



KL Rahul hits over the top

## India sets targets of 181

CUTTACK: Rohit Sharma-led India posted a competitive 180 for three in 20 overs in the first of three T20Is against Sri Lanka at Barabati Stadium, Cuttack on Wednesday. KL Rahul and Rohit Sharma gave India a steady start before Angelo Mathews dismissed Rohit for 17. After which KL Rahul (61) upped his ante and smashed the ball all over the ground to give India a solid base along with Shreyas Iyer (34). However, the expertise of Thisara Perera came into play when he castled KL Rahul with a slower ball following which India lost track. MS Dhoni and Manish Pandey, later in the game, assessed the situation and started hitting the bad balls for boundaries. For India, KL Rahul scored the highest and for Sri Lanka, Angelo Mathews ended the match with the figures of 1/19. Like their home series, Sri Lanka have by and large been outgunned by India, barring their one brilliant bowling performance in Dharamsala ODI, which left the Indian batsmen widely exposed in seaming conditions. Sri Lanka had their best chance in the last ODI at Vizag but collapsed after Yuzvendra Chahal and Kuldeep Yadav ran through the top and middle batting order as they claimed three wickets each. However, T20 is a different ball game and India would look for a smooth transition to the shortest format, having endured a batting disaster in the first one-dayer. What a ball by Unadkat. He fools Dickwella with the slower delivery, too early into the shot, the bottom hand comes off and hence no power or elevation behind that shot, lobbed to extra cover where Rahul catches it. Unadkat gets his first T20I wicket. Dickwella c Rahul b Unadkat 13(8). In comes Kusal Perera, left handed batsman.

## Vijender confident of ending 2017 on high

JAIPUR, DEC 20 /--/ Ace Indian boxer Vijender Singh today said exuded confidence of ending the year on a high note as he takes on African champion Ernest Amuzu of Ghana at the Sawai Man Singh Indoor Stadium here on Saturday. The 32-year-old India, who is WBO Oriental Super Middleweight and WBO Asia Pacific champions, laughed at his opponent's recent statement that he would leave the crowd favourite "beaten and broken" in the upcoming bout. "Perhaps Amuzu has not goggled about me otherwise he would not have dared to talk like that about me. Only time will tell who is going to trash whom," said Vijender, who holds a 9-0 professional record. "I can't predict how long would the fight last but I can assure you that the first round of the bout would set the tone. I am an experienced boxer



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and I know what and how to do. I have undergone rigorous training sessions for almost two months. I am fully prepared physically and mentally to defend my titles and want to end my year on a winning note in front of my own countrymen," he added. Vijender also said that he has serious doubts about how his opponent will last before him on Saturday. "Undoubtedly Amuzu is an experienced boxer and capable of giving me a few new tests. He has done more rounds than me and fought in title fights but he will have to compete with my power. I don't think he would be standing there for too long," he said. Vijender's trainer Lee Beard, is confident about his ward registering another knockout win on Saturday. "Vijender has the experience now. He can now control and figure out what to do in the fight and plan his moves to carve out a victory for himself," said Beard. The challenger, who has been touted as the African champion for the fight named 'Rajasthan Rumble', reportedly is not a continental champ. The WBO African title holder is world no. 4 Habib Ahmed of Ghana. But the 34-year-old Amuzu too sounded confident. "I have gone through his records and I know how good he is. This is my first visit to Asia and India and I expect a good tough fight against Vijender. I am here to put up a good show," said Amuzu, who holds an impressive record of 23 wins out of which 21 are knockouts. He lost just two out of his total 25 bouts till now. "I am looking forward to the double title defence here. I will finally end his hope of defending his two titles. I am also not worried about fighting him in front of his home crowd. I make a home where ever I go. I have already made home here," he added. (PTI)

# Rohit Sharma on the brink of becoming 2nd Indian to score 1500 T20I runs

Rohit Sharma is just 15 runs short of the landmark. Virat Kohli is the only Indian batsman to reach the milestone

