



We'd no heroes like big team, but everyone has become heroes: J&K coach Ajay Sharma

HUBBALLI, FEB 28: Head coach Ajay Sharma on Saturday said the Ranji Trophy triumph has helped Jammu and Kashmir to unearth new cricketing heroes, as absence of them had haunted him while playing legacy teams like Mumbai or Delhi.

Sharma's wards overcame eight-time champions Karnataka by virtue of a 291-run first innings lead here to seal their maiden title in the premier domestic red-ball tournament.

"It's a proud moment for the team, JKCA and all the Jammu and Kashmir people. It's a dream come true. It's been a long journey and we are very happy. I never thought that we could win the Ranji Trophy," Sharma told reporters after the match.

"When you play against other teams, it's very difficult to beat them. The way they played against Mumbai, Delhi, Bengal, MP, Hyderabad, Rajasthan, they were all former champions with a lot of experience and Test cricketers. We had no hero like them, but everybody has become a hero," he added.

"The players who have played their part, now they have become heroes. They used to think that they are heroes only by playing IPL. But when you win this trophy your fortunes open up. The sky's the limit now. Now, they understand the value of this trophy," he said.

But J&K went through



some tense moments ahead of the final as in-form Shubham Khajuriya and Vanshraj Sharma had to be benched because of injury. J&K, however, found able backups in Qamran Iqbal and Vivrant Sharma.

"A day before the match, two of our main players, Shubham, who was a consistent performer, and Vanshraj were ruled out. We were confused about what to do. But in the end, we had to call in Vivrant and Iqbal.

"Iqbal...hats off to this guy. He had to catch a flight at 11.30 in the night and came here at 6 am. But he showed what he can do for the team in the second innings. He is a match-winner. He has his own style, but it always works for us," he detailed.

On a lighter vein, Sharma said he has now been accepted as a coach in his family circle.

"I am also very emotional. I am quite happy for them. They have started calling me coach now. Manan (Sharma, Ajay's son) used to play for Delhi before retiring. He is now calling me coach.

"I also have the support of my family. When you are away from home for 7-8 months, you get all the support from your family. My both sons, Nipun, Manan, Anchal are my daughter-in-law, and my wife, my mother, all of them supported me," he noted.

Karnataka coach Yere Goud left a disappointed man after his side stumbled on the final hurdle.

"We should have controlled their total around 400. While we were batting, we lost two wickets in the span of two overs, and that made a difference. Otherwise, still the kind of wicket it was, probably the 584 was

still the chaseable target," said Goud.

The former Karnataka middle-order mainstay also said the season offered a lot of positives despite not being able to bag the title.

"Smaran has been the highest-scorer (overall in the season). The way we came back in the Punjab game, chasing the 215, 28 overs. Again beating Mumbai in Mumbai, chasing 325 on the 4th day.

"Karun did well in the league phase. Mayank is among the runs, close to around 650-700 runs. Shreyas (Gopal) with the bat and ball, a lot of contribution has come in the way.

"Yes, definitely we wanted to finish it on high, it didn't happen. But again, this is a work in progress, it will keep coming and we will keep improving on this area," he added.

Lovlina, Nikhat to lead 20-member Indian squad at Asian Boxing Championships

NEW DELHI, FEB 28: Olympic medallist Lovlina Borgohain and two-time world champion Nikhat Zareen will spearhead the 20-member Indian contingent at the Asian Boxing Championships in Mongolia from March 28-April 11.

The 20-member squad was finalised after an intensive month-long evaluation process, with players inducted into the ongoing national camp in Patiala following the National Championships in January.

As per the selection policy, finalists at the Asian Boxing Championships in the approved weight categories for the Commonwealth Games and Asian Games will be selected as direct entries for the respective multi-sport

The continental championship therefore carries added significance as both a medal opportunity and a key qualification pathway for the upcoming multi-sport events.

Lovlina (75kg), who recently struck gold at the Boxam Elite Championship in Spain, will headline the women's squad alongside Preeti (54kg), Arundhati Choudhary (70kg), and Priya (60kg), all of whom also won gold in Spain and have shown consistent form. They will be joined by reigning world champions Minakshi (48kg) and Jaismine (57kg).

