Hodge apologises to Kohli for comments on injury, says meant no harm

NEW DELHI, MAR 30/--/ Former Australian batsman Brad Hodge has apologised to Virat Kohli for his comments after the Indian captain pulled out of the Dharamsala Test due to a shoulder injury. Hodge came under fire in the subcontinent for his suggestions that Kohli had not played the Test in order to save himself for the Indian Premier League (IPL). "You'd hope as a sportsman that he's seriously injured. Because if you miss one game of Test match cricket and you're fronting up the next week for RCB (Royal Challengers Bangalore) versus whoever... you'd be pretty dirty if he didn't front up to a Test match and try and win a valuable series against Australia," Hodge had said on Sunday. The Australian, coach of the Gujarat Lions team in the IPL, has been rattled by the backlash and issued a long apology."I take this opportunity to apologise to the people of India, cricket fans, the Indian national cricket team and particularly Virat Kohli for my previous comments," he posted to Twitter. "My intention was never to harm, criticise or be derogatory toward anyone. They were intended to be light-hearted comments with the utmost respect to the Indian Premier League which I have thoroughly enjoyed through the years. "The public and fans have every right to be upset, and the backlash I have received has certainly driven this home." He said that he respected Kohli and meant no "ill intention".

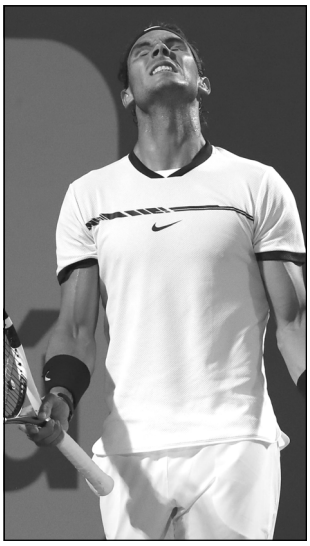
Kohli pulled out of the Dharamsala Test after suffering a shoulder injury on the opening day of the Ranchi Test. Kohli failed to recover in time from his injury and sat out the decisive Test that India went on to win. The Indian skipper had made it clear on the day before the Test that he would play only if 100 per cent fit. Australia's Glenn Maxwell was also at the centre of controversy over Kohli's injury when he grabbed his shoulder in parody and grinned at his teammates after making a similar stop later in the third Test.

Virat Kohli is a 'flog', says Merv Hughes

NEW DELHI, MAR 30/--/ Former fast bowler Merv Hughes has taken a dig at Virat Kohli, who was targeted by current and former Australian players as well as the media during the just-concluded Test series, calling the Indian skipper a "flog", an apparently derogatory Australian slang. "He (Kohli) is a great player and he is probably a bloke you would love to have on your side, but watching it from afar and watching him in other colours, you just think 'what a flog'," Hughes was quoted by 'Daily Telegraph' as having told SEN Radio. Hughes' comments come after a bitterly-fought Test series which India won 2-1 at home. At the end of the fourth and final Test in Dharamsala, which India won by eight wickets, Kohli said he no longer considered Australian cricketers his friends after being targeted both on and off the field by them. Earlier, Kohli had stopped short of calling his rival captain Steve Smith a cheat for his 'DRS Brain Fade' moment after which a section of Australian cricketers (current and former) along with their media targeted the Indian skipper, going as far as to compare him with controversial US president Donald Trump. Worst, the Cricket Australia CEO James Sutherland, in a sarcastic remark to a radio station, said Kohli perhaps does not know how to spell the word "sorry". Kohli pulled himself out of the fourth and final Test due to a shoulder injury. Hughes said both sides were probably better off with Kohli injured for the final Test as the star Indian batsman might have "gone over the top" had he played in Dharamsala. "The Indians played a real tough brand of cricket. I think they went out in the first Test and thought it would be a real piece of cake and when Australia knocked them over in that first Test match, they changed their attitude and they came out real strong and Virat Kohli especially. "If he is talking about the Australians playing it hard, it is a bit hypocritical for me because he turned his game around and played that way in especially that second Test and then going into the third Test, it probably was not a bad thing he was injured because he may have gone over the top," said 55-year-old Hughes, who played 53 Tests and 33 ODIs between 1985 and 1993.

