

The Peninsula SPORT

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New format for Qatar Cross-Country Rally

The Peninsula

Officials at the Qatar Motor and Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) are currently finalising the route for this year's renamed Qatar Cross-Country Rally, round four of the FIA Cross-Country Rally World Cup and round two of the FIM Cross-Country Rallies World Championship. They also

announced that the revised five-day event would take place from April 17 to 22.

Traditionally one of the most demanding rounds of both cross-country championships, in terms of tricky navigation and intricate tracks and sand trails, this year's event has been shortened from five selective sections to four and features a number of exciting innovations.

"We have fine tuned the route and the format for the

Sealine, based on feedback and our intuition," said QMMF President Abdulrahman Al Mannal.

"We have reduced the number of long selective sections from five to four and reduced the actual competitive distance to around 1,380km from 1,635km. The rally will also cover a larger geographical area on this occasion and we will have less stony sections."

The first of four selective sections through the desert gets

underway on April 19 and is followed by three further sections on April 20, April 21 and April 22 – each of around 350km.

The fourth stage on April 21 will take place entirely in the north of the country for the first time, while two of the stages will finish in the dunes around the former bivouac location at Sealine, south of Doha. The fourth stage will start in the same area.

Portugal's Pedro Almeida will continue to work as Clerk of the

Course for the FIA event, with Rashed Al Sulaiti acting as his deputy and Frenchman Franck Vayssié appointed as the new Rally Director. The former Sealine event developed from the Qatar International Baja that ran as a candidate event for the FIA World Cup in 2011 and was won by Qatar's Nasser Saleh Al Attiyah at the wheel of a SAM Mercedes 35CC.

The event is now entering its sixth season as a round of both the

FIA and FIM World Championships. Al Attiyah claimed further wins in 2012, 2014, 2015 and 2016 in Toyotas and Minis and two-time Dakar winner Jean-Louis Schlesser was victorious in 2013. Five-time Dakar winner Marc Coma dominated the motorcycle category with his KTM in 2012, 2013 and 2015, with Spaniard Joan-Barreda Bort winning in 2014 and recent Dakar winner Sam Sunderland claiming another win for KTM last year.



Ignacio Casele celebrates his quad win in Qatar in this file picture of 2016.



We have fine tuned the route and the format for the Sealine event. We have reduced the number of long selective sections from five to four and cut down on the actual competitive distance to around 1,380km from 1,635km, says QMMF President Al Mannal.



Qatar's Nasser Saleh Al Attiyah is the defending champion in the car category at the Qatar Cross-Country Rally, round four of the FIA Cross-Country Rally World Cup and round two of the FIM Cross-Country Rallies World Championship, which will take place in April.

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Tough test awaits cyclists at Al Adaid Desert Challenge

Rizwan Rehmat
The Peninsula

The hugely popular Al Adaid Desert Challenge will be held on March 3, organisers said yesterday.

To be held over a distance of 40kms, the gruelling off-road event is expected to draw more than 250 entries, top officials confirmed yesterday.

Known as the Gulf's toughest one-day cycling event, the Qatar leg has been officially added to the UCI calendar of events. Dr Jamal Al Khanji, Managing Director of Al Adaid Desert Challenge, said during a press conference yesterday.

The action on March 3, will unfold from Sealine to Khor Al Adaid, with riders encountering 6 dunes along the race route. Al Khanji added.

A total of \$50,000 is up for grabs.

The event is organized by the Qatar Cyclists Centre (Qatar Cyclists) under the patronage of the Ministry of Culture & Sport, and is supported by Qatar Tourism Authority (QTA).

Last year, 179 riders - including 52 Qataris entered - took part in the event. A total of 48 Filipino riders also provided fans with

AL ADAID DESERT CHALLENGE

Event schedule

- 6:00 - 7:30 am Race Number Collection
- 8:00 am Race begins
- 9:30 am First riders expected to finish
- 11:30 am K&S award / Finish Area
- 12:30 pm Prize Distribution
- Total prize money: \$50,000

top-class riding and running on the day of the event.

The organisers said registration for the race is open now.

"I would encourage fans to get going. They must enter now as most of the participants will compete with hours of training behind them," Al Khanji said. "The last day of registration is February 28," he added.

Marked as a UCI C3 Cross Country point-to-point race, it will cover 40km of desert track - that will also include 'sinking sand' along the way - from Sealine to one of Qatar's most impressive natural wonders, the 'Inland Sea' or Khor Al Adaid.

