

Sub-junior chess

SPORTS REPORTER

Rezaul Islam and Saidul Islam maintained their winning runs in the 26th National Sub-junior (Under-16) Chess tournament...

Rezaul beat Saimon and Saidul beat Aniruddha to share the top spot securing maximum five points.

Saimon, Aniruddha, Moni, Sharif, Champa, Rahmat, Sabbir and Mohsin followed the leaders with four points each.

Div I h'ball

SPORTS REPORTER

Menjis Krira Chakra and Bharratritta Samaj Kalyan Sangha won their respective super-four matches of the Bactrol First Division Men's Handball League...

Menjis defeated Prime Sporting Club 31-13 after leading the first-half 17-6 while Bharratritta earned a 39-16 win against Mansoor Sporting Club...

Mithali ton gives

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Sri Lanka, who beat Pakistan twice in the event to earn a berth in the final, never looked like they would reach the stiff target despite Chamari Polgampole's 58 and skipper Shikala Siriwardene's 55.

Indian fast bowler Devika Palshikar grabbed 3-31 to derail the Sri Lankan innings.

Former Pakistan great Wasim Akram was the chief guest on the occasion, praising the Asian women's standard of play.

"It is nice to see women play cricket. I am very amazed at watching Indian girls doing so brilliantly and with every chance the Pakistani girls will also improve," said Akram.

The tournament was Pakistan's first staging of a major international women's event after the government of the Islamic nation initiated national championships for women in cricket and football...

Only families were allowed to watch the matches as Pakistan's conservative society does not allow men to watch women play.

Ponting takes

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at the Sydney Cricket Ground on Wednesday:

SOUTH AFRICA: First innings 451 for 9 declared (Prince 119, Kallis 111; Lee 3-82)

AUSTRALIA: First innings (overnight 54-3)

Table with columns: Bowler, O, M, R, W. Lists bowlers like Langer, Hayden, Pollock, etc.

Extras: (lb-10, w-2, nb-2) 14. Total: (All out in 95.1 overs) 359. Fall of wickets: 1-22, 2-35, 3-54, 4-184, 5-222, 6-226, 7-226, 8-263, 9-322

SOUTH AFRICA: Second innings. Smith not out 3. De Villiers lbw Lee 1. Total: (For 1 wktn in 1.3 overs) 4. Fall of wicket: 1-4

Table with columns: Bowler, O, M, R, W. Lists bowlers like McGrath, Lee.

Scrap Mini

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up for grabs, officials are negotiating with Australia, England and Pakistan to force the ICC to alter its Future Tours Programme (FTP).

"The FTP, which outlines the playing commitments for each country over the next five years, has been heavily criticised for creating too many one-sided matches against minnows like Zimbabwe and Bangladesh.

"We have already had bilateral meetings with Australia," Indian cricket board vice-president Lalit Modisaid.

"We have had a positive response from member countries we have spoken to. This is not a challenge to the ICC. This is just a fine-tuning of the FTP."

India's huge cricket-crazy television audience makes it the biggest market for the sport in the world.

Cricket Australia chief executive James Sutherland was quoted by the London-based Observer newspaper as saying: "It is a well documented fact that more than half of international cricket's revenue has its source out of India."



Manchester United forward Cristiano Ronaldo reacts to his missed chance against Arsenal during their Premiership encounter at Highbury on Tuesday.

PREMIERSHIP

Chasing Pack further adrift

Football

REUTERS, London

Arsenal and arch rivals Manchester United fought out a tense 0-0 draw on Tuesday that moved Chelsea closer to a second consecutive Premier League title.

There were few scoring chances in a passionate affair at Highbury, with the two sides packing midfield and seeming to worry more about avoiding defeat than taking maximum points.

Second-placed United will have more regrets, though, after the draw left them 13 points behind runaway leaders Chelsea.

Arsenal's title hopes were realistically already over, they now trail Chelsea by a whopping 24 points in fifth position.

