

Youhana's Christmas

AFP, Wellington
Yousuf Youhana happily tucked into a celebratory Christmas lunch here Thursday while his Pakistani cricket teammates barely batted an eyelid on the eve of the second Test.

Vice-captain Youhana, the only Christian in the Pakistan squad, celebrated Christmas Day with his wife Tania and said there were never any problems with his teammates of Muslim faith who do not observe Christmas.

"I usually get cards from them and they always make it a special day for me," he said.

Youhana said the last time the team were in camp on Christmas Day, teammate Rashid Latif took him out for lunch to celebrate.

Otherwise it was a routine day for the tourists who had a relaxed morning before training at the Basin Reserve.

In the opposition camp, New Zealand's cricketers played Santa Claus to make the day for some hospitalised children.

Three players Daniel Vettori, Lou Vincent and Ian Butler handed out gifts to children in Wellington hospital.

It was a regular routine for the Black Caps who have spent four of the past five Christmas Days assembled in Wellington, a day out from the traditional Boxing Day Test.

After the hospital visit, the players assembled for training at the Basin Reserve before gathering at their hotel with partners for the traditional Christmas lunch.

Orient handball

UNB, Dhaka

Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) emerged Group A champions to reach the semifinal in the Orient Bread Cup handball tournament with an all-win record beating Narinda Progoti Boys' Club by 39-25 at the Outer Stadium handball court yesterday. Despite the day's defeat, Narinda Progoti Boys' Club also moved into the semifinal as they finished runners-up in the same group.

In the day's match, BDR led the first half by 18-14.

Mirza and Kamrul scored 10 goals each for the winners while Akram made 8 and Rafique 6 for the losers.

In the day's other match, Dhanmondi Club outplayed Prime Sports Club by 20-7 after dominating the first session by 12-4 goals at the same venue.

Topu netted 6 and Ripon 5 for the winners. Ripon also scored 5 for the losers.

BCDF team

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BANGLADESHI TEAM: Habib Mohammad Motalab (captain), Mahebulah, Wascoronni Ahmed, Faisal Bin Mostak, Mohammad Mahub Alam (vice captain), Mustafizur Rahman, Saklain Sojib, Sheikh Nizamuddin, Uttam Kumar Sarker, Rasel Parvez, Uttam Sarker, Ilyas Hossain, Sohel Wasef and Ahmed Sadequr Rahman (players), Jajal Ahmed Chowdhury (coach) and Ahmed Sajjadul Alam (manager).

Cairns blow

FROM PAGE 13

Oram, Robbie Hart, Daniel Vettori, Daryl Tuffey, Ian Butler, Richard Jones, Paul Wiseman.
PAKISTAN (from): Inzamamul Haq (captain), Taqeeq Umar, Imran Farhat, Yasir Hameed, Yousuf Youhana, Salim Elahi, Asim Kamal, Younis Khan, Mooin Khan, Abdur Razaq, Shoaib Malik, Danish Kaneria, Shoaib Akhtar, Mohammad Sami, Shabbir Ahmed, Umar Gul.

'Pressure on India'

Cricket

REUTERS, Melbourne

Steve Waugh says the pressure will be on India in Friday's third Test and that his top-ranked Australia side is relishing the challenge of trailing 1-0 at home in a four-Test series.

"For all of us this is our biggest Test for a long while, which is great," Waugh told a news conference.

"I know the guys are looking forward to it. We've said often in the last couple of years we need a challenge to get us going to play our best cricket and we won't get a better challenge than right now."

India's shock four-wicket win in last week's second Test in Adelaide placed Australia in danger of losing their first series at home in more than a decade, and it was India's first Test victory in Australia for 22 years.

"I think there will be more pressure on India now. They are in front, they probably didn't expect to be," Waugh said.

"Their record wasn't good away

from home and now they've got an opportunity to win a series.

"People in India will expect them to win from here. I'd like to think it's the other way around,



STEVE WAUGH

that there is more pressure on them now.

"They are a different side than they have been in the past. They're certainly mentally tougher.

