



## RCB eye second crown, DC aim to break jinx as WPL set for thrilling finale

VADODARA, FEB 04:

Royal Challengers Bengaluru skipper Smriti Mandhana will have the opportunity to lead her side to parity with Mumbai Indians in terms of success in the Women's Premier League, while Delhi Capitals will look to break their final jinx when the tournament's two most entertaining sides take on each other in the summit clash here on Thursday.

Former champions RCB have enjoyed a dream run this season, repeatedly showing the ability to step up and bounce back when the chips are down.

That resilience helped them create history by beginning their campaign with five consecutive wins, becoming the first WPL team to do so.

Adding to that, one or two players from within the group have consistently taken their game to the next level when required, a pattern that has emerged with monotonous regularity this season.

If Australian stalwart Grace Harris' blazing 75 against UP Warriorz in the previous match -- after a topsy-turvy season -- set the tone for an emphatic eight-wicket win, then little-known Gautami Naik's 73 against Gujarat Giants proved pivotal in a commanding 61-run victory for the 2024 champions, who will be aiming for a second title to draw level with Mumbai Indians.

Although RCB batters -- including Mandhana, Harris, Georgia Voll and Richa Ghosh -- have lacked consistency this season, isolated but timely contributions have proved decisive. Pace bowlers Nadine de Klerk and Sayali Satgare have

delivered when it has mattered most.

South African Nadine de Klerk is currently the third-highest wicket-taker this season with 15 scalps from eight matches, including a best of 4 for 22, making her a potential game-changer in the final. Shreyanka Patil adds spin heft to the attack, a factor that was on full display in the decimation of Gujarat Giants, where she returned a five-wicket haul.

A well-rounded squad

that can rise at crucial moments is the hallmark of Mandhana's side, and she will be hoping a few more players to step up in the title clash to see off the challenge from Delhi Capitals.

The Capitals, under new skipper Jemimah Rodrigues, are eager for a maiden title after finishing runners-up in all three previous editions of the WPL.

Delhi Capitals have relied on the strength of their formidable bowling lineup, with pacers Chinelle Henry and Nandani Sharma making their presence felt with

reliable top-order batter Laura Wolvaardt has provided the stability the side needed throughout the season.

With both their batting

and bowling heavily influenced by South African players, the Capitals have benefited from a tight-knit core that has played together for several years, fostering strong camaraderie and resilience in high-pressure situations.

the new ball.

Nandani, who could stake a claim for an India berth after taking 16 wickets this season to emerge the second-highest wicket-taker, has been the standout performer with several breakthrough spells.

On the batting front, Delhi Capitals' lineup has also begun to click. Lizelle Lee made a useful contribution at the top in the Eliminator against Gujarat Giants, while Shafali Verma

managed to put her iffy form behind to forge a half-century partnership with the South African.

Reliable top-order batter Laura Wolvaardt has provided the stability the side needed throughout the season.

With both their batting and bowling heavily influenced by South African players, the Capitals have benefited from a tight-knit core that has played together for several years, fostering strong camaraderie and resilience in high-pressure situations.

Match starts at 7:30pm.

That strong bond could prove crucial for Delhi Capitals as they aim to break their jinx and win the WPL title on their fourth attempt, guided by their new and charismatic skipper Rodrigues, who is poised for a big innings after a relatively subdued season.

Teams (from):

Delhi Capitals: Jemimah Rodrigues(c), Taniya Bhattacharya(wk), Lucy Hamilton, Chinelle Henry, Marizanne Kapp, Alana King, Lizelle Lee, Minnu Mani, Niki Prasad, Sneh Rana, Shafali Verma, Nandani Sharma, Shree Charani, Pragati Singh, Eddla Srujan, Laura Wolvaardt.

Royal Challengers Bengaluru: Smriti Mandhana(c), Lauren Bell, Nadine de Klerk, Richa Ghosh(wk), Grace Harris, Dayalan Hemalatha, Gautami Naik, Shreyanka Patil, Kumar Prathyusha, Prema Rawat, Arundhati Reddy, Sayali Satgare, Linsey Smith, Pooja Vastrakar, Georgia Voll, Radha Yadav.

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Deputy Commissioner Kathua, Rajesh Sharma, today inaugurated the Excise Department Cricket Tournament being organised by the District Administration Kathua in collaboration with the Excise Department J&K at Kathua Sports Stadium. The tournament marks the beginning of the first-of-its-kind Kathua Cricket League aimed at promoting sports culture and spreading awareness against drug abuse among youth.

DC Kathua, Rajesh Sharma, while interacting with players and officials emphasized that cricket serves as an effective medium to channelise youthful energy in a positive direction. He stated that engaging youth in sports is essential to keep them away from bad habits, particularly drugs and narcotics. He further informed that a volleyball tournament is also on the anvil in collaboration with the Social Welfare Department as part of sustained efforts to promote a healthy and drug-free society. He also disclosed that indoor stadium facilities will be opened for public usage in a regulated manner to encourage indoor sports and fitness activities.

ETO Kathua described the tournament as a pioneering initiative of the Excise Department in collaboration with the District Administration Kathua. He informed that in the first phase of the Kathua Cricket League, eight junior category teams from different

parts of the district are participating. He added that senior category teams will take part in the second leg of the tournament, which will be organised soon. He said the Excise Department is committed to combining enforcement with social outreach and preventive measures to combat drug abuse through constructive engagement of youth.

The inaugural match marked the commencement of competitive fixtures aimed at fostering sportsmanship, teamwork and camaraderie among participants. The event witnessed the presence of senior officers, officials of the Excise Department, sports lovers and players.

## U-19 World Cup: Aaron's classy hundred carries India to final

HARARE, FEB 04:

Aaron George's silken hundred seamlessly merged with the explosive fifties from IPL stars Vaibhav Sooryavanshi and Ayush Mhatre to guide India to the ICC U19 World Cup final with a seven-wicket win over Afghanistan here on Wednesday.

India now face England in the summit clash here on Friday. It will be India's 10th final in the U19 showpiece, a testimony to BCCI's structured junior cricket programme that unequals serious talent.

India seemed to have a tough task ahead once Afghanistan piled 310 for four, built around hundreds by Faisal Shinozada (110) and Uzairullah Niazi (101).

But India cantered past the target in 41.1 overs and it was also their highest-ever chase in the U19 World Cup. Aaron (115, 104b) led the chase with a hundred of impeccable pace and precision placements of his hits.

He received ample backing from Suryavanshi (68, 33b) and Mhatre (62, 59b) as India kept their run-rate above seven all the while.

As is wont, Sooryavanshi gave a flying start to India's innings with a flurry of boundaries, mainly off-spinning Wahidullah Zadrani.

There was a slice of fortune too when Niazi dropped the left-hander on 22 at point off Abdul Aziz.

But around that lapse,

Apart from his unflappa-

bility and situational awareness, the aesthetics of Aaron's batting was also impressive.

Not one shot was hit in anger, as the right-hander, who migrated from Kotayam, Kerala, to Hyderabad, batted with seldom-seen elan at this age of range-hitting.

His cover drives off Zadran and Roohullah Arab were a sight to behold, and even his lofted shots which foisted him sixes were bereft of stress.

Aaron went past his hundred in 95 balls with an exquisite tuck past mid-wicket for a four.

Mhatre, who has been struggling for his rhythm in this tournament, made a fifty at the right moment, displaying his full selection of shots.

Once again, Aaron played the anchor's role to perfection as Mhatre took all the risks to keep his side much ahead of the asking rate.

Mhatre's dismissal did not deter Aaron, and he batted on composedly.

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