

Sai Sudharsan interview: 'Last year, I was a bit slow ... changed mindset, shots'

Sudharsan is the hottest young player in the IPL, also tipped to feature in the Test tour of England. He talks about the changes he made in his game from last season.

It's a diary entry that Sai Sudharsan made after a IPL game against Chennai Super Kings at the end of the last season that marks the improvement in his batting and captures why the 23-year old is the talk of the town this year in a league filled with flamboyant hitters.

He had matched Shubman Gill shot for shot on that night in Ahmedabad in a 51-ball 103 knock, but he wasn't entirely satisfied. After a long deliberation, he wrote something on these lines: 'There is scope to push myself harder and be explosive'.

In what is turning out into an incredible season for Gujarat Titans, Sai Sudharsan is leading their batting charts with 509 runs from 11 innings. While he tallied 527 runs last season as well and even scored a century and averaged more, the noticeable change is in the strike-rate column. This season he has been striking at 153.31, 12 more than last season and 10 more than his career strike-rate. And the best part of all it has been that he has been able to do it without deviating from his game and not compromising on his compact technique.

"Last year, in certain innings, I was a bit slow," Sai Sudharsan tells The Indian Express. "The pitches that we played also were a bit different to the others. And even the team situation was such that there were no great starts. We kept losing wickets and I wasn't able to give good starts. I was slow to get off the block.

"I realised that I'd have to push myself more; be a bit more explosive. So I went home and worked on the mindset of it. As you said, I didn't change anything with my batting, but just brought more clarity. I wanted to bring the explosive element very early in the innings. If I could do it later, I could definitely do it at the beginning as well from ball one. From there on, I practiced with these thoughts in mind," the left-hander says.

That the Tamil Nadu Premier League followed soon after did help Sai Sudharsan to an extent. At TNPL, he began to bring this element to his batting.

"The idea to be a bit more positive started at the TNPL. Even before last season's IPL was done, I remember asking myself how we should play next year and what should I do to take my batting forward. I definitely had ideas to add more elements to my batting. I wanted to see what it brings to my game. The mindset had to change. When the TNPL happened, it didn't start well, but by the end I was able to see the difference. Unless you go through that grind and test yourself, you don't know the ceiling you can reach," Sai Sudharsan says.

In previous seasons, pacers had found a way to tie him down, particularly with those lines that denied him room to free his arms. Having largely depended on conventional shots, this season Sai Sudharsan has brought out the paddle shot, which has been an effective scoring shot.

"Definitely it is one of the vital shots that I have used in white ball or T20 cricket for sure. What it brings to your game is even if a bowler is delivering his best ball, you are able to score off it to a less protected pocket in the field. So when you have that sort of an option for a bowler's go-to delivery, you are invariably putting him under pressure. He is pushed into doing something different. That was the reason behind it (adding to his shotbook)."

Even against spinners, Sai Sudharsan has shown how his range has only widened. While he mostly targeted the mid-wicket pocket for lofted shots, a lofted drive is a new addition this time alongside the reverse-sweeps.

“The lofted shot is primarily because of the length most of them operate. You have to bring some explosive ways to disrupt the bowler. Otherwise, they will keep bowling that good length which you can’t do much about. So I thought of ways to disturb them or else you are playing to their tempo. And when you allow that, the pressure falls on myself. When you have more options for a delivery, you have your nose in front,” he explains.

Having mostly batted at No 3 in the previous three seasons, this edition is the first instance of Sai Sudharsan has started every game as an opener forming a left-right combo with Gill. Though he has been an opener right through, the Chennai lad tapped in on Gill and Jos Buttler to learn the tactical nuances. “In terms of the mindset and how to take the game deep, I did have conversations with Jos and Gill because I’d not opened a lot in the IPL. This is the first time I’ve started as an opener — so wanted to know how one has to transition from powerplay to the middle overs and beyond,” he says.

In the race for Orange Cap, there are five players who have touched 500 or more runs this season with 10 runs being the gap between the one at the top and at No 5. Sai Sudharsan is at second spot, just one run behind Suryakumar Yadav with Gill, Virat Kohli and Buttler following on his heels. The Orange Cap though isn’t in Sai Sudharsan’s mind.

“It always feels great for sure to be in a race with such great players. But I am not thinking about it. I am thinking of it as a by-product to the things I’m doing right. Of course, the desire and hunger to get it is there for sure. But at the same time, that is not the main priority. The priority is to do the best for the team and if you get this while doing so, I would take it with both my hands.”