

## Short Takes

### Coach Valverde says Barcelona's style of play is sacred

**Madrid, June 10** : FC Barcelona's new chief coach Ernesto Valverde says he will not be changing the style of play of the Catalan football giants. Barcelona have long been associated with a passing game, which developed under Johann Cruyff and reached its apex under the direction of Pep Guardiola. Now the man who was named as the replacement for Luis Enrique in the Barca dugout at the end of the season, says he has no intention of altering what has become the Barcelona hallmark, reports Xinhua news agency. "It is something that has become part of the team's legend," said Valverde in an interview on Barcelona's TV station; Barca TV. The presence of forwards Leo Messi, Neymar and Luis Suarez, all of whom are virtually guaranteed to start, limits the options of any coach looking to pick a Barcelona side, given that the trio are guaranteed to start and Enrique tended to play a 4-3-3 formation with three forwards and three midfielders.

Valverde used a 4-2-3-1 system at Athletic Club Bilbao for the past four seasons and hinted the 4-3-3 was something he could change. "It's a system what Barcelona have used for a long time, although it is not exclusive and they have played using a 3-4-3 or even a 4-2-3-1, but independent of the scheme, what has to prevail is the style," said the new coach. Valverde said that Barcelona's style was "based on their attacking midfielders and I have to continue with that, although I will give it my personal touch," he said.

### Striker Gomez to stay at Wolfsburg

**Berlin, June 10** : Germany striker Mario Gomez will remain at Wolfsburg, both sides have confirmed. The 31-year-old joined the German football club in summer 2016 to provide 16 goals in 33 competitive appearances since then. "In the last days we discussed the situation with those in charge several times. Despite the very difficult season, I have confidence in our team, the club and the fans. I decided to play here next year," Gomez said on Friday. Wolfsburg almost dropped into the second division. However, they were able to edge second division side Braunschweig (2-0 on aggregate) in the relegation play-off matches to ensure another year in Germany's top flight, reports Xinhua news agency. Wolfsburg's sporting director Olaf Rebbe said: "Mario Gomez has not only once again demonstrated that he is an absolute top striker but he has also proved that he can greatly deal with responsibility within the team and the club."

### Zimbabwe cricketers unsure of participation in Afghan T20 League

**Harare, June 10** : Following a massive truck bomb explosion on May 31 in Kabul, Zimbabwe Cricket (ZC) and the International Cricket Council (ICC) are still unsure about the participation of Zimbabwe players in Afghanistan's Shpageeza Cricket League, expected to get underway from July.

According to Fox Sports, the sports and recreation commission in Zimbabwe is still to take a final call on whether to send their players for the T20 league considering the security situation reported in Kabul.

"Normally, we approve trips on the blessing of the national association and also the international federation of the national association is affiliated to," Sports and Recreation Commission (SRC) director-general, Joseph Muechechere was quoted as saying by Fox Sports on Friday.

"In this case, ordinarily we will require Zimbabwe Cricket and the ICC to provide their firm word. But where we feel there is a serious concern for the safety of our sportsmen, we take the matter to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which then makes the final decision on the basis of security reasons."

Zimbabwe cricketers Hamilton Masakadza, Solomon Mire, Sean Williams, and Sikandar Raza all went under the hammer for Afghanistan's domestic T20 league.

Cricketers from Pakistan, Bangladesh and the West Indies are amongst the others set to participate in the tournament.

## World Cup win will be revolutionary for Indian women's cricket: Mithali

**Mumbai, June 10** : India women cricket team skipper Mithali Raj on Saturday exuded confidence that her team will put up a good show in the upcoming ICC Women's World Cup which begins on June 24 in England, insisting that it would be a revolution if the Women in Blue manage to win the pinnacle tournament. "We definitely want to win the World Cup. It would be a revolution kind of thing for the Indian women's cricket team. And it gives impetus to young women to take up the sport," Raj told a press conference.

"It would serve as a great platform to showcase the kind of cricket we have been playing in the past two years," she added.