"The one-day desert challenge provides off-road cyclists a good combination of fun and hard work among the participants," Al Khanji said.

"It's also a way of simply enjoying the outdoors on a bike.



Dr Jamal Al Khanji (left), Managing Director of Al Adaid Desert Challenge, poses for a picture along with Dr. Mohamed Al Kuwari (second left), President Cycling Federation, Dr. Abdulaziz Al Kuwari (second right), Director, Qatar Cyclist Centre and Colin Smith, CEO, Rayyan Mineral Water Company, after a press conference in Doha yesterday.

Pic: Qassim Rahmatullah/The Peninsula

It is a spectator-friendly event and riders are encouraged to invite their friends and families to join them for the day in the desert," he added.

Spectators are allowed to drive along the route (except prohibited areas such as the race sand dunes) and welcome the riders at the finish line, after which they can enjoy the afternoon together. The event also offers a fun non-competitive kids' race at the finish area which also promotes family engagement.

"The Al Adaid Desert Challenge attracts visitors and residents to one of Qatar's most impressive natural wonders by offering a unique challenge, exciting sports and fun activities for families. QTA is proud to be supporting the seventh edition

of this annual event which has steadily grown over the years, and promises to contribute to the country's efforts to develop the sports tourism sub-sector in Qatar," Rashed Al Quresh, Chief Marketing and Promotion Officer at QTA, said in a statement.

"It is a great honour that our event is recognized by the government as one of the most compelling events with potential for tourism. Our goal is to attract international participants and we will direct even more energy in achieving this," Al Khanji said.

"One of the steps towards this goal was done by placing our event in the UCI calendar. We are preparing packages that will ease travel and accommodation for riders coming to Qatar. I am positive they will return home

with great memories and stories to tell," he added.

Besides the gruelling sand dunes, there are several sandy patches on the flat surfaces, which makes the race even more challenging. The length of the race might not be extreme, but every sand dune, each patch of sand demands something new from the riders. To be competitive, riders need to be extremely fit, have an optimally set-up bike, choose the best path and sometimes also be lucky.

The event has the sponsorship backing of QNB, Ethicon, Ooredoo, Rayyan Natural Water and partners: Qatar Cycling Federation, Rassen Adventure Shop, Matwater, GMC, Carbon Wheels, Royal Riviera Hotel, Qatar Airways.



A file picture of cyclists taking part in last year's Al Adaid Desert Challenge.

QATAR STARS LEAGUE

FIXTURES

Today

Al Kharaitiyat vs Al Sailiyah, at Al Khor Stadium, 4:40pm
Al Arabi vs Al Gharafa at Al Arabi Stadium, 6:50pm

Tomorrow

Umm Salal vs Al Ahli at Qatar Stadium, 4:40pm
Al Khor vs Muaither SC at Al Khor Stadium, 4:40pm
Al Rayyan vs Lekhwiya at Al Sadd Club Stadium, 6:50pm

February 11

Al Shahaniya vs El Jaish at Al Arabi Club Stadium, 4:40pm
Al Sadd vs Al Wakrah at Al Sadd Club Stadium, 6:50pm

Struggling Al Kharaitiyat and Al Sailiyah eye full points

The Peninsula

Struggling Qatar Stars League (QSL) outfits Al Kharaitiyat and Al Sailiyah will be looking to gather full points when they meet in Round 20 match at Al Khor Stadium today.

Both the relegation-threatened sides are separated by four points in the league, and Al Kharaitiyat know that only a victory can put pressure on the sides above them.

Last time out Al Kharaitiyat managed to stop the rot of three straight defeats in the league by drawing 0-0 with Umm Salal.

Three points will be much needed for the Thunders who could be cut off from safety by six points if results don't go their way.

Al Kharaitiyat will be hoping for a big performance from Uzbek winger Sanzhar Turunov who has been one of the sides leading players in recent weeks. Ahmed Al Ajlani, the head coach of Kharaitiyat, believes that all the remaining matches are like cup finals.

"We are now in the twentieth week and all the games are seen as cup final matches. We will play for victory, we will not accept to end the match without any points.

"We only scored two goals in six games which means that there is trouble in attack. If you compare missed opportunities and goals scored there is a big difference," added the Tunisian tactician.

