

Sai Sudarshan stands tall in First Division Cricket, Ajith Ram stakes claim with consistent performance with the ball

Fast bowlers in short supply, Young batters fail to show consistency

By S Prabhu

TNCA made a few significant changes ahead of the new first division season. Decision was taken to not have Semi Finals and Final with the top team in the league winning the Palayampatti Shield like it had been in the historically. To make the players equipped for the longer version, the matches were once again to be of three days duration as against the two in previous years. 5 points were on offer for first innings lead but only 6 points for an outright win. There were to be six rounds of matches at the start of the season with a break of two days between each of the matches. This was to give the selectors a fair view of the players on offer. Here is a look at how things have progressed after the first phase of the first division matches.

Sai Stands alone at the top

Jolly Rovers' opener Sai Sudarshan has been the stand out batsman in the first division not just with the amount of runs he has amassed but with the ease with which he taken on the opposition bowlers and dominated them. End of August, he scored a century before lunch in a 185 run opening stand with captain Kaushik Gandhi. When Jolly Rovers needed just under a hundred to beat MRC A, he dominated the chase and showed the form he was in. He then followed up with a double century stand with his captain with both scoring centuries again. Sai ended the first phase of the league season with his third hundred. He stood tall far and above any other (local) batsman in the first division. His performance is sure to have sealed a place in the TN team in all the three formats.

Chief of the Jolly Rovers cricket team and former India cricketer Bharath Reddy is pleased with his performance "Sai has done exceptionally well. His consistency augurs well for the state."

Opener R Kavim began the season with a big double hundred for Grand Slam. He continued his great start with consistent scores. Former TN and Goa all-rounder DJ Gokulakrishnan is the mentor of Grand Slam. He is all praise for Kavim in the way he has played "**By batting for over 130overs, he has shown that he has got unperturbed temperament. He has performed consistently for us and has stood out along with Sai Sudarshan amongst the batsmen in this phase in first division.**"

Batting Coach of the TNCA Academy and state batsman from the 1980s PC Prakash has seen Kavim closely in age group cricket and is pleased with the way he has begun to convert the starts into big knocks "**He is extremely talented but failed to convert the 50s into bigger knocks earlier. Now he has realized the importance of big scores and his consistent performance over the last month should give him a lot of confidence.**"

Apart from these two, there has not been great consistency from the younger lot in batting. Many centuries have been scored in these six rounds but consistent performance has been lacking.

Lack of depth in Bowling

Bowling has been a weak point for TN in the years gone by with the team lacking consistency in bowling out opposition twice. And this came to the forefront once again at the start of this season. There are plenty of left arm spinners on view but quality off spinners and leg spinners have been difficult to find as have been the fast bowlers.

Like Sai Sudarshan in batting, Globe Trotters's Ajith Ram has been the one stand out player in bowling. His star turn with the ball helped his club to two outright wins.

S Suresh under whose captaincy TN reached the Ranji twice in successive years is the mentor at Vijay CC. He is not happy with what he has seen on the bowling front **“For a few years, the bowlers had got used to a defensive style of bowling based on the two day format. They are taking time to adapt to the requirements of three day cricket. The attacking mindset in bowling has not yet happened in the first round of matches. Some of them have been good in patches but consistency in bowling is what is required.”**

He says the odd five wicket hauls won't work. Bowlers need to be more consistent in taking wickets. **“The wicket taking art is unfortunately going away and that is not good news.”**

Prakash is keen to see a fully fit Aswin Crist make a comeback into the TN team **“He is a genuine fast bowler who has to walk into the state side if he is fully fit. When fast bowlers are in short supply, a fit again Crist will make a big difference to the squad especially if we are going to play Ranji cricket on non-spinner friendly wickets across the country.”**

The All-rounder spot

With Vijay Sankar out through injury, J Kousik of Vijay CC has it in to take the all-rounder's spot **“Every time he bowled he provided a break through. In batting, he could anchor or hit and hence is one for all situations”** says Seasoned umpire D Dharmaseelan, who umpired all the rounds in this first phase.

