

Findlay backs Lara in ODIs

AP, Kingston

Despite Brian Lara's lean form, he was still the spearhead of West Indies' batting in one-day cricket internationals, says former chairman of selectors Mike Findlay.

Lara, who collected just 127 runs in seven innings during the Champions Trophy in India, needed to bat higher, Findlay said.

"No matter what his form is Brian Lara is still our best batsman," he added.

Findlay, who served as a selector for six years and convenor from 1998 to 2002, also defended Lara's captaincy, noting he was still the team's best choice for the position.

"He is not the best captain in the world but Brian Lara is the best captain available to the West Indies at this time. He is best suited for the job," Findlay said.

Asked about West Indies' recent performances in reaching the final of the Champions Trophy and the preceding DLF Cup in Malaysia, Findlay said he was pleased with the team's improvement but believed it lacked sustained professionalism to win the "big games".

"The problem is in their heads, they can't think on their feet," Findlay said.

"We must also remember that outside of (Chris) Gayle, (Ramnaresh) Sarwan, Lara and (Shivnarine) Chanderpaul, we don't have world-class players. They (other players) are good players but not yet world class." He believed that limited opportunities to play county cricket in England compared to the past was also hindering their progression to an extent.

Nimbus makes

FROM PAGE 21 safeguard this time to keep the board's interest which had difficulties during their last engagement with ESPN-STAR Sports.

"We regret that the Sports Adviser didn't discuss the issue with an elected body before taking such an important decision," he added.

However a great deal of uncertainty emerged over this almost happy ending after the sports ministry order on Wednesday.

The board officials led by Mahbubul Anam met the joint-secretary first and then Youth and Sports Adviser Shafi Sami in the morning to convince him to continue the process but only had the revised order in the evening when the two ministry officials arrived.

The board officials as well as the two bidders spent anxious moments due to the delay and seemed confused about the future of the whole process when they came to know from the ministry officials that they could proceed but without the authority to finalise the deal within the 24 hours deadline according to a clause.

After a lot of discussion and bargaining the two parties agreed to open the tenders.

"We have come here because we feel that Bangladesh cricket has huge potential. We are here to do business but I think both the parties would be benefitted from this venture," said Nimbus senior vice-president Yanich Colacco.



Swiss Martina Hingis is elated after beating Russian Nadia Petrova at the WTA Championships in Madrid on Wednesday.

Maria, Martina move

Tennis

AFP, Madrid

Maria Sharapova powered to her second win in two days at the WTA Championships here Wednesday defeating Belgium's Kim Clijsters 6-4, 6-4 in a top-quality encounter.

The 19-year-old Russian put herself on the cusp of reaching the semifinals with a dominant display against an opponent who had clawed her way back to top form after an injury-ravaged summer.

Sharapova pocketed the first set 6-4 but had to withstand a determined fightback by Clijsters in the second.

The US Open champion had to stave off break points in the second and fourth games, but did so mainly thanks to her big serve, one of the most powerful in the women's game.

"She then struck in the fifth game to get a vital break of serve and moved out to 5-2 ahead before Clijsters staged one brave last stand.

The Belgian broke Sharapova's serve for the first time in the eighth game and then held her own to get

to 5-4. She then had two break points to level the set, but once again Sharapova produced her best tennis and she ran out a confident winner in 1hour 29minutes.

Earlier, Svetlana Kuznetsova showed Sharapova she was not the only on-form Russian in town with a 7-5, 6-3 win over Elena Dementieva in the same red group.

Number four Kuznetsova had to fight hard in the opening set as her rival, already beaten in straight sets by Sharapova on Tuesday, rebounded after losing the first two games but succumbed in 1hr 50min to a service winner.

It was Dementieva's eighth straight loss at the year-ending event after she lost all her group matches in her two previous appearances.

After a titanic opening saw the pair split the first six games Dementieva hit a forehand long to drop serve in the eighth game but Kuznetsova produced a double fault when serving for the set.

However, the French Open finalist Kuznetsova finally threw off her inconsistent spell as she held and then broke to take the set 7-5 at the third time of asking after a 70min

struggle. Buoyed by getting her nose in front the 21-year-old from Saint Petersburg raced into early command in the second set making it five games on the trot as she mottored 3-0 and then 4-1 clear with an ace.

