

# India hope for Shami's wrist magic to reclaim Champions Trophy

**PTI, BENGALURU:** Mohammed Shami's right hand has more sleight than a magician. A simple cock of his wrist can outfox the best batters in the world. But can he unlock the sorcery and help India reclaim the ICC Champions Trophy after 12 years?

The fans will certainly expect Shami to hit his strides straightaway in the marquee event because India's primary strike weapon Jasprit Bumrah has been ruled out due to an injury.

But there are multiple concerns as well about Shami's readiness for an event of this magnitude. India start their Champions Trophy campaign on February 20 against Bangladesh in Dubai.

The 34-year-old is coming back from an injury. Even though he has played a few matches at various levels and formats since his re-entry into cricket late last year, delivering in a high-pressure tournament is an altogether different proposition.

Another reason for the trepidation surrounding Shami is the absence of

Bumrah, his trusted ally in the last six years or so at the other end. In the Champions Trophy, Shami is all set to partner Arshdeep Singh. But for all his skills and promise, Arshdeep is not yet at Bumrah's level.

So, can Shami drag the train forward all by himself? Former India pacer Laxmipathy Balaji found no reason to believe otherwise.

"Actually, he had out-bowled Bumrah in the 2019 (50-over World Cup) and in the last World Cup (2023). Bumrah is the champion bowler across formats. But Shami has experience and, before Bumrah's arrival, it was Shami who carried India's attack all through," Balaji, now a reputed pace bowling coach, told PTI.

Bumrah's unavailability makes it imperative for Shami to strike upfront consistently. Balaji underlined that factor.

"I think it's very important. If India has to do well, then Shami has to come good with the new ball. The kind of impact he can make in his first six overs with the new ball, it will

play a crucial role for India. "Old ball is anyway...it is a defensive game now. If he can make early inroads regularly that will give a huge booster to India," he added.

But can he find his optimal and ideal running speed, because Shami's effectiveness totally depends on his rhythm.

Balaji thought it was not a task beyond Shami.

"Since that (ankle) injury has happened, there was a little bit of slowness, maybe. It's natural. But there is nothing you

can do about it. It's part of any sportsperson's career.

"He has the experience to get over it and he will do it as he bowls more. It's just about accepting the (physical) condition and continuing his best practices," he said.

However, Shami's duty will not be just restricted to taking wickets, as the senior bowler will also have to guide understudies like Arshdeep and Harshit Rana during the course of the Champions Trophy.

Balaji felt the body of work that Shami has built over the last 12 years

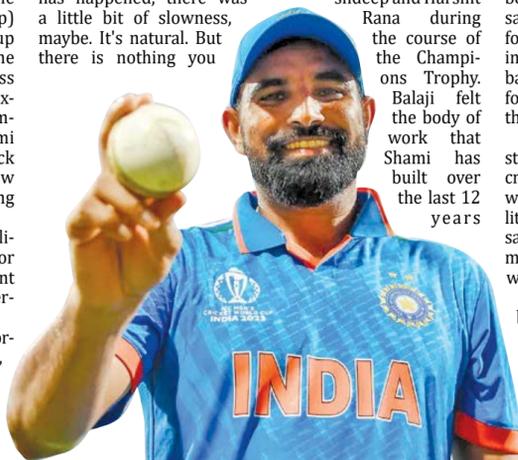
makes him an ideal candidate for it.

"Shami is the leader of the pack right now. I mean, he has been the leader of the pack for a long time now. If you see what Shami has done in 12 years of cricket and, especially, in Test cricket, it has been humongous.

"Now, if he starts striking with the new ball the confidence it gives to other bowlers will be huge," he said. It could be a blessing for Shami that India is playing their matches in Dubai, a venue where pacers found appreciable help in the past.

"He keeps attacking the stumps, a quality that is very critical in a place like Dubai, where batsmen may get a little bit more assistance," said Balaji. How does Shami manage to be so effective with the new ball?

"Shami has one of the best wrist positions in the game, helping him bring all of his variations. See, conditions in Dubai will be more or less be similar to India, so he just needs to follow his methods there," he added.



## Naqvi sells his 400k Dirham VIP box for PCB funds

**PTI, KARACHI:** Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) chairman Mohsin Naqvi has decided to watch the Champions Trophy match against India from the stands, after selling the 30-seat VIP Hospitality Box offered to him for around 400,000 dirhams (INR 94 lakh), and putting the proceeds into the PCB's coffers.

According to a report in Pakistan media, Naqvi was offered the premium seating for himself, his family, and guests for the matches in Dubai.

However, he chose to sell the box and watch the game, including the game against India, from regular enclosures to experience the atmosphere with the fans. Naqvi apparently has informed the ICC and Emirates Cricket Board that he will prefer to watch the match with the crowd and experience how they back the Pakistan team on match days.

The PCB chairman has also mentioned that the board will cover the expenses of approximately 18 billion rupees on the upgrade of the stadiums in Karachi, Lahore and Pindi by using the gate money and other seating receipts from the ICC.

