

## Asif again sidelined

REUTERS, New Delhi

Pakistan fast bowler Mohammad Asif was sidelined with back trouble as India's Uttar Pradesh reached 268 for seven against Sialkot on the opening day of a four-day game between the national champions.

Asif said the injury was minor and he was being cautious ahead of the ICC Champions Trophy starting in India next month.

Ranji Trophy champions Uttar Pradesh also suffered a blow before the toss when India batsman Mohammad Kaif withdrew due to fever.

Asif, 23, struck two early blows for Pakistan's Quaid-e-Azam Trophy winners, including that of India one-day batsman Suresh Raina (5), before he was forced off the pitch after bowling just 6.4 overs.

## Henman reaches qtrs

AFP, Bangkok

Tim Henman won his second all-British battle in a row Thursday as he shrugged off a pair of poor line calls to defeat Alex Bogdanovic 6-3, 5-7, 6-1 for a place in the quarterfinals at the Thailand Open.

The 32-year-old Henman, ranked 59th, followed up on his first-round win against British No. 1 Andy Murray 24 hours earlier by fighting through against Bogdanovic, the world No. 148 in two hours, 20 minutes.



Pakistan legend Wasim Akram (R) and speedster Shoaib Akhtar pose as the latter checks out a sports shoe during the inauguration of Akram's new shoe shop in Karachi on Wednesday.

## Freddie gets Ashes jibe

AFP, Sydney

Australian fast bowler Glenn McGrath has launched into the Ashes mind games, querying whether it will be possible for Andrew Flintoff to bat and bowl well while captaining England.

McGrath, who has a history of niggling opposing sides before a Test series, made the remarks less than two months before the opening Gabba Test in Brisbane on November 23.

"It's a massive ask, there's no doubt about it," McGrath told The Sydney Morning Herald Thursday.

"He's (Flintoff) such a key player, not only with their bowling, but in the field and in the batting."

"So if you throw the captaincy on top of it, maybe it will take the focus off his bowling and batting a little bit more and onto the captaincy and have an effect on his game."

"But he's a class player, and if anyone can handle it, he can."

McGrath, Test cricket's leading wicket-taking fast bowler with 542 wickets in 119 matches, said the England captaincy will drain Flintoff.

"It makes you think a lot more about the game," he said.

"Instead of Flintoff just focusing on his batting or his bowling and putting all his efforts and energies into that, now he has to think about who's going to bowl next, what field placements to use, where the game is going and so on. It will take a lot out of him."

Australian captain Ricky Ponting has also been trying to undermine Flintoff's confidence ahead of the much-anticipated return Ashes series.

"Freddie is going to have a lot on his plate now," Ponting told the newspaper.

"Even for me, last year in that Ashes series, we were kept pretty busy as captains. He's got to do extra training because he's an all-rounder as well, so it will all mount up on him."

## We're Aussie nemesis: Akhtar

Cricket

AFP, Karachi

Fit-again paceman Shoaib Akhtar on Wednesday said world champions Australia are beatable in next month's Champions Trophy as well as in next year's World Cup and that Pakistan can be their nemesis.

"Australians are beatable and we have beaten them and other sides have come close to wins against them. If Pakistan play up to their potential, yes, we can be one of the sides to beat the Aussies," Akhtar told AFP.

The 31-year-old fast bowler looked in fine fettle while inaugurating his former colleague and pace partner Wasim Akram's shoe shop here.

Akhtar, who missed Pakistan's last one-day international against England two weeks ago due to ankle injury, said he is raring to have a go in the ICC (International Cricket Council) Champions Trophy to be held in India.

"It's an awesome tournament with world best eight teams competing and I feel Pakistan has a

good chance to win the trophy, I would love to see a Pakistan-Australia final.

"Recently in Kuala Lumpur, India came close to beating Australia and if you sustain the pressure from Australia you can beat them," said Akhtar, who wants another showdown with Australian paceman Brett Lee.

