

CLEAN SWEEP ON TEAM INDIA'S WISH-LIST TODAY

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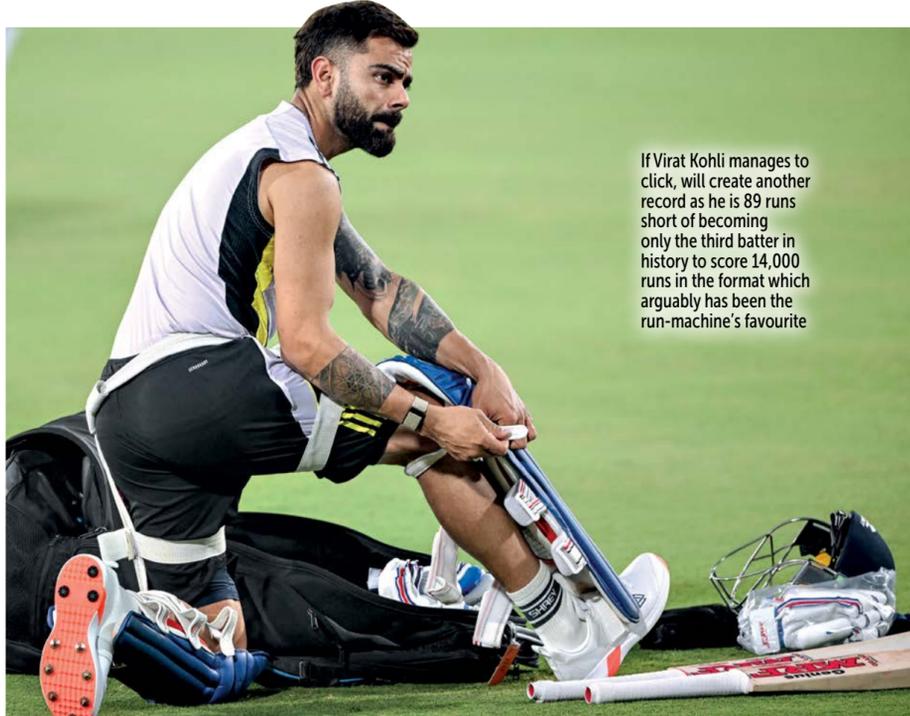
PTI, AHMEDABAD: A big knock from Virat Kohli's currently silent bat along with a series clean-sweep over England will be on Team India's wish-list when the two teams square off in the third and final ODI, here, on Wednesday, marking the end of their Champions Trophy build-up.

While India hold an unsailable 2-0 lead with identical four-wicket wins in each of the first two ODIs, Rohit Sharma's men will be extra motivated to get a win here at the Narendra Modi Stadium where they had suffered a crushing ODI World Cup final loss in 2023.

3RD ODI: INDIA VS ENGLAND

Needless to say, having their batting mainstay Kohli among runs and a win would be perfect culmination to the home side's Champions Trophy preparations. The eight-team competition gets underway from February 19 in Karachi with India starting against Bangladesh the next day in Dubai as per a hybrid model of hosting.

The team has already got a shot in the arm by Rohit's return to form. His 90-ball 119 in the second ODI was a source of relief to both the



If Virat Kohli manages to click, will create another record as he is 89 runs short of becoming only the third batter in history to score 14,000 runs in the format which arguably has been the run-machine's favourite

side and to him after a prolonged run of poor scores.

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If he manages to click,

Kohli is in with a chance to create another record. He is 89 runs short of becoming only the third batter in history to score 14,000 runs in the format which arguably has been the run-machine's favourite. India don't seem

to have put a foot wrong in this series as they continue to make the most of their rich reservoir of talent.

The addition of Varun Chakravarty has given additional ammunition to their lethal spin attack

which will be vital for the Champions Trophy and Mohammed Shami's return after lengthy injury layoff has been seamless too.

