

Sri Lanka expect top order to fire



The ICC Champions Trophy

MANOJ VATSAYANA

Sri Lanka will be looking forward to impressive contributions from top-order batsmen to make a big impact on the Champions Trophy. Sri Lanka failed to qualify for the semi-finals of the tournament's last edition in India in 2006 and look keen to turn around things this time with an improved performance. Consistency is Sri Lanka's main problem. They were always considered unbeatable at home but have produced a mixed bag of results in recent times, having lost to India twice, beaten Pakistan once before losing to India again in Monday's Tri-nations series in Colombo.

"Over the last year, we have been patchy and inconsistent in one-day internationals," senior batsman Mahela Jayawardene said recently.

"The top order has to get runs. We get to bat the



most overs, and it's our responsibility to get the big scores and bat through the innings." Sri Lanka cannot afford to be inconsistent as they are in the tough Group B with South Africa, England and New Zealand, who are capable of beating the best on their day. The top two sides will advance to the semi-finals.

Openers Sanath Jayasuriya and Tillakaratne Dilshan are expected to

play big roles as they can dominate any attack with a wide range of attractive strokes. Jayasuriya may be the oldest batsman at 40, but can overshadow youngsters with his unorthodox stroke-making. He returned to form with a blazing 79-ball 98 in a recent match against India in Colombo.

Sri Lanka's search for an aggressive pair of openers appeared to have ended with the recent exploits of

Dilshan, a middle-order batsman performing the role of an opener remarkably well.

Dilshan has already been nominated for three International Cricket Council awards — Cricketer of the Year, Test Player of the Year and Twenty20 International Performance of the Year.

Sri Lanka also have solid batsmen in skipper Kumar Sangakkara, Jayawardene and Thilan Samaraweera to capitalise on a brisk start, but expect more from others to set or chase a stiff target.

An encouraging piece of news for Sri Lanka is that their pacemen, led by Lasith Malinga, have been backing the spinners in recent matches.

"The positive for us has been our bowling, which has been consistent and has allowed us to use well the variations we have at our disposal," said



Tillakaratne Dilshan

Jayawardene. Veteran off-spinner Muttiah Muralitharan, the world's leading wicket-taker in Tests and one-dayers, is as shrewd as ever in drying up runs or taking crucial wickets.

Sri Lanka have an unorthodox spinner in Ajantha Mendis, who mesmerised batsmen with his subtle variations last year. He has been struggling of

late and his side expect him to regain rhythm soon.

They also have an effective pace attack to put the opposition on the back foot, with Malinga, Nuwan Kulasekara and Thilan Thushara all among wicket-takers in recent matches. **NEW DELHI, Friday (AFP)**

Rebuilding time for champion Aussies

ROBERT SMITH

The Australian team is in a rebuilding phase while skipper Ricky Ponting is reassessing his future priorities as the one-time kingpins prepare for the defence of the Champions Trophy.

Shaken by the recent loss of the Ashes to England and the subsequent recriminations, the Australians are typically fighting back, stretching to a 5-0 lead over England in the on-going ODI series.

Since the 2007 World Cup triumph in the Caribbean, the Aussies have dropped home series against India and South Africa and lost two ODIs in a five-match series against Pakistan in Dubai/Abu Dhabi last May.

The Australians are developing a new one-day team for the 2011 World Cup and a new generation of stars are in the making,

learning hard lessons along the way.

"The Champions Trophy is a key event on ICC's cricket calendar and is a good opportunity for us to see how this new-look Australian one-day squad goes in its bid to retain the Trophy," chairman of selectors Andrew Hilditch said.

"The one-day team hasn't played in a major tournament since the 2007 World Cup and this will be a good chance to see where we are at.

"The team is in a rebuilding phase and we look forward to seeing how this squad goes in South Africa as we prepare for the 2011 World Cup in the subcontinent."

Ponting, who became the first Australian skipper in 100 years to lose two consecutive Ashes Test series in England, took some time off during the ongoing seven-match ODI

series in England to escape the pressures.

He obviously has an eye on Australia's demanding playing schedule beyond the Champions' Trophy, including a one-day series against India in October as well as six home Tests against the West Indies and Pakistan.

Ponting has already announced his retirement from international Twenty20 cricket in a bid to prolong his Test career.

"The decision is all to do with my longevity in the game," Ponting said.

"Over the last couple of years I have found it increasingly difficult to play all three forms of the game at the level that I want to play them."

Ponting has become the team elder in a younger group following the retirements of Adam Gilchrist, Matthew Hayden, Shane Warne, Glenn McGrath and Justin Langer.

He now relies on vice-captain Michael Clarke and senior batsman Mike Hussey for the experience that is largely missing from the current set-up.

Australia's Trophy chances also took a blow with the loss of wicket-keeper Brad Haddin following finger surgery.

The big-hitting Haddin broke the ring finger of his left hand prior to the third Edgbaston Ashes Test and has been replaced in the Trophy squad by Tasmanian Tim Paine.

The Australians will be also relying on the batting of emerging star Callum Ferguson and allrounder Shane Watson and the bowling of Ashes troupe, Ben Hilfenhaus, Mitchell Johnson, Peter Siddle and Nathan Hauritz, complemented by senior paceman Brett Lee and Nathan Bracken. **SYDNEY, Friday (AFP)**



Brett Lee

Batting doldrums have New Zealand in a spin

CHRIS FOLEY

just not learned anything on tour," Vettori said as they packed up and prepared to head to South Africa.

WELLINGTON, Sept 17, 2009 (AFP)

New Zealand will need a remarkable reversal of form if they are to emerge as serious contenders in the Champions Trophy and reverse their tumbling world status. They arrive in South Africa from a morale-sapping series in Sri Lanka where they failed to be competitive and their world ranking fell from fourth to sixth.

While ever-consistent spinner Daniel Vettori, backed by the return of speedster Shane Bond, ensures there is some fight in the field, the Black Caps fragile batting leaves them vulnerable.

When opener Jesse Ryder fell for a second-half duck in their must-win pool match against India in the triangular tournament in Sri Lanka it ignited the familiar scene of a top-order batting collapse.

After being whitewashed by Sri Lanka in the preceding two-Test series, New Zealand had looked to build for the Champions Trophy by lifting their game in the ODIs.

But they crashed out of the tournament and failed to bat out 50 overs in back-to-back hidings by India and Sri Lanka. "In terms of putting up results, we've



Daniel Vettori.

Dhoni's India bank on consistency

MANOJ VATSAYANA

Mahendra Singh Dhoni's India will be keen to maintain their consistency to fulfill their fans' expectations at the Champions Trophy starting in South Africa next week.

India disappointed in the tournament's last edition at home in 2006 when they failed to qualify for the semi-finals, but have given their fans plenty to cheer about with their recent successes.

They won five successive bilateral one-day series — twice against Sri Lanka and once each against England, the West Indies and New Zealand — and saw off Sri Lanka again in a Tri-nations series which finished on Monday.

"We have set our goals and one of them is to be

the best team in the world," said India coach Gary Kirsten.

"We are headed that way and are very excited. We know we have to perform well as we continue the quest to be the best. We take pride in our consistency and we'd like to continue that."

India will be without explosive opener Virender Sehwag and key paceman Zaheer Khan, but Kirsten said the team still had the resources to give a good account of themselves in South Africa.

"Missing a player like Sehwag is huge because he is a quality batsman. But we've got a lot of depth in our cricket at the moment. We've got a good batting line-up which is flexible," said Kirsten.

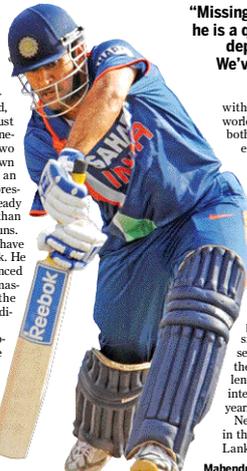
The Indian batting looks formidable despite Sehwag's absence as Yuvraj Singh, Sachin Tendulkar and Dhoni are all capable of playing match-

winning roles with their exciting stroke-making.

The spotlight will be on middle-order batsman Rahul Dravid, who has just returned to the one-day after nearly two years. He is known for building an innings under pressure, having already scored more than 10,000 one-day runs.

"It's good to have him (Dravid) back. He is a very experienced player and adds massive value to the team," said the Indian coach.

Gautam Gambhir keeps alive India's chances of making a brisk start as he has been in a fine touch. He is likely to open the innings



Mahendra Singh Dhoni

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with Tendulkar, the world's leading scorer in both Tests and one-dayers.

Tendulkar, playing international cricket for nearly two decades, will again be the key for his ability to play according to the situation and inspire confidence in others.

India also have the bowlers to keep the opposition, with left-arm seamer Ashish Nehra in the middle of an excellent run since returning to international cricket this year.

Nehra, who impressed in the West Indies and Sri Lanka in recent series,

and fellow-paceman Ishant Sharma and Rudra Pratap Singh are all capable of providing early breakthroughs, which are essential to seize the advantage.

India have a specialist spinner in Harbhajan Singh who can keep the batsmen under check with his tidy off-spin.

Part-time spinners Yuvraj, Suresh Raina and Yusuf Pathan cannot be ignored as they have been doing a commendable job.

India straightaway step into a high-pressure situation in South Africa when they clash with arch-rivals Pakistan in their opening match, hoping their consistency will see them through. **NEW DELHI, Friday (AFP)**

More on ICC Champions Trophy on Monday

