

Spin-heavy Pakistan hit form, but India boycott risks early T20 exit

Forfeiting the marquee India clash leaves Pakistan with zero margin for error in Group A

- **Must win opening games vs Netherlands, USA**
- **Aims to avoid repeat of 2024 failure**
- **Batting consistency remains a major concern**

AFP | Lahore

Pakistan's spin-heavy squad are in winning form ahead of the T20 World Cup, but a controversial decision to forfeit their marquee clash against India could still trigger another early exit.

Pakistan came close to withdrawing from the tournament in solidarity with Bangladesh, who pulled out after refusing to play in India, citing security concerns.

The Pakistan government eventually cleared the team's participation but it barred them from facing India in Colombo in a blockbuster clash on February 15.

With two points for a win, a forfeit of the match will leave Pakistan with no margin for error if they are to progress as one



Pakistan's players celebrate during a match (file photo)

of the top two from a five-team Group A.

It means they must win their opening game against the Netherlands in Colombo on Saturday and beat the United States three days later to stay in contention.

Their final group game will be against Namibia on February 18.

Captain Salman Agha said the move to boycott the India game was out of the team's hands.

"That is not our decision. We have to follow what our government decides," he said.

The Pakistan government has not said what their stance might be if the team were to end up facing India again in the semi-finals or final. Agha was not thinking about that.

"Our job is to win, and we are capable of doing that," he said.

Pakistan will be keen to avoid a repeat of the last T20 World

Cup in 2024, where a shock super over defeat to co-hosts the United States led to them failing to get out of the group.

The side has since faced criticism for failing to adapt to the modern demands of T20 cricket, with the batting, particularly Babar Azam's low strike rate, under scrutiny.

The criticism was fuelled by Pakistan's record last year, where 21 of their 34 T20 inter-

YOU
KNOW WHAT

Pakistan's wildcard spinner Usman Tariq has drawn attention for his unorthodox, slinging action and dramatic mid-delivery pause – a style likened by fans to “a magician holding time still.”

national wins came against lower-ranked opponents.

Confidence restored

Against elite teams, the results were sobering: three losses to India in the Asia Cup and a 4-1 series defeat to New Zealand.

However, Agha believes recent performances have restored confidence.

Pakistan beat South Africa 2-1, won a home tri-series, and then completed a 3-0 sweep of an under-strength Australia.

"We've had good preparation by beating Australia. We have the luxury of quality spinning

all-rounders like Mohammad Nawaz, Shadab Khan and Saim Ayub.

"We're ticking most boxes and believe we can win the World Cup," Agha said.

The spin department has been strengthened by Abrar Ahmed and Usman Tariq, the latter known for his unusual, slinging action and exaggerated pause at the crease.

The pace attack is led by the experienced Shaheen Shah Afridi and Naseem Shah.

Faheem Ashraf provides seam-bowling all-round support and newcomer Salman Mirza has been impressive.

Batting remains Pakistan's most volatile component.

When openers Saim Ayub and Sahibzada Farhan provide strong starts, the side can post competitive totals, but collapses remain a constant threat.

Head coach Mike Hesson has added another layer of risk by leaving out experienced wicketkeeper Mohammad Rizwan because of poor form, opting instead for makeshift options in Usman Khan, Khawaja Nafay and Farhan.

For Pakistan, the ingredients for a deep run are present, but with points potentially forfeited, there is little room left for error.

Draper to make long-awaited return in Davis Cup qualifier

AFP | Paris

Jack Draper insists he is "still improving" as he prepares to return from a long-term injury absence this week in Britain's Davis Cup qualifier against Norway in Oslo.

The 24-year-old has not played since withdrawing from the US Open last August following his first-round match with an arm injury.

Draper enjoyed the best year of his career in 2025 before the injury, climbing to fourth in the world rankings and winning the Indian Wells title.

He returns on Thursday against a Norway side which may include three-time Grand Slam runner-up Casper Ruud.

"I think last year definitely started off amazingly well," said Draper.

"The second half was extremely challenging, but I took a lot of belief and confidence from the first half of the year and what I achieved.

"I've kept that in mind and I want to be competing right at the top of the game.

"It's going to be a bit of a challenge and a journey to get back to where I was, just because I've been out for such a long time.

"At the same time I'm constantly getting better and I'm constantly improving still. I hope I get to show that sooner more than later."

Draper has only won one of his four Davis Cup matches and has not played in the team event



Jack Draper reacts during a match

since losing a singles rubber to Felix Auger-Aliassime in the 2024 Finals group stage.

Jacob Fearnley, who enjoyed a breakthrough season last year, and the in-form Cameron Norrie are also part of a strong British side who will be favourites to beat Norway and set up a second-round qualifier against either Australia or Ecuador.

Ruud was named in Norway's squad but his partner gave birth to their first child last week and he is yet to confirm if he will still be available.

"They've obviously got a

young player, (Nicolai Budkov) Kjaer, who was number one in the world juniors and playing great tennis on the tour," said Draper.

"He'll be really tough and we all know Casper Ruud has been a top-10 player for a long time.

"It's going to be a great challenge for us all, but I think we're ready to embrace it and we're ready to fight for every point."

Alcaraz hints at playing Davis Cup this year

Recent editions of the Davis

Cup Finals, to be held this year in Bologna in November, have been hit by withdrawals from the majority of the world's best players.

A weakened Italy, without Jannik Sinner or Lorenzo Musetti, won last year's title against a Spain team missing Carlos Alcaraz in the final.

Spain have received a bye into September's second qualifying round as the 2025 runners-up, while reigning champions and hosts Italy have a place assured in the Finals.

The Davis Cup is one of the few big titles Alcaraz is yet to win after he became the youngest man to win the career Grand Slam at the Australian Open on Sunday.

"The Davis Cup, it is a goal as well. I really wanted to achieve that for my country, for Spain," Alcaraz said after beating Novak Djokovic in the final at Melbourne Park.

"I set up some other goals for the season, and I will try to be ready for, or to try to get those goals."

Elsewhere this week, Serbia and Chile go head-to-head on Friday and Saturday in Santiago in a bid to set up a tie with Spain.

Qualifying second seeds Germany, without world number three Alexander Zverev, host Peru.

Nine-time winners France take on Slovakia in a tie starting Saturday and Belgium, surprise semi-finalists last year, play Bulgaria in Plovdiv.

Cunningham leads Pistons past Nuggets rally, Knicks roll on



Cade Cunningham (left) and Duncan Robinson (right) react during the game
AFP | New York

Cade Cunningham scored 29 points as the Detroit Pistons held off a late rally from the Denver Nuggets to seal a 124-121 victory in their heavyweight potential NBA Finals preview on Tuesday.

Eastern Conference leaders Detroit looked to be cruising towards a comfortable win after surging into a 20-point lead early in the third quarter after a 37-point second period.

But Denver star Nikola Jokic rallied with 10 points in the third quarter and Jamal Murray poured in 14 points in the fourth to reduce the Pistons' lead to single digits in the final minutes.

Cunningham though was equal to the challenge, draining two crucial late free throws

to give Detroit a five-point lead with nine seconds remaining as the Pistons closed out the win.

Jamal Murray led Denver's scoring with 32 points while Jokic finished with 24 points, 15 rebounds and four assists.

All five Detroit starters finished in double figures, with Cunningham supported by 20 points from Duncan Robinson -- including six three-pointers -- and Jalen Duren 19 points.

The win gives Detroit a 37-12 record at the top of the Eastern Conference, five-and-half games clear of the second-placed New York Knicks, who extended their winning streak to seven games with a 132-101 blowout over the Washington Wizards on Tuesday.