

Sports

Kohli gets a last shot at World Cup glory as India captain

DUBAI: Virat Kohli will be looking for a fairytale ending to his leadership of India's Twenty20 team as he chases an elusive first major title at the World Cup. The 32-year-old Kohli will step down as T20 skipper after the 16-nation tournament in the United Arab Emirates and Oman that starts on Sunday.

The prolific run-scorer has also quit as captain of Indian Premier League side Royal Challengers Bangalore and many have welcomed his decision to concentrate more on his batting. Kohli had been at the center of growing speculation in recent months as the wait for success grew.

Former India all-rounder Irfan Pathan said Kohli can go into the World Cup, that will start for them against Pakistan on October 24, with no pressure and that will be good for the team. "I think he will enjoy his cricket more now after taking this decision," Pathan, who played a key role in India's inaugural T20 World Cup triumph in 2007, told AFP. "India will do well with the side, the confidence and the experience they have."

Kohli became captain across all formats after M.S. Dhoni relinquished his limited-overs leadership in 2017. But India have not won a World Cup or Champions Trophy since. Kohli will still have Dhoni by his side as the former captain, who led India to the T20 title in 2007 and the 50-over crown in 2011, is the team mentor for the tournament. Kohli was closing in on his India debut when Dhoni's team created history by winning the first world T20 title in Johannesburg.

Competitive World Cup

The triumph triggered a T20 boom across

South Asia and led to the birth of the IPL in 2008. After making his ODI debut in 2008, Kohli soon created his own brand of cricket but has faced pressure over his failure to win a global title. India, the hosts and led by Dhoni, lost in the semi-finals to eventual winners West Indies despite an unbeaten 89 by Kohli in 2016. India also bowed out in the final four three years later, under Kohli, in the ODI World Cup.

India remain one of the favorites to lift the T20 trophy in Dubai on November 14 alongside holders West Indies and Eoin Morgan's England. Pitched against old rivals Pakistan, New Zealand, Afghanistan and two other qualifying teams in



India a favorite to lift T20 trophy

Group B, India are hoping for a smooth path to the semi-finals.

"I will always want India to win, but West Indies will be one of the favorites," added Pathan. "England and Australia all have good attacks and you can never count out Pakistan. It will be a very, very competitive World Cup."

All 15 Indian squad members, and three standby players, have been in the UAE for over a month with their IPL teams getting used to the pitches in Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Sharjah. Swash-buckling opener Rohit Sharma is widely tipped



MUMBAI: In this file photo taken on March 31, 2016 India's Virat Kohli plays a shot during the World T20 cricket tournament semi-final match between India and West Indies at The Wankhede Cricket Stadium in Mumbai. —AFP

to be Kohli's successor as T20 captain and will also be key to the team's chances. The in-form K.L. Rahul and wicketkeeper-batsman Rishabh

Pant complete the top order batting spearhead while Mohammed Shami and Jasprit Bumrah will lead the pace attack. — AFP

IPL final turns into Dhoni vs Morgan tactical showdown

DUBAI: The Indian Premier League final today will be a clash between two of cricket's finest tacticians when M.S. Dhoni's Chennai Super Kings take on Eoin Morgan's Kolkata Knight Riders. Between them they have won every major title on offer.

Morgan led England to victory in the 2019 50-over World Cup. Dhoni masterminded India's wins. He was India's captain when they won the Twenty20 World Cup in 2007 and the 2011 50-over title. Neither has been a big run scorer in this year's pandemic-hit tournament, which forced it to be moved to the United Arab Emirates.

But Dhoni's Chennai, three-time champions, have been the team to beat this year, the first to make the playoffs. The 40-year-old, who will be a mentor for India at the T20 World Cup starting Sunday, has been his usual unflappable self as the tension mounts.

"Purely from the captaincy point of view who can handle the pressure best, probably has to be Dhoni," admitted Gautam Gambhir, the former India batsman who led Kolkata to their two previous IPL triumphs. Morgan's Kolkata resumed the tournament seventh out of the eight teams, but went on to win five out of seven games to reach the playoffs.



Eoin Morgan

'Very clever' Morgan

They knocked out Virat Kohli's Royal Challengers Bangalore in the eliminator and then Delhi Capitals in the second qualifier on Wednesday to reach the final. Kolkata advisor David Hussey, the former Australian international, said Morgan has made a huge impact on the team's results, aided by the break during the IPL's suspension when a coronavirus surge hit India in April.

"I truly believe that Morgan is captaining really well, he's mar-

shalling the troops, he's tactically very clever. The bowling changes have been spot on. I think that's contributed to our success this time around," Hussey said after the win over Delhi.

Morgan made smart bowling choices on the slow UAE pitches with West Indies mystery spinner Sunil Narine as the attack kingpin. Opener Venkatesh Iyer has emerged as an unlikely batting hero, while Morgan has scored just 129 runs in 16 games.

The left-handed Iyer, who made his debut for Kolkata in the UAE leg, smashed 55 in Wednesday's game in a big partnership with fellow opener Shubman Gill. Hussey hailed Iyer as "a class player". "He is tall, a Stephen Fleming clone I believe. He has got a big future in the game."

Kolkata may be forced to leave Shakib Al Hasan out of the team and bring back Andre Russell, who is recovering from a hamstring injury. Bangladesh want to keep Shakib fresh for the T20 World Cup that starts in the UAE after the IPL.

Ruturaj Gaikwad and South African veteran Faf du Plessis have led Chennai's batting while Dhoni showed just a flash of his past brilliance when he made 18 off six balls, including three fours, as Chennai beat Delhi to reach the final for the ninth time.

Chennai are still smarting from their failure to reach the playoffs last season. But Dhoni says key players made use of their time to improve their performances. "That is the reason why we have come back strongly this season," said the legendary Indian.

Morgan knows he faces a classic battle in Dubai but knows the IPL can throw up surprises. "We would like to keep going, playing against CSK, one of the best franchises in IPL history. Anything can happen," said the England leader. — AFP