



PHOTO: AFP

File photo shows Wembley Stadium in north-west London. The FA Cup final is unlikely to return to its spiritual home for the coming season as developer Multiplex said that major events are off the cards till June 2007.

Wembley unlikely until 2007

Football

AFP, Sydney

The FA Cup final is unlikely to return to its spiritual home at London's Wembley Stadium next year after Australian developer Multiplex said major events were off the cards until June 2007.

The announcement means the FA Cup final in May of next year is set to be played at Cardiff's Millennium Stadium for the seventh time since 2001 as wrangling over the redevelopment of Wembley continues.

"It is unlikely that the stadium will be able to stage a test event for 90,000 spectators before June 2007," Multiplex said in a statement to the Australian Stock Exchange.

Multiplex said it had advised stadium owner, Wembley National

Stadiums Ltd. (WNSL), that it was entitled to a contract extension until October 2007 and was taking legal action claiming WNSL was delaying completion of the project.

The redeveloped 90,000-seater stadium in north London was originally scheduled to open early this year but the date has been successively pushed back by a series of cost overruns and disputes between Multiplex and its subcontractors.

On Monday, Michael Cunnah, WNSL's chief executive, warned that Multiplex still had "major items to complete" on the stadium. Tuesday's announcement dashes any hopes that this month's Community Shield, the traditional curtain raiser to English Premier League season, will be held at Wembley.

Multiplex said in its statement that the stadium was largely completed, aside from the installation

of some seats that were originally meant to be put in by a contractor who became insolvent.

"But it said it could not achieve "practical completion" until WNSL staged test events so the stadium gained required licences and approval.

"It said the stadium owner had not arranged the test events, adding to the delays.

"The problem at the moment in terms of when the stadium becomes operationally complete, or reaches practical completion, really surrounds commencement and completion of the client works," Multiplex director of communications Peter Murphy told BBC Radio 4 in Britain.

"So at this stage, Multiplex as builder is reliant upon our client, WNSL, completing a series of critical works to get us through to the point where we're capable of actually hosting or running test

events and, at this stage, we're unclear and we haven't been informed by WNSL when in fact they'll commence and complete those works."

However, a spokesman for WNSL rejected the argument, saying WNSL had always stressed it could not run test events until Multiplex had finished its work. The company did not accept the new deadline, he added.

But WNSL would not confirm that the 2007 FA Cup Final would be held at Wembley.

The disagreement marks a further deterioration in the relationship between Multiplex and WNSL, with the repeated bickering expected to be followed by a legal case in the coming month.

Multiplex cut its earnings forecasts five times last year and at last count its losses on the Wembley project were about 480 million dollars (360 million US).

Pierce poised to return

AFP, San Diego

Holder Mary Pierce is expecting few surprises as she returns to tennis for the first time since February, defending her title at this week's San Diego WTA tournament.

"I don't think the tour has changed too much in the time I've been away," said the sixth-seeded Frenchwoman who lifted the title here a year ago when she beat Japan's Ai Sugiyama.

"Martina (Hingis) is back and she's really been making a difference. But other than that, not a lot has changed."

Pierce, 31 and ranked ninth, last played as she lost the final of the Paris Indoors nearly six months ago to Amelie Mauresmo. A torn ligament in her right foot kept the two-time Grand Slam finalist busy with rest and rehabilitation.

But Pierce kept in synch with the tennis world, amazed as Mauresmo claimed the Wimbledon title.

"It was excellent," said Pierce, playing now without coaching from her brother David, who has stepped away from the game for the moment and is remaining in Paris.

"It was amazing to see her win Wimbledon, which I don't think anyone expected. I know how much it meant to her to win that event."

As she tests herself for the first time, Pierce is carrying realistically few expectations into the San Diego hardcourt week.

"Of course it would be great to defend my title, but at the same time I'm coming here without any expectations.

"I want to enjoy myself out on the court and hopefully be pleasantly surprised."

Pierce, who did her rehabilitation in Paris, was in Florida last week hitting with her one-time estranged father Jim.

"I guess I'm a bit like Roger Federer, I'm not totally alone here. But I know my game pretty well and what I need to do.

