

Ahead of CT, stars' form & fitness under scanner, India begin ODI series against England today

The 3-match series is India's only tune-up tournament for Champions Trophy and could be a make-or-break event for two stalwarts (Rohit & Virat)



India's Virat Kohli and Yashasvi Jaiswal during a practice session ahead of the first ODI between India and England, at Vidarabha Cricket Association Stadium in Nagpur, on Wednesday. (Right) England's captain Jos Buttler, Ben Duckett, Jacob Bethell, Saqib Mahmood, Brydon Carse, Mark Wood, Jamie Overton and others during a practice session

PTI, NAGPUR: Form and fitness of seasoned stars is under the scanner as India enter the final phase of their Champions Trophy preparations with the three-match ODI series against England starting, here, on Thursday, aiming to find the right balance for some specific slots in the line-up.

The likes of skipper Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli have been under tremendous scrutiny after their dismal run in red-ball cricket.

The two stars, after making hyped but disappointing appearances in Ranji Trophy last month, will be eyeing strong performances in a format that they have dominated for several years.

The ODI series against

England is India's only tune-up tournament for the Champions Trophy, to be held in Pakistan and Dubai from February 19. The eight-team competition could be a make-or-break event for the two stalwarts who have already retired from T20Is. However, their form is not the solitary concern for the outfit.

One of the grey areas is the wicket-keeper's slot. Who among KL Rahul and Rishabh Pant should get the nod for the playing XI?

With skipper Rohit and his deputy Shubman Gill likely to open, followed by Kohli, Shreyas Iyer and Hardik Pandya, the wicket-keeper-batter is likely to slot in at number five.

Rahul has proved to be

SQUADS

India: Rohit Sharma (C), Shubman Gill (VC), Yashasvi Jaiswal, Virat Kohli, Shreyas Iyer, KL Rahul (WK), Rishabh Pant (WK), Hardik Pandya, Ravindra Jadeja, Washington Sundar, Axar Patel, Kuldeep Yadav, Harshit Rana, Mohd. Shami, Arshdeep Singh, Varun Chakravarty

England: Ben Duckett, Phil Salt, Joe Root, Harry Brook, Jos Buttler (C&WK) Liam Livingstone, Jacob Bethell, Brydon Carse, Jofra Archer, Adil Rashid and Saqib Mahmood

Match starts 1.30 pm

one of India's most consistent middle-order batters.

On the other hand, the left-handed Pant offers variety in India's right-hand dominated top order. Additionally, his unpredictability, raw power, and ability to clear with breathtaking ease make him the X-factor.

The Indian think tank could always go with both

but that would likely come at the expense of Iyer, who despite under-performing in the Sri Lanka series, has been a prolific contributor. His exploits in the domestic season are hard to ignore.

The series will also test the preparedness of veteran pacer Mohammed Shami and wrist spinner Kuldeep Yadav, both of

whom had been laid low by injuries and could be key to India's success in the Champions Trophy.

Spearhead Jasprit Bumrah was never in contention for this series due to a back problem. In-form mystery spinner Varun Chakravarty is expected to get a debut to strengthen his case for inclusion in the Champions Trophy squad.

The team management also have to make a tough choice for the spin all-rounder's position. Ravindra Jadeja, who hasn't played an ODI since the 2023 ODI World Cup final, Axar Patel and Washington Sundar are all in contention and it is not yet clear how this will be settled.

England announced their playing XI on the eve of the match with Joe Root returning to the ODI side for the first time since the 2023 World Cup. The 34-year-old veteran will be batting at the number three slot in the first match.

Like the hosts, England too will look to iron out the kinks in their armour and present a stronger challenge. But the task is easier said than done given that they have lost back-to-back 50-over series against Australia (in September) and West Indies (in November).

