to try to win the World Cup," said Babar, who recently became the second batter after Virat Kohli to go past the 4000-run mark in T20Is. Star Indian batter is leading the chart with 4037 runs, and Babar is a close second with 4023 runs.

But for Babar, who has been reinstated as the Pakistan skipper after their tumultuous brief spell under pacer Shaheen Shah Afridi following the 50-over World Cup in 2023, the focus was solely on playing as per the team requirement.

"I am not here thinking about personal records. What matters is that the team does well," Babar added.

Pakistan are dangerous opponents for the best of teams in major tournaments but they could face a rocky road in their quest for a first Twenty20 World Cup title since their sole triumph in 2009 after a radical overhaul in recent months.

Pakistan are one of the three teams to have not played any warm-up fixtures ahead of the 20-team tournament, but Babar was not fixated on it.

Pakistan come fresh from playing a four-match T20I series against defending

Having come into the mega event on the back of a historic series win over Bangladesh, the USA opened the T20 World Cup in majestic fashion. Powered by a 40-ball 94 from Aaron Jones,



USA's Aaron Jones leads the T20 World Cup top-scorers chart, having scored a 40-ball 94 in their first game against Canada.

Pakistan's Imad Wasim, the only left-arm spinner available in the squad, will be missing the USA game owing to a persistent side strain.

champions England, but two of those games in England were washed out while the other two were won by the hosts.

Meanwhile, ICC associates USA, despite being ranked 11 spots lower than sixth-placed Pakistan in T20I rankings, will be fancying their chances of springing a surprise in Dallas today.

the USA chased down a 195-run target with seven wickets and 14 balls to spare.

That effort definitely showed that USA not only have the firepower for a big chase -- something they might need against top T20 nations like Pakistan in the tournament.



SHORT CORNER

Antonio Conte named new Napoli coach

Former Chelsea and Tottenham coach Antonio Conte was hired by Napoli on Wednesday as the deposed Serie A champions try to bounce back from their disastrous league title defence. Conte has signed a three-year deal which according to Italian media is worth eight million euros per season.

Shakib regains top spot from Hasaranga

Shakib Al Hasan is the beneficiary of an unusually disappointing outing for Sri Lanka's Wanindu Hasaranga against South Africa on Monday, with the Bangladesh all-rounder leapfrogging Hasaranga into the top spot in the latest ICC all-rounder rankings. Shakib had held the top spot for quite a few years before losing the throne to Hasaranga last week. However, despite Hasaranga taking two wickets against South Africa, the Lankan captain slipped to second position behind Shakib.

More than one in four Germans are not interested in Euro 2024

More than one in four Germans have no interest in the upcoming Euro 2024 hosted by their country, the biggest sports event in Germany in almost two decades, a poll conducted for public broadcaster ARD showed on Wednesday.

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'Pakistan-India contest is like Super Bowl'

AGENCIES

Pakistan legend Shahid Afridi is excited that the American public will witness cricket's equivalent of the Super Bowl in New York on Sunday when archrivals Pakistan and India face off in a blockbuster T20 World Cup clash.

Comparing it to the famous Super Bowl, Afridi, the ICC Men's T20 World Cup 2024 ambassador, said that America's cricket-loving crowd will witness the 'greatest cricketing rivalry'.

"For those Americans discovering the tournament, they should know that Pakistan's game against India is like our Super Bowl," Afridi wrote in his column for the ICC. "I used to absolutely love playing India and I really believe it is the biggest rivalry in sport."

"Against India, it is about handling the pressure of the occasion. There is so much talent in both teams, they just need to put it together on the day."

"People are going to love the support in the States. There is a great expat community over there which absolutely loves cricket."

"And the Americans absolutely love their sport, whether it is American football, basketball or baseball. I really believe that cricket will hit the mainstream over there in the next few years."

While he refused to pick any favourites from the India-Pakistan contest, he backed the Men in Green to overcome their recent indifferent form and bring their A-game out during the tournament.



Australia begin treble bid against self-assured Oman

AGENCIES

With the ICC Test Championship and the ODI World Cup already in the bag, Australia begin their T20 World Cup campaign against Oman at the Kensington Oval in Barbados today in their quest to become champions in all three formats.

The 2021 winners have brought an uber-experienced squad for their title charge and one will not be surprised if it's Mitchell Marsh's men dancing in ticker-tape after the final in Barbados, with history made as the first nation to hold all three of cricket's top global trophies.

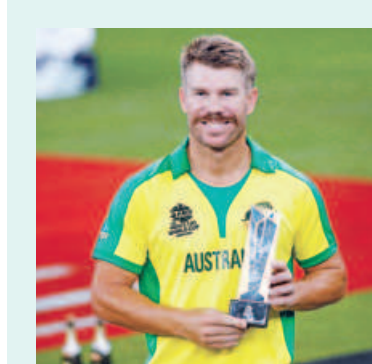
Australia boast world-class players from top-to-tail and a champion outfit's conviction that no matter how bad things get, someone among them will carry the day.

Plenty of old hands remain, though, with 37-year-old opener David Warner to soak up his final farewell from international cricket and the usual pace trio of Mitchell Starc, Pat Cummins and Josh Hazlewood reporting for duty.

Most of the players in the squad are over 30 and some will be managed carefully by staff, especially against a relatively feeble Oman who began their campaign with a Super Over defeat.

A few of Australia's key players whose teams progressed into the playoff of the IPL arrived late as they were allowed to return home for a few days.

Either Mitchell Starc or Pat



This is set to be Australia's first-ever T20I encounter against Oman.

Oman skipper Aqib Ilyas is set to play his 50th T20I.

