

A new captain, few from old guard & some fresh faces herald new beginning

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Team India captain Shubman Gill with teammates during a practice session on the eve of first Test match against England, at Headingley, Leeds, on Thursday

PTI, LEEDS: A new captain, a headstrong coach, a few from the old guard and some fresh faces will be determined to create a compelling narrative during the next 45 days when an in-transition India takes on an equally combustible England in a five-Test series for the Anderson-Tendulkar Trophy starting, here, on Friday.

PREVIEW 1ST TEST: ENGLAND VS INDIA

That only three Indian teams -- Ajit Wadekar's batch of 1971, Kapil's Devils in 1986 and Rahul Dravid's sprightly bunch in 2007 -- have won a Test series in Old Blighty in the past nine decades doesn't make for a rosy picture. Neither does the fact that India's most devoted long-format cricketer of the past decade, Virat Kohli, has walked into Test sunset making the batting line-up look slightly thin on experience.

For the 25-year-old Shub-

man Gill, this series will be nothing short of baptism by fire against an England side, which has changed the conventions of Test match batting under Brendon McCullum's coaching and Ben Stokes' captaincy.

Gill's selection as India's 37th Test captain was more about what one could expect of him rather than what he has done as a batter and a leader in the traditional format. The 'Prince' does have his plate full and has a lot to prove.

An unusually warm Leeds (maximum temperature on Friday could be 29 degree celsius) and the 8mm grass laden 22-yard surface at the Headingley isn't exactly a paradise for England's proverbial 'Bazballers' but this series will be about which batting unit blinks first under pressure.

England's batting with Joe Root, owner of 13,000 plus Test runs including 36 hundreds, looks superior on paper compared to India as the visiting team's most ex-

perienced batter is KL Rahul (58 Tests, 3257 runs).

But the presence of a peerless Jasprit Bumrah in the Indian bowling unit puts the visitors on even keel. This despite the pace spearhead being available for only three Tests.

Despite the absence of Kohli and Rohit Sharma, who played his best Test cricket in the 2021 series, this could be India's best chance to put pressure on an English bowling line-up that wouldn't have the quality that James Anderson and Stuart Broad brought for two decades.

An attack comprising

Chris Woakes, Brydon Carse, Josh Tongue and Shoaib Bashir with skipper Stokes to complement them doesn't exactly strike fear in the opposition ranks.

Head coach Gautam Gambhir, easily the most powerful man in the Indian change room after the departure of Kohli and Rohit, wouldn't want his already blemished record of six defeats to worsen any further. The series would be first real test of tactical acumen for Gambhir.

While Karun Nair's comeback seems to be a given if one went by slip cordon's composition during practice, where he was

SQUADS

England (playing XI): Zak Crawley, Ben Duckett, Ollie Pope, Joe Root, Harry Brook, Ben Stokes (C), Jamie Smith (wk), Chris Woakes, Brydon Carse, Josh Tongue and Shoaib Bashir

India: Shubman Gill (C), Rishabh Pant (VC & WK), Yashasvi Jaiswal, KL Rahul, Sai Sudharsan, Abhimanyu Easwaran, Karun Nair, Nitish Reddy, Ravindra Jadeja, Dhruv Jurel (WK), Washington Sundar, Shardul Thakur, Jasprit Bumrah, Mohd. Siraj, Prasidh Krishna, Akash Deep, Arshdeep Singh, Kuldeep Yadav, Harshit Rana

Match starts at 3.30 pm IST

stationed at first slip, there will be one more batting slot that needs to be fretted upon. Would Gambhir play an extra batter and hand the talented B Sai Sudharsan his maiden Test cap? Or does he play both seam bowling all-rounders in Nitish Reddy and Shardul Thakur to compensate for the lack of an extra specialist batter?

Then there is the lure of playing Kuldeep Yadav, who can turn the ball irrespective of surfaces, but Ravindra Jadeja despite his shortcomings as a left-arm spinner in SENA countries is still a solid No. 7 batter.

Another issue is whether T20 specialist Arshdeep Singh should be given a go as third seamer depending on conditions or should a Prasidh Krishna, who bowls at a quicker clip but slightly back of length, get the nod.

Not to forget Akash Deep, who is widely considered a perfect foil for Bumrah and Mohammed Siraj in these conditions. The decisions that Gambhir takes will certainly define India's game philosophy during the next six and half weeks.

The hosts have already announced their eleven and one can see that Stokes and McCullum have opted for a batting heavy eleven where Woakes comes in at No.8.