The remaining categories include World Boxing Cup Final gold medallist Nikhat Zareen (51kg), Ankushita Boro (65kg), Pooja Rani (80kg), and Alfiya Tarannum Akram Khan Pathan (80+kg), completing a well-rounded squad that blends



experience with emerging talent.

In the men's category, World Boxing Cup Final and Boxam Championship gold medallist Sachin (60kg) leads the contingent.

He is joined by Akash (75kg), who also won gold in Spain, along with silver medallist Deepak (70kg) and Ankush (80kg).

The squad further includes Jadumani Singh Mandengbam (55kg), bronze medalist in Spain and silver medalist at the World Boxing Finals.

Vishwanath Suresh (50kg), Aditya Pratap Yadav (65kg), Lokesh (85kg), Harsh Choudhary (90kg) and Narender (90+kg) complete the rest of the lineup.

"The Asian Championships are always a true test of quality and consistency. Our focus has been on selecting boxers who have shown form, discipline, and the ability to perform under pressure. We are confident this group can compete strongly against the best in Asia," BFI President Ajay Singh said in a release.

The evaluations were conducted under the watchful eyes of head coaches Santiago Nieva (Women) and CA Kuttappa (Men), with the support staff closely monitoring preparations in camp. The team heads into the tournament after winning nine gold medals at the Boxam Elite in Spain, the highest among participating nations and securing consis-

tent top-three finishes at the World Championships and World Boxing Cup.

Indian Squad for Asian Boxing Championships:

Men: Vishwanath Suresh (50kg), Jadumani Singh Mandengbam (55kg), Sachin (60kg), Aditya Pratap Yadav (65kg), Deepak (70kg), Akash (75kg), Ankush (80kg), Lokesh (85kg), Harsh Choudhary (90kg), Narender (90+kg).

Women: Minakshi (48kg), Nikhat Zareen (51kg), Preeti (54kg), Jaismine (57kg), Priya (60kg), Ankushita Boro (65kg), Arundhati Choudhary (70kg), Lovlina Borgohain (75kg), Pooja Rani (80kg), Alfiya Tarannum Akram Khan Pathan (80+kg).

Batting boom lifts India but bowling questions linger ahead of virtual quarters against West Indies

KOLKATA, FEB 28: Their batting has finally burst into life but cracks remain in India's bowling armour as they take on an explosive West Indies in a virtual quarterfinal of the T20 World Cup, here on Sunday.

West Indies' defeat to South Africa and India's emphatic win over Zimbabwe have turned this Group 1 Super Eights clash into a do-or-die contest, making it a high-stakes battle at the Eden Gardens.

The winner will get a place in the second semifinal against England on March 5 in Mumbai.

India's batting revival against Zimbabwe was just perfect and long-awaited. In a rejigged line-up, with Sanju Samson returning to the top, all the top six contributed in unison.

Making a comeback, Sanju scored only 24, but he deserves credit for lifting the

tempo early and giving India a flying start.

That aggressive approach settled the nerves of Abhishek Sharma, whose previous best in an uncharacteristically lean tournament had been 15 following a hat-trick of ducks.

The star opener responded in style with a half-century, while Tilak Varma flourished in his new No.6 role batting with renewed intent in his 16-ball 44 not out.

India ticked all the boxes with the bat, posting 256/4 - the highest total of this T20 World Cup—but that does not mean they arrive at Eden Gardens without concerns.

While left-arm pacer Arshdeep Singh was India's pick with a triple strike against Zimbabwe and Jasprit Bumrah and Hardik Pandya have been clinical, it is spin ace Varun Chakravarty who has

looked a shadow of his past. The mystery spinner has failed to get his length right and appears guilty of experimenting too much.

His growing ineffectiveness hurt India badly against South Africa, where he conceded 47 runs in four overs as David Miller and the talented Dewald Brevis went all out with a predetermined attack in a total of 187/7, before India were bowled out for 111.

Varun bowled mostly short against South Africa and when he tried going fuller versus Zimbabwe, the result was no different.

This time, the seasoned Sikandar Raza toyed with him as he leaked 35 runs in four overs.

Though unlike the South Africa match, it did not hurt much as Zimbabwe were chasing a record 257.

It remains to be seen whether the team management continues to back

Chakravarty or gives him a breather by bringing in left-arm wrist spinner Kuldeep Yadav, who has played just one match so far (against Pakistan).