As for Al Sailiyah they know that a win will settle any relegation fears that the Peregrines squad may have. Sami Trabelsi's boys managed a creditable 1-1 draw with an out of sorts El Jaish side last time out.

Al Sailiyah are currently on a three game undefeated streak in the league, and will be targeting to maintain their form.

"It's an important game for the two teams and both teams are on a similar level. They got reinforcements and are stronger now. They are missing a lot of chances but they are creating opportunities." Sami Trabelsi, the head coach of Al Sailiyah said.

Speaking about the changes in his team, Trabelsi added: "Our team is 60% changed as we have some new players coming in from Al Arabi and some players left. We have important games coming up and we need to be concentrated."

World Cup winner Lahm to retire at end of season

Berlin
AFP

Germany's World Cup winning captain Philipp Lahm yesterday confirmed he will retire at the end of the season and leave Bayern Munich, having rejected a role as sports director.

"I have decided to stop playing football at the end of the season," Lahm said after Bayern's 1-0 win over Wolfsburg in the third round of the German Cup.

"I am sure I can keep putting in the performances until the end of the season, but not after that," added the Bayern captain, confirming an earlier press report.

"I first thought about the decision over a year ago and have been constantly checking it.

"I love football and it has given me a lot, but everything has to eventually come to an end and I wanted to decide that myself."

Lahm explained why he has turned down the vacant sports director role, which would not have included a place on Bayern's board following recent restructuring at the club.

"There were discussions and at the end of those I decided that

it's not the right time for me to step up with FC Bayern," he said.

"I'll be a private person again in the summer, then I'll have time to take care of other things and to have a few conversations."

The 33-year-old made his 500th appearance for Bayern last Saturday and will hang up his boots in June despite having a year left on his contract.

Lahm retired from international football after captaining Germany to the 2014 World Cup title in Brazil and making 113 appearances for the Mannschaft. He joined Bayern as an 11-year-old in 1995 and, apart from a two-year loan spell at VfB Stuttgart, he has spent his entire career at the Bavarian giants.

He became club captain after Dutch hardman midfielder Mark van Bommel stood down in January 2011.

Lahm then skipped the Bayern to their 2013 Champions League victory at Wembley when they beat Borussia Dortmund 2-1 in the final.

That season, they became the first German club to complete the treble of Champions League, Bundesliga and German Cup.

With Bayern currently four points clear in the Bundesliga

and through to the Cup quarter-finals, Lahm is well set to go out on a high and add to his seven league titles and six Cup victories.

With Lahm now out of the running, Borussia Moenchengladbach's Max Eberl is now favourite to take over as Bayern's director of sport after Matthias Sammer quit last year.

"We talked to Philipp Lahm, but there is no plan A, B or C," Bayern's president Uli Hoenes told broadcaster ARD.

"We have not talked to anyone else, but there will be a sports director starting on July 1.

"It is not about the power you have in that position, but about the responsibility."

Lahm caught team-mates and club bosses by surprise when he not only announced he will retire in June but also that he will spurn an offer to fill the vacant sports director role at Bayern.

Chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge put out a statement on Wednesday saying the club is "surprised by Philipp Lahm and his advisor" and he had "assumed a joint statement would be made."

Rummenigge stressed "the door will always be open for Philipp at FC Bayern."



Referee Jochen Drees (centre) checks Bayern Munich's Polish striker Robert Lewandowski (ground) beside team-mates Philipp Lahm (left) and Arjen Robben (second left), Xabi Alonso (second right) and Thiago Alcantara (right) look on during the German Cup match against VfL Wolfsburg in Munich, southern Germany on Tuesday.

Oscar shows golden touch for Shanghai

Shanghai
AFP

Megabucks import Oscar began repaying some of his hefty price tag when he scored on his competitive debut for Shanghai SIPG, helping them seal a spot in the AFC Champions League group stage.

The Brazil midfielder, who cut Chelsea in a \$64m deal, rolled in SIPG's opener in Tuesday's 3-0 play-off victory over

Thailand's Sukhothai FC. Fellow Brazilian Elkeson also got on the scoresheet as SIPG took their place in Group F alongside FC Seoul, Urawa Red Diamonds and Western Sydney Wanderers.

It means that SIPG, coached by ex-Chelsea and Tottenham Hotspur boss Andre Villas-Boas, get a shot at Asia's club crown, won twice by Chinese rivals Guangzhou Evergrande in recent seasons.