Shami's successful comeback has certainly been assuring given that

Bumrah still not fully fit but can India risk leaving him?

PTI, NEW DELHI: The Sports and Medical Science team of National Cricket Academy in Bengaluru has left it on the Ajit Agarkar-led selection committee to decide on Jasprit Bumrah's selection for the Champions Trophy.

There are two parameters of fitness that the NCA checks before clearing a player's return to action.

It is understood that once Bumrah completed his rehabilitation

for his lower back injury under strength & conditioning coach for Rajnikanth and physio Thulasi, he was declared medically fit.

However, doubts still remain over whether he is bowling fit or not before a tournament as big as the Champions Trophy.

The ball has now been put in Agarkar's court

and it is learnt that the chairman of selection committee, who is in Ahmedabad, had a chat with skipper Rohit Sharma and coach Gautam Gambhir on the issue.

While there is a debate whether it is worth taking a world class bowler who might be half fit or opt for a rookie like Harshit Rana who is fully

fit, but if Bumrah is available for the back end, they would not want to miss out on a chance to have him on the roster. Rana in any case will be a travelling reserve and can always come in if Bumrah is eventually ruled out.

The other factor that's stopping them from completely resting Bumrah is optics. If he misses the Champions Trophy and is then available for the cash-rich IPL, it wouldn't look good.



Kohli is world's best player regardless of form, says Gayle

PTI, NEW DELHI: Virat Kohli may have been going through a poor run of form but the senior Indian batter remains the "best player in the world", feels former West Indian swashbuckler Chris Gayle.

The 36-year-old Kohli endured yet another poor outing as he was dismissed for just five runs in the second ODI against England in Cuttack on Sunday.

But Gayle, who has played alongside Kohli at the Royal Challengers Bengaluru in IPL, remains unperturbed by the Indian's lean stretch.

"He is still the best player in the world regardless of the form, Virat Kohli is still the best player, the stats prove that, how many centuries across formats he has scored as well," Gayle said on the sidelines of an event here on Tuesday.

"It's just one of those things that we cricketers go through in patches. I know it is coming at the back end of his career as well, but these things do happen, so he just needs to pick himself up and come back again."

Kohli has been struggling for runs in international cricket of late, but he was expected to find form in the ODIs, which he has dominated like no other for the longest time. Kohli's return to the format, however, was not a great one as he was caught behind off Adil Rashid in the second match after missing the opening game due to a sore knee.

Asked if Kohli can break Gayle's record for most number of runs scored in the Champions Trophy, he

said, "It is easy for him just to get 200 runs (more to surpass Gayle). I don't know how many games they will be playing but I am sure he can get over 200 runs, and I am sure he will get a century for sure, so it's just a matter of time before he goes on to break that record."

Known for his flamboyance besides his big-hitting capabilities, Gayle called Indian captain Rohit Sharma the "new king in town" after the Mumbaier broke the Jamaican's record for most number of sixes in the ODI format.

"Congratulations to Rohit, sports always need a new entertainer and Rohit has been entertaining all these years as well I have done it alongside him. So he is the new king in town now. So congrats to him, and hopefully, he goes on to hit more sixes."

Asked about youngster Abhishek Sharma's blistering hundred against England in the fifth T20I, Gayle said, "I heard about his innings, it was a cracking innings and for a youngster to do such a thing on an international platform, is huge

and fantastic." Gayle also expressed his disappointment at West Indies' absence in the Champions Trophy.

"I am disappointed, no West Indies in the Champions Trophy but it is good to have the Champions Trophy back, so I am looking forward to it." "Hopefully, it will be an entertaining one. I know it is actually taking place in Pakistan and Dubai, so hopefully, we will have some entertaining cricket."

TEAMS

India: Niki Prasad (c), Sanika Chalke, G Trisha, Kamalini G, Bhavika Ahire, Ishwari Awasare, Mithila Vinod, Joshitha VJ, Sonam Yadav, Parunika Sisodiya, Kesari Drithi, Aayushi Shukla, Anandita Kishor, MD Shabnam, Vaishnavi S.