But Dementieva dug her heels in and held only to be bamboozled by a superlative backhand and then two of her own mistakes as Kuznetsova moved to the brink of victory.

Dementieva saved a match point with a beefy forehand winner but Kuznetsova was not to be denied second time around.

In the final game of the evening, Switzerland's Martina Hingis beat Russian Nadia Petrova 6-4, 3-6, 6-3 which means France's Amelie Mauresmo is certain to lose her world number one status after 34 weeks in pole position.

Hingis is playing the end-of-year event for the eighth time but first since leaving the Tour in 2002 with foot and ankle injuries.

The top two in each group will go forward to the semis in a competition which contains four former winners for the first time since 1992.

Vaughan eyes Perth return?

CRICINFO, undated

Even as Andrew Flintoff and Duncan Fletcher work out various combinations for the Ashes, Michael Vaughan has said he could be back to playing cricket in three weeks' time.

What that means is that he would be available for selection for the third Test starting in Perth on December 14, and the two-day game against Western Australia from December 9.

Vaughan missed the entire summer season this year with a knee injury and Andrew Strauss and Andrew Flintoff have taken turns to lead the English side in his absence. Flintoff was finally chosen to captain England in the Ashes. The last time Vaughan represented England was in the Lahore Test last December.

This latest statement from Vaughan comes after his last month's prognosis where he had said that making it to Australia was a "long shot".

"I hope to be playing cricket again in three weeks," Vaughan said at the pre-Ashes lunch in London. "The knee is coming on well and by that time I hope to be able to put a call in and say 'I'm available to play'."

Richie rooting for Pommies

PTI, Melbourne

Australian cricket great Richie Benaud believes that England are capable of overcoming the string of injury problems to defend the Ashes.

Benaud feels that in England's Ashes campaign, the onus will be on the pace attack, who have the firepower to rattle the Australians.

"England's pace bowling is the key to the series," he was quoted as saying by The Age on Thursday.

"I said in 2004 that if England's pace attack bowled well they could win the Ashes and everyone laughed at me. Look what happened." The English pace quartet of Simon Jones, Matthew Hoggard, Andrew Flintoff and Steve Harmison had Australia on the backfoot in 2005.

But England have arrived in Australia without Jones and Michael Vaughan, who led the team to the first Ashes victory in almost 20 years.

"They'll miss Jones and Vaughan. Jones will certainly be missed, partly because he was an improving bowler. England are going to miss Michael Vaughan because of his tactical expertise and the fact that he's a good player."

"But there's no reason why England cannot have a balance in their attack this year, even though Jones isn't there, he further said.

"They still have Steve Harmison, Matthew Hoggard and Flintoff. That's three main-line bowlers with plenty of pace about them, I think if they stay fit and bowl well they are right in there."

Chelsea try

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right now," he said. Hedman added that Chelsea were considering signing him for the rest of the season.

Cech is still recovering from a fractured skull suffered last month in a league win at Reading. The Czech international had two metal plates inserted into his head and is not expected to return to training until late January.

Third-choice Hilario has deputised for Cech and Cucidini, who was also knocked unconscious at Reading but returned for Chelsea's League Cup win over Aston Villa on Wednesday.

Milan stage

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from the left. Chievo, without a win in Serie A after 10 matches, scored twice in the last five minutes to earn a 2-2 draw at Reggina.

In other matches Livorno lost 2-1 to second division Arezzo and Empoli defeated Serie B leaders Genoa 1-0.

The second legs are on November 29 and December 6, dates still to be decided.

Biggies avoid

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this summer. Liverpool went on to carve out enough chances to have won at a canter with Craig Bellamy, who had a second half penalty saved by Maik Taylor, particularly profligate.

Despite the win, it was a tough night for Liverpool with key midfielder Mohammed Sissoko stretched off midway through the first half with what appeared to be a dislocated shoulder.

Defender Tom Huddlestone scored twice for Spurs, including a precious equaliser ten minutes from the end of regulation time after Leon Constantine had given Port Vale the lead.