T20 frenzy as PSL juggernaut rolls into action in Dubai today

Fawad Hussain
The Peninsula

The Pakistan Super League (PSL), only in its second year, has become a big name in the world of Twenty20 cricket, luring the headlines in the format.

The inaugural PSL was a blockbuster and the organisers are promising that the second edition - which rolls into action in Dubai today - will eclipse the success of first season of the lucrative league.

"The second edition of the PSL will be a greater success. It will be bigger and better," said PSL Chairman Najam Sethi yesterday.

"We are better prepared and have gained more confidence of the stakeholders after the successful start last year," Sethi added.

Islamabad United, who became the first PSL champions after defeating Quetta Gladiators in the final, will take on Peshawar Zalmi, led by World T20 winning West Indian captain Darren Sammy, in the opening match which will follow a colourful opening ceremony.

The stellar line-up in the five-team competition includes T20 superstar Kevin Pietersen of England, New Zealand's batting maestro Brendon McCullum, big-hitting West Indian Chris Gayle and Sri Lankan cricket legend Mahela Jayawardene.

"The first PSL was a big hit and there



Peshawar Zalmi players train in this last year's file photo. Zalmi will take on defending champions Islamabad United in the opening match of PSL 2 in Dubai today.

will be more fireworks this month," said Jayawardene who is representing Karachi Kings, one of the five franchises in the fold.

"The PSL is a good edition to the format and it will help Pakistan in producing world class cricketers," he added.

Karachi King's new recruit Gayle, known for his six-hitting prowess, is itching for the event to commence. "I was happy to be a part of the event last year and I am very excited about

the second edition," Gayle, 37, said. "We (Karachi Kings) are aiming for a better show this time and title is our target," said the left-handed batsman.

The competition starts off in round-robin format, with teams playing each other twice before the top four progress to the play-offs.

The top two sides play in a qualifying final, with the winner going through to the decider while the loser is given a second chance.

The third and fourth-ranked teams play in an eliminator, with the loser knocked out of the competition.

The winner of the eliminator faces the loser of the qualifier for a spot in the March 5 final.

This year the Pakistan organisers have scheduled the final in Lahore eyeing a breakthrough in ending the drought of top-notch action in the country.

Sethi has been active in convincing the players and it is understood that most of the foreign players are looking forward to playing in Pakistan providing their teams reach the title-deciding game at Gaddafi Stadium.

"Giles Clarke (Chairman England Cricket Board) and his team visited Lahore last month and were hugely impressed by the

security arrangements we made at the stadium and the National Cricket Academy (NCA)," Sethi said on Tuesday during the 'Meet and Greet' event to welcome the foreign players and coaches in Dubai.

"The government has also made a huge investment in securing the city and rest assured, we will provide foolproof security to the players who will travel for the PSL final," he told the foreign players.

Legendary cricketer and brand ambassador of PSL Wasim Akram spoke about the importance of the return of international cricket in Pakistan.

"Pakistanis are passionate about the game. My wife who is an Australian is staying in Karachi for the last four years and she is having a great time. Let me also remind you all that the government will do everything possible to ensure the safety of the players," said the former great fast bowler.

Another brand ambassador Ramiz Raja also spoke to the audience.

"Lahore is a beautiful city, the perceptions about the place might be muddled, but I can assure you that the players who will travel will be making a priceless contribution to Pakistan cricket," said the former Pakistan captain.



PSL's second edition trophy.

Botha joins United as fielding coach

The Peninsula

Johan Botha, the former South Africa captain, will be Islamabad United's fielding coach for the HBL PSL 2017.

This announcement was made yesterday by the franchise management.

Botha will replace Darren Berry for the post. This is the only change in the team staff for Islamabad United from season 1 to season 2 of the PSL.

Darren Berry, who is currently serving as the coach of the South Australia team, had requested unavailability for the second season of the PSL due to family commitments.

Botha, who has previously been the captain of the South Australia team, is

currently playing for the Sydney Sixers in the Big Bash League. Regarding his replacement Darren Berry said: "For personal reasons and commitments back home I will unfortunately not be able to join the PSL this year. However, in Johan Botha, United has a former international captain and someone whom I've worked with for years. I am sure that he will be the perfect replacement and will add to an outstanding coaching staff. I wish him and the rest of the Islamabad United guys every success in PSL 2."

