

Sports

India a class act with soft underbelly: Sanjay Manjrekar

Vijay Shankar likely to fill the number four spot

MUMBAI: India are a class outfit but they will go into this year's World Cup with a soft underbelly having failed to settle on a number four, former batsman Sanjay Manjrekar told Reuters in an interview. With the experienced partnership of Rohit Sharma and Shikhar Dhawan locked in as openers and captain Virat Kohli coming in at first drop, the twice champions have a top order the rival of any in the game.

Selectors continue to fret over who bats after the second wicket falls, however, with a series of candidates having fluffed their auditions.

Ajinkya Rahane, Manish Pandey, Lokesh Rahul and Dinesh Karthik have all been trialled for the number four spot and been found wanting.

Ambati Rayudu emerged as the most likely choice to fill the berth but scores of 13, 18 and two in the first three matches of the recent home series against world champions Australia damaged his cause.

The hosts ended up losing the series 3-2 and Manjrekar felt India were back to square one with no more ODIs scheduled before the May 30-July 14 World Cup in England and Wales, where India will be looking to add to their 1983 and 2011 triumphs.

"There was only one little gap that needed to be filled which is number four and getting some exciting options at four, five, six," Manjrekar said.

"They tried quite a few people and I don't begrudge them that. I don't think that was wrong. It's just disappointing that the players have not used the opportunity to cement their places.

"Like, Ambati Rayudu had a great opportunity. He got a 90 in New Zealand and I thought that's done. But then he fails in the next few innings and then a good ball will suddenly get him out and you sort of lose faith in him as the number four."

Vijay Shankar's rise as a handy, nerveless all-rounder was one definite gain from the Australia series.

With India's first choice pace-bowling all-rounder Hardik Pandya injured, Shankar proved he could float in the batting order and hold his nerve in the death overs with ball in hand.

Manjrekar, who played 37 Tests and 74 ODIs for India before turning his hand to media punditry, said that Shankar was his pick to fill the number four spot.

"Your number four has got to have a little bit of class because in England it's perfectly possible that you are 20-2 so you got to have somebody who will just weather the storm and then take India close to 300 runs," he said.

"That perfect number four India still haven't found and I don't think they will find it now.

"So when India goes into the World Cup, it's a class team with genuine class in bowling and batting but with a soft underbelly which will be their middle order.

"Vijay Shankar is my current number four-not the ideal number four but from the candidates that we have, he is my number four."

AUSTRALIA REVIVAL

Manjrekar, speaking on the sidelines of the launch of ESPNcricinfo's Superstats which uses data science to analyse cricket, said he expected the usual suspects to be challenging for the World Cup.

Five-times world champions Australia arrived in India as clear underdogs for the recent short format tour, having endured a wretched couple of years in ODIs during which they lost six series in a row.

That form slump was exacerbated by the ball-tampering scandal that robbed them of Steve Smith and David Warner for 12 months.



Sourav Ganguly (left) and Sanjay Manjrekar.

Without their two best batsmen as well as frontline pace duo Mitchell Starc and Josh Hazlewood, they still managed to win a five-match series from 2-0 down for the first time.

"I am delighted that Australia is coming into their own," Manjrekar said.

"Because you don't want a World Cup where there are one or two teams clear leaders and others are really struggling.

"And don't forget they know what it takes to be

champions. So if they have one or two good games, they will be thinking about only the title, nothing else."

Manjrekar did not have the same optimism about the chances of hosts England, who top the ODI world rankings but have yet to win the World Cup.

"I want to see England on a global sort of platform, when the entire world is watching," he added.

"I want to see how they cope with the pressure that comes with it. I have a big question mark over their temperament as a team." — Reuters

Fantastic Finch punishes Pakistan in Australia's win

SHARJAH: Aaron Finch struck his second century in as many games to lead Australia to another thumping eight-wicket victory over a hapless Pakistan in the second one-day international in Sharjah on Sunday.

The Australia captain smashed a 143-ball 153 not out for his 13th ODI hundred-also his highest score in ODIs-to anchor Australia's comfortable chase of a 285-run target in 47.5 overs.

Finch, who scored 116 in Australia's eight-wicket win in the first game at the same venue on Friday, put on a solid 209-run opening wicket stand with Usman Khawaja who made a 109-ball 88 to give Australia a 2-0 lead in the five-match series. Finch struck six sixes and 11 boundaries in a dominating innings, improving on his previous highest one-day score of 148 against Scotland at Edinburgh in 2013.