Not Graduating to the next level

Three left handers Vishal Vaidhya, Vimal Khumar and Anchit D had held big potential as teenagers. At the age group level, they were seen as those who had it in them to make it big at the state level. Unfortunately all three have not done enough to convert their potential into runs at the first division.

Anchit scored a century at the start of the season but he had already decided to head to Australia for higher studies putting an end to his serious playing interests. Vimal Khumar has been handed the responsibility of captaincy of Alwarpet but has failed quite badly with the bat while the team is also languishing at the bottom of the table.

For a decade, Vishal Vaidhya had been under the watchful eyes of late VB Chandrasekar. He was quite successful at the age group level but has somehow not been able get the big runs to catch the eye of the selectors. Earlier this year, in the final rounds of league matches of the 2021-22 season, captaining UFCC he was in scintillating form, scoring two hundreds and missing out narrowly on two more. Just when one thought he was finally making it count, he has had a miserable first phase this new season also having to come up on turning tracks though he did come up with a big century in the final match of the first phase.

Prakash has watched both Vimal and Vishal very closely for almost a decade and is puzzled at their inability to show consistency **“Vishal had a great end to the league last season and one expected him to continue that form into the new season. Even if under pressure, batting at No. 4 is a great opportunity for him to showcase his skills but his lack of consistency is puzzling. Vimal definitely had it in him to take his game to the next level but he too is struggling like Vishal. Others like Lokeshwar, Swaminathan and Radhakrishnan too have failed to graduate into the next level in cricket and have not been able to translate potential into performance.”**

Three Day Format

While square turners have meant a quick end to some of the matches, there have been several matches where teams have batted past the 100 overs mark. The three day format has helped in testing the temperament of the batsmen but only a couple of them have been able to show consistency. This format should have helped bowlers bowl to attacking fields unlike the previous couple of years. But except on square turners the attacking mindset has been absent.

Bharath Reddy while applauding the decision to move into a three day format is not pleased with the decision to take away the Semi Finals and Final **“It will make for one sided contests with teams going for the kill in certain matches with ‘square turners’ or ‘green tops’.”**

This was on view when India Pistons bowled out MCC on the first morning of the match and MRF bowled out UFCC almost twice on the first day.

However, Gokulakrishnan has a different view on this. **“Teams have eleven matches to showcase their skills. It is fine for the top team after 11 matches to be crowned as the champion.”**

Those to watch out for

While some of the teenagers of yesteryears have failed to graduate to the next level, there are a few who are beginning to show glimpses of their talent. Globe Trotters’ Ajitesh (he has been selected for the T20s) is one who certainly holds potential. Dharmaseelan sees him as a special talent **“He is one batsman who has it in him to go high up in cricket. He has all the shots in the book especially in the shorter version.”**

Sonu Yadav is very talented, has got runs and bowled well. He is really quick as a bowler and that the state should look to groom him for the future. Sanjay Yadav has got ‘attacking’ runs and taken wickets.

TN U19 quick MRC A’s V.P. Dhiran is a fast bowling talent that can be nurtured. The team’s coach Guru Kedarnath says that it is a challenge for all fast bowlers in the city in the first division league as they come up on slow wickets. **“It would be worth the while to see how he performs on quicker wickets when he goes around the country for the U19 matches”** says Kedar.

Former RBI opener S Ramesh is now the mentor at Nelson and Sea Hawks. He says that Mohit Hariharan is one to be watched out for. He has been impressive scoring over 400runs.

Among other batsmen, Guru Raghavendra and Mohammed Ali showed glimpses of what they are capable with big hundreds and it would be interesting to see how they perform in the second half of the league season.

The Disappointments

From a Ranji selection point of view, the first six rounds have not thrown up any special off spinner, leg spinner or fast bowler. Despite the opportunity for each of the batsmen to play really long innings (especially on non turning tracks), the selectors may not have had new names challenging the existing lot. And both these have proved to be disappointing at the end of the first phase of the first division this season. In Ajith Ram’s case, with Sai Kishore and M Siddharth as the lead spinners, it may be difficult for the selectors to get him in as the third spinner despite his extraordinary performances over the last month.