"We can relax and go out there and play our brand of cricket. I

know if we take our catches we'll win the match."

A Melbourne Cricket Ground crowd of about 70,000 will feast on the batting talents of India's century-makers in this series, captain Saurav Ganguly, Vangipurappu Laxman and Rahul Dravid, and the game's fourth-leading runscorer Sachin Tendulkar.

Australia boast three of the 10 top-ranked batsmen in the game, world record holder Matthew Hayden, vice-captain Ricky Ponting who made 242 in the first innings of the Adelaide Test, and fast-scoring wicketkeeper Adam Gilchrist.

"If you look at the records of both these sides, they are probably two of the best batting sides to have come up against each other in the history of Test cricket," Waugh said.

Waugh added he felt Tendulkar's next big score was not far away after the Indian failed to reach a half-century in the first two Tests.

"You have to expect a guy like that (Tendulkar) to get runs at some stage. Hopefully he can wait another two Test matches," Waugh said.

Ganguly to follow winning formula

Cricket

AFP, Melbourne

India want to retain the winning formula over under-pressure Australia heading into the third Boxing Day Test at the Melbourne Cricket Ground here on Friday.

With Australia down 1-0 in a home series for the first time in 10 years, captain Steve Waugh admitted his team had "to do some



SAURAV GANGULY

things a little differently" if they wanted to avoid losing the four-match series.

He said the main thing his players had to do was take their catches.

In Adelaide, Ricky Ponting and Adam Gilchrist dropped key catches off dynamic pair VVS Laxman and Rahul Dravid respectively which could have changed the course of the game.

Indian captain Saurav Ganguly said his side would try to repeat the formula which led to a dominant performance in the drawn Brisbane Test and a four-wicket victory in Adelaide.

"I think you have to look at the past," Ganguly said when asked how India would deal with the pressure of leading the series.

"We need to look at the Brisbane Test, look at the Adelaide Test, look at what we did before the game, what we did in the meetings, what we did in the game let's stick to that, let's not do anything special or different.

"There's no point in adding other things to increase pressure, we have to stick with what we did in Adelaide and Brisbane, how we woke up in the morning, what we did in the lead-up to the game, how we batted, how we bowled."

Espanyol give up on Rivaldo

SKY SPORTS

Espanyol have decided to end their pursuit of Brazilian ace Rivaldo after he continued to stall on a decision over his future.

The Primera basement boys lost patience with the former Milan star after he told them he wanted until Friday to make up his mind over his next destination.

Rivaldo's agents insist he has still not turned his back on the Catalan outfit, and is just keen to fully mull over his options.

However, Espanyol president Daniel Sanchez Libre claimed that the club were no longer interested in securing the services of the 31-year-old.

"He has now told us that he does not want to say anything until the 26th (December), but as a result of this date Espanyol will tell him no," stated Libre.

"We have already waited a long time. He wants to be near his family and I don't want to intervene in that, but for us he has now been passed over.

Rafter to play in Australian Open

AFP, Sydney

Pat Rafter was confirmed on Wednesday as a starter in the doubles competition at next month's Australian Open in Melbourne.

His doubles partner Josh Eagle revealed the dual US Open champion had accepted a wildcard into the year's first grand slam.

Rafter, who turns 31 on Sunday, hasn't played competitive tennis since Australia's Davis Cup final loss to France in December 2001 and formally announced his retirement in January this year.

The serve-volleyer on Tuesday was announced as making an appearance in the doubles with Eagle at the Australian Hardcourt Championships in Adelaide from January 5 to 11.

But Eagle said on Wednesday Rafter would also make a comeback to the Australian Open -- three years after his epic five-set semi-final loss to eventual champion Andre Agassi.

"We just chatted. He had nothing else to do and he decided to have a game," Eagle said after a round of golf with Rafter on Queensland's Sunshine Coast on Wednesday.

"He had nothing on at the moment and he felt like it would be something fun to do.

"He knew that it would probably be my last Australian Open and last Australian summer circuit, so he thought we may as well go out in style."