IPL 2017: De Kock's absence big loss for Delhi Daredevils, says Rahul Dravid

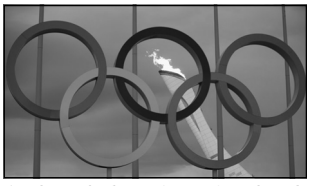
NEW DELHI, MAR 30/--/ Delhi Daredevils coach and former India batting stalwart Rahul Dravid on Thursday admitted that missing a batsman of Quinton de Kock's calibre along with seasoned player JP Duminy will affect the balance and composition of the team going into 10th edition of Indian Premier League (IPL). Duminy had cited personal reasons for pulling out of the Twenty20 tournament while De Kock has a fractured finger sustained during the Test series between South Africa and New Zealand at Wellington. "It is obviously a big blow when you lose big players like JP Duminy and Quinton De Kock. If these things happen before the auction, then it is easier because you can plan better. But then this is how it goes and you cannot help it. We do have talented players like Sam Billings and hopefully they can go up and perform," Dravid told PTI during an interaction at Delhi Daredevils' academy ground. Dravid is now banking on experienced international all-rounders like Corey Anderson of New Zealand and Sri Lankan captain Angelo Mathews to fill Duminy's void but admitted that De Kock is a bigger loss considering he was built into a player to give the team momentum at the top of the order. De Kock was Daredevils' top scorer during the last season of the IPL. "We have all-rounders like Corey Anderson and Angelo Mathews so we hope that these boys can stand up and perform and in some way replace JP. But yes, Quinton is a big loss because he played so many games for us and was one of our main batsmen. We had built him up for this season, but this is how life is and you cannot do much about it," said Dravid. Dravid is hopeful that the Indian core group of batsmen like Shreyas Iyer, Karun Nair, Sanju Samson and Rishabh Pant will have a good season, which will see them atleast making it to the last four since 2012. Asked what he expects from Pant's second season after a terrific opening season, Dravid smiled and said, "I hope it is better than last season from our perspective. Well I won't say Rishabh is our only X-factor. We have guys like Karun, Sanju, Shreyas and Tare." Dravid hoped that they will be able to strategise better giving youngsters more opportunity. "We will also look to strategise better and give the players good opportunity. In a format like the IPL, it is also important to rest the players and keep them fresh and we will also look at that and give it our best and be successful." ther."



Rafael Nadal of Spain reacts after missing a shot against Jack Sock of the United States (not pictured) on day nine of the 2017 Miami Open at Crandon Park Tennis Center. Nadal won 6-2, 6-3 ——Reuters

Olympics needs reboot: Bid process `dead` and needs revamp, claims ex-IOC official

LONDON, MAR 30/--/ The Olympics needs a reboot to regain the confidence of the public in the bidding process because the current model is "dead", a high-ranking former IOC official says. Michael Payne, widely credited with transforming the International Olympic Committee brand and its finances through sponsorship, told AFP there was no problem with the end product of the Games itself. But the 59-year-old Englishman, a former director of marketing at the IOC who is advising Los Angeles in their 2024 bid, said that was not the case when it comes to convincing the public that they want the Games in their



city. The race for the 2024 Summer Games has only two candidates left standing -- Los Angeles and Paris -- after the likes of Boston, Rome and Budapest dropped out due to a perceived lack of popular support at home. This contrasts to the six candidates that the 1992 and 1996 Games attracted and the 2000-2012 editions drew five candidates apiece. "To clarify: the bidding process as we know it is dead," Payne said on the sidelines of SportsPro Live in London, a conference on the commercial, political and operational aspects of sport.