The Indian captain further stated that she has asked her teammates to take one match at a time as the format of this year's tournament is different. "Our first target would be to definitely get into the semis," she said. India have only made one change to the 15-member squad that played in the ODI quadrangular in South Africa, with Smriti Mandhana replacing Devika Vaidya.

They retained the same group of players otherwise, with two wicketkeepers in Sushma Verma and Nuzhat Parween, who made her ODI debut against Ireland during the quadrangular. The 34-year-old insisted that the senior players in the team would have to help the youngsters deal with the pressure and the expectations of playing in the World Cup. "There are few seniors in the team who are aware of the World Cup, they are aware of the expectations and the pressure that one faces during the event. But the youngsters are someone that we as seniors can always get them under us and we can be there for them during the pressure situation," she said.

The team is coming off a successful tour to South Africa, where they won the quadrangular series and thus would go into the

World Cup with loads of confidence in their baggage. During the quadrangular series, multiple records were broken. Jhulan Goswami became the leading wicket-taker in Women's ODIs. En route to this achievement, she went past Australian Cathryn Fitzpatrick record of 180 wickets.

Sharma recorded the highest score by an Indian when she notched up 188 against Ireland. She also hit 27 fours in that innings which is another world record.

Deepthi Sharma and Punam Raut created history by becoming the first pair to share a 300-run stand in Women's ODIs.

In the league match against Ireland, the duo added 320 runs for the first wicket in 45.3 overs. It was the first time that the women's ODIs had witnessed a 300 or more runs stand. The Indian women's team recorded 16 successive victories between February 2016 and May 2017. However, the loss against the Proteas didn't allow them from equalling Australia's record of 17 consecutive ODI wins. "We are happy with the preparations. We had a good tour of South Africa. It made a lot of difference to the girls, especially for young players like Deepthi and comeback player like Poonam to be among runs. It sorted a lot of issues for us as a captain and as a coach because India has always struggled with the opening pair," she said. "In the last two series, we have seen the openers doing their bit and giving us the right kind of start. Beating South Africa was exceptional that too in their home and I am hopeful that the team would continue that form in the World Cup," she added.

India will begin their World Cup campaign on June 24, when they take on hosts England in Derby. The eight teams will play each other once, with the top four going through to the semi-finals. Lord's will host the final on July 23.

# Acid Test For Captain Virat Kohli As India Face South Africa In Do-Or-Die Clash

**Birmingham, June 10** : Virat Kohli will be facing the toughest battle of his nascent ODI captaincy career when defending champions India take on South Africa in a do-or-die virtual 'quarter-final' of the ICC Champions Trophy on Sunday. Their confidence shaken after Sri Lanka effortlessly out-batted them in a high-scoring encounter, the Indian team and Kohli in particular will be keen to ensure that South Africa are continued to be known as "chokers".

Call it irony, if India lose the game, it will be defending champions making an exit even before the semi-final. If the Proteas lose, then the current No.1 ranked ODI side would be ousted before the last four stage.

A defeat will have the skeptics blaming the speculated off-the-field issues for the performance.

In such a backdrop, Kohli will be under huge pressure with margin of error being next to nil.

For AB de Villiers, it

will be an opportunity to prove that self-imposed exile from five-day game has not affected his limited overs skills.

With three quality left-handers -- Quinton de Kock, JP Duminy and David Miller -- in the South African line-up, Kohli can't afford to keep Ravichandran Ashwin in cold storage. More so after knowing what can happen to Ravindra Jadeja when there is absolutely nothing in the strip.

Ashwin at least has some natural variations, including the off-break which is his stock ball. The proud performer that he is, Ashwin will be smarting after being excluded in the first two games and it can only work positively in India's favour. However, skipper Kohli's leadership acumen and understanding of the current situation will be under scrutiny depending upon the kind of playing XI he opts for the next game. Ashwin's entry into the playing XI looks logi-



cal but he certainly won't replace Jadeja as two spinners are likely to play against the Proteas, who are not known to be comfortable against slow bowlers. The other big factor is Jadeja's electric fielding inside the circle and the powerful arm from anywhere at the boundary line. Jadeja can save at least 15 runs per match which makes him an useful player in this format.