There were goalmouth melees at both ends in the closing minutes while Arsenal had a penalty appeal waved away when Spanish midfielder Cesc Fabregas went

down under a challenge by United's England defender Gary Neville.

But the spectacle fell short of what had been expected between two sides whose encounters had become the sharpest in English football.

Arsenal, starting with an unfamiliar five-man midfield and Thierry Henry as a lone striker, appealed the early pressure without carving any clearcut chances.

Alexander Hleb miskicked an early Robert Pires cross while Fabregas shot wide from the edge of the area after United tried to clear an Henry free kick.

Pires was the next to try his luck with an angled shot that was palmed away by Edwin van der Sar while Henry whistled another free kick narrowly wide of the Dutch keeper's post.

If Arsenal were lacking a killer pass, United were missing the inventiveness of the absent Paul Scholes and Wayne Rooney's usual creative spark. Yet they still con-

jured up the best scoring chance in a spell of pressure before halftime.

Ruud van Nistelrooy unleashed a searing shot that Jens Lehmann could only parry and Cristiano Ronaldo, who scored twice when United won 4-2 here last season, ballooned his follow-up over the bar.

Buoyed by their flourish, United looked the better side after the break, intent on revenge after last season's penalty shootout defeat by Arsenal in the FA Cup final.

Ronaldo sent in several telling crosses, van Nistelrooy found more time and space and Rooney showed neat flicks.

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger threw on Dutch forward Dennis Bergkamp in search of a late winner but it was United who nearly had the final say when Wes Brown's effort was cleared off the line.

Though the rivalry stretches back to a mass brawl at Old Trafford in 1990, there has been no shortage of fireworks in recent years.

Khan speaks well of Akhtar

Arrangements satisfy Indian safety team

Cricket

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Pakistan's tearaway bowler Shoaib Akhtar is a more disciplined bowler now and is capable of running through the strong Indian batting line up in the forthcoming series, says Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) chairman Shaharyar Khan.

He said here on Wednesday that Pakistani bowling was not at its best when they had hosted India last time two years ago but the scenario had changed since Bob Woolmer took over as coach.

Shaharyar, now here for the two-day Asian Cricket Council meeting, said Akhtar in particular had become a better bowler and would prove to be quite a handful for the Indians when they arrive in Pakistan on January 5 to play three Tests and five one-day international matches.

"Last time, India had the best batting line up in the world. But our bowlers were not disciplined and gave away a lot of extras.

"This time, it is going to be different. Our bowlers were very disciplined (in the recent series) against England. And I am sure Akhtar will

provide the breakthroughs."

Shaharyar, however, said that there was a huge difference between the Akhtar now and the Akhtar then.

The PCB chief refused to get into a debate on the controversies surrounding Akhtar and former Indian captain Sourav Ganguly.

"I cannot comment on whether Ganguly should be in or out of the Indian team. All I can say is that his experience will benefit India. Whether it is Akhtar or Ganguly, each player has to correct himself.

"When I saw him (Akhtar) bowl the way he did against England (in the recent home series), I could not take him out. The bowler I now see is very different from the one I saw before Woolmer took over."

Shaharyar also said that Pakistan would issue 10,000 cricket visas to Indian fans for the coming series against India.

"Eight-thousand visas will be issued (to Indian fans) and another 2,000 will be issued to fans who have purchased tickets through the internet from various countries," he said.

He said cricket visas were "non-political reporting visas", meaning the visa holder did not have to report to

the local police which is the normal procedure for Indian and Pakistani nationals when they cross the border.

Meanwhile CricInfo adds, a report on the security arrangements made for the visit of the Indian team to Pakistan has been submitted to the home ministry in New Delhi.

"Broadly, the reaction of the delegation which had gone to assess the security arrangements at the various venues especially in Karachi has been satisfactory," a home ministry press release stated on Wednesday.