"The present system that there is a nice beauty contest and then two of them turning up at the altar is dead." Payne, who after leaving the IOC in 2004 performed a similar role with Formula One, said the power of social media had left bidding for the Games open to unprecedented scrutiny and people wanted to know more than before what public money was being spent and why. Budapest abandoned its 2024 bid after young activists collected over a quarter of a million signatures. Fearing spiralling costs and the risk of corruption, the activists said taxpayers should decide how their money is being spent. "I think the bidding process for all major events needs radical overhaul and the understanding of hosting them also needs a radical overhaul," Payne said.

Miami Open: Rafael Nadal on track for Roger Federer showdown

LONDON, MAR 30/--/ Rafael Nadal took a step closer to a possible final against long-time rival Roger Federer in the Miami Open after a straight sets win over American Jack Sock on Wednesday at Key Biscayne. Nadal's 6-2, 6-3 win over the 13th-seeded Sock sets up a semi-final meeting with unseeded Italian Fabio Fognini who upset second ranked Kei Nishikori 6-4, 6-2 earlier in the day. The Spaniard's forehand was ominous as he neutralised Sock in one hour and 22 minutes. Nadal was able to save six of seven break points earned by Sock as he kept control of the contest.

He broke Sock in the American's first service game and swiftly established a 3-0 advantage and a second break at 5-2 wrapped up the opening set. The American showed his spirit though as he broke Nadal at the start of the second but was unable to take advantage of a double break that could have put him 3-0 up. Instead, Nadal pulled back to 2-2 and with Sock failing to make the most of a chance of further break points it was comfortable in the end. The 30-year-old Spaniard has never won in Miami despite being a four-time finalist and he expects plenty of work to get past Fognini and make it a fifth appearance. "We know each other very well. He has beaten me a couple of times and so it will be a good test. I am happy to be the semi-finals but it will be a tough one and I will need to play my best," said Nadal.

Fognini has three wins from ten meetings with the Spaniard, the most recent coming on clay in Rio de Janiero in 2015. The 29-year-old world number 40 showed plenty of confidence as he took the game to his Japanese opponent from the outset. It was the Italian's first victory in three attempts over Nishikori and his first Masters series quarter-final win since 2013, when he reached the last four in Monte-Carlo. Nishikori earlier said he had not felt fully in top shape for the contest. "I wasn't 100 per cent, physically, I mean, it was tough conditions for me," he said, referring to the heat on the mid-afternoon Key Biscayne centre court. "But it was also same for him, too. He was playing a lot of the long matches, but I think he still played good enough to beat me today," he added. Fognini, who was cheered on by his friend, former Italy footballer Christian Vieri, said he had come through a demanding test. "It wasn't easy and I was just focused on my game. I am very happy, I'm in the semifinal, I'm playing well and I feel good again on the court," he said. On Thursday, Federer takes on Czech tenth-seed Tomas Berdych while the last quarter-final pits Germany's Alexander Zverev against Australia's Nick Kyrgios.

Jose Mourinho 'totally against' International friendlies

LONDON, MAR 30/--/ Manchester United manager Jose Mourinho says he is "totally against" international friendlies following injuries to key central defenders Chris Smalling and Phil Jones on England duty. Mourinho expects to be without five first-team players against West Bromwich Albion on Saturday, including the injured Paul Pogba and suspended Zlatan Ibrahimovic. "I am totally against the friendly matches," Mourinho told Sky Sports, after Jones had to withdraw from the England squad with a toe injury suffered in a training ground clash with Smalling, who pulled out after sustaining a leg injury in the Germany friendly.

Both defenders missed England's 2-0 World Cup qualifying win over Lithuania, leading Mourinho to question the need for friendlies during the season. "I think friendly matches for the national team only make sense before the final phases," he said. "A couple of weeks before the Euros or a couple of weeks before the World Cup makes sense. But mid-season friendly matches mixed with qualification matches, I don't think that makes sense. "On top of that the matches are not really big matches so I am not a big fan. But I think one day I will be there so I cannot be very critical."

