

Last dance? Kohli, Rohit eye one final ICC glory

PTI, DUBAI/KARACHI: Intrigue, uncertainty, backstage drama. The ICC Champions Trophy has seen it all even before the curtains go up on the tournament and it would only get more stirring over the next three weeks, starting with the opening clash between Pakistan and New Zealand in Karachi.

Eight teams will vie for a trophy, often talked up as tougher to win than the World Cup, and also to script a new chapter in their own cricketing story. While India will fight it out in Dubai, others will be primarily based in Pakistan, which would get to host its first ICC event since the 1996 World Cup.

TODAY'S FIXTURE
Pakistan vs New Zealand,
at National Bank Stadium,
Karachi,
at 2.30 pm (IST)

Several barriers had to be hurdled over to cobble this tournament together after eight years. The tournament is also crucial amid the raging debate on the relevance of ODI cricket, which is struggling to find its space amid the rage for T20 cricket and the devotion for Test format.

Perhaps, no other cricketing event in the recent past has been harried so much by long-standing geopolitical tensions, stubbornness by administrative boards of two important participants, and



Champions Trophy set to start amid debate on relevance of 50-over cricket

DRAMA, LEGENDS & HIGH-STAKES CRICKET

The grand return: The ICC Champions Trophy returns after 8 years, with Pakistan hosting an ICC event for the first time since 1996.

India vs Pakistan clash: The biggest match of the tournament on February 23 in Dubai, at 2.30 pm, packed with history, rivalry, and high stakes.

Farewell for legends?: This could be the last ODI tournament for Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma, marking the end of an era.

Gambhir's Test: India's head coach Gautam Gambhir faces scrutiny; a win could solidify his position.

New challengers & missing stars: Australia is missing key pacers, while New Zealand and England are rebuilding with fresh faces.

Dark horses: Afghanistan and Bangladesh could pull off surprises, adding unpredictability to the tournament.

phy in 2017.

The opening match in itself is a curious clash -- a talented-yet-volatile Pakistan unsure of its own destiny against a team for which order is everything.

But the blue riband match of

the tournament will be on February 23 when India take on Pakistan, ushering in customary waves of nostalgia, emotions, political grand-standing, and the social media battle. That marquee showdown

NEW ZEALAND'S SQUAD: JAMIESON TO REPLACE FERGUSON

PTI, KARACHI: Kyle Jamieson will replace injured pacer Lockie Ferguson in New Zealand's squad for the Champions Trophy after the ICC Event Technical Committee approved the change on the eve of their campaign-opener against Pakistan here on Wednesday.

Thirty-year-old Jamieson, who has played 13 ODIs, was

named as a replacement after Ferguson was ruled out due to an injury to his right foot. This will be Jamieson's first ODI match since playing against Bangladesh in September 2023, and the first international appearance after the first Test against South Africa in February last year. Since that Test, the 30-year-old had to sit out of all the ac-

tion because of stress fracture on the back. The doctors had advised him year-long rest and recuperation. The strapping pacer returned to competitive cricket through the Super Smash T20 in January for Canterbury. Fellow pacer Ben Sears too made his return through the Super Smash and was drafted into the national squad.

will be in Dubai as India remained steadfast in its refusal to set foot on Pakistani soil owing to security concerns.

But beyond such team equations, certain individual players would want this tournament to be a memorable one.

On top of the list are India's batting talismans Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma. They have been magnificent servants of the game over the last decade and half.

Few in modern era were able to match their achievements and aura. But now, these two titans have reached the last lap of a long race, and would want to bow out in a blaze of glory.

It's tough to imagine Kohli and Rohit being part of India's ODI set-up after the Champions Trophy irrespective of the outcome.

The Aussies themselves are without their premier pacers Pat Cummins, Mitchell Starc and Josh Hazlewood. But the two-time champions still pack a punch as they have a batting unit to meet the demands of ODI format.

Once a feared white-ball team, England have slipped a few rungs as age and form have caught up with some of their leading performers.

New Zealand are also travelling on fresh avenue following the retirement of Trent Boult and Tim Southee.

Afghanistan and Bangladesh could pull off surprises, adding unpredictability to the tournament.