The five-member delegation, led by Yashvardhan Azad, an Inspector General of Police, also included Ratnakar Shetty, executive secretary-in-charge of the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI), GS Walia, a member of the BCCI media committee and two government officials. Azad was sent for his "expertise" in security-related issues.

The delegation, which expressed apprehensions over Karachi being selected as one of the venues for a Test match and an ODI, was assured by the Pakistan administration of fool-proof security arrangements, including air surveillance during the matches in Karachi.

Bangladesh in Group F

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Bin Hammam told.

"It was my mistake. If we had a choice we definitely wouldn't do it again."

It means the Australians face three long journeys to the Middle East where they will have little support. Kuwait are always difficult to beat at home while Bahrain shocked everyone by making the semi-finals in China.

Lebanon, meanwhile, have a sizable expatriate population in Australia for support.

On the flip side, the shorter travelling distance from Europe could encourage Australia's European-based stars like Harry Kewell, Mark Viduka and Tim Cahill to make the trip.

AFC president Mohammed Bin Hammam said there was no excuse for them not to play.

"It is easy for them to travel," he said. "Australia are lucky because all their games in the Middle East are only five hours or so from Europe."

But Gary Moretti, a Football Australia official, said it was not that easy, pointing out that February 22 was not a FIFA match day -- meaning clubs are not duty-bound to release players.

"The challenge for us will be to see what sort of squad we are able to assemble for these games because it won't be easy to get a full-strength team out every time," he said.

Will Abahani be 3rd

FROM PAGE 16

and set a semifinal clash against Abahani.

Although the Abahani defence looks suspect at the right flank, hardworking Marshall and Pradeep in the centre have managed to keep things tight. With Wali Faisal recovering from a damaged knee, coach Amlesh Sen would be relieved to get back his winning combination.

"We have not won a trophy in the last five years. So winning this title is very important for the club. We have to maintain the form and consistency that we have been showing since the second phase of the Premiership to reach the National League final," said Abahani manager Satyajit Das Rupu.

"The return of the national players after the SAFF Championship has filled in the gaps. Our foreign recruits have also been giving their best. We just have to score from the chances we will get in a big match tomorrow."

"It has been very discouraging that we have not seen big crowds. So I would love to see our huge fans turn out to inspire us win tomorrow," the former national midfielder said.

Muktijodha captain Aminul, the number one national custodian, felt that absence of three key players would definitely weaken their attack.

"The players have done well in absence of the national players.

AFC president admits blunder

AFP, Singapore

Asian Football Confederation (AFC) president Mohammed Bin Hammam admitted Wednesday it was a major blunder to allow the 2007 Asian Cup finals to be co-hosted by four countries.

The football supremo, who acknowledged that he recommended the move to the AFC's executive committee, told AFP that in hindsight it was a big mistake and he would reverse the decision if he could.

"If we had a choice we definitely wouldn't do it again," he said.

The tournament, in July 2007, will be co-hosted by Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia and Vietnam.

Bin Hammam said the tournament was proving costly and logistically difficult to organise.

"It is proving very difficult for us. We have to have four organising committees, four media centres and there are also financial considerations," he said.

"It was my mistake. I proposed it and I was for it and I presented it to the executive committee, but since we have done the work, we have found it to be very hard.

"Financially we are not happy and logistically we are not happy."

Research finds soccer most exciting

AFP, undated

Soccer is the most exciting major sport to follow while American football is the most predictable, according to a scientific gauge of sporting competitiveness.

Three scientists of Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico analysed the results of more than 300,000 games that took place in American football, in the US ice hockey, baseball and basketball leagues and in the top English soccer league.

Soccer, whose database went back to 1888, provided the biggest "upset frequency" -- a win by an underdog -- of all these sports, followed by baseball.

At the bottom was American football, where the possibility of an upset is a huge 25 percent less than in soccer.