"Lee was in fine form in the Malaysia tri-series last week so it would be great fun to be in the opposite side of Lee and it's always an enjoyable duel," said Akhtar, regarded as world's fastest bowler alongside Lee.

Akhtar, who has 165 Tests and 208 one-day wickets, said India pitches would suit Pakistan in the Champions Trophy.

"Pakistan has not won Champions Trophy yet but this would be a good chance because the pitches and weather would be to our liking but we will have to play the best cricket to win a tournament where other seven teams have equal chance," he said.

The fast bowler, who has recovered from an ankle bruise he sustained before the fifth and final one-day against England at

Birmingham, said it would be tough to stay fit given playing schedules are hectic.

"We play the Champions Trophy, then against the West Indies and then tour South Africa before the World Cup so it's tough and one has to be very wise to keep fitness," he said.

Akhtar missed a Test series against England due to an ankle injury, but he took nine wickets in four one-day internationals against England and bowled, on average, at 145 kilometres (90 miles) per hour.

"I still have to work hard to get into my rhythm, hopefully it will come in India where the crowds give you the sort of encouragement you need to bowl at your best," he said.

Akhtar was also bullish about Pakistan's prospects in the World Cup in the Caribbean next year.

"We are going to try to win it and, of course, we are one of the best teams in the world. I don't believe in favourites but if we play to what our potential is, we can win the trophy," he said.

## Vengsarkar talks the talk

Cricket

AFP, Mumbai

Indian cricket's new chief selector, Dilip Vengsarkar, on Thursday backed Sourav Ganguly's bid to return to the national team, saying no player would be discriminated against.

"There will be no bias against any player, we will go purely by form," Vengsarkar told AFP a day after replacing Kiran More as chairman of India's five-man selection committee.

"Let me assure you I will not close the door on any player. My message to players is that only performance and fitness will matter if anyone is looking to make a comeback or

wants to play for India.

"I am pretty clear that merit will be the only criteria. Get big runs if you are a batsman and big wickets if you are a bowler. Prove yourself in domestic cricket."

Ganguly was sacked as captain and later dropped from the national side by More's previous committee following unfavourable comments from coach Greg Chappell, who said Ganguly was a "disrupting influence" in the team.

The stylish left-hander, 34, has not played a one-day international since September last year and was dropped from the Test squad after the tour of Pakistan in February.

Ganguly dispelled speculation that he was going to retire from the game, insisting he was still good enough to play for his country and that he would show his form in

domestic cricket this season.

The left-hander on Tuesday was handed a berth in the domestic Challenger one-day series in Chennai from October 1-4, a selection trial for the busy international season that culminates with the World Cup in the Caribbean next March.

He has not been selected for next month's Champions Trophy, but Ganguly is being regarded as a serious candidate for the tour of South Africa later this year and the World Cup, with the floundering Indian team having won just one of its last nine one-dayers.

He is one of only four batsmen in the world to score more than 10,000 runs in limited-overs cricket and has played in two World Cups, the last as captain in 2003 when India reached the final.

## Legends slam ICC decision

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Do not stick, Pakistan legend said Thursday.

The International Cricket Council (ICC) will act unfairly if it bans Inzamam just to protect the players' code of conduct, former fast bowler Akram said of a two-day hearing which started in London on Wednesday.

"I strongly feel that the ICC and the umpires will not be able to prove ball-tampering charges against the Pakistan team and since Pakistan's protest was linked to the accusation of tampering they should not ban Inzamam," Akram told AFP.

"I think the ICC will try to have the upper hand and would ban Inzamam to safeguard their code of conduct, but it would be hugely unfair."

Inzamam, 36, is answering disciplinary charges of ball tampering and bringing the game into disrepute after Pakistan refused to take the field in the fourth Test against England at the Oval last month.

Pakistan protested after umpires Darrell Hair and Billy Doctrove penalised them five runs for ball tampering. The team was judged to have forfeited the game, the first such case in Test history.

