

Eng stronger now: Warne

Cricket

AFP, Sydney

Australian spin king Shane Warne on Wednesday rated England's underperforming Test side stronger than the one that sprang a surprise Ashes series win over Australia last year.

Warne predicted England would mount a staunch Ashes defence when international cricket's oldest rivalry resumes later this month, saying the side touring down under was stronger than the one that ended an 18-year Ashes drought in September 2005.

Warne said he was not underestimating England, even though since the Ashes defeat Australia have swept aside all comers in the Test arena, while England has displayed indifferent form.

"The Ashes always brings out the best in both teams, no matter how poor one of the sides are playing," he told reporters.

"At the moment, England aren't playing as good as they would like but at the end of the day it's all about how they play during this series.

"They've got some match-winners there and I'm sure they'll be looking to entertain and play well."

Warne said England campaigners from the last series such as batsman Kevin Pietersen and captain Andrew Flintoff now had more experience, with the latter well rested after an injury-enforced layoff.

Test cricket's leading wicket taker was also impressed with England's Ashes debutants, spinner Monty Panesar and wicketkeeper Chris Read.

"The two key areas in Australia are the wicket-keeping department and the spin bowling department," said Warne, who hopes to become the first bowler to claim 700 wickets during the upcoming series.

"I think everyone realises that Chris Read is the best keeper in England and Monty Panesar is a match-winning spinner, he's shown this summer that he's an attacking spinner who can win you games."

Warne said England's selectors had to weigh Panesar's attacking prowess with the added protection his main rival for the spinner's spot, Ashley Giles, could offer the batting line-up.

"I suppose a big concern for

them is their tail," he said.

"If they play Panesar, then they've got (Matthew) Hoggard, (Steve) Harmison and a few of their other players down there, they could have a very long tail ... Ashley Giles can hold a bat."

Unlike previous Ashes series, Warne has not attempted to develop a mystery ball for the upcoming clash, saying success would be a matter of hard graft and meticulous application of an armory now familiar to his opponents.

"There's no mysteries, they know what they expect from me and what I bowl," he said.

"We know how they're going to bat, they know how I'm going to bowl, it's a matter of execution and who does the best on the day."

While respectful of his opponents, Warne was pleased with Australia's form.

"Since we lost the Ashes in England we've played some exceptional cricket, we've won 11 out of 12 Tests -- the one-day side has been playing exceptional -- everyone has a little bit of form," he said.

Australia captain Ricky Ponting was also upbeat, saying he "couldn't be happier" with his squad and

dismissing criticism the side's ageing stars could leave the host nation vulnerable.

"Those guys keep performing -- look at Warne, (Glenn) McGrath and (Matthew) Hayden, they're some of our best performers currently and I'm sure they'll put their hands up and get the job done here," he said.

The first Test in the five-match Ashes series begins in Brisbane on November 23.

Meanwhile, Warne said he wanted to claim his 700th Test wicket during the upcoming Ashes series and ruled out retiring while he still enjoyed playing the game.

Already Test cricket's leading wicket-taker with 685 scalps, Warne said he hoped the series against England would take him past the 700 mark.

"I only need 15, so I'd like to think at some stage during the series I'd get that," he told reporters.

The 37-year-old said there was no need to consider retirement if he was still taking wickets.

"I'm probably fitter now than when I started, also I think it's dictated by performances -- if

SEE PAGE 18 COL 5



DOWN AND OUT: A distraught Wayne Rooney lies on the ground after their defeat against minnows Southend in their League Cup clash at Southend on Tuesday.

Lehmann's WC sheet to raise funds

AFP, Berlin

Arsenal's German international goalkeeper Jens Lehmann revealed Tuesday that he plans to sell the secret penalty shootout note from the World Cup quarter-final win over Argentina with the funds going to a charity for sick children.

The auction will take place in Berlin on December 16 with television channel ZDF following proceedings.

Lehmann was the hero for Germany in the quarter-final win over Argentina saving two penalties from Roberto Ayala and Esteban Cambiasso.

It later came to light that goalkeeping coach Andreas Koepke had given Lehmann a secret sheet of paper with advice on all of Argentina's penalty takers and the note stole the headlines in the press.

Hosts Germany were eliminated 2-0 by eventual winners Italy in the World Cup semi-final and had to settle for third after defeating Portugal in the play-off.