England: Abi Norgrove (c), Phoebe Brett, Olivia Brinsden, Tilly Corteen-Coleman, Trudy Johnson, Katie Jones, Charlotte Lambert, Eve O'Neill, Davina Perrin, Jemima Spence, Charlotte Stubbs, Amuruthaa Surenkumar, Prisha Thanawala, Erin Thomas, Grace Thompson.

Match starts at 12 pm

sportspopup

Australia look to fine tune for Champions Trophy in Sri Lanka ODIs

COLOMBO: Captain Steve Smith admitted Tuesday the Champions Trophy would be on Australia minds when they play Sri Lanka in two one-day internationals this week, the final warm-ups for the eight-team tournament. Australia face Sri Lanka in Colombo on Wednesday and Friday, fresh from a dominant 2-0 Test series sweep. "I'd be lying if I said the Champions Trophy wasn't at the forefront of our minds -- it's a massive ICC tournament for us," Smith told reporters in Colombo. "While our focus is firmly on finishing this series on a strong note, there is no denying that the Champions Trophy is looming large. We want to make sure we carry good form into that competition." Both ODIs will be played as day games. The floodlights in Colombo's R Premadasa Stadium are out of action as part of renovations ahead of the 2026 T20 World Cup, which will be co-hosted with India.

Test cricket still ultimate for me, hunger to make comeback alive: Rahane

KOLKATA: Out-of-favour India batter Ajinkya Rahane on Tuesday reaffirmed his love for Test cricket and said his hunger to make a comeback to the national team remains intact. The 36-year-old last played a Test for India in July 2023, during the West Indies tour, but his form in domestic cricket has been exceptional across formats this season. "I am batting well now. Mushtaq Ali went very well. I have scored runs in earlier matches. I am happy with my batting," Rahane said following Mumbai's entry into the semifinals of the Ranji Trophy with victory over Haryana here. Leading Mumbai from the front, Rahane scored a brilliant second-innings century to script a stunning comeback, sealing a 152-run win. Rahane, who was picked by Kolkata Knight Riders in the IPL auction, has been in red-hot form in his last 10 innings, registering three 90-plus scores, one 80-plus knock, and now a century in the quarter-final.

Plymouth handed Man City tie in FA Cup fifth round

LONDON: Plymouth will travel to Manchester City in the FA Cup fifth round as the Championship strugglers landed a dream draw to follow their stunning win against Liverpool. The Pilgrims shocked Premier League leaders Liverpool as Ryan Hardie's second half penalty sealed a memorable 1-0 win at Home Park on Sunday. Draw for the FA Cup fifth round: Preston vs Burnley, Aston Villa vs Cardiff, Crystal Palace vs Millwall, Manchester United vs Fulham, Newcastle vs Brighton, Bournemouth vs Wolves, Manchester City vs Plymouth, Exeter or Nottingham Forest vs Ipswich. Ties to be played on the weekend of March 1 and 2.

Denis Law funeral: Man Utd fans gather at Old Trafford to pay tribute to club great

MANCHESTER: Thousands of Manchester United fans gathered at Old Trafford on Tuesday to pay tribute to Denis Law ahead of the club great's funeral. Law, the only Scottish player to win the Ballon d'Or, died last month at the age of 84. Alex Ferguson and Ruben Amorim, the past and present managers of United, were among those expected to attend the funeral at Manchester Cathedral.

Bangla's Shohely banned on corruption charges

PTI, DUBAI: Bangladesh's Shohely Akhter on Tuesday became the first woman cricketer to be banned by the ICC for corruption charges after she was found guilty of attempting to fix matches during the 2023 T20 World Cup.

The 36-year-old was banned for five years. Shohely, who bowls off-spin and appeared in two ODIs and 13 T20 Internationals for Bangladesh, admitted breaching five provisions of the ICC Anti-Corruption Code during the tournament in South Africa.