Rafter will play fellow former world No.1 Mats Wilander in an exhibition match in Townsville in north Queensland on February 2 -- the day after the Australian Open ends -- but Eagle ruled out a permanent singles comeback for his good friend.

"Definitely not," he said. "This is purely something we're viewing as a bit of fun... if we happen to win a match or two, so be it. That'd be a bonus."

Eagle said Rafter was ready for the intense media focus that would follow his decision to play again.

"He's fully aware of what to expect," he said.

"He knew his decision to play wouldn't be taken lightly by the press and media and by the public, and he understands. He's been involved in it long enough."

Paul McNamee, the Australian Open tournament director, said Rafter's appearance at Melbourne Park would be a popular one.

"He'll be a really good addition to the tournament and for the fans in particular. The fans will get a kick out of it," McNamee said.

"It'll be interesting to see how he goes. He and Josh will have had a game in Adelaide and that will have them in good stead for Melbourne."

Duff stays positive

AFP, London

Ireland winger Damien Duff is hopeful of making his Chelsea comeback within three weeks following the dislocated shoulder he suffered in the win over Fulham last weekend.

Duff does not believe he will need surgery and told the club's website: "I'd far rather be playing than having an operation. I've been determined to come back as soon as possible."

"I'm sore but I feel much better already."

The 17-million-pound signing from Blackburn will miss the Boxing Day trip to Charlton but boss Claudio Ranieri has Dutchman Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink back from his one-match ban for accumulating five yellow cards.

India A whip

FROM PAGE 13

India got off to a flying start when left-handed Gambhir (82) and Bangar (81) put on a run-a-ball 154 for the opening wicket.

One-day specialists Kaif (75) and Yuvraj (60) continued to keep pressure on the Pakistani attack, adding 121 for the fourth wicket to help their team set a stiff target in the eagerly-awaited clash.

Pakistan last toured India in 1999 when the national side under Wasim Akram played three Tests.

The Indian government banned bilateral cricket matches against Pakistan in 2000 following tension over Kashmir, but allowed the teams to take part in multi-nation events like the World Cup.

The recent thaw in diplomatic relations between the arch-rivals saw cricket ties being revived again in November.

BRIEF SCORES

INDIA A: 329 for 6 in 50 overs (Gautam Gambhir 82, Sanjay Bangar 81, Mohammad Kaif 75, Yuvraj Singh 60, Naveed Latif 2-51, Mohammad Hafeez 2-58)

PAKISTAN A: 240 in 48 overs (Naved Latif 128, Bilal Asad 22, Aminur Rehman 21, Amit Bhandari 4-47, Yuvraj Singh 2-25)

Result: India A won by 89 runs.

Man-of-the-match: Amit Bhandari.

Friday's match: India A v Sri Lanka A.



PHOTO: AFP

India A's Mohammad Kaif in action on way to scoring a superb 75 against Pakistan A during their tri-nation series match at Eden Gardens yesterday.

Hectic 2004 ahead

Cricket

SPORTING LIFE, undated

If you already think England play too much cricket make the most of their inactivity over next two months.

January and February 2004 will provide Michael Vaughan et al with an unaccustomed break from the treadmill.

But once they arrive in the West Indies for four Tests and seven one-day internationals Vaughan's team can forget all about the rest and practice time they crave.

By the time the hectic Caribbean schedule concludes on May 5 in Barbados, England can look forward to around 10 days off before they need to ready themselves for the first of three Tests on home ground against New Zealand.

There follows a triangular NatWest Series one-day competition against New Zealand and the West Indies, four more Tests against Brian Lara and co, a three-match NatWest Challenge with India and finally the ICC Champions Trophy involving all the Test-playing nations in September.

What chance is there then of Vaughan and his team coming through all that with a modicum of success?

The suspicion, for Vaughan himself in particular, is that 2004 should be a year to savour.

He underachieved against

Zimbabwe and South Africa last summer just as undoubtedly as he overachieved in Australia last winter.

The truth is that Vaughan's true level is somewhere between the two although he is much nearer the world-beater he appeared in the Ashes than the runless wonder he impersonated for much of summer 2003.

