

Devastating Jofra Archer already back to his world-class best

It is as if he has never been away, let alone injured for two years worrying he was finished. Jofra Archer's remarkable comeback at this World Cup is a great bonus regardless of how far England progress in the tournament.

After being 46 minutes away from being washed out of the World Cup in Antigua, England will almost certainly confirm a semi-final place if they beat South Africa in St Lucia on Friday, a result that would avenge one of their biggest World Cup hammerings.

It was South Africa in Mumbai last October, who really sent England on a downward spiral at the 50-over World Cup from which we may, in time, realise they only properly emerged in St Lucia on Wednesday night with their clinical win over the West Indies.

England were routed in Mumbai, the defending champions humbled as the aura of the Eoin Morgan era melted away on a blazingly hot day. Their fuzzy thinking saw them opt to bowl first on an afternoon of choking smog and temperatures of over 30C rather than defend in the cooler evening. England conceded their highest ever white-ball score of 399 and slumped to 170 all out in 22 overs, their largest defeat by runs in an ODI.

It was a result that really cast serious doubt on the position of Matthew Mott as head coach and Jos Buttler as captain.

But that day Archer was flying home from Mumbai, where he had tried to step up his recovery from a back stress fracture and elbow problems by bowling in the nets only to suffer pain again. He was badly missed as toothless England were taken apart by Heinrich Klaasen's 61-ball century, Buttler at a loss to stem the runs. If only he had had Archer to call on to throw in the mix like he has now.

Archer bowled the best over by England at this World Cup in St Lucia on Wednesday night in the victory over West Indies. The pivotal 16th belonged to him as he snuffed out the threat of a West Indies march in the final five overs. With Nicholas Pooran, who made 98 just 48 hours earlier, ready to launch on 32 from 27 and Liam Livingstone conceding 20 in the previous over, West Indies were ready to motor on 137 for two after a sticky start.

But Pooran never laid a bat on Archer. He played and missed at three, cut an unconvincing four off another, and nicked the last to Buttler. Archer's pace ranged from 65mph to 93mph, his skills with cutters, back-of-the-hand slower balls and lethal speed the absolute trump card for Buttler to play at awkward moments. A crushed West Indies made only 43 in the final five overs. "I was just glad I executed, it was everything that we talked about in the bowling meetings – that's one of the times you nail it, execution was almost perfect. If Woody had dived, he might have caught that one as well. I'm really glad that over was probably the turning point," said Archer.

Archer finished with one for 34 on a pitch with little margin of error. He was the only pace bowler all night to complete his allocation and is England's leading bowler at the World Cup with six wickets at 16 and an economy rate of a run a ball.

He is truly world class and so much rests on him staying pain-free and successfully following a phased return to Test cricket that England hope will see him ready for the series against India at home next summer.

Twenty20 is how Archer made his name and can bowl in any phase because he can, in effect, deliver four death overs sprinkled across the innings, combined with those lethal change-ups in pace.

That 16th over deflated West Indies and kept the target below

200 on a good pitch. That allowed England to dictate the run chase, which was another clinical aspect of their performance; Jonny Bairstow and Phil Salt flicking through the gears to ensure a good run rate boost that could be crucial with rain forecast in Barbados on Sunday for the final group game against United States.

This is a bowler's World Cup and in Archer they have four bankable overs which is priceless in what are likely low-scoring games. Mark Wood was expensive against West Indies but is a bold, aggressive pick ahead of Chris Jordan. The rain in Antigua against Namibia forced a late rethink of their XI that day but in doing so accidentally gave them clarity over their best team, Bairstow and Harry Brook moving up with Will Jacks dropped. His replacement, Sam Curran, gives Buttler another option, and he seems to need the comfort blanket of lots of bowling choices.

Salt paid tribute to Kieron Pollard, acting as an assistant coach, for giving clarity to pace a run chase, a role he was the master at. His idea is to break it down to two distinct parts. "He's brought a lot to the group. We've spoken a lot about taking eights [eight an over in first 10 overs] from one side and to take twelves [12 an over from next 10] from the other and that's 200. It sounds so simple to say it but putting that into action meant out there I knew I had slowed down, I knew I hadn't got much strike, but I knew that If I just get through that period, and I can have a good dip, a good calculated risk at the seamers."

South Africa's 100 per cent record at the World Cup hides some close scrapes against Bangladesh, Netherlands and Nepal. Their batting is yet to click properly partly because of the dodgy pitches in New York, but their bowling is formidable. Kagiso Rabada, Anrich Nortje and Marco Jansen are a potent trio, but at least Buttler can throw something back at them this time.