"I would prefer to have my brother here but he decided to take a break."

Pierce called herself "excited and happy."

"It's nice to come back to one of my favourite events, it's a beautiful place to play," she said of the golf resort setting which looks likely to lose the tournament after 2007 in a dispute over a larger stadium.

The Frenchwoman said that much of her time in Paris was spent healing.

"I've done pretty well to stay active. I don't really feel that I've been out of it for that long."

Ray of hope

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Although he may find it tough to break into the side for the event, cricket officials feel Ganguly's experience could be used during a busy season that includes a proposed tri-series against Australia and West Indies ahead of the Champions Trophy.

One of only four players to aggregate over 10,000 runs in one-day internationals, Ganguly has maintained that he wants to play in next year's World Cup in the Caribbean.

When contacted, Indian board secretary Niranjan Shah said: "To find 30 men, maybe they (selectors) require Ganguly."

India next play in a one-day tri-series in Colombo involving hosts Sri Lanka and South Africa from August 14.

"They could come at the end of the day or in the morning, but not in the middle of the day when you have training scheduled."

"It's not a big difference if it's in the morning, the night or the next day. It's not like anything's going to go away."

Doping tests are a timely topic across all of sport these days given the latest doping allegations against two US stars, Tour de France winner Floyd Landis and 100m world record co-holder Justin Gatlin.

Hingis said she is all for random drug testing - "the rules should be respected," she declared - but that testers could do with some consideration for those who take the tests.

Hingis said she will never forget a 6 a.m. test performed in Switzerland in 1996.

Milan's European

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European soccer's governing body said on its Web site on Monday that it had "invited Milan and the Italian Football Federation to submit observations on the matter after last Thursday's meeting of the Emergency Panel."

The panel will decide "after a detailed study of the matter, including analysis of any further information received."

Jorginho named

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Amarim de Oliveira Campos, won 64 caps. He also played for America-Rio de Janeiro, Flamengo, Sao Paulo, Vasco da Gama and Flamengo in Brazil, Bayer Leverkusen and Bayern Munich in Germany and Kashima Antlers in Japan.

Earlier this year, he had a brief stint as coach of America-Rio de Janeiro.

Dunga names his first squad on Tuesday for a friendly in Norway on Aug. 16 and is expected to announce an experimental group of players consisting mainly of home-based talent.

Libertadores heads for all-Brazil finale

Football

REUTERS, Rio de Janeiro

South America's Libertadores Cup could produce an all-Brazilian final for the second year running if Internacional and Sao Paulo press home their advantages in their semi-final ties this week.

Defending champions Sao Paulo, the only one of the semi-finalists to have won the trophy before, need a draw at home to Mexico's Guadalajara in their second leg on Wednesday.

They won last week's first leg at the Jalisco stadium 1-0 with a late penalty converted by goalkeeper Rogerio Ceni.

Internacional have a slightly more complicated task at home to Paraguay's Libertad, needing a win after their 0-0 draw in Asuncion last Thursday.

Last year, Sao Paulo beat Atletico Paranaense 5-1 on aggregate after the final was contested by two teams from the same country for the first time in the competition's history.

Guadalajara, whose team includes five members of Mexico's World Cup squad, are still confident of ousting the titleholders.

The Chivas, the only Mexican team not to field foreigners, beat Sao Paulo home and away during the group stage, winning both games 2-1.

Their win at the Morumbi ended Sao Paulo's 30-match unbeaten home run in the Libertadores, a record which stretched back to 1987.

"We have a very powerful attack and it's unusual for Chivas to not score at least one goal in a game," said midfielder Juan Pablo Rodriguez.

Sao Paulo, the Brazilian championship leaders, crashed 4-0 at home to Santos on Sunday after resting all

their regulars apart from Rogerio Ceni.

But the defeat has not dampened their spirits.

"We're going to play against Chivas in our usual way, pressing the opponents into their own half of the field," said coach Muricy Ramalho.

Guadalajara defender Diego Martinez returns after missing the first leg through suspension.

Internacional, who have seen their arch-rivals Gremio win the tournament twice, have described Thursday's match in Porto Alegre as an historic challenge.