Some Test match wickets have been bowled by those suggesting that such a level-headed, self-assured individual was allowing the England captaincy to adversely affect his batting.

Vaughan is a high-class player and will have a good opportunity to prove that all over again in the Caribbean in the spring and at home next summer.

Among those most likely to make a name for themselves alongside him are Andrew Strauss many people's idea of a future England captain and wicketkeeper-batsman Chris Read.

England, meanwhile, have good prospects of a first Test series win in the West Indies since 1968 although they will undoubtedly have to play well to do so.

Back at home, New Zealand will be a tougher proposition than Zimbabwe and Sri Lanka have proved in the first half of the English season in recent years.

But particularly if they have already beaten the Windies abroad England should be able to comfortably prevail again in July and August.

Further afield, Australia should not be hard-pressed to twice get

the better of Sri Lanka although conditions may favour the underdogs both at home and away, in Darwin and Cairns.

South Africa ought to be able to soften up the opposition twice for England, against the Windies in the ongoing turn-of-the-year series and in New Zealand in March.

When everyone arrives in England in September for the ICC Trophy it will be no surprise to see Australia in the best shape of all, and victory for them would be a far better outcome than the all too predictable washed-out stalemate between Sri Lanka and India which marred the last staging of the mini-World Cup.

Before the finale of the England summer, we will know whether Sussex have managed to build on 2003's first-ever county championship title and will also be wiser about the lasting popularity or otherwise of the England and Wales Cricket Board's Twenty20 competition which was blessed by good weather and also won the curiosity vote in its inaugural season.

Expect Mushtaq Ahmed's wickets and Ian Ward's runs to take Sussex close again in the championship, while Twenty20 battles in vain for a youth audience pulled unerringly in the direction of football's Euro 2004.

Nothing else is certain, except England's glut of injuries as they struggle through an outrageously packed schedule... and the head coach's attendant protestations about an unnecessary evil which is beyond his control.

Roddick, Henin ITF champs

Tennis

REUTERS, London

World number ones Andy Roddick and Justine Henin-Hardenne have been named 2003 ITF world champions, the International Tennis Federation said on Monday.

American Roddick, 21, earned the award after winning his first grand slam crown at the U.S. Open in September as well as reaching the semi-finals at the Australian Open and Wimbledon.

Belgian Henin-Hardenne, also

21, was twice a grand slam winner in 2003, beating her compatriot Kim Clijsters to clinch both the French and U.S. Open titles.

"The selection of the ITF men's world champion was a very difficult decision," ITF president Francesco Ricci Bitti said in a statement.

"Both Andy Roddick and Roger Federer turned in excellent years but, in the end, Roddick's superior performance at the grand slams and in the Masters Series gave him a slight edge over Federer."

Swiss Federer, 22, won Wimbledon and the season-ending Masters Cup before finish-

ing the year ranked second behind Roddick.

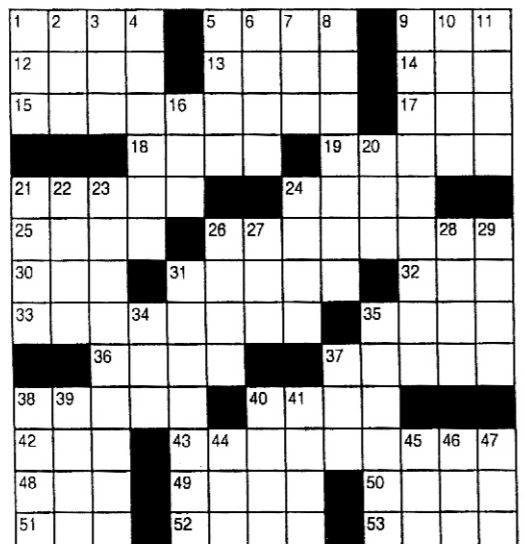
Bob and Mike Bryan were named ITF men's doubles champions, the American brothers having won the French Open and the Tennis Masters Cup, as well as reaching the final at the U.S. Open.