Both have played a bulk of their IPL with Kolkata Knight Riders at this venue, and know the conditions well, though Chakravarty has played more here.

Another worry is seam all-rounder Shivam Dube's erratic show with the ball.

Dube leaked 46 runs in just two overs against Zimbabwe, including four wides and two no-balls in a 10-ball over. Gambhir's fascination for bowlers who can bat is well known, but Dube's military-medium pace on a fast and juicy Eden track could backfire against a powerful West Indies lineup.

With a bit of grass likely on the Eden surface, there should be some assistance for the pace trio of Bumrah, Arshdeep and Pandya.

Pakistan knocked out of T20 World Cup despite win against Sri Lanka; New Zealand enter semifinals

PALLEKELE, FEB 28: Pakistan were on Saturday knocked out of the T20 World Cup despite winning against Sri Lanka by five runs in their Super Eights match here, with New Zealand sneaking into the semifinals on the basis of better net run rate.

Invited to bat, Pakistan made a formidable 212 for 8 with Sahibzada Farhan (100) hitting a stunning century and his opening partner Fakhar Zaman scoring 84.

Pakistan needed to restrict Sri Lanka to 147 or less to surpass New Zealand's net run rate and reach the semifinals from Group 2 of the Super Eights.

But they failed to do so as co-hosts Sri Lanka, who were already out of reckoning for a semifinal spot, ended at 207 for 6.

Pakistan and New Zealand ended on three points each in the Super



Eights stage but the Kiwis qualified for the semifinals as the second-placed team from the group on the basis of better NRR.

England have already qualified for the semifinals after winning all their three Super Eights matches.

Captain Dasun Shanaka top-scored with 76 not out off just 31 balls while Pavan Rathnayake contributed 58.

For Pakistan, Abrar Ahmed was the most successful bowler with three wickets for 23 runs.

Brief Scores:

Pakistan: 212 for 8 in 20 overs (Sahibzada Farhan 100, Fakhar Zaman 84; Dilshan Madushanka 3/33, Dasun Shanaka 2/42).

Sri Lanka: 207 for 6 in 20 overs (Dasun Shanaka 76 not out, Pavan Rathnayake 58; Abrar Ahmed 3/23).

Felix Gill, Federico Cina reach final of men's singles event at MahaOpen ATP Challenger 75 C'ship

PUNE, FEB 28: Felix Gill of Great Britain will take on young Italian Federico Cina in the singles final at the MahaOpen ATP Challenger 75 Men's Tennis Championship as they advanced to the title clash with commanding semi-final victories at the Shiv Chhatrapati Kreeeda Sankul, Mhalunge Balewadi Tennis Stadium.

The prestigious tournament is being organised by the Maharashtra State Lawn Tennis Association (MSLTA) in association with the Department of Sports and Youth Services, Govern-

ment of Maharashtra, PCMC, PMC and PMDTA, and is sponsored by the Pune Metropolitan Regional Development Authority (PMRDA), as per a press release.

In the singles semifinals, Felix Gill of Great Britain displayed grit and composure to overcome eighth seed Edas Butvilas of Lithuania 6-4, 7-5 in a tightly contested encounter that lasted 1 hour and 44 minutes. Gill held his nerve in crucial moments, breaking at decisive junctures in both sets to seal his place in the final. Sixth seed and for-



mer world number four junior Federico.

Cina of Italy was equally impressive as he outplayed Duje Ajdukovic of Croatia 7-5, 6-2 in 1 hour and 15 minutes. After edging a closely fought first set, Cina raised his intensity in the second, dictating rallies from the baseline to close out the match in straight sets. Nam.

In the doubles final, fourth-seeded Jisung Nam of Korea and Patrik Niklas-Salminen of Finland upset second-seeded Indo-Thai pair of Pruchya Isaro and Niki Kaliyanda Poonacha to

capture the doubles title with a hard-fought 6-4, 6-7(1), 10-7 victory. The doubles champions received the trophy, USD 4,980 and 75 ATP ranking points, while the runner-up pair was awarded the trophy, USD 2,880 and 50 ATP ranking points.

The prizes were presented by Shra- van Hardikar (IAS), MD of MMRDA, Sunder Iyer, Hon. Secretary, MSLTA, Rajiv Desai, Jt Secretary of MSLTA and ATP Supervisor Rogerio Santos, Leena Nageshkar were present on the occasion.