Neither can Hardik Pandya be dropped as his

pyrotechnics at No 7 is just what is needed from a batsman used as a floater in the order.

Jasprit Bumrah is another specialist bowler, who is a certainty in the playing XI, with his ability to bowl Yorkers at will at the death. Therefore it will either be Bhuvneshwar Kumar or Umesh Yadav, who may have to make way for Ashwin. In the second Powerplay overs during the Sri Lanka match, India had conceded over

200 runs, something Ashwin will be asked to check as a marauding AB de Villiers will be itching to score big. With scores of 319 and 323 in the two games, the batting has a settled look. All the top-order batsmen have got a decent hit including the opening duo of Rohit Sharma-Shikhar Dhawan, who conjured back-to-back century partnerships. While both openers have been in good nick, there's no denying that they have also consumed a lot of balls initially, which finally had an impact during the Lanka game. With new Powerplay rules, any total of less than 340 can be knocked off with some positive intent in stroke-play. Kohli is happy with the batting performance but on a practical note, feels that they may need 20 runs of cushion.

"May be you think of phases where we could have accelerated (vs SL), but I don't see that as a major issue. Maybe we will have to push harder

now in the next few games to give us a 20-run cushion after seeing a result like this, because we're playing on the same ground as well," the skipper had said.

In fact, South Africa batting coach Neil McKenzie also agreed that fluency has been an issue for openers of all the teams.

"It's been a little bit of tough going for the openers. The fluency has been an issue. But one needs to adapt according to situations as the conditions here demand little bit of caution. The wickets need to be kept so that one can attack in the back end," McKenzie said.

On the personal front, Kohli himself would like to lead with the bat against a side that has bowlers like Morne Morkel and all-rounder Chris Morris.

Imran Tahir, whose stock ball is googly, might just test Rohit's defence as the Mumbaier had some trouble reading the wrong 'un from him during IPL.

## First among equals as Halep, Ostapenko eye French Open title

**Paris, June 10** : Simona Halep is targeting the world number one ranking in Saturday's French Open final but fast-rising Latvian upstart Jelena Ostapenko threatens to crash the Romanian's party as a first-time major champion will be crowned. Halep marked herself out as a favourite for the title at Roland Garros after winning in Madrid and finishing runner-up in Rome, but a tumble in the Italian Open final left her with ankle ligament damage and cast doubt over whether she would play in Paris. The 25-year-old has since dismissed concerns over her fitness and finds herself one win away from a memorable maiden Slam title triumph that would also see her supplant Angelique Kerber at the top. "It's a big challenge, a big chance. I think I have the game. I have the mentality to win, but it's going to be tough," said Halep, who lost to Maria Sharapova in three sets in the 2014 French Open final. "I learned many things during the years, not just after that final. Also semi-finals in Wimbledon. Then US Open against

(Flavia) Pennetta before that match. My game is stronger, and it's different. I think more about the game, and I play smarter, in my opinion, and also physically. I'm much better, stronger. Attitude better. I think I'm different player, and I'm much stronger than 2014."

Third seed Halep stormed into the quarter-finals without dropping a set, but she faced match point against Elna Svitolina before pulling off a miraculous recovery from 3-6, 1-5 down to reach the last four. Halep then beat Karolina Pliskova for the fifth time in six meetings to set up an intriguing clash with unseeded Ostapenko. "I never played against her. I don't know what to expect from her," said Halep, bidding to become just the fifth player to win both the girls' and women's singles titles at Roland Garros. "She's much younger than me. Of course she has nothing to lose." Ostapenko's run is all the more remarkable given her third-round exit at this year's Australian Open represented her best previous

Grand Slam performance. She is the first Latvian to reach a Slam final, going one step further than Ernests Gulbis in 2014 when a young Ostapenko was in his playfully box as he beat Roger Federer in the quarter-finals in Paris. In Latvia, she is better known as 'Alona', and that is the name she uses among friends and family.