Mourinho, who had 13 players away on international duty, believes his side will be at a disadvantage when they resume Premier League action at Old Trafford this weekend.

"If you compare our situation with our opponents, West Brom, only one player on international duty," Mourinho told this week's Soccer Saturday programme, underestimating the number of Baggies players who joined up with their national teams in the past fortnight. "They had time to work, time to rest and prepare. It's going to be hard."

Richardson hints at ICC Olympic approval

Cricket featured in the opening ceremony at the London 2012 Olympics ——File photo

NEW DELHI, MAR 30/--/ David Richardson, the ICC chief executive, has indicated that the governing body has come around to the idea of cricket becoming an Olympic sport, and that it is close to making a decision on whether to apply to the IOC for involvement in the 2024 Games.

The question of cricket's inclusion at the Olympics has long been fraught with difficulties but, speaking at the SportPro conference in London, Richardson reportedly gave his backing to the move, which would likely take the form of a T20 tournament featuring six to eight teams. "We need to make a decision by July this year so we can make an application in time for September, when, as I understand it, the IOC will consider new sports for 2024," he said. "I think the majority of the members - and certainly myself - think the time is right and we've come to the conclusion that the overall benefit to the game in terms of globalising and growing it, outweigh any negatives, so I'm hoping." The host city for the 2024 Olympics has yet to be determined, with only Los Angeles and Paris left in the running (Rome, which has withdrawn from the bidding process, had previously given its backing to cricket being played). Cricket has only featured at one previous Olympics, the 1900 Paris Games.

"T20 is the ideal format and we'd say even better than rugby sevens as it's actually one of the mainstream formats of cricket," Richardson said. "Neither LA or Paris would be a disaster for us, in fact both would be opportunistic, especially the US option."

The BCCI has been seen as the major obstacle within the ICC. The ECB was previously opposed to the idea, fearing it would clash with the English season, but the new chairman, Colin Graves, signalled a change in stance after taking office in 2015. Making cricket part of the Olympic programme has been seen as a way to gain access to increased funding and help spread the game globally, with the MCC a consistently strong advocate.

Richardson said the IOC had decreed the best players must be involved if cricket is to win inclusion - "They've told us we mustn't send beach cricket or six-a-side teams, it must be a format played at international level and it must be our top players" - and mooted the possibility of regional qualifying tournaments to decide which countries get to take part at the Olympics. He also suggested that England would be able to compete as Great Britain and potentially select Scottish or Irish players.

"From an ICC perspective, the fixture calendar is the most challenging part of it," he said. "In the northern hemisphere, the Olympics are held in the English summer, so that's a problem for them if they've got an Ashes series on. So there will be issues and England in the past have said 'are we sure we want to go down this route?'"

India Open: Saina Nehwal, PV Sindhu, Sameer Verma sail into second round with comprehensive wins

Sameer, who had clinched his maiden Grand Prix Gold title at Syed Modi International, shocked fourth seeded Korean Son Wan Ho 21-17 21-10 in a 45-minute contest to set up a clash with Hong Kong's Hu Yun in the next round

NEW DELHI, MAR 30/--/ Olympic medallists P V Sindhu and Saina Nehwal made a resounding start to their women's singles campaign but it was Sameer Verma who hogged the limelight with a stunning straight-game win over Korean Son Wan Ho in men's event in the opening round of India Super Series here today.

Rio Olympics silver medallist Sindhu streamrolled compatriot Arundhati Pantawane 21-17 21-6, while London Games bronze medallist Saina defeated Chinese Taipei's Chia Hsin Lee 21-10 21-17 in a lop-sided contest.

