

Key overseas players out as IPL nears play-offs

BCCI directs South African players to return home by May 26; Buttler, Moeen and Mustafizur among other key absentees

PTI, NEW DELHI: The BCCI on Thursday instructed the IPL franchises to release eight WTC-bound South African players latest by May 26, making them unavailable for the play-offs.

In an advisory to teams, the BCCI also informed that the West Indies players will be available for the remainder of the tournament which was suspended last week due to the India-Pakistan military conflict. Following the ceasefire announcement, it was decided to resume the IPL from May 17 with the final pushed back to June 3 from May 25, clashing with international commitments of players from South Africa, England and the West Indies.

Facing an unforeseen situation, the BCCI had tough negotiations with foreign boards including CSA over player availability but the gov-

erning body from South Africa has not relented in light of the WTC final against Australia beginning at Lord's on June 11.

It is worth mentioning all six teams in South Africa's flagship T20 league are owned by IPL franchises.

South Africa are supposed to assemble in the UK on May 31 while the play-offs begin on May 29, and the date also marks the start of England's home white-ball series against the West Indies.

"The South African players must return to South Africa at the latest by Monday, May 26. West Indies players will be available throughout the tournament," BCCI conveyed to teams in an official communication.

The absence of eight South African players including Tristan Stubbs (DC), Wiaan Mulder (SRH), Kagiso Rabada (GT), Corbin Bosch

(MI), Ryan Rickelton (MI), Marco Jansen (PBKS), Lungi Ngidi (RCB), Aiden Markram (LSG) may adversely impact the teams which are in the race for play-offs.

SRH has released Mulder early as they are already eliminated and in all likelihood Markram too could be freed after the league stage with LSG unlikely to make the play-offs.

But Jansen has made a big impact for Punjab Kings and the same stays true for MI opener Ryan Rickelton. Stubbs is an important member of Delhi Capitals and so is speedster Kagiso Rabada for Gujarat Titans.

Titans will also miss the services of in-form Jos Buttler who is set to miss the play-offs for England duty.

Meanwhile, Gujarat Titans will lose Jos Buttler after their final three league matches. According to ESPN-Cricinfo, Kusal Mendis will replace

him during the play-offs. Titans are currently among the top two teams.

Kolkata Knight Riders announced Moeen Ali will not return due to illness, along with Rovman Powell, who is undergoing a medical procedure. KKR stated: "We wish them good health and a quick recovery."

Other England players unavailable include Jofra Archer (RR), Sam Curran, and Jamie Overton (both CSK).

Mustafizur Rahman's inclusion for Delhi Capitals is also uncertain due to a pending No Objection Certificate from the Bangladesh Cricket Board, as he is currently playing a T20I series in the UAE.

With key overseas players ruled out, teams face tough decisions heading into the final stages of the tournament, as international commitments once again take precedence over franchise cricket.

Punjab sign Jamieson for injured Ferguson

PTI, NEW DELHI: Punjab Kings have drafted in New Zealand pacer Kyle Jamieson as a replacement for the injured Lockie Ferguson, the BCCI announced on Thursday.

The Punjab side was forced to seek a substitute for Ferguson as the Kiwi pacer has been ruled out of the remainder of the IPL with a hamstring injury.

The 33-year-old had picked up the niggles during Punjab's match against Sunrisers Hyderabad on April 12 and exited the field after bowling just two balls.

"The right-arm Kiwi pacer will join PBKS for Rs 2 Crore," said a BCCI release.

Jamieson had few fruitful outings of late for New Zealand in the Champions Trophy in March and in the subsequent bilateral T20I series against Pakistan at home.

Meanwhile, Gujarat Titans have signed Sri Lankan Kusal Mendis, who will replace wicketkeeper batter Jos Buttler.

sportspopup

BCCI board room named after Gavaskar to mark 10,000 Test runs



MUMBAI: Indian batting legend Sunil Gavaskar was, on Thursday, given a special honour by the Board of Control for Cricket in India. In honour of Gavaskar's milestone of 10,000 Test runs, a Board Room at the BCCI headquarters in Mumbai, was named in his honour. "Honouring a legend! India great Sunil Gavaskar inaugurates 10,000 Gavaskar -- a Board Room named in his honour and his iconic milestone at the BCCI HQ in Mumbai," the BCCI tweeted a video on their X handle. "This is a huge honour. I'm very, very thankful to BCCI for this honour," Gavaskar said. "MCA is my mother, BCCI is my father. Thank you so much. Really appreciate the opportunities that I've got, to be what I am thanks to Indian cricket," he added.