But names are tightly regulated in Latvia and while 'Alona' does not appear on the official list of legally acceptable Latvian names, Jelena does, and so that is the name she uses in order to avoid paperwork mix-ups on the world tour. She comes from a sporting family. Father Jevgenijs Ostapenko was a goalkeeper with Ukrainian club Metallurg Zaporozhe and mother Jelena Jakovleva is a tennis coach. Speaking to the LTV7 TV channel following his daughter's semi-final victory over Timea Bacsinszky on her 20th birthday, Jevgenijs said: "We always believed it would happen -- and even thought it might happen sooner."

## Australia to defend 277 vs England to stay alive in Champions Trophy

**Birmingham, June 10** : A disciplined bowling effort from England helped the hosts restrict Australia to 277/9 in what is a do-or-die ICC Champions Trophy contest for the Kangaroos at the Edgbaston Stadium here on Saturday. Pacer Mark Wood and leg-spinner Adil Rashid were the pick of the English bowlers, with figures of 4/33 and 4/41 respectively as the visitors lost their last five wickets for 38 runs. Earlier, a 96-run second wicket partnership between skipper Steve Smith (56) and Aaron Finch (68) helped Australia recover from the early loss of opener David Warner (21) after the Kangaroos were put in to bat. Warner started off on a cautious note before losing his concentration and edging one back off Wood, who tested the southpaw with some immaculate line and length. Warner's fall brought in his captain Smith, who along with Finch steadied the ship to take the visitors to the three-figure mark.

In the process, Finch got to his 50 off 47 balls and looked set for a big innings before an attempt to launch Ben Stokes misfired with English skipper Eoin Morgan completing a smart catch at mid-off.

Australia's decision to promote Moises Henriques to No.4 did not work out as the all-rounder could add only 25 runs for the third wicket with his skipper before falling to Rashid.

Smith also did not last long and fell immediately after completing his half century off 68 deliveries, which contained five hits to the fence. Thereafter, Travis Head (71 not out) and Glenn Maxwell (20) added 58 runs for the fifth wicket before Maxwell failed to make the most of the life he got on the same score and became Wood's third victim. Reeling at 239/5, Australia lost the remaining four wickets of Matthew Wade (2), Mitchell Starc (0), Pat Cummins (4) and Adam Zampa (0) within a span of 15 runs to lose the plot.

Towards the end, Head played a lone hand smacking Ball and Stokes out of the park twice to milk 19 runs off the final two overs with tailender Josh Hazlewood (1 not out) a mute spectator at the other end. Head's 64-ball innings was laced with five fours and two sixes.

## Pakistan need to maintain positive attitude: Afridi

**Cardiff, June 10** : Former all-rounder Shahid Afridi has asserted that Pakistan need to maintain a positive attitude in order to defeat Sri Lanka in a must win Group B game and reach the semi-finals of the ongoing Champions Trophy cricket tournament. Pakistan have one win and a loss so far. They next face fellow sub-continent side Sri Lanka in their last group game here on Monday.

Monday's game will be a virtual quarter-final for both teams as Sri Lanka have a similar win-loss record as Pakistan and need a win in order to keep their Champions Trophy campaign alive.

Pakistan started their campaign on a disastrous note, suffering a 124-run thrashing at the hands of arch-rivals India. But they bounced back in superb fashion, defeating South Africa by 19 runs via the Duckworth-Lewis method in their second group game. Afridi opined that Pakistan need to maintain the momentum and keep their spirits up ahead of the clash with Sri Lanka.

"I would say that Pakistan now has as good a chance of reaching the semi-finals as it could have hoped for at the start of the tournament. The side must now be oozing with confi-

dence after its remarkable turnaround in the match against top-ranked South Africa as it prepares to take on Sri Lanka in Cardiff on Monday," Afridi wrote in the official website of the International Cricket Council (ICC) on Saturday.

"I feel Pakistan should stick to its strengths and play with the same positive approach it displayed against South Africa," he added. The veteran all-rounder has also backed Pakistan opener Fakhar Zaman to come good against the Lankans.

