

Opener Agarwal hits ton as India dominate South Africa

PUNE: Mayank Agarwal hit his second century in successive matches on the opening day of the second Test against South Africa yesterday and said his side should aim for a 500-run first innings. The opener, who made a double century in India's opening Test win, scored 108 after the hosts elected to bat.

India were 273-3 when bad light forced an early end to play, with skipper Virat Kohli unbeaten on 63 and vice-captain Ajinkya Rahane on 18. Kohli and Rahane put on 75 runs for the fourth wicket to thwart South Africa's determined bowlers who kept them under pressure as the gloom crept in.

Agarwal, 28, said he was thrilled with his performance. "The team is in a good position, winning the toss, batting first and with one batsman short, it's a good thing to make runs... 450-500 would be nice," Agarwal said.

"Try and get big runs in the first innings... (that) could help us in case we don't want to bat again. It could really put pressure on the South Africans." Kohli, leading the Test side for the 50th time, reached his half-century with a boundary off fast bowler Vernon Philander.

But Agarwal took the lead role despite being hit on the helmet from a bouncer by debutant paceman Anrich Nortje. He went on to hit Nortje

for three glorious off drives in one over before lunch. The right-handed batsman put on 138 runs for the second wicket with Cheteshwar Pujara, who made 58, to steady the innings after the fall of Rohit Sharma early in the day.

He was eventually caught in the slips by South African captain Faf du Plessis — one of fast bowler Kagiso Rabada's three wickets for the day. "There were periods where I was getting boundaries very easily, there were periods where they bowled very good line and lengths and were testing the bouncer as well," said Agarwal, who is playing his sixth Test since making his debut last year.

Rabada also claimed Sharma, who edged the ball into the gloves of wicketkeeper Quinton de Kock for 14 in the 10th over. That was a disappointment for Sharma, who hit twin centuries in his first run as Test opener in Visakhapatnam where India took a 1-0 lead in the three-match series.

Rabada struck again to get Pujara, caught again by du Plessis, just before tea. Pujara, who was dropped by Temba Bavuma before he scored, hit a six and nine fours.

Rabada returned figures of 3-48 in 18.1 overs. Victory for India in the series will see them beat the record of 10 straight home series wins they share with Australia. — AFP



PUNE: India's captain Virat Kohli plays a shot on the first day of second test cricket match between India and South Africa at the Maharashtra Cricket Association Stadium in Pune yesterday. — AFP

Naomi Osaka picks Japanese citizenship with eye on Olympics

TOKYO: Tennis star Naomi Osaka has decided to choose Japanese nationality with an eye on the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, public broadcaster NHK reported yesterday. Osaka, who has a Japanese mother and a Haitian father, told NHK she has completed an administrative step to obtain Japanese citizenship ahead of her birthday next week.

Japanese law stipulates that a Japanese with more than one nationality must choose one before turning 22 years old. "It gives me a special feeling to try to go to the Olympics to represent Japan," the two-time Grand Slam champion told the broadcaster in an interview in Tokyo. "I think I will be able to put more of my emotion into it by playing for the pride of the country," she said, according to the article published in Japanese on the NHK website. Osaka added she wants to aim for the gold although she is also worried as expectations will be high.

The young tennis sensation is a household name in Japan, where her every move is followed feverishly by local media, particularly when she is in the country of her mother's birth. She is the face of several leading Japanese brands, including the carrier ANA, and "Naomi-chan" — as she is affectionately known — was the main attraction at last month's Pan Pacific Open in Osaka, which she won.

But she has faced controversies over her dual heritage in a nation that is fairly racially homogeneous, as well as scrutiny for her imperfect Japanese language skills — though others insist they add to her charm.

Mixed-race children can often face prejudice in Japan, although attitudes among younger generations are changing. Osaka became the first Japanese player to win a Grand Slam last year after beating Serena Williams at the US Open. — AFP



Naomi Osaka

Cardinals swamp Braves, book NL showdown with Nationals

LOS ANGELES: The St. Louis Cardinals exploded for 10 runs in the biggest first inning in Major League Baseball playoff history on Wednesday, routing the Atlanta Braves 13-1 to book a National League Championship Series showdown with the Washington Nationals.

The Nationals advanced with a 7-3 extra-innings victory over the Dodgers in Los Angeles, where Howie Kendrick belted a grand slam in the 10th to complete Washington's rally from an 0-3 deficit. Kendrick's blast off Dodgers relief pitcher Joe Kelly came after Los Angeles' three-time Cy Young Award-winner Clayton Kershaw — pitching in relief — gave up home runs to Anthony Rendon and Juan Soto on back-to-back pitches in the eighth inning. With the score tied at 3-3, Kelly walked Adam Eaton to lead off the 10th and Rendon doubled before Soto was intentionally walked.

Kendrick fouled off a pitch, then smacked a 97 mph fastball over the wall in center field.

"You know what, it was electric," said Kendrick, whose massive shot atoned for three fielding errors in the series. "Probably the best moment of my career."

The Dodgers had seized the early initiative with homers from Max Muncy and Enrique Hernandez.

The Nats pulled a run back when Soto singled in a run in the sixth. Their late-game turnaround gave the Nationals a 3-2 win in the best-of-five National League Division Series and denied the Dodgers — winners of a whopping 106 regular-season games — in their bid to reach the World Series for a third

straight year. They fell in MLB's championship showcase to the Houston Astros in 2017 and to the Boston Red Sox last year. Instead the Nationals — who rallied from a 3-0 eighth-inning deficit to beat the Milwaukee Brewers in the NL wild card game — will battle the Cardinals for a World Series berth in the NL Championship Series starting on Friday.

"We never gave up," Kendrick said of a Nats team that started the season 19-31. "The city had faith in us, the fans had faith in us. We believed in ourselves, everybody came through for us."

All the drama came early in Atlanta, where Braves starting pitcher Mike Foltynewicz — who pitched seven scoreless innings in a game-two victory — retired just one batter before he was pulled in the first frame.

Tommy Edman, Dexter Fowler and Kolten Wong each had two-run doubles, Cardinals pitcher Jack Flaherty walked with the bases loaded to force in a run, and St. Louis scored their final run of the first on a strikeout when Braves catcher Brian McCann couldn't corral a pitch in the dirt. St. Louis sent 14 batters to the plate before Braves relief pitcher Max Fried finally ended the inning.

"It's hard to score 10 runs in an inning without hitting a home run," mused Cardinals manager Mike Shildt. "But just great at-bats, relentless."

It was the most ever runs in the first inning of a post-season game and tied for the most runs in any inning of a playoff game.

"I don't know that I've seen that many guys hit in the first inning that quick in my entire life," said shell-shocked Braves manager Brian Snitker. "I don't know. It wasn't how we drew it up, I know that."

"That thing just kept rolling and we couldn't stop it." The Cardinals' 13 total runs matched their total in the first four games of the best-of-five NL Division Series. The Braves endured their 10th straight playoff series defeat while the Cardinals wrapped up a 3-2 series win to reach the NLCS for the first time since 2014. — AFP