



PROTEAS PEAKING with ruthless precision

Already armed with a statement win over hot-favourites India in the Super Eights, South Africa reinforced their status as the team to beat in this T20 World Cup by dismantling the previously unbeaten West Indies by nine wickets in Ahmedabad yesterday. In a week defined by captain's knocks -- Mitchell Santner's punchy intervention for New Zealand and Harry Brook's record century for England -- Aiden Markram delivered one of control and command. Chasing 177, he raced to a 27-ball fifty and remained unbeaten on 82, anchoring a decisive 95-run opening stand with Quinton de Kock (47 off 24). The Proteas powered home with 23 balls to spare, ruthless in execution and peaking at precisely the right moment, their semifinal berth now all but sealed after five wins in five.

PHOTO: AFP

WI roar in defeat

STAR SPORTS DESK

After yesterday's nine-wicket defeat to South Africa in Ahmedabad, two-time champions West Indies now find themselves staring at a virtual knockout against co-hosts India for a place in the semifinals of the T20 World Cup.

Even in defeat -- their first of this edition -- the men in maroon stayed true to their identity. From 83-7, Jason Holder and Romario Shepherd unleashed a record-breaking counterattack, stitching together an 89-run stand for the eighth wicket -- the highest in T20 International history. Their stand eclipsed the previous record of 80 set by Scotland's Sayaan Sharif and Preston Mommsen in 2015, also in a losing cause.

Their rescue act carried West Indies to 176-8, though it ultimately proved insufficient.

The six count keeps swelling. The 11 maximums struck in that match, with Holder and Shepherd combining to seven sixes, pushed their tournament tally to 66 -- the most by any team in a single T20 World Cup edition, eclipsing their own previous benchmark of 62, set in 2024.

Earlier, in their 254-6 against Zimbabwe, they smashed 19 sixes in an innings, equalling the tournament record. This edition has already become the most six-laden in World Cup history -- and West Indies, win or lose, remain at the heart of the power surge.



A game with three sides at play

AGENCIES

With England already through to the semifinals, their final Super Eight fixture against New Zealand at the R Premadasa Stadium in Colombo today carries consequences far beyond the two sides in action. While England have secured safe passage, Pakistan's players and fans will be watching every run and wicket with anxious interest.

With Sri Lanka eliminated, the race for the second semifinal spot in Group 2 of the Super Eights has narrowed to New Zealand and Pakistan. The Black Caps sit in pole position after a commanding 61-run win over Sri Lanka on Wednesday lifted them to three points, bolstered by a formidable Net Run Rate of +3.050. A victory over England will seal qualification, confirm New Zealand as group toppers with five points, and ensure both semifinals are hosted in India.

Head coach Rob Walters believes his side's ability to adapt could prove decisive. "If you look historically at the Black Caps, you would probably say that they're a team that have been great problem solvers," Walters said. "They are street smart, they find a way to understand the conditions quickly. It's certainly something that we pride ourselves on. We can adapt to conditions quickly and find a method."

New Zealand demonstrated that resilience against Sri Lanka, recovering from 84 for 6 before captain Mitchell Santner guided them to 168 for 7 -- a total that proved more than enough.

However, should England prevail, the equation opens up dramatically. England would then top the group with six points, and Pakistan's hopes would flicker back to life.

Yet the path would remain steep. The Salman Ali Agha-led side, currently on one point with a NRR of -0.461, would first need England to beat New Zealand by a significant margin to dent the Black

Caps' superior NRR. Then Pakistan must overcome Sri Lanka in Pallekele tomorrow -- and by a big enough margin to leapfrog New Zealand into the semifinals as runners-up.

England, meanwhile, have already flexed their muscle, booking their semifinal berth after skipper Harry Brook's match-winning century against Pakistan. They will also not want to take this game lightly, as finishing as group champion would see them face the runners-up of the other group.

And New Zealand all-rounder Rachin Ravindra knows the challenge ahead.



"You're always confident going into these fixtures, especially when we know what the surface is going to be like," Ravindra said. "But I think it'd be silly to underestimate England at any point. They're such a quality unit... they've got world-class batters throughout their order."

For New Zealand, it is simple: win and advance. For Pakistan, it is hope wrapped in mathematics. And for England, it is a chance to shape the semifinal landscape with one final statement in Colombo.