Woakes does have a Test hundred against India and is a good enough batter.

But it will also depend on how Zak Crawley and Ben Duckett start against Bumrah and Siraj, who can ask more than a few probing questions. Ollie Pope, who was 'Bumrahed' in the last India series, would know that Jacob Bethell is breathing down his neck.

But it is the Root versus Bumrah duel in three of the five games that could basically determine the outcome of the series.

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No RoKo, Ashwin doesn't mean India is lesser side: Stokes

“There's been a lot said about no Rohit, no Virat and no Ashwin, that doesn't mean that we think it's going to be any easier than what it ever is against India. The pool of talent that Indian cricket has is just ginormous

—Ben Stokes, England skipper

individuals are going to be any less hard to bowl at or bat against, just because of how big the pool of talent is in India.

"We've spent a lot of time out at the IPL, so I know that there's a lot of it. Obviously, three massive names, three people who have done wonderful things for their country, but it is not going to be any easier for us because of those three big names out there," Stokes added.

Stokes acknowledged Jasprit Bumrah will be a threat to the English batting line-up but added that his side won't be focused entirely on handling the Indian ace.

"Bumrah leading their attack, he's a fantastic bowler but there (are) 11 players on the team, and it takes a team to win a game of cricket," he said when asked if the focus of the fans will be on Bumrah given Kohli and Rohit are not a part of the touring party.

"Although Virat, Rohit and Ashwin have done amazing things for their country on the field, that doesn't mean that whoever comes in to replace those

Real held as Man City, Juventus triumph

Manchester City's English midfielder Phil Foden (centre) celebrates with teammates after scoring his team's first goal during the FIFA Club World Cup 2025 Group G match against Morocco's Wydad AC at the Lincoln Financial Field Stadium in Philadelphia

AFP, PHILADELPHIA (United States): Real Madrid were held to a 1-1 draw by Saudi Arabia's Al Hilal at the Club World Cup in new coach Xabi Alonso's first game in charge on Wednesday, after Manchester City got off to a winning start.

CLUB WORLD CUP

Federico Valverde had a stoppage-time penalty saved as Real were forced to settle for a point in the Group H match in Miami having taken the lead.

It was a disappointing outcome for the large contingent of fans of the Spanish side in the crowd of 62,415 at Hard Rock Stadium. The former Bayer Leverkusen coach gave debuts to new signings Trent Alexander-Arnold and Dean Huijsen in defence but Real were missing Kylian Mbappe through illness.

Gonzalo Garcia started in his place and the 21-year-old seized his chance as he opened the scoring just after the half-hour mark from a Rodrygo assist.

Al Hilal hit back in their new coach Simone Inzaghi's first game on the bench with Ruben Neves levelling before the break from the penalty spot following a Raul Asencio foul.

Real had the chance to claim victory in stoppage time after Mohammed Al Qahtani was ruled to have put his hand in the face of Fran Garcia in the box.

However, Valverde's spot-kick was saved by Yassine Bounou to give the Saudi team a draw after a hugely creditable performance. RB Salzburg took the lead in Group H with a 2-1 win over Mexican outfit Pachuca in Cincinnati.

The match was suspended early in the second half with the Austrian team leading 1-0 because of a storm, resuming 97 minutes later.

RESULTS

Manchester City 2 (Foden 2, Doku 42) **Wydad Casablanca 0**, **Real Madrid 1** (Gonzalo Garcia 34) **Al Hilal 1** (Neves 41-pen), **CF Pachuca 1** (Gonzalez 56) **Salzburg 2** (Gloukh 42, Onisiwo 76), **Al Ain 0 Juventus 5** (Kolo Muani 11, 45+4, Yildiz 31, Conceicao 21, 58)

Phil Foden and Jeremy Doku scored first-half goals as Pep Guardiola's City eased to a 2-0 win against Wydad Casablanca of Morocco in Group G.

Man City gave debuts to new signings Tijjani Reijnders and Rayan Cherki, but it was Foden who opened the scoring inside two minutes. Doku converted the second goal from a Foden corner shortly before the interval in a game played in sweaty early afternoon conditions in front of 37,446 fans at Lincoln Financial Field.

The afternoon was slightly marred for City as Rico Lewis was sent off for a dangerous tackle late on, but Guardiola was satisfied with the winning start as his side look to turn the page following a difficult last season.

Juventus, who sent a delegation to the White House earlier in the day to present Trump with a club shirt, surged to the top of Group G with a crushing triumph over UAE team Al Ain at Audi Field. On loan Paris Saint-Germain forward Randal Kolo Muani and Francisco Conceicao both struck twice while Kenan Yildiz was also on target.