Real Madrid's Asencio indicted in underage sex video case

MADRID: Real Madrid defender Raul Asencio has been indicted along with three former youth players at the club, for alleged distribution of a sexual video involving a minor, according to Spanish reports on Wednesday. The judge at a Gran Canaria court is prosecuting "four footballers" for their alleged involvement in "the recording or non-consensual dissemination of videos of a sexual nature involving a minor and another young girl", aged 16 and 18 respectively at the time, read a court document seen by AFP. The judge did not mention Asencio by name, nor specify which player is accused of which misdemeanour. The players are accused of "disclosure of secrets without consent, and violation of privacy, distributing and sending videos to third parties without consent, capturing and using minors for pornographic purposes and possession of child pornography". In September 2023, three unnamed players were arrested at Real Madrid's training centre following a complaint lodged by the mother of the 16-year-old girl who appears in the video.

Messi returns for Argentina in WC qualifiers against Chile and Colombia

BUENOS AIRES: Argentina will have captain Lionel Messi back for its World Cup qualifiers against Chile and Colombia, the national team announced Thursday. The 37-year-old Inter Miami star missed the March doubleheader because of an adductor injury but the team still clinched qualification for next year's tournament by beating Uruguay and Brazil. Defending champion Argentina will visit struggling Chile on June 5 and then will host sixth-place Colombia in Buenos Aires on June 10. Messi will then return to the United States to play in the opening match of the FIFA Club World Cup, when Inter Miami plays Egyptian team Al Ahly on June 14 in Miami. Manchester United forward Alejandro Garnacho, who had been omitted from previous games for tactical reasons, was also included in Argentina's 28-man squad called by coach Lionel Scaloni.

At USD 3.6 million, ICC doubles prize money for WTC winners

DUBAI: The winners of the 2025 World Test Championship will be richer by USD 3.6 million, more than double of what was awarded in the previous edition. Australia had received USD 1.6 million for winning the final against India in 2023. The 2025 final will be played between Australia and South Africa at Lord's from June 11. The losing finalists will earn USD 2.1 million while runners-up of the previous two editions got USD 800,000. "The increase in prize money exhibits the ICC's efforts to prioritise Test cricket as it looks to build on the momentum of the first three cycles of the nine-team competition," said the ICC in a statement on Thursday. The WTC cycle saw South Africa finish on a high with 2-0 home series wins over Sri Lanka and Pakistan, ending with 69.44 percentage points. Defending champions Australia finished with 67.54 points while India finished with 50.00 after leading the table for majority of the time. "We are enormously proud to have the opportunity to defend the World Test Championship, especially at Lord's. It's a testament to all those involved across the past two years who have worked incredibly hard to reach the final, which is a great honour for all of us," said Australian captain Pat Cummins.

Virat surprised me, he had at least 2-3 years of Test cricket left: Shastri

PTI, DUBAI: Former India coach Ravi Shastri said Virat Kohli was "mentally fried and overcooked" due to constant public scrutiny, but was surprised by the latter's decision to retire from Test cricket because he believed that the star batter had another 2-3 years left in him in the longest format.

Kohli announced his retirement from Test cricket on Monday, drawing the curtain on a stellar red-ball career. He represented India in 123 Tests, scoring 9,230 runs at an average of 46.85, including 30 centuries.

Shastri revealed he had spoken to Kohli shortly before the latter made his decision public. "I did speak to him about it, I think a week before that [his announcement] and his mind was very clear that he'd given us everything. There were no regrets," Shastri told The ICC Review.

"Virat surprised me because I thought he had at least two-three years of Test match cricket left in him. But then, when you're mentally fried and overcooked, that's what tells you your body. You might be physically the fittest guy in the business."

"You might be fitter than half the guys in your team, but mentally you're well done, as they say, then it sends a message to the body. You know, that's it," he said. Opening up on their conversation, Shastri said Kohli's infectious personality and the constant spotlight he was under contributed to a burnout.

"He's got accolades around the globe. He has a

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bigger following than any other cricketer in the last decade. Whether it's Australia, whether it's South Africa, he just got people to watch the game. There was a love-hate relationship.

