‘Hitman’ Rohit: Big-hitting leader of India’s cricket quest

AFP- He came, he saw and he conquered. Rohit Sharma rose from humble beginnings to captain a high-profile Indian cricket team to World Cup glory and bid goodbye to T20 internationals. Rohit, 37, lifted the T20 World Cup trophy at Barbados after India edged out South Africa by seven runs in a thrilling final in Barbados.

But after the triumph, two of India’s greatest modern-day cricketers including Virat Kohli and Rohit called time on their T20 careers for the national team.

Rohit leaves a lasting legacy in the shortest format having featured in all nine editions, clinching his second T20 crown 17 years after he was part of M.S. Dhoni’s winning team in the inaugural event in 2007.

In the ninth edition, Rohit’s India came in as favourites and remained unbeaten with the captain leading from the front with three half-centuries including a winning knock in the semi-final against England.

The victory came close to midnight in India, which celebrated like never before, and Rohit announced his retirement in the post-match press conference in the West Indies.

“I loved every moment. I started my India career playing this format. I wanted to win the cup and say (goodbye),” he said with a salute.

“I wanted this badly. Very hard to put it into words,” Rohit said on dropping to his knees and celebrating the win.

Called “Hitman” for getting to big scores quickly, Rohit

signed off his T20 innings for India as the highest scorer in the format with 4,231 runs including five centuries in 159 matches since his debut in 2007.

A celebrated five-time IPL winner for Mumbai Indians, Rohit succeeded Kohli as captain of the team in 2021 in the nation's bid for a first major title since the 2013 Champions Trophy.

After heartbreaks including a loss in the final of last years' ODI World Cup at home to Australia, Rohit finally made India believe they could deliver the World Cup.

In spite of losing the Mumbai captaincy this season, the swashbuckling 37-year-old opener has remained India's go-to batter in the white-ball cricket and will stay on in ODI and Test format.

Rohit gave India real firepower at the top of the innings and his selfless approach allowed the rest of the batters to play freely.

There was double heartbreak in 2023, however, when Rohit led his side to the World Test final at the Oval and the 50-over World Cup final at home in Ahmedabad only to lose both to Australia.

India's failures, however, did not detract from Rohit's stature around the world.

Former England captain Michael Vaughan called him a "genuine hero" and the "man who has changed the culture" of the team.

– Gift of timing –

Rohit took over the captaincy of the white-ball team in 2021 and a year later became the all-format leader in the cricket-crazy nation's quest for a global title.

Dhoni led India to their last World Cup victory in 2011 at home and then a Champions Trophy title two years later before

the team faltered twice in the semi-finals of the 50-over showpiece – 2015 and 2019.

Kohli's inability to lead India to a title began to weigh heavily both with the pundits and with Kohli whose form began to slide.

With record IPL titles under his captaincy belt, Rohit was the chosen one to step in.

Nothing in life came easy for Rohit as he studied on a scholarship after his family was unable to afford the $3.30 monthly fees.

He overcame all odds to become India's limited-overs star and the only batsman to have scored three double-centuries in one-day internationals.

Rohit, who is often criticised for his visible paunch in contrast to Kohli's chiselled frame, has amassed 10,709 runs at an average of over 49 in 262 ODIs for India since his debut in 2007.

His boyhood cricket coach Dinesh Lad, in an interview with AFP last year, said that if his student were to lift the World Cup in Ahmedabad he would be the "richest person in the world".

Little did Lad realise the riches would come a year later.

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