Test series win in any SENA country bigger than IPL title, says Gill

PTI, LEEDS: A Test series win in England, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa ranks as a "bigger" achievement than an IPL title, said India's new captain **Shubman Gill** here on Thursday.

The 25-year-old Gill said his young Indian side without superstars Virat Kohli, Rohit Sharma and R Ashwin will play without any "baggage" in England with the opening Test starting here on Friday.

"Definitely the Test series, in my opinion," Gill replied when asked which one he will rank higher as a skipper between a Test series win in England or title in IPL where he captains Gujarat Titans.

"You don't get many opportunities as a captain to be able to come to England, maybe two (tours) if you are the best of your generation, (or) maybe three," he said during the pre-match press conference.

"IPL comes every year and you get to have a crack at it every year. In my opinion, winning a Test series in England, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa (collectively SENA countries) is bigger," he said.

Gill's side maybe lacking in experience of playing red-ball cricket in England but the skipper was unfazed. "A lot of people talk about, you know, our side is not experienced, but there are also positives that we don't really have any baggage coming to England, because not all of the players have really been to England," he said.

"So that could be one thing that really makes a difference for us because we wouldn't be carrying any baggage," he added.

"The blueprint which we

have got from our seniors in the last 5-10 years is that we can go and win anywhere, we will try to follow that with same confidence."

Gill said both he and head coach Gautam Gambhir felt No. 4 slot was ideal for him once Kohli retired.

"After Virat Bhai retired, me and GG (Gautam Gambhir) bhai had a discussion about it and we were both clear that he wanted me to bat at No. 4 and I was also clear that I also wanted to bat at that number," he said.

The captain once again harped on creating a "secure" environment for his players to ensure they deliver their best.

"If we succeed in creating that environment, then I think our Test series and WTC cycle will be very successful," he said.

Gill also emphasised on giving longer ropes to deserving players.

"It's about (having) clear communication; what you want from them? Trying to assign roles, how they would want to go about their things. Having the confidence to be able to back them with their natural game (as to) how they want to play this game," he said.

"Definitely there would be some players that you tend to give long ropes just because of their pure

potential that you see. But having said that, it's all about giving them clear communication and having honest conversations with them and that's how I feel the bond of a leader and a player is (at) the best," he added.

Gill acknowledged he picked the brains of Kohli and Rohit during the IPL to prepare for the England tour. "I met both of them in the IPL and they told me about their experiences, especially here in England, and some of the challenges that we might face here," he said. "I think the Test series that we played against England in India (2023-24)

Bumrah aiming for three Tests out of five against England

AFP, LONDON: India strike bowler **Jasprit Bumrah** expects to feature in only three matches of the five-Test series against England as he manages his workload following a back injury. The 31-year-old has taken 205 Test wickets at a stunning average of under 20 apiece, with his unique action and ability to generate sharp pace off a short run making him especially difficult to face.

But he suffered a back injury during the final match of India's 3-1 series loss in Australia, in January. And with five Tests in less than seven weeks, starting at Headingley on Friday, Bumrah is concerned to maintain peak fitness as India bid for their first series win in England since 2007. "The body is feeling good, no issues, no complaints," the fast bowler told Sky Sports.

"I have to be smart as well as I am not becoming younger by the day. I have to take care of my body as I would love to play for longer and contribute

in all three formats.

"I plan on the go but three Test matches is what I am looking at, what I can manage at this moment."

"The first is definitely going to happen, the rest we see how things are, what is the workload, what are the scenarios. Hopefully in the games I play I give my absolute best."

Bumrah, who has taken 60 wickets at an average of 22.16 in 14 Tests against England, is a senior figure in a youthful squad now captained by Shubman Gill after former skippers

Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli both retired last month. The paceman said the expectation that he would not be involved in every Test against England was central to his decision to rule himself out of the captaincy.

Bumrah led India during two Tests in Australia but batsman Gill is now in charge. "There are no fancy stories, no controversy, no headlines that I was sacked," said Bumrah, who had back surgery in 2023.

"I discussed about my workloads going forward, spoke to the people who have managed my back, spoke to the surgeon. I came to the conclusion I have to be a little more smart so I called the BCCI (Board of Control for Cricket in India) and said I don't want to be looked at in a leadership role." "They were looking at me for leadership but I had to say 'no' as it's not fair for the team if in a five-Test series, three matches somebody else is leading and two matches somebody else is leading."