SHORT CORNER

Ronaldo buys stake in Spanish second-division Almeria

Cristiano Ronaldo announced on Thursday that he had acquired a 25 per cent stake in Saudi-owned Spanish second-division club Almeria. "This strategic investment in UD Almeria reflects Ronaldo's long-term commitment to professional football ownership," said a statement from his new sports holding company CR7 Sports Investments which gave no financial details of the deal.

FIFA's ticket email error leaves 2026 World Cup fans confused

FIFA has sparked fresh confusion over ticket sales for the 2026 World Cup after sending out emails to thousands of supporters announcing an "exclusive" 48-hour purchase window -- without specifying when it would begin.

SL's Shanaka says constant criticism affected players' mental health

Sri Lanka captain Dasun Shanaka said the relentless criticism aimed at his players has been damaging to their mental health and undermined their efforts at the Twenty20 World Cup, where they were eliminated from the group stage on Wednesday.

Pybus 'fine with' working and living in Afghanistan as head coach

Richard Pybus said he had no issues with moving to Afghanistan to take over as head coach of the national cricket team following Jonathan Trott's departure last week at the end of their Twenty20 World Cup campaign.

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National pacer Taskin Ahmed, representing Central Zone in the ongoing Bangladesh Cricket League one-day format, was seen taking selfies with fans during their second match against East Zone in Bogura yesterday. The 30-year-old returned to 50-over cricket after four months, marking his comeback with an impressive 2 for 46 that helped Central Zone to a five-wicket victory and kept their hopes of reaching the final alive. In the day's other fixture in Rajshahi, Nahid Rana and Meherob Hasan produced standout bowling performances as North Zone secured their second straight win, defeating South Zone by six wickets.

PHOTO: BCB

Vini seals Real-Benfica trilogy

STAR SPORTS DESK

The Champions League delivered in full yesterday with the final four teams, taking their place in the last 16.

Real Madrid recovered from an early scare to beat Benfica 2-1 at the Bernabeu, sealing a 3-1 aggregate win.

Rafa Silva's opener briefly stunned the hosts but Aurelien Tchouameni and Vinicius Jr struck either side of halftime to turn the tie around and complete part three of this season's Madrid-Benfica trilogy. Either Manchester City or Sporting CP await in the draw.

The night carried added weight after Vinicius alleged racist abuse by Benfica's Gianluca Prestianni in the first leg -- a claim the Argentine denied before receiving a one-match ban that ruled him out of the return fixture.

Vinicius once again proved decisive, scoring in both legs of a two-legged UCL knockout tie for the first time in his career. He repeated his corner-flag dance celebration -- the same move that sparked the first-leg controversy -- after his 80th minute strike gave Madrid breathing space. Later, he posted on Instagram: "The dance goes on."

Tchouameni described the win as a "victory for everyone who stands against racism."

Real have reached the UCL last 16 in all 23 seasons since the round was introduced in 2003-04 -- the only club to do so.

Meanwhile, Atalanta staged a stunning comeback to eliminate Dortmund 4-3 on aggregate, ensuring Italy will have at least one side

in the last 16.

Trailing 2-0 from the first leg in Dortmund, Atalanta roared back in Bergamo. Goals from Gianluca Scamacca, Davide Zappacosta and Mario Pasalic put them 3-0 up before Karim Adeyemi's strike threatened extra time.

Deep into added time, Lazar Samardzic converted a penalty with the final kick of the game to seal a 4-1 win on the night. Timed at 97 minutes and 53 seconds, it was the second-latest goal (excluding extra time) in UCL history since 2003-04.

PLAYOFF WINNERS

Atletico Madrid, Newcastle Utd, Bayer Leverkusen, Bodo/Glimt, Atalanta, Galatasaray, PSG, Real Madrid

**Champions League Last 16 draw today

In Turin, Galatasaray became the first Turkish side in 12 years to reach the last 16 after surviving a chaotic tie against Juventus.

After winning the first leg 5-2 in Istanbul, Gala looked set to cruise but Juventus roared back in Turin, winning 3-0 in normal time -- despite Lloyd Kelly's controversial red card on 48 minutes with the score at 1-0 -- to level the tie at 5-5 on aggregate.

Extra time belonged to the visitors. Victor Osimhen and Baris Alper Yilmaz struck to send Galatasaray through, setting up a last-16 meeting with either Liverpool or Tottenham Hotspur.



PHOTO: FACEBOOK