

Advantage Gujarat Titans against Starc-less Delhi Capitals

The Mukesh vs. Gill match-up could be an enticing watch, while KL Rahul's battle against Krishna could be another key duel.

It's perhaps fair to say that being on the receiving end of Mitchell Starc's feisty yorkers would never be a batter's first choice in any condition. The Player of the Match in last year's final and Qualifier 1 has continued to deliver strong returns for his new franchise Delhi Capitals, despite having his salary nearly halved for this season. But he hasn't returned for the concluding leg of the IPL.

This season, Starc had single-handedly spearheaded Delhi Capitals' pace attack on the mostly placid surface at the Arun Jaitley Stadium. With 14 wickets – Delhi's highest- he sits 10th in the leading wicket-takers list. The next-best pacer for Delhi, Mukesh Kumar, has managed nine scalps, four of which came in a single innings against Lucknow Super Giants.

But with the IPL's resumption post one week halt due to the escalating tensions between India and Pakistan and his wife and Australia captain Alyssa Healy recently describing the situation in Dharamsala as "terrifying," a hesitant Starc, who flew back to Australia, chose to miss out on the remainder of the season. "There was a lot of anxiety around the Australian group because we didn't have a whole heap of information as to what was going on," Healy said on the Willow Talk podcast. "That's probably been the really interesting and probably the scariest part of this whole situation, the misinformation," she added.

In the Aussie veteran's absence, Delhi find themselves in a precarious position as they take on Gujarat Titans in a crucial home fixture on Sunday. The desperation led to the signing of Bangladesh fast bowler Mustafizur Rahman in place of Jake-Fraser McGurk, who had also decided against a return to India.

While the left-arm seamer with slinky action, Mustafizur's death bowling offers DC fans some hope, Starc's pedigree is just irreplaceable. "It's very tough to replace someone like Mitchell Starc, but this is a fresh start," said DC all-rounder Vipraj Nigam, who has impressed with both bat and ball for DC. "We've regrouped and made a few changes. Basically, we're looking to restart the season the way we began initially," he said on the match eve.

Mustafizur, who received an NOC from Bangladesh late on Friday, will also be unavailable for the match against Gujarat as he features in the first T20I against UAE. While opener Faf du Plessis and Tristan Stubbs are back in the mix, the South African middle-order batter and Delhi's mainstay, Stubbs, will leave after the league stage, in preparation for Proteas' World Test Championship final against Australia.

Compounding Delhi's worries is their poor home form. Barring Starc's Super Over heroics against Rajasthan Royals, Axar Patel's side is yet to win a game on their home turf. Delhi now need three wins in their remaining three matches to secure a top-four spot without relying on other results.

While Delhi scrambles for replacements, Gujarat could soon face a similar dilemma, provided they secure a playoff spot. Their English talisman, Jos Buttler, is set to return home for national duty. An astute figure with multi-dimensional skills — a match-winner with bat, an able wicket keeper, and part of the leadership group — Buttler's absence will leave a significant void. Despite having one foot already in the playoffs, Gujarat must address their team balance with the Ashish Nehra-Shubman Gill duo needing to find a way to compensate for Buttler's loss, especially for a top-heavy side like GT. The 2022 winners have roped in Sri Lankan wicket-keeper batter Kusal Mendis as a like-for-like replacement.

Although their rain-interrupted, last-ball thriller win against Mumbai Indians masked their inexperienced middle order, GT remains heavily reliant on their top three: Gill, Sai Sudharsan, and Buttler.

The triumvirate has done heavy lifting for Gujarat, accounting for scoring over 71 per cent runs by themselves. GT's dismissal rate (average balls faced per wicket) of 24 is the highest among all 10 teams. Their scoring rate of 10 runs per over (2130 runs in 212.5 overs) also ranks at the top.

"Right now, the focus is on his availability for the next three games. We'll then assess team balance and combinations," said GT assistant coach Parthiv Patel. "Buttler has been a great performer ... the leader of the group."

In the bowling department, Prasidh Krishna and Mohammed Siraj have been phenomenal for Gujarat. Krishna, the purple cap holder with 20 scalps in 11 matches, has been a revelation, striking early with the new ball while maintaining his impact in the death overs as well.

The Mukesh vs. Gill match-up could be an enticing one to follow, while KL Rahul's battle against Krishna could be another key duel to watch.