The victory came in the 100th one-day international match between the two countries. Finch admitted the start was tough.

"On a wicket like that, you can't afford to take it too deep with new batters," he said. "When you come in, it's tough to quickly at first. I just wanted to get through Imad (Wasim).

"It's hard to take a risk off him. I just hung in there as long as I could. Usman has been in good form, and he's getting big runs at an important time. Things are going quite well at the moment, but there are always things to improve."

Pakistan had replaced fast bowler Mohammad Amir with Mohammad Hasnain for rookie 18-year-old's first one-day and that made for an inexperienced lineup, having already rested six main players for the series.

Finch and Khawaja thrived against the novice attack, with Finch striking two sixes in the final overs while Khawaja's knock had eight boundaries. Finch completed his hundred with a couple off Hasnain on his 97th ball, making successive hundreds for a second time in his career. He scored consecutive hundreds against England in Australia last year.

Khawaja fell to leg-spinner Yasir Shah with 76 needed while Glenn Maxwell cracked two sixes in his 19 before he was run out. Pakistan's stand-in captain Shoaib Malik rued the lack of early wickets. "To be honest, I think early strikes in our bowling is what we are lacking," said Malik. "Overall, there are positives as we fought until the last ball. We are testing our bench strength."

Pakistan owed their total of 280-7, after winning the toss, to Mohammad Rizwan's maiden century. Rizwan, only playing because regular keeper and skipper Sarfraz Ahmed has been rested for the series, added 52 for the third wicket with Haris Sohail (34) and an invaluable 127 for the fifth wicket with Shoaib Malik.

Pakistan lost opener Imam-ul-Haq without scoring off the fifth ball of the innings from fast bowler Jhye Richardson. Shan Masood (19) and Sohail—who scored his maiden hundred in the first game on Friday—took the total to 35 when Richardson struck again, getting Masood caught at short mid-wicket.

But Richardson took 2-16 in his five overs and fell awkwardly in the outfield and left the field in the 11th over. Initial reports suggests he dislocated his shoulder and is doubtful for the remaining three matches. Rizwan, though, lifted Pakistan after Umar Akram fell for 16. — AFP

Patriots' tight end Gronkowski announces NFL retirement

LOS ANGELES: New England Patriots star tight end Rob Gronkowski, a three-time Super Bowl champion, announced his retirement from the National Football League in an Instagram post on Sunday.

Gronkowski brings down the curtain on a nine-year career after helping the Patriots to a third title in five seasons in a 13-3 victory over the Los Angeles Rams last month.

"I will be retiring from the game of football today," Gronkowski said in a post that called the decision "the biggest of my life so far". He thanked Patriots owner Robert Kraft and coach Bill Belichick for the opportunity they gave him "when drafting my silliness in 2010".

His effervescence and irreverence endeared "Gronk" to fans, but the towering tight end was a formidable offensive weapon on the field and a favorite target of superstar quarterback Tom Brady.

Gronkowski, who has suffered a laundry list of injuries in his career and was shaken by a concussion in a playoff win in January of 2018, said after the Patriots' loss to Philadelphia in February of 2018 that he would consider his future.

But he returned for a ninth NFL campaign that yielded another championship ring. "Thank you for everyone accepting who I am and the dedication I have put into my work to be the best player I could be," he wrote. "But now it's time to move forward."

"Cheers to all who have been part of this journey, cheers to the past for the incredible memories, and a HUGE cheers to the uncertain of what's next."

With the catching skills of a wide receiver and the physical size and power of an offensive lineman, Gronkowski was difficult to handle in either role the tight end spot required, befuddling rival defenders and putting him among the greatest to ever play the position.

Gronkowski, who turns 30 in May, is also a four-time First Team All-Pro and five-time Pro Bowl selection



LOS ANGELES: File photo shows Rob Gronkowski, the NFL tight end who helped the New England Patriots win three Super Bowl titles and is a near certain Hall of Fame pick, announced his retirement from football on Sunday. —AFP

who caught 521 passes for 7,861 yards and 79 touchdowns in 115 regular-season games from 2010-18.

He had 81 catches for 1,163 yards and 12 touchdowns in 16 post-season games. But Gronkowski became beloved as a character as much as for his skills, saying that partying helped him relax and thus inspire harder work in training.

His touchdown celebration spiking of the football became classics, many featuring a brief dance. When the Patriots played in London and he scored at Wembley Stadium, Gronkowski imitated a Queen's Guard—what he called a "little nutcracker dude"—in his touchdown celebration.