Botha will join Dean Jones, Tauseef Ahmed, Dean Woodford and Wasim Akram as part of the Islamabad United coaching staff.

PSL FIXTURES			
Feb 9	Peshawar Zalmi vs Islamabad United	Dubai	
Feb 10	Lahore Qalandars vs Quetta Gladiators	Dubai	
Feb 10	Karachi Kings vs Peshawar Zalmi	Dubai	
Feb 11	Islamabad United vs Lahore Qalandars	Dubai	
Feb 11	Quetta Gladiators vs Karachi Kings	Dubai	
Feb 12	Peshawar Zalmi vs Lahore Qalandars	Dubai	
Feb 15	Islamabad United vs Quetta Gladiators	Sharjah	
Feb 16	Lahore Qalandars vs Karachi Kings	Sharjah	
Feb 17	Peshawar Zalmi vs Quetta Gladiators	Sharjah	
Feb 17	Karachi Kings vs Islamabad United	Sharjah	
Feb 18	Quetta Gladiators vs Lahore Qalandars	Sharjah	
Feb 18	Islamabad United vs Peshawar Zalmi	Sharjah	
Feb 19	Peshawar Zalmi vs Karachi Kings	Sharjah	
Feb 20	Lahore Qalandars vs Quetta Gladiators	Sharjah	
Feb 23	Karachi Kings vs Islamabad United	Dubai	
Feb 24	Peshawar Zalmi vs Lahore Qalandars	Dubai	
Feb 24	Quetta Gladiators vs Islamabad United	Dubai	
Feb 25	Lahore Qalandars vs Karachi Kings	Dubai	
Feb 25	Peshawar Zalmi vs Quetta Gladiators	Dubai	
Feb 26	Karachi Kings vs Islamabad United	Dubai	
Feb 28	Play-off 1: Team 1 vs Team 2	Sharjah	
Feb 28	Play-off 2: Team 1 vs Team 4	Sharjah	
March 3	Play-off 3: Winner Play-off 2 vs Runner Up Play-off 1	Dubai	
March 7	Final	Lahore	

PAKISTAN SUPER LEAGUE SQUADS

Islamabad United: Misbah-ul-Haq (captain), Shane Watson, Steven Finn, Sharjeel Khan, Mohammad Irfan, Samuel Badree, Mohammad Sami, Khalid Latif, Brad Haddin, Sam Billings, Hussain Talat, Ahmad Butt, Dwayne Smith, Ben Duckett, Shadab Khan, Zohaib Khan, Saad Aijmal, Imran Khaid, Asif Ali, Rumman Raees, Syed Muzammil Shah

Karachi Kings: Kumar Sangakkara (captain), Shoaib Malik, Chris Gayle, Babar Azam, Ravi Bopara, Imad Wasim, Mohammad Amir, Saifullah Bangash, Shazab Hasan, Sohail Khan, Kieron Pollard, Ryan McLaren, Khuram Manzoor, Kashif Bharti, Ahsan Ali, Abdul Hameed/Hasan Mohsin, Mahela Jayawardene, Usama Mir, Rahat Ali, Ahmad Alam

Peshawar Zalmi: Darren Sammy (captain), Shahid Afridi, Sohail Masood, Feroz Khan, Sohail Abbas, Waqar Yousaf, Tahir, Dhanraj Pillay, Chris Jordan, Sami Patel, Kamran Akmal, Imtiaz Ahmed, Harris Sohail, Hassan Ali, Mohammad Asghar, Marlon Samuels, Andre Fletcher, Khushdil Shah, Shaikh Ali Hassan, Taimur Iqbal, Imran Khan (jr), Junaid Khan, M Irfan Khan

Quetta Gladiators: Sarfaraz Ahmed (captain), Umar Gul, Ahsan Shah, Ahmed Shehzad, Mohammad Nawaz, Kevin Pietersen, Luke Wright, Rilee Rossouw, Mahmudullah Riyad, Anwar Ali, Tymal Mills, Hassan Khan, Nathan McCullum, Thisara Perera, Bismillah Khan, Mir Hamza, Zulfiqar Babar, Saad Nasim, Umar Amin, Noor Wali

Lahore Qalandars: Brendon McCullum (captain), Ahsan Ali, Aamer Yamin, Sohail Tanvir, Sunil Narine, Umar Akmal, Usman Qadir, Yasir Shah, James Franklin, Mohammad Rizwan, Cameron DeCorker, Fakhr Zaman, Bilawal Bhatti, Gulam Mudassar, Usman Qadir, Grant Elliott, Chris Green, Saif Badar, Mohammad Irfan (jr), Zafar Gohar

Islamabad United ready to defend title, says Wasim

Rizwan Rehmat
The Peninsula

Bowling great Wasim Akram (pictured) said defending champions Islamabad United have arrived for the second edition of the Pakistan Super League (PSL) 'well prepared'.