CUTTACK, DEC 20 /--/ Rohit Sharma set the stage alight as he smashed an unbeaten 208, his third double-century in ODIs, against Sri Lanka in the second ODI in Mohali. The right-hander also showed exemplary skills in leading the side in the absence of Virat Kohli. Following India's 2-1 ODI series win, the focus now shifts to the Twenty20 International series that starts on Wednesday in Cuttack. Rohit will once again captain a young Team India with some members looking to prove a point. The stand-in skipper himself is on the brink of a big landmark and will look to get it out of the way as soon as possible. Rohit has 1,485 T20I runs to his name and is just 15 runs away from becoming the second Indian after Virat Kohli to score 1,500 runs. The elegant opener has played 68 T20Is and averages 30.30 with a strike rate of 129.92. He has a century and 12 fifties to his name. The Indian batsman will become the 14th cricketer to score 1,500 in T20I history. Kohli is well ahead of Sharma. The

### INDIA VS SRI LANKA

regular Indian skipper has 1,956 runs with an average of 52.86, the highest in T20I cricket. Kohli has 18 half-centuries but has no hundreds in the shortest format. Kohli is second in the list of top run-getters in T20I cricket behind New Zealand's Brendon McCullum. The New Zealander, having played 70 T20I matches, amassed 2,140 runs at an average of 35.66. Meanwhile, India will be fielding a youthful side in the T20I series against Sri Lanka. The hosts will feature three first-timers in form of Washington Sundar, Basil Thampi and Deepak Hooda. India do not have a happy memory of the solitary T20I that they played at the Barabati Stadium when they were folded for 92 against South Africa in 2015 as crowd trouble brought infamy to the venue. On head-to-head count, India lead Sri Lanka 7-4 and are yet to lose against them in the last four outings. And keeping the Dharamsala batting disaster in mind, the hosts will aim to give a better account of their batting.

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Rohit Sharma has 1,485 runs in Twenty20 Internationals.

## Vidarbha inch closer to maiden Ranji final

KOLKATA, DEC 20 /--/ Vidarbha stood on the verge of making their maiden Ranji Trophy final as they left fancied Karnataka, chasing 198, in a spot of bother at 111 for seven on the fourth day of their last-four clash, here today.

At stumps on the penultimate day, Karnataka skipper R Vinay Kumar (19) and Shreyas Gopal (1) were batting at the Eden Gardens. Resuming at 195 for four and with a lead of only 79, Vidarbha relied on a solid 55 from Aditya Sarwate, whose primary duty is to take wickets with his left-arm spin bowling, to reach 313 before being all out. Overnight on 71, Ganesh Satish was castled by Abhimanyu Mithun for addition of only 10 more runs. R Vinay Kumar and allrounder Stuart Binny picked up three wickets apiece and Sreenath Aravind had two to his name. Chasing a modest total with more than a day to spare, Karnataka were off to a disastrous start as they lost Mayank Agarwal (3) quickly.

Ravikumar Samarth (24) and Dega Nischal (7) got out in quick succession, but the big blow was dealt on Karnataka when Karun Nair (30 off 41 balls) was caught behind off the bowling of Gurbani. C M Gautam, too, was dismissed by Gurbani as Karnataka, seeking to reach their third Ranji final in five years, found themselves in a precarious position. Both Gurbani and Siddesh Neral extracted a lot of movement and bounce from the fourth day pitch to trouble the Karnataka batsmen. At tea Karnataka were 69/3 with Nair and Gautam in the middle. First-innings centurion Nair and Gautam tried to forge a partnership but Nair departed after making a fluent 30. Wickets fell in regular intervals for Karnataka with the batsmen looking clueless against Gurbani. Earlier, Satish and Akshay Wadkar stitched a partnership of 72 runs for the fifth wicket to stretch Vidarbha's lead.