However, the trend in English soccer is clearly towards more predictable results, while American football and major league baseball are becoming more competitive.

The team did not include rugby or cricket in their study, as neither of those sports has a big following in the United States.

Atletico suffer food poisoning

INTERNET, undated

The first leg of Wednesday's King's Cup last 16 tie between Atletico Madrid and Real Zaragoza was postponed after 14 Atletico players went down with acute gastroenteritis. "The two clubs have agreed to postpone the match," SFF spokesman Fernando Carretero told a news conference.

Atletico said the players began vomiting and suffering from stomach pains and diarrhoea after eating dinner during a training camp at the federation's headquarters in Las Rozas.

Club medical staff said the problem could have been caused by food poisoning or a viral infection. Five Atletico players are also injured.

Atletico said they were uncertain whether the 14 would be fit to play in Sunday's league match at home to Valencia.

Wenger, Ferguson concede title

Football

BBC ONLINE

Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger and Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson have admitted they cannot match Chelsea's standard this season.

The rivals saw their sides draw 0-0 at Highbury on Tuesday, leaving leaders Chelsea 13 points clear of United.

After an unusually open game, Wenger said: "The players were less nervous because we are not going for the title - we cannot compete with Chelsea.

His counterpart Ferguson agreed: "Chelsea's consistency is beyond us."

It is remarkable that the men in charge of the two sides, which have dominated the Premiership since its conception, should make such candid admissions at this stage of the season.

And it shows just how far Chelsea have come - and how far behind them are the rest of the country - since the arrival of first Roman Abramovich and then Jose Mourinho at Stamford Bridge.

Chelsea's lead over United is substantial but their advantage over Arsenal stands at a massive 24 points - and Wenger admits that is too much to make up.

Instead, he seemed reasonably satisfied to have avoided defeat against United.

"I am not speaking about the title but I feel this result was a positive one for us," he said.

"If you look at Chelsea, they have a mature team. All their players are between 25 and 30. They have power and a lot of self-belief.

"We have a young team and it is important for us not to lose big games."

And Ferguson, too, has adjusted his goal for the season - also claiming youth has harmed their title chances this term.

He said: "Eventually we hope to reach Chelsea's level. We have a young team who will get better.

"You can see what is going to happen to us over the next two or three years and in the meantime we just keep going.

"We want to be the nearest team to Chelsea, just in case they collapse. You never know what might happen."



Italian striker Antonio Cassano holds his Real Madrid shirt at the Bernabeu on Wednesday. Cassano is only the second Italian player ever to play for the famed Spanish side after right-back Christian Panucci.

Barca, Real win Cup ties

Football

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona started off the New Year on the same note as they ended the last one by beating gutsy third division outfit Zamora 3-1 in the first leg of their last 16 Spanish Cup tie here on Tuesday.

The Spanish championship leaders had to come from behind after conceding a fourth minute goal by Zamora midfielder Xaco with scores from Dutch midfielder Giovanni van Bronckhorst, Mexican defender Rafael Marquez and Frenchman Ludovic Giuly.

Their bitter rivals Real Madrid also gained an advantage winning 1-0 at Athletic Bilbao with England captain David Beckham firing home from Robinho's cross in the 71st minute.

Xaco scored a brilliant solo effort for Zamora taking the ball into the area and slotting it into the Barca net to rock the Catalan giants - who were without European and world footballer of the year Ronaldinho and Cameroon ace



DAVID BECKHAM

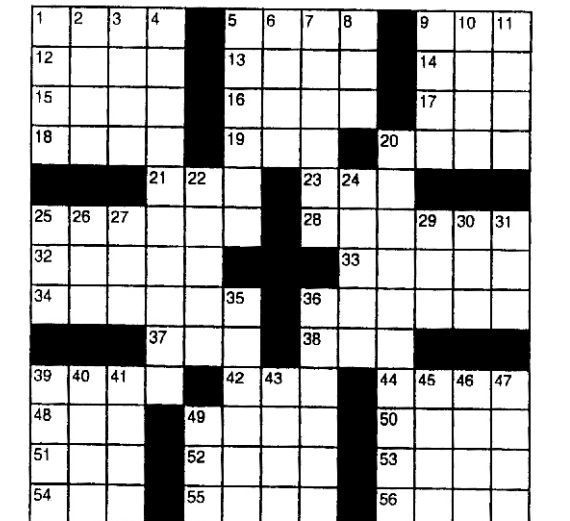
Samuel Eto'o - early on.