Akram, the Director Cricketer of Islamabad United, last year saw his side race to a memorable title win under the captaincy of Misbah ul Haq at the five-team franchise-based event held in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Australia's all-rounder Shane Watson, England's T20 specialist Sam Billings and West Indian hard-hitting opener Dwayne Smith are part of the strong United squad that also includes Pakistan batting star Sharjeel Khan and spin wizard Saad Aijmal.

Former Australian World Cup hero Dean Jones is the team coach of Islamabad United.

The second edition of PSL starts in Dubai today.

"There will be close games. I am sure but Islamabad United has arrived well prepared. They have put in the hard

work. Let's hope the best team wins," Akram said during a TV chat show broadcast yesterday.

"Look, there are five teams and our first goal is to be part of the four sides that qualify for the play-offs," Akram said.

"Obviously there is a long way to go before we could think of the play-offs. There will be a lot of intense battles before we start thinking of the last-four stage," Akram, 50, said.

Akram said PSL was a major hit with Pakistan cricket fans.

"This is an exciting time for Pakistan cricket. It's Pakistan's own tournament with a global appeal," Akram said.

"Last year, it was great to see that the entire country owned the event as their own. The response from the fans was awesome and I am sure the teams will fight for top honours this year as well," Akram said.

Akram said Islamabad United's team physio and dietitian Dean Watford was signed up to ensure players arrive at the pitch and fit every single time.

"He is our trainer. He is one of the fittest guys around the team. We had a



training camp for the squad for a little over a week," he said about Watford.

But Akram said he was shocked to see the players showing scant respect for the quality diet.

"I was shocked to see the diet of the some young players in the squad last year. We were playing the first game and Dean has just joined the team. Normally you enter the ground around 6:00pm and the game would start a couple of hours later at 8:00pm," he said.

"What happens is there is a buffet in every dressing room. In walks Dean and grabs a piece of grill chicken and walks off. Shane Watson had a little bit of pasta. Our boys from Sialkot, they would

take a big serving of rice followed by lots of fried meat on top.

"I told them 'son, is this a time for your meal or just a snack? The game starts in two hours and how will you play if you eat so heavy?'. But that's all they knew. They did not know the importance of a good diet for a top athlete."

"He's also teaching them to eat early; for example, dinner by 8:30," he said. "And that's where Dean has been very helpful," Akram said.

Watford said Misbah would be one of the fittest guys around the squad along with Akram.

"We have quite a few fit players. I would say Akram is the fittest guy still though he doesn't play the sport any longer," Watford said. "Misbah is certainly one of the fittest guys going around."

"Unfortunately, the traditional Pakistani food is not conducive for high performance sports. We are trying to steer them away from the more traditional Pakistani foods. When they eat right, it will give them lots of energy when they play."



Pakistan opening batsman Sharjeel Khan is one of the key players for Islamabad United.

"I have tasted the Pakistani food. I like Biryani, but I stay away from most of the stuff as I want to stay in shape," he quipped.

India snub triple centurion for Test against Bangladesh

Hyderabad AFP

India captain Virat Kohli insisted yesterday that his record-breaking side weren't taking their debut home Test against Bangladesh lightly – despite dropping a batsman who scored a triple century on his last outing.

After going unbeaten in the last 18 Tests, Kohli's number one ranked team is widely expected to swat aside a Bangladeshi outfit that has never beaten top-notch opposition on their travels.

And after a 4-0 win over England in their last series, India's confidence is so high they even feel they can drop rookie batsman Karun Nair, who scored 303 not out in the final Test in Chennai.

But Kohli, who has himself scored three Test double centuries since July, said there was no danger of the world's top-ranked Test team becoming complacent.