"From a batting perspective, I hope that Fakhar Zaman continues to play the way he did against South Africa. If Fakhar stays at the crease for 20-30 overs, he can put the Sri Lanka bowlers under intense pressure. The southpaw should not change his style or curb his instincts unless the conditions demand so," Afridi said. "The rest of the batsmen should do the basics right and follow the game plan. The Pakistan batsmen have been guilty of occupying the crease aimlessly at times. It is important that they don't repeat the mistakes they made in the game against India," the former Pakistan captain added.

New-ball bowlers Mohammad Amir and Junaid Khan are the only bowlers who have delivered for Pakistan in the tournament so far and Afridi felt that the duo will prove themselves against the Lankans as well.

"New-ball bowlers Mohammad Amir and Junaid Khan must get breakthroughs to put pressure on Sri Lanka. I was hugely impressed by Sri Lanka's young batsmen who batted fearlessly against a strong Indian bowling attack. Pakistan must make solid plans and try and make inroads as early as possible to put the opposition firmly on the back foot.

"Both Amir and Junaid are more than capable of extracting advantage of helpful conditions. I want to reiterate here that Pakistan must have the same intensity as it showed against South Africa, with the fielders backing the bowlers," he said.

"While we haven't seen much swing at the start of the innings thus far, one can't rule out such a possibility, especially if there is some early moisture and favourable weather for the ball to move around."

Afridi also opined that the Cardiff pitch may favour the batsmen.

"The Cardiff pitch is

generally good for shot-making, with the straight boundaries shorter than other venues. Like most English pitches, run-making becomes easy after the initial overs, especially if the conditions aren't overcast," he said.

Pakistan -- currently placed eighth in the ICC ODI rankings -- will improve on their position if they manage to beat Sri Lanka and enter the last four stage.

"I have a feeling that we will have an absorbing clash on Monday with both low-ranked teams giving it their all to seal a berth for the semi-finals, which will go a long way in improving their rankings, with the 30 September cut-off for ICC World Cup 2019 direct qualification," Afridi said.

Sri Lanka's star bowler Lasith Malinga too got a mention by Afridi who called the slinger a 'champion bowler'.

"Malinga has looked a tad off-colour in the first two games, but remember he is a champion performer who has won many games for his country," the former explosive opener said.

"The rest of the bowling attack includes efficient bowlers who can more than hold their own on their day."

## Sweden snatch late win over France in World Cup qualifier

Sweden beat France 2-1 and star forward Cristiano Ronaldo got a brace as Portugal rolled over Latvia 3-0 in the sixth round of the European qualifiers for the 2018 football World Cup.

Olivier Giroud on Friday put France 1-0 ahead with an outstanding goal, but Jimmy Durmaz equalised for the hosts just before half time and the Swedes went on to eke out a win with Ola Toivonen's goal in the 93rd minute, reports Efe.

The result leaves France and Sweden level on points at 13, but the Nordics take possession of the top spot in Group A by virtue of goal difference.

The Netherlands routed last-placed Luxembourg 5-0 to claim third place in the "group of death," with 10 points, one ahead of Bulgaria, who lost 1-2 on Friday to Belarus, who boosted their points total to 5. Attacking midfielder Wesley Sneijder became the most capped player in the history of the Dutch football team. On his 33rd birthday, Sneijder played his 131st match for the Netherlands, surpassing the former record set by former goalkeeper Edwin van der Sar (130).

Portugal climbed to 15 points and second place in Group B, where Switzerland leads with 18 points after dispatching the Faroe Islands 2-0 on goals by Granit Xhaka and Xherdan Shaqiri.

Ronaldo, who was the key to Real Madrid's triumphs in La Liga and the Champions League, scored two goals and assisted in the third against Latvia, the weakest side in the group.

History was made in Friday's third Group B contest, as Andorra won their first competitive match since 2004, upsetting third-place Hungary 1-0. Undefeated Belgium won 2-0 away to Estonia and remained atop Group H with 16 points. Dries Mertens scored the first goal for the visitors, while Nacer Chadli made it 2-0 for Belgium in the final minutes against an Estonian squad who played the entire second half with 10 men after Artjom Dmitrijev was sent off with a straight red card. The Belgians now have a 4-point lead over second-placed Greece, who could manage only a scoreless draw against Bosnia-Herzegovina.