A deflected long-range shot from Huddlestone in the first half of extra time gave Spurs the edge and England forward Jermain Defoe made sure of the outcome, finally finding the net after squandering a string of earlier chances.

'Aussies' uncivilised'

Cricket

AFP, Sydney

India's cricket chief branded Australia's behaviour "totally uncivilised" Thursday in his strongest remarks since being manhandled from the presentation stage following the Champions Trophy final.

As Australian captain Ricky Ponting desperately tried to contact BCCI president Sharad Pawar to apologise for his team's actions, the Indian official lashed out at his treatment following Australia's victory last Sunday.

Pawar had previously played down the incident but made it clear in the Australian media he was not happy with his treatment.

"I will not react to this other than to say it was totally uncivilised," Pawar told the Sydney Morning Herald from India in remarks published Thursday.

"This is not good at all but I have decided to play it down because we have an extremely good relation-

ship with the Australian board and we would like to keep that going."

Television footage after Australia's win showed an impatient Ponting gesturing with his finger for Pawar to hand over the trophy quickly and batsman Damien Martyn then pushing him away from the celebrating players.

Both Australians have since offered to apologise to Pawar, one of the most powerful officials in world cricket.

Cricket Australia spokesman Philip Pope said Ponting had repeatedly tried to contact Pawar in India on Wednesday night and Thursday morning but the official was unavailable.

"He's tried to get through to him six or seven times but has not spoken to him yet," Pope told AFP.

Ponting admitted in a televised interview released Thursday to coincide with the launch of his 2006 tour diary that the incident "doesn't look great on television" but insisted there was no malicious intent towards Pawar.

"That's why it's so important for me to be in personal contact and if

there is anything lingering to get it sorted out as quickly as we can," he said.

Martyn also offered Pawar an apology for the behaviour with outraged Indian cricket stars Sunil Gavaskar and Sachin Tendulkar, as well as the host nation's media.

"I didn't mean to offend him and I apologise if I did so," Martyn told Sydney's Daily Telegraph newspaper.

"There was nothing in it other than me trying to help him out as there was a crush of people."

But Pawar said it was the Australian players, not him, intruding on the presentation stage.

"Those players were not allowed to come onto the dais it was only supposed to be the captain," he said.

"Certainly I would accept an apology because then we could close this chapter."

"The Australian board is headed by a respected and civilised man and our relationship is extremely good. If they apologise, it would be a good signal to the people in this country."

England open tour today

Cricket

REUTERS, Canberra

England will play their first match on tour in Australia when they face the Prime Minister's XI in a one-day game on Friday.

The tourists have not named their team yet but are expected to field most of their top players with only two weeks to go before the first test starts in Brisbane.

Andrew Flintoff has indicated he wants to play to improve his fitness after an ankle operation while spinner Ashley Giles is also hoping for a game after being out of action for almost a year with a hip injury.

Giles is battling with Monty Panesar for the spinner's position and said he wants to get back into action as soon as possible.

"It will be almost 12 months since my last bowl in a game...it's been too long," he told reporters on Thursday.

"I'll be a little bit nervous -- and you always are when you go out on

the pitch -- but I am looking forward to it as well.

"We all want to impress...I want to be playing in the test team but we also play as a squad and whoever gets picked, I back them."

Opener Marcus Trescothick and middle-order batsman Alastair Cook are also hoping for some time at the crease after layoffs.

With England only scheduled to play two more three-day games before the opening test, the warm-up games have taken on added importance with competition for places hotting up.

"The guys are just so excited about being here. It's one of those things you talk about a lot. It's a pretty exciting time for us now," opener Andrew Strauss said.

"The more anticipation you have over a series the better the chance of you playing really well. The only thing with a relatively short buildup to that first test is that we get as much preparation in as possible."

Several players in the Prime Minister's XI are also pushing for selection in the Australian team,

ensuring the English will face a torrid workout.

South Australian paceman Shaun Tait, who made his test debut in the last Ashes series, will lead the attack with the instructions to bowl as fast as he likes.

"I'll be giving him as much freedom as he has in state cricket," skipper Cameron White said.