"They would get angry because he had the ability to get under the skin of the viewers. In the way he celebrated, you know his intensity was such that it was like a rash.

"It spread very quickly, not just within the dressing room, but within living rooms as well for people watching cricket. So, he was an infectious personality," he added.

Kohli led India to 40 wins in 68 Tests -- the most by any Indian skipper to date.

"If he decided to do something, then he gave his 100%, which is not easy to match. Individually, as a bowler, as a batsman," said Shastri, who formed one of the most successful captain-coach duos in Indian Test cricket history with Kohli.

"A player does his job, [and] then you sit back. But [with Kohli] when the team goes out, it's as if he has to take all the wickets, he has to take all the catches, he has to make all the decisions on the field."

Injury clouds Bumrah's path towards India Test captaincy

Gill and Gambhir to steer team dynamics

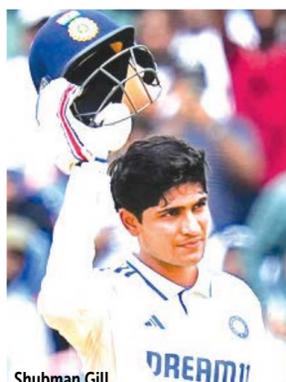
PTI, NEW DELHI: The India captaincy was his for the taking, but since that fateful January 4 morning in Sydney, the peerless Jasprit Bumrah has gradually fallen behind in the race, and it will be difficult for him to avoid the feeling of being shortchanged.

The leadership role was meant for him until he quietly left the Sydney Cricket Ground for a scan while holding his back few months ago.

In Bumrah's absence, any hopes of India winning the final Test against Australia went up in smoke, but that particular injury also dealt a telling blow to his chances of becoming India's long-term Test captain.

"I am shocked that we are looking at option other than Bumrah as Test captain. Worried about his injuries? Then choose your vice-captain carefully," former India Test player and noted pundit Sanjay Manjrekar wrote on his official 'X' handle.

Head coach Gautam Gambhir's presence in Mumbai, for offering puja at the Siddhivinayak Temple, had the rumour mills working overtime that Shubman Gill is still not a done deal for the leadership role.



Shubman Gill

With the new captain-in-waiting having an extended meeting with the head coach in the national capital few days back, there is little chance for the selectors or Gambhir to retract from their original stand.

There were rumours that influential people running Indian cricket aren't exactly happy with Gill's sudden elevation but it would be com-

pletely foolhardy to believe that those powerful men weren't taken into confidence before the Punjab batter was zeroed in as the next Test leader.

That leaves Bumrah, now 31, in a situation where permanent India captaincy might just look like a distant dream and, based on informed opinion, it will be difficult for him to play five Tests on the trot.

In the past, Ravi Shastri was bypassed during his best days, first by contemporary Krish Srikkanth and then by a younger Mohammed Azharuddin.

Down Under, the late Shane Warne was the best captain never to have led Australia but that had a lot to do with the legendary leg-spinner's off-field antics.

In case of Bumrah, the selectors had a very sharp intuitive hands on leader but their worry is also understandable - what happens in case of a breakdown?

Freak on-field injuries can't be controlled but stress fracture (back), side strain, knee and hamstring related troubles that fast bowlers face are part of fitness-related issues.

Superbet Classic: Praggn beats Wesley; in sole lead

PTI, BUCHAREST (Romania): Indian grandmaster R Praggnanandhaa shot into sole lead, defeating Wesley SO of the United States in the 8th round of Superbet Classic, a part of the Grand Chess tour.

The victory with black, took Praggnanandhaa to five points in all on a day when World champion D Gukesh also registered his first victory at the expense of another American Levon Aro-nian.

Maxime Vachier-Lagrave of France played a draw with Fabiano Caruana of USA, while local

GM Deac Bogdan-Daniel also got a draw with Duda Jan-Krzysztof of Poland.

With just one round to come, Frenchman Alireza Firouzja was trying his best to dent the confidence of Uzbek Nodirbek Abdusattorov in a keenly contested battle.

With Praggn on 5, Caruana and Vachier-Lagrave share the second spot currently on 4.5 points apiece. Alireza can join the Indian in lead if he wins against Abdusattorov. After two losses, Gukesh came back in form and he moved to 3.5 points.