The lower middle-order, led by Sarwate, contributed handsomely with the bat to take the team total past the 300-run mark. (PTI)

### GAME NOTES

**Starc has heel bruise, still doubtful for 4th Ashes Test**

MELBOURNE: Scans on Australian fast bowler Mitchell Starc's right heel show only bruising, but the leading wicket-taker in the Ashes remains in doubt for the fourth test against England. Cricket Australia said today that lefthander Starc, who sustained the injury on the fourth day of the Perth test where Australia regained the Ashes, would travel with the squad to Melbourne. It also said Starc, who has taken 19 wickets in the series at an average of 21.05, would be re-assessed before the start of the match at the Melbourne Cricket Ground on Dec. 26.

**Serena sorts out baby teething issues, hints at return**

MIAMI: Serena Williams says she has struggled with her baby daughter's teething pain even as she tweeted a photo hinting she might be working on a comeback to defend her Australian Open title. The next Australian Open begins on January 15 at Melbourne, which would be barely beyond four months after Williams gave birth to her daughter on September 1. Williams began her latest tweets on Sunday with a plea for help on how to ease the torment of teething. "Teething- aka the devil - is so hard," tweeted Williams.

## I don't lack motivation, won't call it quits: Gambhir

NEW DELHI, DEC 20 /--/ With age not on his side, the chances of a national comeback look relatively bleak for Gautam Gambhir despite his golden run in domestic cricket, but the feisty India opener says he won't give up just yet.

For Gambhir, regarded one of the most complete batsmen in Indian cricket, what matters is "motivation" and the day he loses it, he won't shy away from calling it quits. Gambhir continues to turn up for Delhi, which made it to the final of the premier Ranji Trophy this season after 10 years. Gambhir might be out of national reckoning, but he has been in ominous form this season and that is precisely one of the reasons behind Delhi's success. "Keep scoring runs, that is what you can control and you can do. You can't control things which are not in your hands. The only thing you can control is to get a bat in your hand, go out there, perform and score as many runs as possible," Gambhir said on Wednesday. "That is what you are meant to do and that is what I am trying to do. This year is no difference from what I used to do last year. The motivation is exactly the same. The day I don't feel the same I will not hang around." At 36, it is unlikely that Gambhir would get a look in for the national team again, especially in a fitness freak Virat Kohli's team, but that hardly bothers the feisty left hander, who was once India's regular in all three formats of the game. "I don't speak to the selectors and I don't need to speak to the

selectors. Ultimately, my job is to score runs and that is what I only focus on," Gambhir said. Way back in January 2008 it was under then skipper Gambhir, Delhi made the final of the Ranji Trophy last time. That season Gambhir played a key role with the bat and this year too the left-hander was one of the reasons behind Delhi's rise. In this Ranji season, Gambhir has scored 632 runs which includes three centuries and two fifties. He is eight in



the top-scorers chart. "We reached the finals so obviously the achievement is great. Hopefully we can go one step ahead and win it after 10 years which is going to be great," Gambhir said. "So far it's been decent. Obviously, when you get 600 plus runs it's good. The most important is that you have contributed in the games which are very crucial as well, whether it was the quarterfinal or the semi-final. As a senior player you have to be good in the crunch games and there is still one more game to go," he said about

his own form. Gambhir has always been known to be outspoken and didn't shy away from confronting even Delhi Ranji coach KP Bhaskar over differences in the handling of the team last year. Gambhir was handed a suspended four-match ban from first-class cricket for his ugly confrontation with Bhaskar. "Ultimately, it's not the coach or the support staff that matters. What matters is the performance of the team. If the players are performing that is all that matters," he said. Refusing to pinpoint any particular player for the success this season, the senior-most player in the Ranji team, however, feels that Delhi has a long way to go to be in the leagues of sides like Mumbai and Karnataka. "I don't like mentioning about one or two because it's unfair to mention one or two names. Most of the guys have grabbed their opportunities and that is why we are where we are. I don't believe in talking about individuals in a team sport. People have done well, people have taken their opportunities and that is a good sign for Delhi cricket," he said. "There is still a long way to go. Consistency is all that matters. Look at someone like Karnataka, look at some like Mumbai they have won so many times consistently. They are the most consistent teams going around. Let's see how we do next year because the follow-up year is very important and that is what will show where you stand. Any team can have one good one season but ultimately it is the consistency that really matters," Gambhir signed off.