Spain's Virginia Ruano Pascual and Argentina's Paola Suarez won the women's award for the second successive year after winning the U.S. Open and the WTA Tour Championships.

The pair were also finalists at the Australian Open, Roland Garros and Wimbledon.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS 33 Denzel 53 Vivacity 16 Flop 20 New Haven
1 Send Washing-ton role
5 Fellow 35 DNA 1 Type units collegian
9 Slapstick 2 Cam-bridge 21 Cripple
12 Calf-36 Albacore sch-ware 22 Earthen-ware
13 Session 37 Sill 3 McKin-ley's pot
with a 40 "The — first lady 23 Oppor-tune
shrink King" 4 Slight col-24 "Hot
14 Put 42 Farm orations Shots!
in the animal 5 Facial Part —
mix 43 Will do feature 26 Actress
15 More just fine 6 Gridlock Ward
than just 48 Mate of sound 27 Nonstick
applause 42-7 Calendar spray
17 Journal Across abbr. name
18 Yucky 49 Slave to 8 Sing out 28 Pro-
stuff cross-9 Relieved tracted
19 Toast words? 10 "Ameri-can —" site
topper 50 Not 11 Bold and 31 Pre-
blades to 51 Moreover provoc-a- miums
blades 52 Appear tive 34 Prompt
24 Where heros are made 37 Section of L.A.?
25 Pub orders 38 Vicinity
26 Kellogg's product 39 Sunrise
30 Under the weather 40 Queue
31 Hum-dinger 41 Particular
32 Huge amount 44 Deal with
45 Grease
46 Ms Gardner
47 X rating?



CRYPTOQUIP
W R C N Q N P T Y B E N U W L W N C
A N E K T C X L D T L D T K K W U X
J B P B J H L N W L H B U P T H

"BYWPWAB QJBARH."
Yesterday's Cryptogram: WHEN I FINALLY REACHED MY GOAL WEIGHT, A FRIEND COMMANDED: "GO AND THIN NO MORE!"
Today's Cryptogram Clue: N equals O

The Cryptogram is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Single letters, short words and words using an apostrophe give you clues to locating vowels. Solution is by trial and error.

Their biggest

FROM PAGE 13

"Brett's generally a strike bowler but you still want him to get the ball in the right places and not go for too many runs and he's good enough to do that."

By restricting scoring options, Australia hopes to pressure Dravid and Laxman into error.

However, against the exceptional concentration powers of Dravid and the hand-eye coordination of Laxman, he admitted it would be difficult.

"Like any players they're capable of making mistakes under pressure."

"We need to get them out, we've talked about it and it's about executing plans. But with great players like those guys sometimes they overcome your plans."

"Sometimes you need a little bit of luck here and there and you just have to keep plugging away at your game plan."

While a lot rests on Lee as he bowls alongside either Brad Williams, who has played two Tests, or Nathan Bracken (one Test), Waugh said the whole team was facing its biggest challenge in years.

But with his team in the desperate situation where it cannot afford

to lose, Waugh said Australia wouldn't go into its shell and would continue to play its cricket at full speed despite the batting collapse that led to India's four-wicket win in the second Adelaide Test last week.

"I think we'll play the same way we've always played. Just because we messed up once we're not going to change the way we play."

"We know we could have batted better in Adelaide but you take the good with the bad and it's mostly been good over the past few years."

"We were disappointed with the way we played in that innings but it's happened very rarely over the past few years."

TEAMS

AUSTRALIA: Steve Waugh (captain), Justin Langer, Matthew Hayden, Ricky Ponting, Damien Martyn, Simon Katich, Adam Gilchrist, Brett Lee, Andy Bichel, Brad Williams, Nathan Bracken, Stuart MacGill (one to be omitted).

INDIA (probable): Saurav Ganguly (captain), Akash Chopra, Virender Sehwag, Rahul Dravid, Sachin Tendulkar, VVS Laxman, Parthiv Patel, Ajit Agarkar, Zaheer Khan, Anil Kumble, Ashish Nehra, Irfan Pathan.