The charges were in relation to corrupt approaches made during the matches of the Women's T20 World Cup. She was, however, not part of the Bangladesh squad for that tournament. Shohely last



turned out for Bangladesh in 2022. Shohely admitted the charges of breaching Articles of the Code and accepted the five-year ban, starting from February 10, 2025.

The ACU's investigation centred around Shohely's conversation on Facebook Messenger with a cricketer, identified by the ICC as 'Player A', on February 14, 2023. During the investi-

gation, the ACU found that Shohely, prior to the Bangladesh versus Australia match in the Women's T20 World Cup on February 14, contacted her friend and teammate via Facebook Messenger, in which she tried to persuade her to agree to carry out fixes in future Bangladesh matches.

According to the investigation, Shohely told the teammate that her 'cousin', who "bets on his phone", asked her whether she would get out hit wicket during the Australia match.

Shohely also told the said player that she would be paid 2 million Bangladesh Takas if she did the fix, and the money would come from winnings that her 'cousin' made from his bets.

Pakistan retain chosen 15-member squad for CT

PTI, KARACHI: Pakistan have decided to stick with their already chosen Champions Trophy squad after the selectors reviewed it following widespread criticism about the inclusion of certain players.

The Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) chairman Mohsin Naqvi and the selectors reviewed the 15-member squad after the selection of batter Khushdil Shah and all-rounder Faheem Ashraf

invited criticism.

But a reliable PCB source said there will not be any last-minute change, even as the deadline by the International Cricket Council (ICC) technical committee for making changes ends on Tuesday.

"The same 15 players will represent Pakistan in the coming (Champions Trophy) tournament and if there is any injury problem with any player that will be dealt with according to the ICC tour-

nament rules," he said.

SQUAD

Muhammad Rizwan (Capt) Babar Azam, Fakhar Zaman, Saud Shakeel, Kamran Ghulam, Tayyab Tahir, Salman Ali Agha, Khushdil Shah, Faheem Ashraf, Abrar Ahmed, Shaheen Shah Afridi, Naseem Shah, Muhammad Hasnain and Haris Rauf

Ronaldo cracks Al Nassr deal to extend contract

AFP, RIYADH: Portuguese football star Cristiano Ronaldo has reached an agreement with Al Nassr to extend his contract by another year until June 2026, an official with the Saudi club told AFP on Monday.

The official said the sides have agreed on the renewable extension of Ronaldo's contract, "but it has not been signed yet. An announcement will be made over the coming days".

Ronaldo turned 40 last week with his current contract due to end in June 2025. The former Manchester United, Real Madrid and Juventus star joined Al Nassr in January 2023 and has since scored 82 goals in 90 matches.

In August, Ronaldo said he would stay with Al Nassr through the end of his



professional career, which may be "soon or in two or three years".

"But it'll most likely happen with Al Nassr, in the team that makes me happy... and where I feel good."

The Portuguese great appeared to trade an end-of-career payday for football obscurity when he moved to Riyadh's Al Nassr two years ago in

a deal said to be worth \$250 million.

But his influence became clear when he was followed by a parade of ageing superstars to the big-spending Saudi Pro League.

Saudi Arabia was then awarded the 2034 World Cup in December, the crowning glory for the oil-rich kingdom's strategy of revamping its image

through sports, tourism and culture.

When Ronaldo launched his YouTube channel in August, he gained one million subscribers in just 90 minutes and 20 million within 24 hours. He currently has 73.5 million.

Although World Cup glory has probably eluded him, unlike his Argentine rival Lionel Messi, records

still dangle in front of the five-time Ballon d'Or and Champions League winner.

Despite his prodigious form as he closes in on 1,000 professional goals in official matches, Ronaldo is yet to win a Saudi or continental trophy with Al Nassr, with the Arab Club Champions Cup of 2023 his only triumph with the club.

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