

MS WILL REMAIN AN 'IMPORTANT PART' OF FRANCHISE

Goenka's surprise: Smith to lead Pune



Mahendra Singh Dhoni. (Inset) Steve Smith

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Calcutta: Around 15 months ago, Sanjiv Goenka's decision to bid for an IPL franchise was big. On Sunday, the chairman of the RP-Sanjiv Goenka Group and sole owner of the Rising Pune Supergiants made another huge call.

The decision is as big as the first for Mahendra Singh Dhoni is no longer the captain, but the mantle now rests with Steve Smith.

"I have the highest regard and the greatest respect for Dhoni. I've always been impressed with his mind and his thinking..."

"Indeed, I've come away with a wow feeling each time that I've personally interacted with Dhoni..."

"However, we have decided to appoint a younger captain and Dhoni is completely on board with this move of ours," the Calcutta-based Goenka told **The Telegraph**, shortly before the franchise issued a brief statement.

While Dhoni is 35, Smith is eight years younger.

Goenka, who has very good reasons to be dissatisfied with Rising Pune's below-par performance on debut (finishing second from the bottom), added: "Technically, this is my last year as the owner of the franchise. I say that because it was bagged by us only for a period of two years..."

"Of course, I hope to again own Rising Pune when the opportunity arises, but this is my last year for now..."

"I'd certainly like the franchise to give an excellent account of itself in the upcoming edition (No.10) of the IPL..."

"Dhoni will continue to be an important part of Rising Pune and the wealth of his experience is invaluable."

It's not insignificant, perhaps, that Dhoni stepped down as India's ODI and T20I captain last month, though he is available for national duty, and it won't come as a sur-

prise if his remarkable fitness takes him to the 2019 World Cup as well.

Dhoni's record as India's captain is without parallel and, so, his standing in any Hall of Fame is cast in stone.

Forever there.

This Reporter understands that the decision to appoint Smith was conveyed to Dhoni in hometown Ranchi by Raghu Iyer, who heads the franchise's cricket operations.

Iyer had earlier been with the Rajasthan Royals. The Royals and the Chennai Super Kings are currently in the second year of their two-year ban.

Dhoni isn't the easiest of persons to establish contact with, so Goenka may have felt restricted in trying to share his thoughts on a regular basis.

That could have contributed to Goenka's decision. He is definitely intent on playing a far more active role in Rising Pune's affairs this year.

Some franchises have had issues where the captain has been an overseas player, but Goenka insisted that he didn't "foresee any problems" on that count.

For the record, Goenka has been in touch with Smith over the past two days and was to again have spoken to the Australia captain later in the day.

Goenka has already released a number of Rising Pune players, including some closely identified with Dhoni.

Clearly, Goenka hasn't shied away from tough decisions, realising that plenty is at stake in the trend-setting IPL.

The change in the franchise's captaincy has come on the eve of the latest IPL auction, to be held again in Bangalore. The bid decision couldn't have been announced after the event.

Smith, obviously, won't be present but Goenka will certainly be there. As also coach Stephen Fleming.

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SANJIV GOENKA TO THE TELEGRAPH

