

Shastri adds a different hue to India team's training style



COLOMBO, JUL 31 /- After taking charge of the team in its second stint, India coach Ravi Shastri has tweaked team's preparation style and though it's early days, an immediate impact can be noticed. A key implementation on Shastri's part is how the batsmen are now ready to bat in the middle. This has nothing to do with batting order, instead a new practice of warming up before going down to the middle. It was evident in Galle itself when Shikhar Dhawan and Abhinav Mukund India's pairing for the first Test reached the ground before the rest of the squad. The mandate for them was to get to the nets and start hitting balls just in case India bat first. As it turned out, Kohli did win the toss and the amply warmed-up Dhawan smashed 190 off 168 balls in the first innings. By the time the openers went in, Cheteshwar Pujara had completed this routine, while Virat Kohli was in the nets. It is a different approach to the previous regime, of course, and agreeably welcomed in the team as well. The underlining aspect of this new thought process from coach Shastri is his belief that the team should exert its

number one status on the field. India were confirmed as the world's number one ranked Test side under Anil Kumble, romping to successive victories over the West Indies, New Zealand, England, Bangladesh and Australia. Shastri has also brought forth a certain differentiation in the team's thinking in the short span of time that he has spent with them thus far. In one of his first conversations with the team, the coach had underlined the importance of enjoying the game before thinking of anything else. Apparently, he had asked the players to remember why they had started playing cricket and urged them to 'exhibit their course within the dressing room. And there is a keen example of this as well. For some time now, the Indian team has a standing rule that injured/ill players will be given back their spots in the playing eleven when they

make a successful return to the squad after proving their fitness. Apparently, in February when India were preparing to play Bangladesh, Ajinkya Rahane, returning from injury, was not aware of his standing in the team's plans. It was only after Kohli highlighted in the pre-match press conference that Karun Nair despite his triple ton would have to make way for the vice-captain, did a clearer picture emerge. There is much clarity now in keeping with how things shaped up couple years ago. Earlier last week, KL Rahul recovered sufficiently from his illness and joined the team in Galle. He even frolicked with his colleagues on Sunday as the Indian players spent their afternoon at a resort near their team hotel. Although the team management hasn't officially confirmed his return to full fitness, it is expected that he will be part of the playing eleven at the SSC in Colombo when the second Test starts on August 3. As such, it becomes a problem of plenty. India will once again have three fit and in-form openers to choose from, yet it is an easy guess the name expected to lose out. (PTI)

It felt like I was playing one-day cricket: Hardik Pandya

GALLE, JUL 31 /- The sense of occasion gets the better of many when it comes to Test debut but an unfazed Hardik Pandya felt as if he was "playing an ODI" during his whirlwind half-century in his maiden outing. It was Pandya's 50 off 49 balls that enabled India to reach 600 quickly, which gave skipper Virat Kohli an "extra 15 overs" to have a go at the Sri Lankan batsmen in the first Test. Asked about his preparation coming into his first Test, Pandya said: "Even when I was batting in one-dayers, the scenario was perfect for me. As an international cricketer, you need to be smart as in terms of preparation. While switching formats, there is a switch in mindset but skills and sets generally don't change." He has not given it a serious thought but Pandya won't mind if he is able to emulate Yuvraj Singh's six sixes in a single over. Pandya's senior Cheteshwar Pujara feels he can be the second Indian in international cricket, after Yuvraj, to achieve the rarest of rare milestones. "Have you ever given it a thought, Pujara asked Pandya while conducting a fun interview for the 'Bcci TV'. "I don't think about hitting sixes in an over. I have hit three sixes off three balls but never went for the fourth

one as the situation never demanded. If some day, we have a situation where I can go after all six balls, I might go for it," said Pujara. Pujara then asked him about his pull shots and Pandya returned the compliment. "Your pull shots travel 100 metres Pujara bhai," he said. On trying the net pull shots, Pandya said: "I never tried too many pull shots earlier. I am happy that it came off." Pandya said that he is aware that he needs to prepare well when India travel outside the sub-continent to places like South Africa and England. "I know it won't be an easy need to prepare differently for South Africa tour which won't be an easy one. The ball would need to be prepared accordingly." Kohli wants him to do what Ben Stokes does for England, but Pandya's favourite all-rounder is South African legend Jacques Kallis. "My favourite has always been Jacques Kallis for his amazing record across all formats - scoring those big runs batting at No 3, all those wickets." When Pujara asked him if he loves the tag of 'rockstar', Pandya said: "I can't say whether I am rockstar or not but I like experimenting with colour of my hair, like wearing different clothes. If you call me a rockstar for that, I don't mind."



Moeen Ali is hoisted after completing his hat-trick

Moeen hat-trick seals crushing England win

LONDON, JULY 31 /- England ripped apart South Africa's top order in Sunday's final session at the Oval to bear down on a victory that would put them 2-1 up with one to play in the four-test series. Two wickets from successive balls in Ben Stokes' third over removed Quinton de Kock (5) and Faf du Plessis (0) and ended faint South Africa hopes of mounting a rear-guard action in pursuit of their nominal target of 492. Although Stokes failed to record what would have been the first-ever test hat-trick at the Oval, the damage was done. Du Plessis' wicket, bowled without playing a shot to a first-ball inswinger, was a particular blow, with South Africa needing

their captain to survive at least into Monday. The tourists limped to the close on 117-4, still 375 short of their target with a day's play remaining. The battling Dean Elgar was unbeaten on 72 despite a painful blow to his finger, and Temba Bavuma on 16, as England turned to Moeen Ali to try to secure another breakthrough. Elgar had been fortunate to survive on nine, dropped by Keaton Jennings at third slip off Jimmy Anderson, and went on to strike seven fours in his 77-ball half-century. No one else provided much resistance. Before Stokes struck, Stuart Broad removed opener Heino Kuhn for 11 and Toby Roland-Jones dismissed Hashim Amla for the second time in the match, this