Libertad, who have upstaged their larger neighbours Cerro Porteno and Olimpia, are still optimistic.

"Nothing is impossible," said midfielder Cristian Riveros. "I think this group is good enough to make history."

Andre 'on his own terms'

Tennis

AFP, Washington

Nostalgia strikes Andre Agassi at the oddest moments these days, but the eight-time Grand Slam champion is finding his impending retirement from tennis easier to cope with than he expected.

"The last 20 years on the tennis court have always been a preparation for tomorrow," Agassi said on Monday. "I look forward to not 'having' to do things. It's going to be a lot more on my terms, what I want my life to be."

Free of regrets, Agassi will begin his 17th and final appearance at the ATP Washington Classic here on Tuesday confident that his best is yet to come as he prepares for new challenges as a businessman, philanthropist and father.

"Am I sad? Yeah, there's a lot of it I'm going to miss," Agassi said. "I'll miss the practices with people being up by the fence. I will miss the people."

"But really, if you do it right, there's an evolution at work. It's an evolution I

believe takes on deeper roots. I really believe it's going to grow into something better than this."

The 36-year-old American has spent half his life as a pro tennis player. Memories slam into him at the oddest times, such as wiping sweat during a practice break or seeing young fans press faces against a fence to watch him.

"It's hard to ignore the nostalgia that exists. It hits me at those sort of unique moments that take me by surprise," Agassi said. "I just put my head down and remember that it's still all about the work."

Agassi plans to retire after the US Open, hoping to improve upon a runner-up showing last year to top-ranked Roger Federer but knowing his best days as a player are behind him.

"I anticipated it being more difficult," Agassi said. "It's not just hitting a ball. I'm saying goodbye to all the people I've done this with, from fans to peers on so many levels. I don't take that lightly at all."

"I've pushed myself a lot over the past four years to stay at this until I felt this is not something I can do at the

highest level anymore. I'm going to spend the rest of my life taking this all in."

Agassi leaves the sport with no regrets, saying his 1999 French Open triumph to complete a career Grand Slam assured him of that.

"When I won the French Open, at that moment I knew there were no more regrets for me in tennis. To win all the greatest events in my sport, that means a lot to me," Agassi said.

"Achieving the things I have, it has been surreal. It leaves you extremely at peace. It's a bit crazy to think about winning all these tournaments. It shocked me then and it shocks me even more now."

"You don't have to win. You just have to pour yourself into it to be worth it. I have given all of myself. Sometimes it hasn't been pretty. Sometimes you have seen the worst of me. But it has always been all of me."

Shanu passes away

SPORTS REPORTER

Eminent sports organizer and former member of the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) Abdul Majid Shanu passed away yesterday.

A former general secretary of Victoria Sporting Club and also a member of Bangladesh Badminton Federation, Shanu represented as manager of the successful national football team in the 1989 Gold's Cup tournament.

BFF expressed their deep shock and offered their sympathy to the family of the departed soul.

ICC to decide

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Speed, Sonn and Chingoka stressed that Zimbabwe will get more four-day games to prepare the team for Test resumption at the appropriate time. "We encourage that Zimbabwe play more multi-day games," Sonn said. "There is a need to play more longer version games. Whatever support the ICC shall give it shall give." Chingoka said the matches will be "over and above" the ICC Future Tours Programme.

Chingoka also dropped a hint that Zimbabwe may not resume Test commitments as scheduled next year, revealing that there was "confidential discussion of Test resumption" with ICC.

SA in a state

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highest Test score of 374 after sharing a world record partnership of 624 with Kumar Sangakkara (287) for the third wicket.

Stand-in captain Ashwell Prince insisted all was not lost for his team.

"It's not the idea situation, but we have improved," he said. "We can't win the series any more, but we can draw it and bounce back after this defeat."

"The longer the game went on, the better the bowlers started to bowl and the batsmen adapted to the conditions very well in the second innings."

"It's the 169 in the first innings that cost us dearly. We have done some tough talking about that performance. The pitch could not be blamed for even a single wicket we lost."

"There was hardly any sideways movement, nor uneven bounce. The guys threw away their wickets."