Root is the only major addition to the team which is otherwise almost identical to the one that lost 1-4 to India in the recently-concluded five-match T20I series.

sportspopup

Simona Halep announces retirement after 2 Grand Slam titles and a return from a ban
BUCHAREST (Romania): Two-time Grand Slam champion Simona Halep announced her retirement from tennis at age 33 after a first-round loss at a tournament in her home country of Romania on Tuesday, ending an injury-filled comeback from a doping suspension. "I don't know if it's with sadness or joy — I think I'm feeling both — but my soul is at peace with this decision, and I've always been realistic with myself. My body can no longer handle as much as it used to, to get me where I probably once was," Halep said, using a microphone to address the crowd in Cluj, Romania, following her 6-1, 6-1 loss to Lucia Bronzetti in the Transylvania Open. "It's very hard to reach that level, and I know what it takes to get there," Halep said. "That's why I wanted to be here today, in Cluj, to play in front of you and say goodbye on the tennis court, even if my performance wasn't great." It was the first match of the year for Halep, who reached No. 1 in the WTA rankings for the first time in 2017 but is now 870th and was given a wild-card invitation to play in Romania. She had pulled out of qualifying for the Australian Open and a tuneup tournament in Auckland, New Zealand, last month because of pain in her knee and shoulder, the latest interruption of her career.

Cummins unlikely for Champions Trophy: Head coach McDonald

SYDNEY: Australia captain and pace spearhead Pat Cummins is "heavily unlikely" to be fit in time for this month's Champions Trophy, head coach Andrew McDonald has revealed, opening up the possibility of either Steve Smith or Travis Head leading the side. Cummins hasn't been able to resume training after he missed the Test series in Sri Lanka due to the birth of his second child, while also nursing an ankle problem, which flared up during the grueling five-Test Border-Gavaskar Trophy against India. "Pat Cummins hasn't been able to resume any type of bowling so he's heavily unlikely, so that would mean that we do need a captain," ICC quoted McDonald as saying on SEN Radio. "Steve Smith and Travis Head are the two that we've been having conversations with while we've been building out that Champions Trophy team along with Pat (Cummins) back home. They'll be the two that we look at for that leadership post," added McDonald.

Sri Lanka's Karunaratne to bow out of Tests after 'fulfilling dream'

GALLE: Dimuth Karunaratne said he had fulfilled a childhood dream after the Sri Lanka opener announced that his 100th Test, against Australia starting Thursday, will be his last. The 36-year-old former skipper was a rock at the top of the Sri Lankan order for more than a decade, but has gone 25 innings without a century. The second Test against Australia in Galle will be his farewell to the five-day game. "As a kid my only dream was to play just one Test match," Karunaratne, who has scored 7,172 runs in his 99 Tests, said on Wednesday. "Reaching 100 Tests is something truly special. But as you may have heard, this will also be my last. You have to take stock of things and make a call at the right time. I'm at peace with my decision." Renowned for his cool head and affable nature, Karunaratne also proved a shrewd leader. Taking over the captaincy at a turbulent time in 2019, he steadied the ship and led Sri Lanka to a historic series win in South Africa. To this day, Sri Lanka remain the only Asian team to conquer the Proteas in their own backyard.

To see depth of talent in India is exciting for any coach, says Mumbai Indians' Charlotte Edwards

MUMBAI: Mumbai Indians' head coach Charlotte Edwards on Wednesday said that the depth of talent in Indian cricket is exciting for anybody in charge of a team, while conceding that her side, the inaugural Women's Premier League champions, did not play as well as they should have in the second edition last year. Mumbai roped in G Kamalini, who finished as the third-highest run-scorer in recently-concluded U-19 T20 World Cup in Malaysia, along with Sanskriti Gupta, Akshita Maheshwari and South Africa's Nadine de Klerk in the WPL auction last year. "We're really happy to come out of the auction with the players we had and to add to our squad," Charlotte told PTI in an exclusive interview. "I'm certainly a better coach for having this experience. I've learned so much. I've really loved the experience and watching the Indian domestic players really grow throughout the tournament."

India's ICC elite panel umpire Menon opts out of CT due to 'personal reasons'

DUBAI: India's only representative in the ICC Elite Panel of Umpires, Nitin Menon, has opted out of officiating in the Champions Trophy in Pakistan this month due to personal reasons. The ICC on Wednesday announced a list of 15 match officials, including three match referees and 12 umpires for the marquee tournament, scheduled to commence in Karachi on February 19 with the final on March 9. Australian legend David Boon, Sri Lankan great Ranjan Madugalle and Zimbabwe's Andrew Pycroft were named as match referees for the eight-team tournament. The event will be held at three venues in Pakistan -- Karachi, Lahore, and Rawalpindi --, while India will play all their matches in Dubai, starting with a clash against Bangladesh on February 20, owing to security concerns. "The ICC wanted to put him (Menon) on the Champions Trophy roster. But he decided against travelling to Pakistan due to personal reasons," a BCCI source told PTI. Menon could not have stood in the matches in Dubai as the ICC follows the policy of appointing neutral umpires. The world body did not comment on Menon in its statement to unveil the list of officials.