Inzamam faces a big fine and a ban of several matches.

Wasim, 40, said that an unfavourable verdict would be "debatable and one that could be taken to a court of law."

"I would not have waited and would have taken the ICC and umpire Hair to court," he said, adding that his Birmingham-based lawyers were in contact with Inzamam for such an action.

Wasim said a ban on Inzamam would spoil Pakistan's chances of winning the ICC Champions Trophy in India, where the competition begins next month.

"Under Inzamam the team has shown great unity and it's bad to miss your most inspirational figure," he said.

"It would be a huge loss for Pakistan and I hope the Pakistan

Cricket Board have done their homework in case Inzamam is banned. They should take a stay order and let the ban be enforced after the trophy," said Wasim.

The former paceman, with 414 Test and a world record 502 one-day wickets, reiterated that controversial Australian Hair should also be penalised for his role in the saga.

Wasim said he feared that it would not be the last time that Pakistan had to defend themselves against tampering charges.

"When Pakistan is involved, everyone sees it as a big issue. We have been accused of tampering since 1992 and this Oval incident won't be the last time," said Wasim, who along with Waqar Younis was accused of tampering on Pakistan's tour of England in 1992 -- the first time tampering charges attained publicity.

"I sincerely hope Pakistan come out clean," he said.

## Mirza takes

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fitness and mental strength.

"This is the fittest I've been in the last two years and it's the best I've felt this year," she said.

"A true champion is one who comes back from being down. When I went out to serve at 5-4, I hadn't held my serve for the last two games and I told myself to do whatever was necessary."

In Friday's quarterfinal of the 145,000-dollar event, Mirza will face Virginia Ruano Pascual after the Spaniard overcame Indonesia's Angelique Widjaja in straight sets.

"I've never played Virginia before," said Mirza, "but I haven't thought too much about it. When you play Martina, you don't look too far ahead."

## Inzamam cool

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They protested after umpires Darrell Hair and Billy Doctrove decided to penalise them five runs for alleged ball-tampering.

"It was a matter of the team's reputation and ball-tampering allegations meant that we cheated during the Test match," Inzamam said.

"We have built a reputation for this young team in the last four years and what happened at the Oval was an attempt to spoil it. "Everyone in Pakistan welcomed my decision to protest and I think they would have prayed for my team and for myself. That is why we have been acquitted of ball-tampering charges."

## Italy win

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controversy from Italian football after he failed to hand over the World Cup trophy in Berlin this summer. UEFA President Lennart Johansson took charge of the ceremony while Blatter watched from the stands.

## Mancini

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he needed more players. "Of course we're struggling to maintain freshness with so many games and injuries, but it's not an excuse. This game was heading comfortably for 0-0 until the red cards and some mistakes in defence. We barely ran any risks," said the tactician.

"I'm not saying we played well, but this was a difficult game against a tough opponent after we'd lost the first match. It was important to pick up points, whether one or three, but I don't believe the team collapsed. It's true that there's pressure on Inter and always has been, but we want to win the next tie and hope it'll kick-start our European campaign."

Luis Figo was particularly disappointing in the rhombus midfield, but the Inter midfield looks threadbare without Vieira and Esteban Cambiasso.

"We lost Juan Sebastian Veron over the summer and he brought us great quality. At times we put Figo behind the strikers to raise that quota, but we're struggling at the moment because there are few options available."

## Reds Crouch

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And then, seven minutes into the second half came the goal for which this game will always be remembered. Crouch defying the memories of his gangling awkwardness to thrash in a bicycle kick of such quality that there was a perceptible silence before the roar as Anfield took a collective breath.

Including England matches, he has now failed to score in just one of the games he has begun this season, taking his tally to a scarcely credible 10 in eight starts.

If that defied logic, it was nothing to what followed. Veteran Turkish international striker Hakan Sukur and Kuyt both hit the post, before Um It Karan struck twice in five minutes, on both occasions finding far too much space between Jamie Carragher and Daniel Agger.