Veteran all-rounder Shaun Pollock, South Africa's most successful Test bowler with 394 wickets, will return for the second Test after missing the first following the birth of his second daughter.

Hick offered new Worcs contract

Cricket

AFP, Worcester

Graeme Hick is currently considering his future after Worcestershire announced Monday they had offered him a new contract for the 2007 season which would allow the former England batsman to extend his prolific career with the Midlands county.

Earlier this season the 40-year-old Hick became only the second player since World War II, after Yorkshire great Geoffrey Boycott, to score a hundred first-class hundreds for a single county and only the eighth player in all to achieve the feat.

Worcestershire chief executive Mark Newton said the club had no qualms about offering Hick, whose present deal expires at the end of the current campaign, a contract for what would be a 24th season of county cricket.

"Graeme is a legend of Worcestershire cricket and is having another good season," Newton explained.

"I can confirm we recently discussed the situation with him and would love to see him continue to re-write the record books here at Worcestershire."

"The offer has been made and Graeme has asked for time to consider the situation," he added.

Hick's 139 against Northamptonshire in June, as well

as being his hundredth hundred for Worcestershire, was the 130th first-class century of his career.

It left him in eighth place in the all-time list of first-class centuries.

But unlike many players with a similarly glittering record in the county game Hick, born in what was then Rhodesia and now Zimbabwe, did not enjoy a highly successful Test career.

He was forced to serve a residential qualification period before making his England debut in 1991.

Repeatedly dropped and recalled by England, he was famously labelled "a flat-track bully" by New Zealand coach John Bracewell.

Hick played the last of his 65 Tests against Sri Lanka at Kandy in 2001, finishing with 3,383 runs at a modest average of 31.32 with six hundreds.

But his first-class record will be tough for any contemporary or future player to top.

Since Hick made his Worcestershire debut in 1984, there has been a huge reduction in the number of first-class fixtures.

Meanwhile the accompanying growth in the Test programme has led to England batsmen making fewer and fewer appearances for their counties, with the national team management increasingly ordering to them rest between international matches.

Untimely test threw Hingis off

AFP, San Diego

It's not the knock on the door that worries Martina Hingis - it's the timing.

The Swiss former world number one, making her WTA summer hardcourt start in San Diego this week, complained that a Sunday drug test during a pre-tournament training day threw off her carefully prepared routine for no good reason.

Hingis, who returned in January after a long break from the sport, said drug testers need to have some consideration.

"They should look at a player's schedule. They just come in and screw up your whole day," the five-time Grand Slam winner said Monday.

"They could come at the end of the day or in the morning, but not in the middle of the day when you have training scheduled."

"It's not a big difference if it's in the morning, the night or the next day. It's not like anything's going to go away."

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Gatlin sample given more value

Athletics

AFP, Chicago

A more sophisticated doping test than normal was used on the urine sample that showed reigning Olympic 100-meter champion and world record co-holder Justin Gatlin, the Chicago Tribune reported Monday.

The newspaper reported that Gatlin's tainted sample, taken April 22 at the Kansas Relays, tested positive for the steroid testosterone without traditional testing,

instead going immediately to carbon isotope analysis (CIR).

The CIR test, requiring much more labor and costing up to 500 dollars a test, usually comes after a more typical test examines the ratio of testosterone to epitestosterone, also a naturally produced hormone.

Should that ratio exceed 4-1, testosterone-detecting CIR is then usually used. Either ratio or CIR testing can be declared as a positive doping result.

The Tribune reported that the lab testing Gatlin's urine sample was asked to first apply a CIR test,

testers unaware the sample belonged to the 2004 100m Olympic champion who shares the world record of 9.77sec with Jamaican Asafa Powell.

Gatlin's A and B samples showed evidence of testosterone metabolites, the newspaper reported.

Gatlin, who faces a lifetime ban from the sport because of a prior doping violation, said he has never knowingly used testosterone.

An appeal where gatlin can present evidence is possible to the US Anti-Doping Agency and then to the Court of Arbitration for Sport.



PHOTO: AFP

French Laure Manaudou in action during the women's 400m individual medley heat at the 28th LEN European Swimming Championships in Szechy Swimming Complex of Budapest on Monday.