time having South Africa's danger man sharply caught by Joe Root in the slips for five. England have a further 98 overs available on Monday to complete the victory and vindicate Root's decision to delay his declaration to apply maximum pressure to South Africa. England's new captain eventually called time when Jonny Bairstow was dismissed before tea after a breezy 63 which lifted England, who had resumed on 74-1, to 313-4. After Jennings departed early for a painstaking 48, debutant Tom Westley pushed on to a maiden half-century an innings that should ensure an extended run at England's problem number three spot. Westley went on to make 59 before

he was stumped misjudging a dash at Keshav Maharaj. Root (50) followed soon afterwards, top-edging the same bowler after recording a half-century for the ninth successive match. England gradually accelerated with Stokes (31) and Roland-Jones (23 not out) joining Bairstow in some lusty blows as England's lead extended way beyond the test record for a successful final innings run chase of 418. If South Africa fail to survive on Monday, it will complete a one-sided sequence in each of the tests. England won by 211 runs at Lord's before South Africa hit back with an even more emphatic 340-run victory at Trent Bridge. The final test starts in Manchester on Friday, August 4.

England 353 (Stokes 112, Cook 88) and 313 for 8 dec (Bairstow 63, Westley 59, Root 50) beat South Africa 175 (Bavuma 52, Roland-Jones 5-57) and 205 for 7 (Elgar 136, Moeen 4-45) by 239 runs

Neymar in China as transfer rumours grow

SHANGHAI, JULY 31 /- Neymar greeted fans in Shanghai on Monday as speculation mounted that the Brazil star could be set to quit Barcelona for Paris Saint-Germain for a world-record 22 million. The 25-year-old striker is at the centre of an apparent tug of war between the two European giants in what would be the most expensive transfer fee in football history. A training spat with new Barcelona signing Nelson Semedo during a pre-season tour in Miami ramped up chatter that Neymar could be about to swap Spain for the French capital. Neymar, who has remained tight-lipped about the transfer rumours, posted a message for Chinese fans on Weibo, China's equivalent of Twitter, after arriving for a promotional visit. "Ni Hao China! I'm Neymar Jr and I've just arrived in China," he wrote on Monday. "I'm in Shanghai at the moment. I would like to send a huge hug to all my Chinese fans, thank you very much for your support." He posted messages in English and Chinese and asked for suggestions as to what he should do while in Shanghai, where he was scheduled to appear at an event for a fashion brand later on Monday. Separately, China's biggest online travel company Ctrip had said it was cancelling an event with Neymar on Monday in Shanghai because he and his advisers were "busy with transfer issues". People close to the player subsequently told media there had never been an arrangement with the firm. Even after the training-ground bust-up in the United States, after which Neymar appeared to storm off, his Barcelona team-mates said they wanted him to stay at the Camp Nou. "Neymar and I, we are very close and I want him to stay and I know the situation," defender Gerard Pique told ESPN FC. "Right now he doesn't know what to do and we are trying to help him - the ones (on the team) that are more close to him - to take the right decision." PSG's pursuit of Neymar has angered some in Spain, where football league chief Javier Tebas says he will file a complaint with UEFA for financial fair play breaches by the French club.

'Aussie cricket on brink of peace', says local media

SYDNEY, JULY 31 /- Cricket Australia is on the verge of an agreement with the players' union to end the long impasse over a new pay deal and end the need for arbitration, local media reported on Monday. Australia's top 230 players have effectively been unemployed since the last five-year agreement expired on June 30 and an "A" tour of South Africa has already fallen victim to the lockout. With a two-test tour of Bangladesh looming and the Ashes coming up at the end of the year, the parties were involved in lengthy talks over the weekend to broker a deal to end the acrimonious dispute. Neither party made any comment on Monday but News Limited outlets heralded an imminent resolution under the headline 'Aussie cricket on brink of peace', while Fairfax Media reported that a "heads of agreement" deal was close to being struck.



Harmanpreet Kaur arrives in Amritsar

Tendulkar echoes PM's praise for women's team

NEW DELHI, JULY 31 /- Cricket legend Sachin Tendulkar today echoed Prime Minister Narendra Modi's praise for the Indian women's cricket team, in which he had asked Mithali Raj and co. not to get bogged down by expectations. The Prime Minister, in his 'Mann Ki Baat' show yesterday, had said that the Indian women's team, which finished runners-up in the ICC Women's World Cup in England, should banish any thoughts of not having been successful. "My thoughts resonate with those of our PM @narendramodi shared on #MannKiBaat regard my fellow Indian women cricketers' exemplary performance," Tendulkar

posted on his Twitter handle after the programme. Modi advised the players not to feel burdened by their World Cup final loss to England as they have the backing of the media. "I felt happy talking to them, but I had a feeling that they felt burdened by the fact that they could not win the World Cup. This stress, this tension was evident on their faces also." Modi recalled during his 'Mann Ki Baat' address, "I said, 'Look, this is the age of the media. So expectations get hyped up to such an extent that if corresponding success is not achieved, these turn into despair and even resentment.' Modi observed that the country chooses to praise the cricketers instead of

criticising. "But it happened for the first time that when our daughters did not succeed in winning the World Cup, the hundred and twenty-five million people took this defeat on their own shoulders never letting the burden weigh down these daughters of ours. 'Not only this, they lauded them and showed respect to them with their president on their faces also.' Modi viewed this as a healthy and pleasant change and told these daughters that one day they were blessed with such good fortune, and hence they should banish any thought of not having been successful. You may not have won the final match but you have won the hearts of 1.25 billion Indians," he had said. (PTI)