Australia leg-spinner Adam Zampa is eight wickets away from becoming the first from his country to pick up 100 T20I scalps.

Opener David Warner, currently with 3099 runs, is 21 away from surpassing Aaron Finch to become Australia's top run-scorer in T20Is.

Cummins is expected to be rested and the Aussies might look to go with the spin option of Ashton Agar instead. Marcus Stoinis and Cameron Green will fight it out for place in the eleven because of their ability to bowl compounded with Marsh's fitness restrictions which will not allow him to contribute with the ball.

Despite the significant mismatch, Oman skipper Aqib Ilyas, buoyed by their opening game, assured that his side will not be overwhelmed by stars in Australia's ranks and even pointed out a key weakness against spin he thought his opponent had.

"With the Australian team, they used to have a few players with good techniques in the past like Steve Smith and Marnus Labuschagne. But I don't think they have many now. They look to hit big. They only try to go for sixes," Ilyas told reporters.

"But every day is not the same day, and if we get the same wicket (as the one against Namibia) maybe it could be a problem for them."

"Just like the way you saw how difficult it was for the West Indies against PNG. They struggled to chase 130-odd despite them having some of the biggest hitters in the side."

Spin is indeed expected to play a part at the venue as spinners have an economy rate of 7.75 in contrast to the 8.12 runs an over pacers have conceded there.

Paolini stuns Rybakina to reach French Open semis

REUTERS, Paris

Italian surprise package Jasmine Paolini staved off a fightback from fourth seed Elena Rybakina to seal a stunning 6-2, 4-6, 6-4 win on Wednesday and advance to the French Open semifinals for the first time.

The 12th-seeded Paolini set up a last-four showdown with either Belarusian world number two Aryna Sabalenka or Russian 17-year-old Mirra Andreeva, who meet in the quarter-finals later on Court Philippe Chatrier.



Playing in her first Grand Slam quarter-final, the 28-year-old Paolini got off to a confident start by winning the opening two games and forced her opponent to work hard to hold serve, before breaking again en route to taking the first set.

A sublime backhand winner gave Paolini another break in the third game of the next set but 2022 Wimbledon

champion Rybakina responded with one of her own and slowly came to grips with the Italian's power and precision.

Russian-born Kazakh Rybakina exchanged breaks with Paolini again but the 24-year-old held firm to level the contest at one set apiece and recovered after surrendering her serve at the start of the decider.

Paolini secured a hold to love to make it 4-4, playing at the level she showed early in the match and she took advantage of Rybakina's errors to close out a famous victory.

Bangladesh aim to 'make things difficult' for Australia

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh are eager to give visiting Australia a tough time when they square off in a Group I fixture of the FIFA World Cup Qualifiers in Dhaka today.

The match at the Bashundhara Kings Arena is set to kick off at 4:45pm.

Having confirmed a third-round berth in the World Cup Qualifiers with a maximum 12 points from four matches, Australia, who are ranked 160 places higher than Bangladesh, appear upbeat ahead of the encounter against the group's bottom dwellers.

The men in red and green, on the other hand, remain confident in their ability to use their home advantage this time against the Socceroos, who thrashed Bangladesh 7-0 at AAMI Park in Melbourne in November last year and had handed 5-0 and 4-0 defeats at home and away matches, respectively, during the Russia World Cup Qualifiers in 2015.

"If you compare it to Melbourne [match], of course, we have the responsibility of improving what we did there. We had some good moments there, but definitely struggled for different reasons -- one of those was that we conceded quite early, which we want to avoid tomorrow," Bangladesh head coach Javier Cabrera said at a pre-match press conference yesterday.

"We want to show our people at home that here we can compete with everyone, though

we know how challenging it's going to be against tomorrow's [today's] rivals.

"We want to compete and make things difficult for Australia. That is our objective," the Spaniard added.

Captain Jamal Bhuiyan also wants to display their best in front of a familiar environment.



"Although we got short time to get prepared, the positive side was that all players had been in action in the league, and they had been at the top of fitness. We will be trying our level best to perform better against strong Australia," said Jamal, who also believes the day in Melbourne was a bad one for them.

"Wearing hand gloves, we had to play amid chilly weather in Melbourne, but this time we have some advantages -- home ground, familiar conditions and home crowd. So, we

want to utilise these small things to prove that the 7-0 drubbing in Melbourne was a bad day for us," said Jamal.

Australia, who enjoyed a rest day on Tuesday after arriving here, underwent their only training session yesterday in Dhaka following a four-day training in Bangkok, Thailand.

The Socceroos brought a comparatively younger side, dropping 12 players from the squad that played their last match against Lebanon in March. Also, around 10 players, who were part of the Australia squad during their recent Bangladesh encounter, will also miss today's affair.

According to Australia coach Graham Arnold, his troops would be wary of the home team.

"We do know that Bangladesh, when they play at home, they are a different team than away from home. Of course, we beat them seven-nil in November last year but that's all in the past. It's all about tomorrow and making sure our boys are mentally ready and strong for this game; and hopefully in front of a good crowd," said Arnold at yesterday's presser.

"Look, we have our standards and, when I say that, all our players understand that 'I don't care who we play against, whenever you wear the national team shirt of Australia on your heart, you play to the best of your ability with the right mindset to win the game,'" remarked the Australia coach when asked about the slim chances of losing against Bangladesh.



Bangladesh and Australia players sweated it out at the practice venue of the Bashundhara Kings Arena yesterday ahead of their World Cup Qualifier today. The Men in Red and Green had lost the reverse fixture 7-0 in Melbourne in November last year.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED