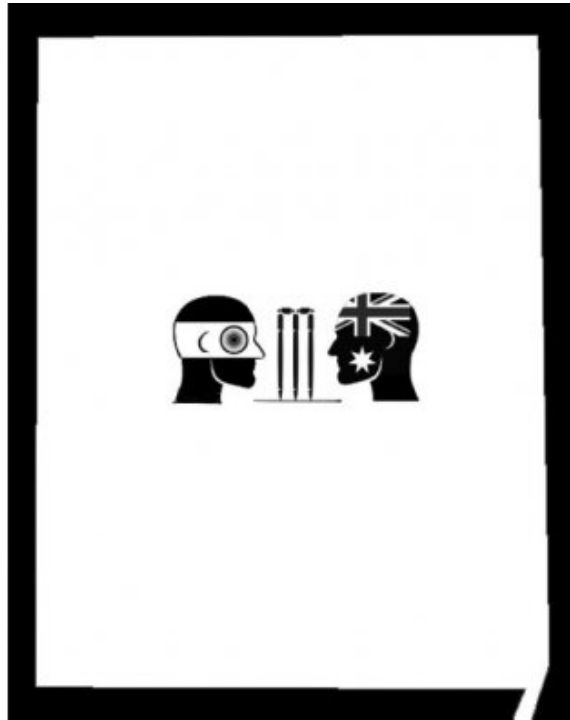


India-Aus: It will come down to fine margins

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Ever since Sourav Ganguly's team stopped Steve Waugh's march to the final frontier at Kolkata in 2001, the India–Australia Test series have overtaken the Ashes rivalry to become the high point of the Test calendar. Each series between these two teams has since been hard fought: at its acrimonious worst in Sydney in January 2008, and at its glorious best in Brisbane in January 2021.

For the four Test series beginning on February 9, the stakes are high – a place in the finals of the World Test Championship. The advantage of playing at home has narrowed in recent years because the teams have become so evenly matched.

Both teams bring a strong five-man bowling attack capable of taking 20 wickets. Australia's combination for this series would probably comprise two pacers, with Cameron Green the all-rounder to back them, along with the peerless Lyon, and a spin partner. If Ashton Agar, slow left-arm, is their second spinner, he will also strengthen their middle order. Four of India's five-man attack select themselves – two pacers and two spin all-rounders – but will the fifth spot go to a spinner or pacer? If it is a spinner, will India go with Kuldeep Yadav in purple form or Axar Patel, who will provide some batting cushion? The choice of that eleventh player will indicate India's approach to this series.

If a batting line-up has David Warner, Usman Khawaja, Steve Smith and Marnus Labuschagne, can it be anything but formidable? On current form, the Indian batting order is less radiant but if they bring their 'A' game to the ground and are egged on by the passionate home crowds, things could be different. Rishabh Pant will be sorely missed but

K S Bharat (the likely replacement) is a fine wicketkeeper. Though he will be playing his first Test, Bharat is a seasoned cricketer, with loads of first-class experience. The nagging worry is that, of late, Indian batters have struggled to play spin, seen as recently as on their tour of Bangladesh.

Both teams are struggling with injuries. Mitchell Starc will be ready only for the second Test while Jasprit Bumrah may not even play a game. Cameron Green may play the first Test, but will he bowl? Will Ravindra Jadeja be fully ready? Of course, in recent years, every team has reconciled to missing a player or two and hope their replacements will be more than adequate. We will know soon.

With such a tight match up, the likelihood of small margins, brief passages of play or an inspired tactical piece deciding the course of a game is high. It may all come down to a session that decisively swings fortunes, a frustrating lower order resistance, a change bowler breaking a vital partnership, or just a careless run-out that might determine not merely the fate of a Test but the place in the WTC Final.

Talking of fine margins, one of the aspects that must not sneak under the radar is that three of Australia's top batters are also handy change bowlers. Between Smith, Travis Head and Labuschagne, they have 39 wickets and, on an average, bowl around 10 overs in a match and perhaps more in the subcontinent. In Indian conditions, they can provide Captain Pat Cummins a valuable option with two of them bowling leg spin and Head bowling off spin.

The Indians have no such change bowler to call upon. Will this hurt? Cast your mind to our team in the early 2000s when we had Sachin Tendulkar, Virender Sehwag and Ganguly who were more than handy with the ball. Between them, they took 118 wickets, some were game-changing breakthroughs. Tendulkar will never forget his dismissals of Steve Waugh that helped India win at Kolkata and Adelaide. Sehwag will forever remember how he bowled Adam Gilchrist round his legs as India won at Perth. We believe that this difference between the two teams might play a role in the coming series. Keep an eye on this.

The other difference is that five of the top eight Aussie batters are lefthanders while the only lefthander in the Indian line-up will be Jadeja. We have argued earlier that India needs a couple of top-order lefthanders to challenge bowlers, especially in a right-left partnership. Never did we feel this more sharply than when India was bowled out for 36 in Adelaide. All the batters were right-handed with not one lefthander to disrupt the lines of Hazlewood and his comrades. The next Test onwards, we had Pant and Jadeja, Pant and Washington Sundar. It was no coincidence that they disturbed the rhythm of the Aussie bowlers. Will this be a factor that Rahul Dravid and crew will bear in mind as they decide the team composition?

The last of these 'small margin factors' will be the price that tailenders will put on their wickets. When India lost 4-1 in England in 2018, it was largely due to England's tail repeatedly retrieving England from a hole and taking them into winning positions. When

India beat England three years later in England, the Indian tail was heroic. From 175 for 6 to 298, 117 for 6 to 191 and 312 for 6 to 466 – these match winning turnarounds were accomplished because Shardul Thakur, Mohammad Shami and Jaspreet Bumrah put up such determined performances with the bat. In the forthcoming series, too, it might well come down to the difference in the contribution of the tailenders of the two teams.

While all the attention in this series is rivetted on the sumptuous spectacle of Kohli versus Lyon, Rohit versus Cummins, and Smith versus Ashwin, let us also keep an eye on the small but critical differences that could swing the games: the availability/absence of change bowlers; the presence/absence of lefthand batters, and the difference in the runs that the tail of the two teams contribute.

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