FIRST ROUND

Each team plays 3 matches
Feb 19 - March 2

GROUP A

- BANGLADESH**
(Dubai, Rawalpindi, Rawalpindi)
- INDIA**
(Plays all its matches in Dubai)
- NEW ZEALAND**
(Karachi, Rawalpindi, Dubai)
- PAKISTAN**
(Karachi, Dubai, Rawalpindi)

GROUP B

- AFGHANISTAN**
(Karachi, Lahore, Lahore)
- AUSTRALIA**
(Lahore, Rawalpindi, Lahore)
- ENGLAND**
(Lahore, Lahore, Karachi)
- SOUTH AFRICA**
(Karachi, Rawalpindi, Karachi)

FINALS

1st semi-final, Dubai

March 4

2nd semi-final, Lahore

March 5

FINAL, to be confirmed

March 9

sportspopup

Shardul Thakur to join Essex for County Championship Division One

LONDON: India all-rounder Shardul Thakur will play seven matches for County team Essex in Division One from the beginning of the 2025 season, the club announced on Tuesday. The 33-year-old Thakur, who has so far played 11 Tests, 47 ODIs and 25 T20s over the last eight years, will be playing in the English country circuit for the first time. Thakur has been in rich form both with the bat and the ball, having scored 51 and 119 for his second First-Class century last month against Jammu and Kashmir, followed by a brisk 84 against Meghalaya in the Ranji Trophy group stage. Thakur also claimed a hat-trick in the match against Meghalaya, in a bid to prove his form and fitness for a national team comeback, with his last appearance being at the 2023 ODI World Cup.

Jaspal Rana will continue as my coach: Manu Bhaker

NEW DELHI: Eyeing glory in next World Championship, double Olympic medallist shooter Manu Bhaker said Jaspal Rana will continue to be her "coach" despite the Dronacharya award being roped in as the High Performance trainer for pistol discipline by the National Rifle Association of India (NRAI). Rana, a four-time Asian Games gold medallist, had a very bitter and public fallout with Manu before the Tokyo Olympics but they reconciled before last year's Paris Games, where the latter made history by bagging two bronze medals. "Honestly, I only have to say one thing that he (Rana) is my coach all I know and he is very good at what he does. He is very, very talented and he has been a great coach for me. "All I know and all I can say is that he is my coach. Of course, he can be anyone else's coach as well but for me he is my coach," Manu said after winning the BBC Sports-women of the Year 2024 award at a glittering function here on Monday night.

I have not resigned from IOA panel, will complete tenure: Mary Kom

NEW DELHI: The Indian Olympic Association's athletes commission chairperson and boxing legend M C Mary Kom on Tuesday denied reports that she has resigned from her position, insisting that she has been misunderstood and will complete her tenure in the panel. The 42-year-old Manipuri, who is also a 2012 Olympics bronze-winner, had travelled to Haldwani for the National Games closing ceremony last week where she expressed her displeasure over being lodged at an "inferior hotel". Speaking to PTI, Mary Kom said her outburst in a private WhatsApp group was misconstrued and leaked to the media as resignation. "I have not resigned, I will complete my tenure (which ends in 2026)," she asserted. "I was merely telling my fellow (athletes commission) members that if this kind of treatment happens again, I will consider resigning. I never said that I am resigning. IOA is my family and if I am unhappy over something, I have every right to express it. "This does not mean that I am resigning," she went on. Mary Kom was elected to the panel in 2022 with table tennis stalwart A Sharath Kamal as vice-chairperson.

Curran hits maiden ton as Zimbabwe win Ireland ODI series

HARARE: Ben Curran struck a one-day international career best 118 on Tuesday to steer Zimbabwe to a nine-wicket triumph over Ireland in Harare, and a 2-1 series victory. The son of former Zimbabwe cricketer Kevin Curran and brother of England internationals Tom and Sam Curran faced 112 balls, and his knock included 14 fours. Ben Curran could not hide his pride after the innings as he became the first player in Curran family to score a century in international cricket. It was a dramatic improvement in form by the 28-year-old, whose previous highest ODI score was 28 runs. He reached his maiden century from the third ball of the 36th over, hitting off-spinner Andy McBrine for four. Replying to 240-6 by Ireland, Zimbabwe reached 246-1 with 63 balls to spare at Harare Sports Club, where rain delayed play for 30 minutes during the afternoon.