Big Phil keeps Ronaldinho off list

REUTERS, Sao Paulo

Portugal and former Brazil coach Luiz Felipe Scolari said on Tuesday he had left World Player of the Year Ronaldinho off his list for this year's vote.

Scolari told reporters he had voted instead for Frenchman Thierry Henry, whose goal knocked Brazil out of this year's World Cup in the quarter-finals, followed by Brazil midfielder Kaka and England defender John Terry.

"I've voted three times for Ronaldinho and now I have chosen some other players," said Scolari, whose 2002 World Cup winning team included the Barcelona player.

Loew not experimenting

AFP, Berlin

Germany coach Joachim Low says he will not bring in any new faces for the Euro 2008 qualifier in Cyprus on November 15.

German Under-21 strikers Aaron Hunt and Mario Gomez have both impressed Low with their league form for Werder Bremen and VfB Stuttgart, but the coach wants to keep things the way they are for the final competitive match of the year.

"We only have two training days available so it does not make any sense to integrate new personnel," Low said. "We want to build on our good position in the Euro qualification and crown a great year with a win."

Germany lie second in group D, a point behind the Czech Republic, after a perfect three wins but must do without injured Bayern Munich striker Lukas Podolski for the Cyprus tie.

"The alternatives to Lukas are obviously Mike Hanke and Oliver Neuville," Low said. "One of the two will partner Miroslav Klose in an attack."

Low has won all five games in charge of Germany since taking over from Jurgen Klinsmann who resigned after the World Cup

Fergie takes positives

Football

AFP, Southend

In true Glaswegian style, Sir Alex Ferguson claimed his side's League Cup "smack in the face" from Southend could actually bolster the club's bid for glory on bigger stages this season.

Ferguson watched in barely disguised fury as Manchester United fan Freddy Eastwood gave the struggling Championship outfit a 1-0 win in Tuesday night's 4th round encounter with a superbly struck free-kick mid-way through the first half.

But the Scot refused to read too much into a result he clearly regarded as a freak for his side, who are currently top of the Premiership and virtually assured of winning their group in the Champions League.

"I bet he doesn't score another goal like that in his life," Ferguson said of Eastwood's winner. "If you are going to lose, it might as well be to something special like that."

Ferguson, who spent Monday celebrating 20 years in charge at Old Trafford, insisted something good could come out of a frustrating evening on the Essex coast.

"It's a great reminder to everyone at the club that football can smack you in the face," he said. "I've been here 20 years and I am not impervious to it either."

"In a way, it is great for me because I know tomorrow we can pull our togs on and start working again. There is no harm in defeat providing it improves you and you can learn from it."

"I am sure we will get slaughtered for this defeat but there is no need for any knee-jerk reaction, no need for any mass sackings and there will be no suicides."

"A few of the players will be a bit embarrassed because it is a disappointing result."

"But all three of the matches we have lost this season have been 1-0, so there is not too much wrong with us."

"Our league form has been good and we will be ready to face Blackburn on Saturday."

Maria starts off fine

Tennis

AFP, Madrid

World number one Amelie Mauresmo made a disastrous start to the end-of-season WTA Championships here on Tuesday when she returned from a shoulder injury.

Instead, the Australian Open and Wimbledon champion, nursing an injured shoulder which forced her to pull out of her last tournament in Zurich, admitted she never got into gear.

With the race on for the year end number one slot, which is a three-way tussle between Mauresmo, Sharapova and Justine Henin-

Hardenne of Belgium beat Switzerland's Martina Hingis, playing her first end-of-season championships since 2002, 6-2, 6-7 (5/7), 6-1.

With four former champions and five current or former world number ones on the draw card, Mauresmo was hoping to survive an opening tussle as she returned from a shoulder injury.

Sharapova was all business as she dispatched Dementieva in 1hr 27 min.

Dementieva double-faulted to gift Sharapova the opening game and the pattern continued with a total of 16 double faults during the match.



Russia's Maria Sharapova celebrates after beating her compatriot Elena Dementieva during their WTA Tour Championship tennis match at Rockodromo Stadium in Madrid on Tuesday.



Australia captain Ricky Ponting (R) and Shane Warne pose with the original Ashes urn at the Museum of Sydney on Wednesday.

Adriano told to quit Inter

INTERNET, undated

Adriano has been advised to leave Internazionale by former Brazil boss Carlos Alberto Parreira.