Premier League refs set to make in-stadium announcements on VAR calls

LONDON: Referees are set to make in-stadium announcements about the outcome of video reviews in the Premier League from the start of next season — and Liverpool manager Arne Slot isn't a fan. The protocol is currently being trialed in this season's English League Cup semi-finals, with a first announcement coming in the first leg of Tottenham's match with Liverpool when a goal for Spurs was ruled out for offside. Tony Scholes, the Premier League's chief football officer, told reporters the protocol could now be used in league play, too. Asked for his reaction, Slot said "for me, that's not necessary," but he did acknowledge it might benefit match-going fans in the stadium. "If the fans like it and it's something nice for the fans, let's do this," said Slot, speaking Wednesday ahead of the second leg against Tottenham on Thursday, which Liverpool goes into trailing 1-0. "But I wonder if we are all going to like this." On that occasion in the first leg, referee Stuart Attwell used the public address system to announce via a wireless microphone that the goal scored by Tottenham striker Dominic Solanke in the 76th minute had been ruled out for offside. Attwell spoke after a VAR review lasting around two minutes.

Rohit plays down speculations on future

PTI, NAGPUR: Indian captain Rohit Sharma on Wednesday played down speculations about his future in international cricket, saying it is irrelevant to talk about his career at a time when he is "focussed" on the three ODIs against England and the Champions Trophy.

"How it is relevant that I talk about my future plans when there are three ODIs and a Champions Trophy. The reports (on my future) are going on for a number of years and I am not here to clarify those reports," Rohit said at the pre-match press conference.

"For me, the three games (against England) and the Champions Trophy is very important. My focus is on these games and I will see what happens thereafter," the India skipper added.

The 37-year-old has been battling poor form



for a while now, managing only 31 runs across five innings at an abysmal average of 6.20 in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy in Australia.

While there is no doubt that he is not looking to walk into international sunset anytime soon, there were reports that the BCCI has asked him to spell out his future plans after the Champions Trophy.

With India now competing in ODI cricket, a format

in which Rohit has enjoyed a lot of success, the skipper stressed that instead of harping on the past, he is focussed on the assignments ahead of him.

"This is a different format, different time. As cricketers, there will be ups and downs and I have faced those a lot in my career. This is nothing new to me. We know everyday is a fresh day, every series is a fresh series," and irate Rohit said when asked how confident he is feeling after his recent failure in red-ball cricket.

"I am looking forward to the challenge, not looking at what has happened in the past. There is no reason for me to look behind too much. It's important that I focus on what is coming up and what lies ahead for me. Look to try and start this series on a high," he added.

India tour a good preparation for CT: Jos

PTI, NAGPUR: It hasn't quite gone the way England would have liked but skipper Jos Buttler on Wednesday said the ongoing tour of India is "as good a preparation as you can have" for this month's Champions Trophy given the similarities in conditions with Pakistan where his team will be based for the event.

Buttler also believes that veteran batter Joe Root will play a pivotal role in both the ODI series against India, starting Thursday, and the upcoming Champions Trophy, given his experience.

England have received a much-needed boost with Root's return.

"Root is one of the great players of the game, so in all the formats here he's obviously been a vital part of ODI cricket for England for a long time," Buttler told reporters on the eve of the first ODI here.



"He's got loads of experience in ODI cricket, which would be great for some of the guys who haven't played as much in our group. He's been a vital player for England in all formats, and we feel like he's got a crucial role for us to play in these games."

The ODI series serves as England's final preparation before the Champions Trophy, where Buttler and his team will begin their campaign against Australia on February 22 in Lahore.

"As preparation goes for any tournament, I think taking on India in India is always going to be a great challenge and as good a preparation as you can have," Buttler said.