India will feel Bumrah's absence strongly: Dhawan

PTI, DUBAI: India will feel Jasprit Bumrah's absence "very strongly" in the Champions Trophy but they still have a great chance to win the tournament considering their recent form and a host of match-winners at their disposal, reckons former opener Shikhar Dhawan.

Pace spearhead Bumrah was ruled out of the tournament due to a lower back injury, having taken the maximum load during India's five-match Test series against Australia.

"My concern is they are going to miss Jasprit Bumrah, there is no doubt he will be a big absence and I think they will feel it very strongly," Dhawan wrote in an ICC column published on Tuesday.

"For me, he is the best bowler in the world, and his accuracy is hard to replicate. He is also a very calm character and that is crucial in a huge ICC event like this."

Dhawan is, however, backing Shubman Gill and Harshit Rana to sizzle in the tournament.

"At the same time, Harshit Rana has come into the side and I think that is really exciting - keep an eye on him, I think he could have a breakout tournament."

"I like his attitude, he is a go-getter and he is not afraid of anything. He accepts challenges and we have seen in the England series that he is in form. I am sure he will look to seize this opportunity and, if he does, he could provide a real X-factor for India."

India's bowling coach Morkel returns home due to emergency

PTI, DUBAI: India's bowling coach Morne Morkel has left for his home in South Africa due to a family emergency.

Morkel, who was appointed for the job in September last year, had travelled to Dubai with the Indian team on Saturday, and also attended the side's first practice session ahead of the ICC Champions Trophy beginning on Wednesday.

The 40-year-old former South African pacer was, however, not around

for the Indian team's second practice session on Monday, it has been learned.

The development comes just as India geared up to began their campaign with a match against Bangladesh at Dubai International Cricket Stadium here on Thursday.

The Indian bowling attack for the ICC tournament comprises specialist pacers and one fast-bowling all-rounder in Hardik Pandya.

Pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah

was ruled out of the event due to lower back injury, leaving the task of shouldering the fast-bowling responsibility on Arshdeep Singh, Harshit Rana and Mohammed Shami, with Pandya being the fourth option.

Pakistan is the host nation of the tournament, but India will be playing all their matches in Dubai as per the hybrid model agreed by the concerned stakeholders.

The much-awaited match between India and Pakistan is scheduled to take place on Sunday.

The first semi-final will be played in Dubai on March 4, and the final, if India qualify for it, will also take place in Dubai on March 9.

From Oman to Dubai: A dream come true!

Cricket fans brave long wait to meet their idols; passionate supporters collect memories and autographs

PTI, DUBAI: Rehman Zaid and Fatima made a trip from Oman to Dubai to catch a glimpse of India's superstar cricketers, and it did not matter to them that they had to wait for hours to turn a long-cherished dream into reality.

Rarely fans from a cricketing outpost get to see Indian players up close, but once they got a chance the supporters returned home with some precious memorabilia.

There were fans from

India, of course, but among the 200-plus supporters assembled at the ICC Cricket Academy were Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Oman, UK and USA citizens - mostly of Indian origin.

The Indian team members were here on Monday evening for a nearly three-hour training session ahead of their Champions Trophy opener against Bangladesh on February 20.

With little time wasted, they captured the cricket-

"I am so happy. I am so grateful to ICC for allowing us to see and interact with the Indian cricketers from so close. I managed to get the autograph on the T-shirt. This is so unreal. I saw Virat. He came and signed this one for me and for others. He is so nice and wonderful. I just missed Shami's autograph - Fatima, fan

ers' pictures and videos on their phones, standing a mere 5 metres away and separated only by a barricade and a few security personnel.

"We have come from Oman. We will be watching a few matches of In-

dia. We are quite happy that we got such an opportunity to see the cricketers from so close," said Zaid, who has come along with his family of four.

The fans waited till India's net session got over, and tried to click them

once more.