The striker, who has recently returned to training in Milan after 'recovering' in Rio, has been advised that a move away from the San Siro would rejuvenate his career.

Parreira, who led Brazil to victory in the 1994 World Cup, thinks that Adriano needs a 'new motivation' in his career, and a move away from Italy would do just that.

Speaking to Channel 4's Football Italia website, Parreira said: "After doing well in the Confederation Cup and the Copa America, Adriano was out of form during the World Cup in Germany, just like teammate Ronaldo."

"I think both players need new motivation. Adriano has been at Inter for too long and now it's time to change."

"Ronaldo too could benefit greatly from a move to another club, as long as he plays in a League at the level of the Spanish one, like the Premiership."

Mexes staying put

INTERNET, undated

Roma boss Luciano Spalletti has moved to dismiss reports that defender Philippe Mexes could be on his way out of the club.

Recent reports have speculated that Real Madrid coach Fabio Capello will launch a £10 million bid for the 24-year-old in January, but Spalletti has labelled the reports as nothing more than the usual rumours.

"We don't want to sell Mexes," Spalletti insisted.

"It's possible that someone may want him, but for us he is indispensable."

"Many rumours do the rounds, especially here, and we are used to that at Roma."

Platini envisions more open league

REUTERS, Belgrade

Former French international Michel Platini has vowed to make the Champions League more open to less wealthy clubs if he beats his rival Lennart Johansson in their battle for the UEFA presidency.

"I want progress but not a revolution," Platini, 51, told a news conference during a brief visit to Belgrade as part of his campaign to oust the 77-year-old Swede, who has been in charge since 1990.

"My advantage over Mr. Johansson is that my candidacy came at a moment when he thought about calling it quits and then decided to run against me for some

reason," Platini said.

Johansson has launched his own bid for a fifth and final term saying he has the experience Platini lacks and the outcome of their battle will be decided at the UEFA Congress in Dusseldorf on January 27.

Platini, 51, believes that while the 32-team format of Europe's premier club competition should remain unchanged, the number of clubs from the top leagues should be reduced in order to give more countries a chance to participate.

"Italy, England, Germany and Spain should have three clubs each in the Champions league so that teams from other leagues that are not in the same financial bracket can compete with them on the pitch."

"There are not enough champions taking part in the competition as

it is. There are many countries in Europe whose clubs can't hold onto their most talented players but they still deserve a chance to play against the top clubs."

"My mission is to protect soccer and I believe everyone will benefit from the idea to get more leagues, countries and clubs in Europe involved in the Champions league."

"It would be a more European competition and as such would actually entice sponsors," he said in a bid to dispel fears that reorganising the competition would trigger a financial backlash.

Platini said implementing his project would not mean doing anyone any favours and added it was designed to help "both the rich and the poor."

Carlos close to new deal

INTERNET, undated

Roberto Carlos has confirmed he is close to signing a new contract at Real Madrid after months of negotiations.

The Brazilian left-back has often stated his desire to stay at the Bernabeu even though he has held talks with other clubs.

He told Spanish radio station Cadena COPE: "I want to stay. We're close to reaching an agreement, which would be my last contract."

The former Internazionale defender has been linked with a

move to England but insists he is happy in the Spanish capital.

He added: "I spoke with people representing other clubs who had great offers, but my future is in Spain with Real Madrid."

"I want to give back to Real Madrid everything they have given me. I've watched English football on television, but I prefer Spanish football."

Roberto Carlos is aware Madrid need to improve in several areas if they are to challenge Barcelona this season and he pinpointed Antonio Cassano and Ronaldo as two teammates who need to raise their game.

Cassano criticised coach Fabio Capello last week and has since refused to apologise, while Ronaldo is still struggling for fitness.

Roberto Carlos added: "Antonio

needs to apologise to the coach and his team-mates through a press conference."

"Ronaldo needs to lose weight and score the 35 goals he promised. It's for the general good."

"(But) there's still a great atmosphere surrounding this team."

"The coach likes us to train exactly how we would play in a match, and whoever doesn't train, doesn't play."

"Everyone has to work hard. The veterans have to keep the younger players excited and make sure they respect those who are playing."

"You can't be unmotivated and you can't leave the coach with any doubts. Every week it's the best XI who get to play."