"No team is invincible, no team is unbeatable," he said, ahead of the one-off match in



One game doesn't overshadow two years of hard work from another player. You need to understand what 'Jinks' (Rahane) has done for the team over the past two years: Virat Kohli



Captaincy could propel Root to new level: Cook

London Reuters

Joe Root's prodigious batting could reach a new level if he is made England captain, Alastair Cook said after stepping down from the role following 4-1/2 years in charge.

The 26-year-old Root, the world's third-ranked batsman, is favourite to be named as Cook's successor, raising some concerns that the extra responsibility could affect his form.

Cook, who captained England for a record 59 Test, sees no reason why the Yorkshireman would not thrive – pointing to the impact captaincy has had on India's run-machine Virat

Hyderabad which starts on Thursday.

"We have been able to win games because of persistence by the bowlers, application by the batsmen, coming back from tough situations," he added.

Kohli did not reveal his line-up, but made clear that his again Ajinkya Rahane would return in place of Nair who has a Test average of 160 after scoring an unbeaten 303 against England in December.

"One game doesn't overshadow two years of hard work from another player. You need to understand what 'Jinks' (Rahane) has done for the team over the past two years," Kohli said.

"He averages almost fifty in this format and he is probably the most solid batsman in the Test team. He deserved to walk back into the team whenever he got fit.

"Karun was stepping into his shoes and what he did was remarkable, but sealing his spot as far as the squad was concerned is what Karun did."

Kohli is well aware of the dangers of India getting carried away after the home favourites were knocked out of last year's World Twenty20 at the semi-final stage by the unfancied West Indies.

During the same tournament, India only just scraped home in their match against Bangladesh in the last ball of the game.

India also lost a one-day series in 2015 on a tour of Bangladesh, while a one-off Test was drawn after being disrupted by rain.

"We are wary of their ability and the talent that they bring to the table," Kohli told reporters.

This week's match marks the first time that Bangladesh have been invited to play a Test in India since they won Test status



India captain Virat Kohli during team's practice session on the eve of Test against Bangladesh in Hyderabad. Inset: Karun Nair

in 2000. While Bangladesh did manage to beat England for the first time in Test cricket in Dhaka last year, their struggles away from home were once again underlined by two subsequent defeats in New Zealand.

Bangladeshi skipper Mushfiqur Rahim said the tourists were excited by the prospect of taking on the best in the world in an historic match.

"It is a great opportunity to show some character and show our ability and hopefully we can match up with the top side," said the wicketkeeping batsman ahead of the match.

"We played really well against England and

individually we played well against New Zealand... Although we lost the last two Tests (there were a) lot of positives coming from those two games."

Although Bangladesh are ninth out of 10 in the Test rankings, Kohli said India would not underestimate their opponents whom he said deserved to be given more chances to improve as a team.

"They have the skill, it's just that they don't play that many Test matches to gain confidence as a squad," he said.

India enjoy an unbeaten record against Bangladesh with six wins and two draws in their eight encounters.



Kohli. "He (Root) has got a very, very good cricket brain, he's a part of the newer generation of

cricketers and he's a bloody good cricketer who demands respect in the dressing room

39 sixes as Indian batter scores T20 triple century

New Delhi AFP

A little-known batsman made headlines across India yesterday after scoring an unbeaten triple century in a Twenty20 match, a knock which included a staggering 39 sixes.

Mohit Ahlawat also smashed 14 fours in his 72-ball 300 – thought to be the first T20 triple century – which has earned him a trial with the Delhi Daredevils for next month's glitzy Indian Premier League (IPL).

Ahlawat, who hails from a family of farmers, hammered the hapless bowlers from a team called Friends XI to all corners of the ground in east Delhi on Tuesday.

The 21-year-old was playing for the Maavi XI, a semi-professional team which had invited him to join them for a league match at the last moment.

"They invited me to play and I simply went. It's good that something like that has happened," Ahlawat told *The Times of India* newspaper.

"When I reached 150, I told myself 250 was there for the taking. So I told my partner at the other end that I was going to take most of the strike."

His last 50 runs came off the final two overs, leaving him unbeaten on exactly 300

as his team finished on 416 for two. Friends XI only managed 200 in reply.

Sanjay Bhardwaj, Ahlawat's coach at the LB Shastri Cricket Academy in Delhi, said he was not surprised by his protege's heuristics.

"This doesn't surprise me. He is an aggressive batsman who hits it long but also has a clear sense of the game," said Bhardwaj.