The cricketers, who trooped into the team bus quickly, however, found some time to sign a few autographs, much to the glee of the fans.

The 17-year-old Fatima managed to get Shreyas Iyer's sign on a T-shirt, and she was delighted.

"I am so happy. I am so grateful to ICC for allowing us to see and interact with the Indian cricketers from so close. I managed to get the autograph on the

T-shirt.

"This is so unreal. I saw Virat. He came and signed this one for me and for others. He is so nice and wonderful. I just missed Shami's autograph," she said.

As one would expect, the loudest cheer was reserved for Kohli, a crowd puller wherever he goes.

Now, they plan to return to see their heroes once again on February 20 and 23 for the matches against Bangladesh and Pakistan respectively.

Germany thrash India 4-1 in FIH Pro League

PTI, BHUBANESWAR: India were found wanting against a relentless German outfit as they suffered a 1-4 drubbing at the hands of the reigning world champions in their FIH Pro League match here on Tuesday.

India were weak in defence and they lacked enough quality in the final third.

Florian Sperling gave Germany the lead with his seventh minute strike but Gurjant Singh (13th) equalised for India within six minutes.

In what proved to be a riveting first quarter, Thies Prinz (14') restored Germany's lead a minute later as three goals were scored in the first quarter.

After a goalless second and third quarter, Michel Struthoff (48') and Raphael Hartkopf (55') scored twice in the fourth and final quarter to power Germany to a convincing win against the Paris Olympics bronze medallists.

Senior defender Amit Rohidas led

the Indian team in this match as regular skipper Harmanpreet Singh was not part of the starting XI. It was, however, not clear why the champion drag flicker did not start.

Harmanpreet, though, was also rested for the home team's second game.

Coming into the game after a 2-0 win over Spain in their last outing, India could not begin well as Sperling drew the first blood with goalkeeper Krishan Bahadur Pathak unable to thwart the danger.

Unperturbed by the opening German strike, India responded swiftly with the experienced forward Gurjant deflecting the ball towards the opponent's goalpost.

Germany, however, regained their lead in the blink of an eye as the ball again got the better of Pathak after it came off Prinz's stick.

At the end of first quarter, Germany

led 2-1.

India had a chance to equalise in the 20th minute but Gurjant, trying to deflect a pass from Rajinder, missed the target.

Four minutes later, Arshdeep Singh missed the target by a whisker, even as substitute goalkeeper Suraj Karkera denied Sperling.

Penalty corners continued to be a problem for India in the third quarter as they failed to convert them.

Instead, Germany scored twice within seven minutes in the fourth and final quarter to seal the match.

Women: Spain edge out India 4-3

An unsuccessful fourth and final quarter saw the Indian women's hockey team go down 3-4 to Spain to suffer their first defeat. Baljeet Kaur (19'), Sakshi Rana (38'), and Rutaja Dadaso Pisal (45') scored for India, while Estel Petchame (25', 49'), Sofia Rogoski (21') and Lucia Jimenez (52') netted for Spain.

Clinical MI trounce GG by five wickets

PTI, VADODARA: All-rounder Nat Sciver-Brunt starred in both departments as Mumbai Indians produced a clinical performance to return to winning ways with a five-wicket victory over a self-destructive Gujarat Giants in their Women's Premier League match here on Tuesday.

Sciver-Brunt smashed a 39-ball 57, her second consecutive half-century, after taking two wickets for 26, as MI first bowled out GG for a modest 120 and then chased down the target, scoring 122 for 5 with 3.5 overs to spare.

Invited to bat, Gujarat paid the price for their over-aggression, with MI's bowlers, led by off-spinner Hayley Matthews, delivering a tight performance.

Shabnim Ismail (1/17), Amelia Kerr (2/22), and A man j o t Kaur (1/17) also played key roles in restricting

Gujarat's batting. In response, Sciver-Brunt dazzled with a flurry of boundaries, playing cut, pull, sweep, and scoop shots with ease. She hit 11 fours during her innings and was dismissed in the 16th over with just seven runs required to win.

WPL FIXTURE

Delhi Capitals vs UP Warriorz,
BCA Stadium, Kotambi
(Vadodara), at 7.30 pm