May this be the first of many...

A typical Corporate Tuesday morning led me to think about my plans for the weekend already. But my day was about to get better.

Then came a pleasant surprise. It was a call from the TNCA office. I was informed that a development camp is to be held at Natham, Dindigul for U-19 girls who could not make the state team for the previous season. I was asked if I will be available to Coach at the 22-day Development camp. My dull Tuesday morning had already brightened up and I immediately agreed to be a part of the camp.

My fellow Coaches and support staff were equally excited and enthusiastic about this camp as this was the First outstation development camp for the girls. Ours was a team of Seven that included Five coaches, a trainer, and a physio.

The preparations were done and dusted, and we started our journey to Dindigul. Our destination was NPR Engineering College that was about an hour's ride from Dindigul Junction. The bus ride was one filled with photos and videos for the Gram and Statuses. The picturesque landscape gave us a hint of what to expect. Lo and behold! The Ground seemed like one that was straight out of a fairy tale. It was truly one of the most beautiful cricket grounds that you will ever come across. See for yourself.



In photo: Sitting (L to R): Coaches Ms. Kavya, Ms. Sharadha, Mr. Chandramouli, Ms. Jeyalakshmi, Ms. Bobby, Trainer Ms. Swetha and Physio Ms. Angel.



We were given accommodation right above the ground next to the pavilion and that was the best spot to get magnificent views of this spectacle. It is fair enough to say that we spent a lot of time just gazing at the ground and the scenery from the pavilion.

The camp kickstarted with physio and fitness assessments. The schedule was for two full weeks with the first week focusing on skill development while a lot of practice matches were scheduled for the second week. There were designated areas for net practice and of course we had the entire ground for us to practice fielding. The morning session which was exclusively for fitness and fielding would start at about 7:00 AM and the net and skill sessions were scheduled for the evening. Our trainer and physio worked hard with the girls on various aspects like endurance, speed, and agility. An entire day dedicated to the yo-yo tests as well.

As Coaches, this was our debut development camp, and we had the full autonomy to design a programme for the day based on the schedule. We thoroughly enjoyed planning match ups, drills, and the plans for every skill session as the views of each coach had something unique that we could all learn and enrich our knowledge.

We got ample centre wicket practice and matches in the second week and the girls thoroughly enjoyed the experience. Once again as Coaches, we would put in our heads together everyday to form equally strong teams and shuffle them for every match. The girls played a total of Six practice matches of different formats. All the games were close ones and we had scores of 230 plus being posted and being chased down. There was also a game where the chasing side was Seven wickets down and still needed 50 runs to win. The last wicket partnership won the game for them, and it was heartening to see the young girls showing a lot of character and evolving every single game. The strategies got better, the field sets were more precise and all of them demonstrated excellent leadership and awareness. They just got better every single day.

One more fascinating fact about the ground was that the ground would be ready to use for a match at 9:30 am although it poured cats and dogs the previous evening. The drainage system was that efficient and well maintained. So, despite some heavy rain, all our matches could be completed. Credits to the Curator and his team for having made this possible.

Off the ground, the entire team loved the hospitality of the college staff who tended promptly to our basic requirements. The food and snacks that were served at the canteen were also extremely healthy and fresh. The girls and even the Coaching staff became healthier at the end of the camp just because of the food and environment.

The days just flew by.

Overall, it was a great exposure for the girls since they got a lot of game simulation and practice matches.

As a group, we concurred that:

- At least 20 players out of the 33 have the talent to get to the next level.
- The camp also benefitted a lot of girls from the districts, as they got to learn and interact with fellow players from the city and the coaching staff.

It would benefit immensely, if at least two such camps are organized at different venues for all age categories; one for off season and another one just before the commencement of every domestic season.

Finally, the camp left some invaluable lessons for each, and every person involved, irrespective of their role. Everyone took something home to ponder and work upon. Above all, it gave us some great memories that will stay with us for a very long time. That was the biggest takeaway.

May this be the first of many more to come ...

Sharadha Sridharan
Former TN Cricketer & Cricket Coach.