Bhardwaj, who has coached several Indian players including the opener Gautam Gambhir, said news of Ahlawat's barnstorming knock had spread so quickly that he had already been tapped up by the Delhi Daredevils.

"You won't be able to reach him on the phone today as the Daredevils called him for a trial after they heard of his knock," Bhardwaj said.

It is the first time that anyone is believed to have hit a triple century in a T20 game, although it was not classified as a first class match.

The highest score recorded in a first-class T20 was the West Indian batsman Chris Gayle's 175 while playing for the Royal Challengers Bangalore in the 2013 IPL.

Australia's Aaron Finch holds the record for the highest score in a T20 international after hitting 156 against England in 2013.

NZ tour: Proteas stick to winning formula

Johannesburg AFP

South Africa yesterday retained the squad that has outplayed Sri Lanka in a one-day series for the limited-overs section of a tour of New Zealand starting next week.

The same 14 players lead Sri Lanka 4-0 in a five-match home series. The final match is in Centurion tomorrow and the squad will leave for New Zealand the next day.

Fast bowler Dane Paterson was added as cover for all-rounder Dwayne Pretorius, who will miss the only Twenty20 international in Auckland on February 17 and the first one-day in Hamilton on February 19 because his wife is expecting their first child.

Paterson will return home when Pretorius joins the tour.

Batsman David Miller, ruled out of the last three matches of the Sri Lanka series because of a finger injury, is fit to travel to New Zealand but fast bowler Lungi Ngidi, who suffered a hip

injury during the Twenty20 series against Sri Lanka, has not recovered.

The squad will do duty for the Twenty20 international and five one-day internationals. A squad for three Test matches will be announced later.

Cricketer South Africa selection convener Linda Zondi said: "We are very happy with the way the squad has jelled over the past six months and consistency in selection is very important as we continue our build-up towards the ICC Champions Trophy tournament (in England in June)."

Squad

South African squad: AB de Villiers (one-day international captain), Faf du Plessis (T20 international captain), Hashim Amia, Farhaan Behardien, Quinton de Kock (wkt), JP Duminy, Imran Tahir, David Miller, Chris Morris, Wayne Parnell, Dane Paterson, Andile Phehlukwayo, Dwayne Pretorius, Kagiso Rabada, Tabraiz Shamsi.

Rugby: The Coffee Brewer becomes sponsor for ARST, QR7s

The Peninsula

The Qatar Rugby Federation (QRF) and Strategic Partner Alliance (SPA) yesterday announced a new one-year sponsorship of the Qatar Rugby National Sevens team and the Asia Rugby Sevens Trophy - Doha 2017 (ARST) Championship.

The agreement, which commenced on January 10 ahead of the ARST and Qatar national team selection, will see SPA's - The Coffee Brewer becoming the official partner to the QRF and the ARST.

The new manufactured Qatar rugby sevens jersey will

be worn by the national team in Doha for the first time at the ARST championship carrying the new sponsors brand name.

Over the coming 12 months, The Coffee Brewer will use both new and existing technology to develop and create events, activations and content that will benefit all rugby fans in Qatar.

Speaking at the sponsorship announcement, managing director Omran Al Sherawi said: "We at SPA are very proud to partner with the QRF and the Asia Rugby Sevens Trophy Championship for what promises to be an extremely exciting partnership."

"The QRF has built

something very special. There is a bond there between the officials, players, clubs, teams and the supporters from Qatar and beyond which epitomizes the very essence of rugby and our company".

QRF President Yousef Al Kuwari said: "The new Qatar rugby jersey is packed with technology and features designed to withstand regular pounding and meet the specific needs of the Asia Rugby Sevens."

"In addition, I welcome The Coffee Brewer to the Rugby fold and appreciate their tremendous support and partnership at a time of fragile economic downturn. We hope that our partnership

can extend beyond our agreement and we looked forward to making The Coffee Brewer the sole partner of all Qatar rugby events and tournaments".

The Asia Rugby Sevens Trophy is an annual series of regional rugby seven's tournaments run by Asia Rugby and host nation the QRF. The competition has attracted 11 teams including: India, Jordan, Pakistan, Philippines, Qatar, Singapore, Thailand, UAE, Bangladesh, Iran and Nepal.

The ARST will be the biggest rugby event in Qatar and will be played on March 3 and 4 at the Aspire Warm and Rugby Stadium.

QRF President Yousef Al Kuwari