## Politically divided Spain united by El Clasico rivalry between Barcelona and Real Madrid



MADRID, DEC 20 /--/ Often symbolised as pitting the pride of Catalonia against Spain's capital, the 'El Clasico' between Barcelona and Real Madrid is a match laced with political and social as much as sporting tension. Even more so this week when the sides face off in Madrid on Saturday lunchtime just over 36 hours after polls will close in local elections in Catalonia that were called over the crisis caused by the region's drive for independence. "They have a very strong ideological connection," political scientist Pablo Simon told news agency. "On the one side are Real Madrid, who normally can be said to have a more conservative and nationalist fan base." By contrast, Simon cites Barca's 'more than a club' motto as being rooted in a sense of Catalan identity. The sights and sounds of their Camp Nou and Santiago Bernabeu stadiums reflect that difference. In Barcelona, Catalan flags, including the independence-supporting Estelada, are commonly flown, while the crowd at Europe's biggest stadium chant in favour of independence in the 17th minute of each match to mark the fall of Catalonia in the Spanish War of Succession in 1714. At the Bernabeu, Spain flags are splattered across the stadium, while cries of "Viva Espana" rang around on October 1 in the hours following a violent crackdown by Spanish police forces on a referendum on independence called by separatists in Catalonia. However, for all their differences, El Clasico and particularly the fear of losing the match should Catalonia gain independence, unites both sets of fans. "It is the derby of Spain and it feels like it is impossible to be neutral," Sid Lowe, a Spanish football journalist and author of the book "Fear and Loathing in La Liga" on the rivalry, told AFP. "It is a unifying event. No-one wants to lose this game, even in the event of Catalan independence." La Liga president Javier Tebas has repeatedly warned Barca would not be allowed to continue playing in the Spanish league if the drive for in-

dependence is followed through. However, that is a scenario both clubs refuse to envisage with many believing threats from Tebas, who attended a nationalist march earlier in the year, are aligned to his own political beliefs. "I want to tell all members that the intention of the club is to continue playing in La Liga. Right now our participation is guaranteed," Barcelona president Josep Maria Bartomeu told the club's AGM in October. "I can't contemplate a Spain without Catalonia, nor La Liga without Barca." Real Madrid president Florentino Perez told Spanish newspaper El Espanol. Bartomeu's board has tried to tread a fine line by defending Catalonia's institutions following the Spanish government's application of home rule, but also not coming out in favour of independence. Barca played Las Palmas behind closed doors on October 1 in protest at the violence at the polling stations. However, even outspoken pro-independence campaigners like former Barca president Joan Laporta have called for Barca to remain in La Liga. "No one at Barcelona wants to lose this game even though that potentially contradicts their political or social position," added Lowe. The most-watched football match in the world will attract a potential TV audience of 650 million people who will tune in to see five-time Ballon d'Or winners Cristiano Ronaldo of Real and Barcelona's Lionel Messi. "It paralyses normal life in Spain," added Simon. "That's why we always recommend to go to the theatre or the cinema at that time because they will be empty." Yet, the fact that what could happen to Barca, and by extension El Clasico, has played such a big role in the independence debate is a sign of the match's deeply-rooted importance to Spanish society as something more than just a sporting event. "On the face of it the fact we are concerned about the impact for football from Catalan independence is absurd because there are so many other things to be worked through," added Lowe.