TEAMS

ENGLAND (from): Andrew Flintoff (captain), Marcus Trescothick, Andrew Strauss, Alastair Cook, Kevin Pietersen, Paul Collingwood, Ian Bell, Chris Read, Graint Jones, Ashley Giles, Monty Panesar, Stephen Harmison, Matthew Hoggard, Sajid Mahmood, Liam Plunkett, James Anderson.

PMS XI: Cameron White (captain), Travis Birt, Mark Cosgrove, Brett Dorey, Ben Hilfenhaus, Phil Jaques, Shaun Marsh, Tim Paine, Adam Prichard, Shaun Tait, Adam Voges, Mark Divin (12th man).

Don't stop me: Akhtar

Cricket

AFP, Lahore

Pakistan paceman Shoaib Akhtar broke his silence Thursday over his doping ban, saying he had taken nutritional supplements and no banned substances.

The 31-year-old fast bowler was banned from all international and domestic cricket for two years on November 1 after testing positive for the steroid nandrolone.

"I maintain I have done nothing wrong," Akhtar told AFP in an exclusive interview.

"Don't stop me from playing cricket, my whole career is at stake," the mercurial bowler, whose career has been dogged by controversy and injury, said.

He said he told a tribunal set up by the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) that supplements available on the market should be banned before he was stopped from playing.

Akhtar's new-ball partner Mohammad Asif was banned for one year after the tribunal found them guilty of failing a dope test.

The pair have lodged appeals,

which will be heard by a committee comprising former judge Justice Fakhruddin Ibrahim, former Test player Haseeb Ahsan and doping expert doctor Danish Zaheer.

Akhtar said he hoped that the committee would overturn his ban because the nutritional supplements and herbal medicines he took were not banned.

"The nutritional supplements like Promax-50 and Nitron-5 are not banned even in World Anti-Doping Agency list and I don't know if they have produced nandrolone in my body," said Akhtar, who only returned to international cricket in late August.

He underwent twin knee operations in February this year and missed Pakistan's tour of Sri Lanka and the Test series in England because of a recurrence of an ankle injury.

"They should have considered my medical condition, I have gone through dozens of operations and have taken hundreds of medicines to heal up injuries. I am not a doctor and don't know much about medicines.

"There are certain herbal medicines which are not banned and I have been taking them. Greg

Rusudski was cleared even though his levels of nandrolone were higher than mine," said Akhtar, referring to the British tennis player, who was cleared after testing positive for nandrolone in 2004.

He added: "The doping expert doctor Abbas Rizvi in his statement before the tribunal contended that the type of food and supplements I have been taking can easily take the nandrolone substances to higher levels."

Akhtar said he attended just one doping seminar conducted by the PCB, in 2002.

"The seminar merely told us how to give urine samples, how to close the bottle carrying samples and it did not tell anything about what we have to take and what we can't.

"Since 2002 a lot of new nutritional supplements have been introduced and are available in the market," Akhtar said.

The "Rawalpindi Express", as Akhtar is known, is also embroiled in controversy over allegedly slapping coach Bob Woolmer during the recently concluded Champions Trophy in India.

Stop Andy: Ricky

Cricket

AFP, Sydney

Australian captain Ricky Ponting admitted Thursday his England counterpart Andrew Flintoff would be the host nation's main target when the campaign to regain the Ashes begins this month.

Ponting said Australia believed containing the talismanic Englishman could spark a collapse among other players in the touring side that would help bring the Ashes back down under, after last year's shock loss to their old rival.

"He's such a vital part of their side, if you happen to keep him down for a

few Test matches in a row or a few performances here and there, it might drag a couple of their other players down with him," Ponting said.

Flintoff was England's leading wicket-taker and third-highest run-scorer in last year's Ashes campaign, earning plaudits as the best cricketer in the world as he inspired his side to its first series win in 18 years.

This time around, he has the added burden of the captaincy and is recovering from ankle surgery, giving Ponting hope he can be restricted.

"It is important that we do that with him, more so for his playing abilities than his leadership," he said. "We all saw last time around that he can be dynamic with the bat and the ball."

"I think their team really do run off him a little bit. If we can restrict him and put him under pressure right through the series, then hopefully a few of their other players might start feeling the pressure as well.