Barcelona, though, then laid siege to the Zamora goal and all the pressure finally told in the 36th minute as van Bronckhorst shot home from the edge of the area.

The lower league club defended stoutly in the second-half but finally cracked in the 80th minute as Marquez rifled home a direct freekick and four minutes later Giuly wrapped up the first leg when he received Sylvinho's pass inside the area and shot into the net.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

Crossword puzzle grid with clues for Across and Down words.



CRYPTOQUIP A O J X V O A C K E V F A C M P D D G F I V F N F U T G B J E N P R F U T T E I F P N P G G R P X : K F I X T N B J T L B F H L V P K M F . Yesterday's Cryptquip: IF YOU GO TO A HIGHLY REGARDED PODIATRIST, I SUPPOSE YOUR FEET ARE IN GOOD HANDS. Today's Cryptquip Clue: G equals I. The Cryptquip 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.

Moroccan football in turmoil

AFP, Rabat

Moroccan football was thrown into further turmoil just over two weeks before the African Nations Cup finals begin as their national federation's vice-president and secretary-general resigned on Tuesday.

The resignations of vice-president M'Hamed Aouzal and secretary general Ahmed Ammour come just a few days after coach Philippe Troussier - who they pushed hard to hire as part of their drive towards reforming Moroccan football - was sacked.

Troussier - known as the 'white witch doctor' for his ability to turn the fortunes round of African teams - had only been in the job for two months.

"We have presented our resignation letters to the Federation president Hosni Benslimane," they confirmed at a press conference.

The duo had come in for severe criticism over their handling of the reform of the sport.

Morocco have a tough task at the African Nations Cup having being drawn in Group A along with hosts Egypt, World Cup finalists Ivory Coast and Libya.

Essien set to miss ACN

AFP, London

Ghana suffered a huge blow to their hopes of lifting the African Cup of Nations when star midfielder Michael Essien was ruled out by his club manager Chelsea's Jose Mourinho on Tuesday.

The 23-year-old suffered an injured ankle in Monday's 3-1 Premiership victory over West Ham and Mourinho said that it was no point in the former Lyon ace travelling to Egypt for the African showpiece which gets underway in Egypt on January 20 and runs till February 10.

"Essien I think is not going," Mourinho told Chelsea's website after a scan showed up the damage.

"To have treatment, it is better to stay with Chelsea. He would be going (to Egypt) for nothing."

Essien had to go off early during the match after being tackled by Nigel Reo-Coker but despite Mourinho railing against the challenge the Football Association refused to take any action.

Essien's injury is the second blow to hit Ghana in days after Udinese midfielder Sulley Muntari, was ruled out for at least a month with an ankle injury.

I'm not Greg's

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shouldn't need to motivate anyone. If I'm needing to motivate an international cricketer then there's something wrong actually. The challenge is to not demotivate anyone.

"If you're going to be spending time in the team always having to cajole and look after a few people in the team, you're doing a disservice to the rest.

"You're wasting and investing too much time and energy in a few people who're taking away from the group.

"Players need to understand that they need to give energy to the unit. There are times of course when you're not doing well, and your form's not good and you'll need the support of other people.

"But most of the time you've got to give to the team and make sacrifices to the team and give back to the team."

India will play three Tests and five one-dayers in Pakistan, the third series between the neighbours in the last two years.