"I gifted her seven points, I was a bit anxious to finish the match. The score should have been 21-10 21-10. She is a tricky player. She also plays doubles, so some of her strokes were difficult to gauge. I am happy with my movement," said World No. 8 Saina, who will face Thailand's Pornpawee Chochuwong next.

World No. 5 Sindhu, who will next take on unseeded Saena Kawakami of Japan, said: "It was a good match. It was close in the first game but I took a lead in the second early on. I am focused on the next game, taking one match at a time." Sameer, who had clinched his maiden Grand Prix Gold title at Syed Modi International, shocked fourth seeded Korean Son Wan Ho 21-17 21-10 in a 45-minute contest to set up a clash with Hong Kong's Hu Yun in the next round. "Son was injured in All England. I was prepared and also saw a few videos. I played a lot of cross-court shots, he was finding it difficult to bend to retrieve the shots. His cross court is also strong. It is a good win but it is just first round so I need to capitalize on it. I need to be consistent," Sameer said.

It was a delightful day for the Verma brothers as Sameer's elder brother Sourabh also reached the second round with a 21-13 21-16 win over compatriot H S Prannoy, who had his right knee tapped due to a freak injury at Swiss Open. Sai Praneeth, finalist at Lucknow and who recently recovered from a shoulder injury, staved off a challenge from Japan's Kenta Nishimoto to win 16-21 21-12 21-19. He will play seventh seed Chou Tien Chen next.

Meanwhile, 2015 champion Kidambi Srikanth fought back from 1-8 down in the first game to

eventually notch up a 21-19 21-16 win over China's Zhao Junpeng. He will face Olympic bronze medallist Victor Axelsen next.

Ajay Jayaram gave a good fight before going down 21-23 17-21 to third seed Viktor Axelsen of Denmark. National champion Rituparna Das also produced a scintillating performance to eke out a 19-21 21-15 21-19 win over Chinese Taipei's Chiang Mei Hui. In women's doubles, Ashwini Ponnappa and N Sikki Reddy defeated the England pair of Gabrielle Adcock and Jessica Pugh 21-16 21-16. The Indian duo will face fourth seeded Thai pair of Puttita Supajirakul and Sapsiree Taerattanachai next. Seventh seeds Pranaav Jerry Chopra and Sikki defeated Indonesian combo of Hafiz Faizal and Shela Devi Aulia 21-15 21-19.

Saena Kawakami of Japan ended Rasika Raje's campaign beating her 21-10 21-12, while Reshma Karthik lost 9-21 8-21 to Zhang Yiman of China and Sri Krishna Priya Kudaravalli lost 11-21 13-21 to second seeded Sung Ji Hyun of Korea. Pardeshi Shreyanshi suffered a 14-21 18-21 defeat to Linda Zetchiri of Bulgaria. Tanvi Lad retired midway at 6-2 due to an injury, while P C Thulasi suffered a 15-21 16-21 loss to seventh seed Nozomi Okuhara of Japan while Anura Prabhudesai lost to Sayaka Sato of Japan 21-17 21-16. In men's doubles, it turned out to be a disappointing day as Vietnam Open winners Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty lost 14-21 17-21 to Denmark's Kim Astrup and Anders Skaarup Rasmussen. Among other Indians in fray, women's pair of Aparna Balan and Prajakta Sawant, and Jakkampudi Meghana and Poorvisha S Ram, Juhi Dewangan and Saumya Singh, Kuhoo Garg and Ningshi Block Hazarika, Gauri Asaji and Megha Morchana Bora, Sruthi K P and Haritha Manazhyil Harinarayanan, Mahima Aggarwal and Maneesha K also crashed out in first round.

Also crashed out were Arjun M R and Ramchandran Shlok, men's pair of Manu Attri and B Sumeeth Reddy, Jishnu Sanyal and Shivam Sharma, Sourabh Sharma and Anoushka Parikh, Ketan Chahal and Tanveer Gill, M Anilkumar Raju and Venkat Gaurav Prasad.