"If we can start taking more than one player down, it gives us a great chance of winning."

England's touring party has its first match since arriving in Australia against a Prime Minister's XI in Canberra Friday.

It is expected to provide a hit-out for several players short of match fitness, including spinners Ashley Giles and Monty Panesar, and batsmen Marcus Trescothick and Alastair Cook.

The first of five Ashes Tests begins in Brisbane on November 23.

Ronaldo

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He has scored 14 times.

Scolari named both Ronaldo and Andrade in his 20-man squad which will face Kazakhstan in a Euro 2008 group A qualifier at home on November 15. Benfica striker Nuno Gomes was designated the captain of the squad for that match.

Shoaib slapped

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appoint Anil Kaul as the liaison officer of the Pakistan team," BCCI's administrative head Ratnakar Shetty said in a statement.

"Kaul was appointed as the close protection officer of the Pakistan team by Bob Nichols, the security consultant engaged by the International Cricket Council."

Pakistan, along with India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, failed to make the semifinals of the Champions Trophy, which was won by Australia on Sunday.

Pakistan begin a three-Test series against the West Indies on Saturday.

Abahani

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loss after seven straight wins, Abahani ended the first-leg on top of the table by virtue of better goal difference (33 scored, five conceded) although they are level with Usha (31 scored, 5 conceded) on 21 points after eight rounds.

The goal difference of the first-leg, however, will be ignored in the championship leg.

The new league leaders will now take on Sonali Bank in the Super Five opener today at the same venue while Usha are pitted against fourth-placed Mohammedan Sporting Club (16 points) tomorrow.

Mariners, who are third with 18 points, complete the super league lineup.

Mashrafee

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Sakib 12\*, Shafiq 2-23). DHAKA FIRST INNINGS: 173 all out in 55.1 overs (Javed 17, Mehrab 13, Shahriar 9, Ashraf 29, Ayub 13, Nadif 9, Anwar 15, Rafique 8, Sharif 4, Shahadat 37\*, Shakil 11, extras 18; Sajid 4-56, Ishraq 4-46, Arafat 1-16); BARISAL FIRST INNINGS: 59-2 in 18.3 overs (Imran 8, Hannan 32, Nasiruddin 10\*, Mehdi 0\*, extras 9; Shahadat 1-26, Sharif 1-25).

Much Adu

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monitoring the teenage striker's progress and that he is due to travel to Manchester on November 18 for a two-week trial.

"The reports contradict statements released last season in which United expressly pointed out that Adu was not a player they are currently interested in.

"Despite the recent bout of speculation, United's stance has not changed and Adu will not be attending a trial."

Narayanganj

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while International Master Abdullah Al Rakib and FM Mehdi Hasan Parag drew their boards with FM Taibur Rahman and Debaraj Chatterjee respectively. GM Reefat Bin Sattar saved their blushes when he defeated FM Abu Sufian Shakil.

Chittagong Mohammedan and Leonine Chess Club moved to joint-third place with 13 points. Leonine, featuring GM Niaz Murshed and two foreign Grandmasters, blanked Mohakhali Pradeep Sangha 4-0 while Chittagong Mohammedan beat Sonali Bank 3.5-0.5.

In other matches, Muktijodha Sangsad edged Faith Chess Club 2.5-1.5, Friends Chess Power beat Farashganj SC by same margin and Dhaka University defeated Rajshahi Daba Unnayan Sangstha 3.5-0.5.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

Crossword puzzle grid with clues for Across and Down words. Includes a solution time of 25 mins and a key for the crossword.

Cryptoquip puzzle grid with a key: WO IQT CSXS WL HQLKQL, BLK LSSKSK B HWOZ, W, DTSUU IQT EWDMZ RBHH.

CRYPTOQUIP WO IQT CSXS WL HQLKQL BLK LSSKSK B HWOZ, W DTSUU IQT EWDMZ RBHH ZMS CSUZEWLUZSX RBYI. Yesterday's Cryptoquip: I SUPPOSE A YOUNG BUSINESSPERSON'S ENERGETIC LITTLE DOG COULD BE A PEPPY YUPPIE PUPPY. Today's Cryptoquip Clue: S equals E. The Cryptoquip 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.