If there were nerves around Anfield when he glanced Arda Turan's left-wing cross past Jose Reina after 59 minutes, there was full-on panic when he thumped in a right-wing delivery from Sabri Sarioglu on 64.

Sasa Ilic dragged a volley wide when well-placed and Sukur headed a half-chance straight at Reina, but for all the edginess, the arrival of Momo Sissoko in central midfield steadied matters and Galatasaray never created the clear-cut chance that might have given them a remarkable point.

## Drogba puts

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weak shot squeeze through the previously impeccable Petkov's body and into the net to take the game away from the Bulgarians.

Drogba's glorious night was completed 17 minutes later when the lanky striker scrambled in a pretty ugly effort but it was enough for his hattrick and was his last touch of the game as he was immediately taken off and replaced by Dutch international striker Arjen Robben.

However it was the Bulgarians who had the final say in terms of goals as Mariyan Ognyanov's long range shot beat Petr Cech but it was far too little too late.

## Messi magic saves Barca

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Brazilian playmaker Diego also recovered from a knee injury to start while Germany's World Cup finals golden boot winner Miroslav Klose shrugged off an ankle injury to return in attack.

Bremen, lying a disappointing ninth in the Bundesliga, were not intimidated by the champions of Europe and had a good opening early on with German international Torsten Frings shooting inches wide of the post after a mix-up in the Barcelona backline.

"I would have settled for a 1-1 before the match but it goes without saying that we are disappointed at conceding the equaliser so late on," bemoaned Frings.

Spanish champions Barcelona were spreading the ball around with real panache but, while it was pleasing on the eye, the usual cutting edge was missing.

## Bayern end Italian jinx

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ball to run too far ahead of him, and his feeble shot was blocked by the Bayern skipper.

Kahn's counterpart Julio Cesar saved Inter from falling behind in the 22nd minute.

Dutch striker Roy Makaay escaped his marker and fired an angled shot that was heading for the corner of the net, but the Brazilian keeper's outstretched leg kept the hosts on level terms.

Inter, whose biggest problem was containing the incisive runs of German international Philipp Lahm, one of the stars of this year's World Cup, finished the first half on top with Grosso and Ibrahimovic both firing narrowly wide.

Bayern started the second half brightly with Pizarro's head an inch away from applying the finishing touch to Lahm's left-wing cross.

Marco Materazzi was lucky to stay on the pitch after his wild tackle stopped Bayern's Brazilian

Cameroon international striker Samuel Eto'o spurned Barca's best, and only, real chance of a below-par first half with Wiese using his legs to block his goalbound shot.

At the start of the second half the Spanish visitors pushed on but Bremen took the lead in the 56th minute with Barcelona skipper Puyol putting through his own net.

Aaron Hunt crossed from the right and Spanish international Puyol got his clearance all wrong as the ball squirmed off his shin and past goalkeeper Victor Valdes.

Tim Borowski went centimetres from adding a second for the hosts ten minutes later with his shot flashing across Valdes' goal.

Bremen looked to have done enough for a historic win but then Messi popped up at the death to salvage a point for the holders.

defender Lucio in his tracks, before Mark van Bommel curled a shot inches past the post for the visitors.

Ibrahimovic saw red for a second yellow in the 58th minute before Kahn denied Hernan Crespo with a breathtaking one-handed save.

Pizarro finally made the breakthrough in the 81st minute, clipping the ball past Julio Cesar after sneaking in unmarked behind the Inter defence to latch onto Roy Makaay's chipped pass.

Grosso received a straight red card somewhat harshly for using an elbow on Bastian Schweinsteiger in the final minute before Podolski netted his first goal for Bayern since his summer move from FC Cologne.

The 21-year-old striker raced clear after an attempted back pass by Ivan Cordoba fell short before walking round Julio Cesar and slotting home.

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