"Gronk is a one of a kind person," Brady said. "He's one of the most positive people I've ever been around and he loves to have fun." That's how he wound up on the cover of ESPN magazine's 2012 body issue wearing almost nothing and again posing for the magazine in 2014 with kittens.

And it's what had him on the ice before an NHL Boston Bruins game spiking a hockey puck a few days

after the Patriots won the 2015 Super Bowl.

Three months later, Gronkowski celebrated his 25th birthday with a party at the Hard Rock Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas. Weeks later, he was Twerking on the Celebrity Family Feud television show.

"Gronk" removed his shirt and flexed his muscles during the Patriots' 2017 Super Bowl celebration parade in Boston and two months later he bodyslammed a pro wrestler during a Wrestlemania match in Florida. Not even the White House was safe from being Gronked, the NFL star interrupting a news briefing during his April 2017 White House tour.

Sponsors delighted in his lively manner, making him a popular pitchman for doughnuts, cell phones, cereal, credit cards and video games. Gronkowski, the great-grandson of a 1924 US Olympic cyclist who held five world records, was nagged by injury throughout his career. Torn right knee ligaments ended his 2013 campaign after seven games. In 2016, he suffered hamstring injuries, a bruised lung and a herniated disc that required surgery. — AFP

W Indies cricket chief Cameron ousted in vote

LONDON: Controversial Cricket West Indies president Dave Cameron has lost a vote to remain in the post, the governing body announced Sunday.

Cameron was defeated eight votes to four by Ricky Skerritt, a former West Indies team manager in a ballot conducted in Kingston, Jamaica. Skerritt's running mate Dr Kishore Shallow, who challenged Emmanuel Nanthan for the vice-presidency, won by the same margin.

"I am humbled and deeply honoured to be elected as president," said Skerritt in a CWI statement. "We pledge to work for improvement on and off the field for West Indies cricket."

Cameron's six years as president were marked by a series of high-profile rows with several senior players, including Chris Gayle and Darren Sammy. The 47-year-old Jamaican administrator also

came under fire for his role in the sacking of Phil Simmons as head coach of the West Indies men's team in 2016.

Simmons, a former West Indies batsman who is now the coach of Afghanistan, has since launched legal action against CWI for constructive dismissal. In the run-up to Sunday's elections, CWI issued a statement detailing Cameron's expense arrangements following Skerritt's claim his time in charge had caused "significant damage" to the board in both financial and reputational terms.

Four years ago, the West Indies abandoned a tour of India following a pay dispute and in 2016 Sammy, the then captain of the side, publicly questioned CWI policy following the team's victory in the 2016 World Twenty20 in India.

But Cameron and Nanthan defended their record in a joint statement. "We were glad to be able to serve and proud of our achievements," they said. "We are happy that we left 123 players under contract. West Indies Cricket now has a home owned by the board at Coolidge Cricket Grounds (in Antigua).

"The world championships and bringing back the Wisden Trophy (which the men's team regained by beating England in a recent home Test series) are also other achievements that we are proud of." — AFP

Australia name Troy Cooley as bowling coach for Ashes tour

SYDNEY: Australia yesterday appointed ex-England bowling coach Troy Cooley for their upcoming Ashes series as they bid to win the urn on away soil for the first time in 18 years. Meanwhile Adam Griffith, a former head coach of Tasmania and assistant to national coach Justin Langer at the Western Warriors, takes charge of the bowlers for the team's World Cup campaign in England.

Their appointments follow the departure of another former England bowling coach, David Saker, who quit in February. Tasmanian Cooley is credited as being a key figure in helping England break their Ashes drought on home soil in 2005.

He recently coached Australia's

one-day bowlers for an away series win against India and is currently with the squad in the United Arab Emirates for their limited-overs clashes against Pakistan.

Cricket Australia's team performance manager Belinda Clark said Cooley and Griffith brought a wealth of knowledge and experience. "We reached out to the coaches working in Australian cricket and received expressions of interest from a strong field of candidates and through the process Adam and Troy emerged as the clear standouts for these secondments," she said.

"Adam and Troy have extensive coaching experience, which we believe will help support our players to best prepare and perform in the upcoming campaigns."

Former Australian skipper Ricky Ponting was last month appointed as batting coach for the World Cup. Ex-England player Graeme Hick is Australia's Test batting coach. The World Cup kicks off on May 30 and ends on July 14, while the five-test Ashes series is in August and September. — AFP