Shafali returns to T20 side for England Tour

PTI, NEW DELHI: Attacking opener Shafali Verma on Thursday returned to India colours after a gap of seven months as she was included in the national T20I squad for the five-match away series against England, starting from June 28 in Trent Bridge. Shafali was out of the Indian team from October 2024 on account of modest form but she could not find a place in the ODI squad for the three-match series against England, which was also announced on this day.

Perhaps, her fine outing in this season's Women's Premier League (WPL) for Delhi Capitals where she aggregated 304 runs from nine matches at a strike-rate of 152.

Another player to make a comeback was wicketkeeper Yastika Bhatia, who was sidelined since last November due to a wrist injury sustained during the Women's Big Bash League.

India's campaign ends at Thailand Open

PTI, BANGKOK: India's dismal run in elite international badminton tournaments continued, as all remaining shuttlers, including world number 10 women's doubles pair of Treesa Jolly and Gayatri Gopichand exited early, ending the country's campaign at the Thailand Open Super 500 here on Thursday.

Treesa and Gayatri, returned to action following an injury layoff but fell 20-22, 14-21 to Japan's Rui Hirokami and Sayaka Hobara in the second round.

With Lakshya Sen having bowed out in the men's singles opening round on Wednesday, Treesa and Gayatri were the last elite Indian players in the fray.

The young Indian shuttlers also couldn't make an impact with Unnati Hooda, Malvika Bansod, and Aakarshi Kashyap bowing out after straight-game defeats against higher-ranked opponents in the women's singles second round on Thursday.

Seventeen-year-old Unnati, champion at the 2022 Odisha Masters and 2023 Abu Dhabi Masters, was no match for world No. 2 and top seed Pornpawee Chochuwong, going down 14-21, 11-21 in just 39 minutes.

World No. 23 Malvika, the 2024 Hyllo Open runner-up, also struggled against former world champion and local favourite Ratchanok Intanon, losing 12-21, 16-21 in the USD 475,000 event.

AP, VATICAN CITY: Pope Leo XIV has made peace with Jannik Sinner.

The top-ranked tennis player visited the new pope, gave him a tennis racket and offered to play, during an off day for Sinner at the Italian Open.

Leo, the first American pope, is an avid tennis player and fan and had said earlier this week that he would be up for a charity match when it was suggested by a journalist.

But at the time, Leo joked "we can't invite Sinner," an apparent reference to the English meaning of Sinner's last name.

By Wednesday, all seemed forgotten.

"It's an honour," Sinner said in Italian as he and his parents arrived in a reception room of the Vatican's auditorium. Holding one of his rackets and giving Leo

Pope meets Sinner: No.1 player gives tennis fan Pope Leo XIV racket on Italian Open off day



Pope Leo XIV shares a light moment with Italian tennis star Jannik Sinner during a private audience at the Vatican

another and a ball, the three-time Grand Slam champion suggested a quick volley. But the pope

looked around at the antiques and said, "Better not." Leo, a 69-year-old from Chicago, then appeared to

joke about his white cassock and its appropriateness for Wimbledon, perhaps a reference to the All England Club's

all-white clothing rule.

He asked how the Italian Open was going. "Now I'm in the game," Sinner said. "At the beginning of the tournament, it was a bit difficult."

Sinner has a quarterfinal match on Thursday in his first tournament back after a three-month ban for doping that was judged to be an accidental contamination.

He will next face freshly crowned Madrid champion Casper Ruud. Sinner is attempting to become the first Italian man to win the Rome title since Adriano Panatta in 1976.

During the audience, Angelo Binaghi, the head of the Italian Tennis and Padel Federation, gave Leo an honorary federation card.

"We all felt the passion that Leo XIV has for our sport and this filled us with pride," Binaghi said in a

statement. "We hope to embrace the Holy Father again soon, maybe on a tennis court."

The pope and Sinner posed for photos in front of the Davis Cup trophy that Sinner helped Italy win for the second consecutive time last year. Also on display in the room was the Billie Jean King Cup trophy won by Italy in 2024, the biggest women's team event in tennis.

Earlier in the week, after Leo's first quip about not wanting to invite him, Sinner said it was "a good thing for us tennis players" that the new pope likes to play the sport.

In addition to tennis, Leo is an avid Chicago White Sox baseball fan.

His predecessor, Pope Francis, was a lifelong fan of Buenos Aires soccer club San Lorenzo.