## sportspopup

### Manu wins BBC Sportswoman of the Year award

**NEW DELHI:** Star Indian pistol shooter Manu Bhaker was named the BBC Indian Sportswoman of the Year on Monday, following her outstanding performance at the Paris Olympics. Manu was among five nominees for the award, alongside golfer Aditi Ashok, para shooter Avani Lekhara, India women's cricket vice-captain Smriti Mandhana, and wrestler Vinesh Phogat -- each recognised for their exceptional contributions to Indian sport. The nominees were shortlisted by an eminent jury of sports journalists and writers. Now in its fifth edition, the ISWOTY Award celebrates and honours remarkable achievements of women athletes in India.

### KL Rahul focuses on big-hitting at nets ahead of Champions Trophy

**DUBAI:** Gearing up for the finisher's role, wicketkeeper-batter KL Rahul worked on his big-hitting skills as the Indian team trained for the second time on Monday ahead of their Champions Trophy opener against Bangladesh. Rahul, typically known for his technical approach, appeared to shift gears as he focused on playing aggressive shots. With Rishabh Pant pushing for a spot in the playing XI, the 32-year-old seemed to embrace a more proactive, power-hitting mindset. Rahul was seen clearing the ropes with ease, practising sixes off almost every delivery. Set to bat at No 5 or 6, Rahul's role will be crucial in the final overs, where he might be needed to accelerate the innings from the outset and he could be seen practising range-hitting during the high-intensity session. Shreyas Iyer, who has displayed aggressive batting in the recent series, also worked on his power game. Opener Shubman Gill looked in sublime touch with a range of elegant strokes, including crisp drives and pulls. India skipper Rohit Sharma also looked sharp, practising late cuts and delicate touch shots. Batting mainstay Virat Kohli also spend time honing his skills.

### India postpones winter games

**NEW DELHI:** India suspended its winter games on Monday due to a lack of snow in one of the world's highest ski resorts, in a stark sign of rising global temperatures. While snow levels fluctuate each year, scientists say climate change is driving erratic rainfall and shifting weather patterns. The Himalayan resort of Gulmarg in Indian-administered Kashmir was due to hold national competitions in Alpine skiing, Nordic skiing, ski mountaineering and snowboarding from February 22-25. Organisers had planned for hundreds of athletes to take part, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi had earlier said he was looking forward to the games, which would "encourage upcoming talent".

### Neymar scores his first goal since returning to Santos in Brazil

**SAO PAULO:** Neymar scored his first goal for Santos since returning to Brazil when he converted a penalty Sunday in a 3-1 win over Sao Paulo-based Agua Santa. Finding the net from the spot in the 14th minute of the Sao Paulo state championship match will provide the 33-year-old star some relief after a tough restart. Thaciano in the 26th and Guilherme, with an assist by Neymar, in the 70th rounded out the scoring for Santos. So far, Neymar has not managed to play all 90 minutes in a match for Santos. His performances were below par in the first three games for the club, but he showed some improvement on Sunday as he continues his recovery from a knee injury.

## Smriti, Renuka shine as RCB demolish DC by 8 wkts

**PTI, VADODARA:** Smriti Mandhana smashed a blistering 47-ball 81 to power reigning champions Royal Challengers Bengaluru to a resounding eight-wicket victory over Delhi Capitals in the Women's Premier League here on Monday.

RCB bowlers, led by Renuka Singh (3/23) and Georgia Wareham (3/25), produced a disciplined performance to bowl out Delhi for 141 in 19.3 overs.

RCB's opening duo of Smriti and Danni Wyatt-Hodge

(42 from 33 balls; 7x4) made the target look effortless, forging a commanding 107-run partnership in just 55 balls before Richa Ghosh (11 not out from 5 balls) sealed the chase with a six in 16.2 overs.

The Indian vice-captain Smriti smashed 10 fours and three sixes, dominating the bowlers with her signature sweeps, inside-out drives, and a towering pull over deep mid-wicket off Marizanne Kapp.

She reached her fastest

fifty of the tournament in just 27 balls, setting the tone for RCB's clinical chase. Danni provided solid support, striking seven boundaries, keeping the momentum going.

The English batter survived a dropped catch at long-off when Jemimah Rodrigues spilled a sitter with Danni on 34. The duo's staggering opening stand in

just 10 overs, left Delhi with no answers. RCB stormed to 50 in just five overs, ensuring there was no let-up.

Smriti's powerful six off Arundhati Reddy over long-off was an early statement of intent, while back-to-back boundaries off Shikha Pandey further dismantled Delhi's bowling attack.

The toss also proved crucial as RCB's decision to

bowl first paid off.

With dew making it difficult for Delhi's bowlers to grip the ball, the spinners struggled, allowing Smriti and Danni to dominate the chase.

With this emphatic win, RCB flexed their batting firepower and bowling discipline to lead the standings with two wins out of two.

Earlier, after being put in to bat, Delhi had a solid powerplay, reaching 55/1, but RCB struck back with a double blow in the seventh

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