"The conditions here in India may be similar (to those in Pakistan). Each ground that we play at always has their own nuances and a little bit of difference. We're always trying to adapt to that," he added.

The England captain reaffirmed his team's commitment to the aggressive brand of cricket that has come to define it.

"We want to find ways to put pressure on the opposition with the bat. You've got to take wickets, I think, and it's crucial you see how, if you let guys back for a period of time, they can go on to hurt you. So, we'll be desperate to try and find ways of taking wickets," he said.

Abhishek skyrockets to 2nd spot

PTI, DUBAI: In-form India opener Abhishek Sharma leapfrogged 38 places to the second spot in the ICC Men's T20I Player Rankings for batters while his teammate Tilak Verma dropped a rung to the third place on Wednesday.

Abhishek produced the best innings of his fledgling international career when he smashed a quick-fire 135 in the fifth and final T20 against England in Mumbai, leading India to a thumping 4-1 series win. It was the highest score by an Indian men's player in the shortest format. As a result, the 24-year-old zoomed to the second spot in the latest ranking.

T20 BATTERS' RANKING

Australia star Travis Head continues to lead the T20I batters' chart, but Abhishek is just 26 rating points behind him following his record-breaking effort at Wankhede.

Skipper Suryakumar Yadav is placed fifth and all within striking distance of Head, while his India teammates Hardik Pandya (up five rungs to equal 51st) and Shivam Dube (up 38 spots to 58th) also moved up the rankings chart following some good scores against England.

It's a similar story on the bowlers' rankings with spinner Varun Chakravarty moving up three places



to joint second with Adil Rashid on the back of his 14 wickets and player-of-the-series effort against England.

Fellow spinner Ravi Bishnoi (up four places to sixth) also climbed the list after taking five wickets in the series against England. Left-arm pacer Arshdeep Singh also finds himself in top 10 at ninth place.

West Indies spinner Akeal Hosein re-claims his spot as the No.1 bowler after he lost the mantle to

Rashid a week earlier.

A host of Australian players gained ground in the latest Test rankings following their impressive effort in defeating Sri Lanka by an innings and 242 runs during the recent first Test in Galle.

Stand-in skipper Steve Smith gained three places to move up to fifth following his 35th Test century, while opener Usman Khawaja climbed six places to 11th after contributing his highest Test score of 232 during the romp. Yashasvi Jaiswal remained on the fourth spot in the Test batters list, which is being headed by England's Joe Root, followed by Harry Brook and New Zealand's Kane Williamson.

Jasprit Bumrah, who is recovering from back spasm, maintained his top spot. He was recently named ICC Men's Cricketer of the Year and ICC Men's Test Cricketer of the Year. Left-arm spinner Ravindra Jadeja is the other Indian in top 10 at the ninth spot.

South Africa's Kagiso Rabada jumped a spot to the second while Australia captain Pat Cummins is at third position, followed by Josh Hazlewood and Noman Ali of Pakistan.

Veteran Australia spinner Nathan Lyon has improved two spots to jump to sixth overall and pacer Mitchell Starc is up two places to 12th following their efforts in Galle.

Sky's the limit: Root after returning to ODI set up

PTI, NAGPUR: Star batter Joe Root says coach Brendon McCullum's cricketing philosophy complements the skills set of England players, creating endless possibilities for the team.

Root is making a return to England's ODI setup in the three-match series against India, starting Thursday.

Interestingly, Root had played his last ODI on the Indian soil only, back in November 2023 when he competed against Pakistan in a World Cup match at the Eden Gardens in Kolkata, scoring 60 off 72 balls.

Asked about McCullum's successful 'Bazball' approach that benefitted England team immensely, the 34-year-old Root said he has experience of working with the Kiwi in England

Test set up and he knows what "he's going to bring".

"The way he (McCullum) looks at the game fits nicely with how the team sets up and the squad sets up, like the skill sets that we have, it's a really exciting mix. When you put that all together, the sky's the limit

for this team, so, or this squad," Root said.

Root said he was happy to be back in the ODI set-up.

"There's a lot of special things that they are capable of. By playing together more and more and getting a further understanding of each other and buying into how we want to do things for a long period of time, I'm sure, we will see success at some point. It's a really exciting time to be involved in the white ball team."

