

Do-or-die for fallen giants



AFP, New Delhi

Former masters India and Pakistan face a stiff test to restore the balance of power at the Asian Games as South Korea consolidates its field hockey supremacy in the region.

The Korean men are favourites to retain the gold medal they won in Busan four years ago that triggered a spectacular slide by the sub-continental giants.

India and Pakistan go to Doha knowing they must reverse their flagging fortunes to keep the sport alive in their cricket-mad nations or face an uncertain future at the international level.

Seven-time champions Pakistan failed to win an Asian Games medal for the first time since hockey was introduced at the 1958 Tokyo Games when they came in fourth at Busan.

Pakistan, who finished sixth at the World Cup in Germany in September, have not won a major

title since the Shahbaz Ahmed-inspired triumph at the World Cup in Sydney in 1994.

India's eight Olympic gold medals are all but forgotten in the wake of crushing setbacks at the international level -- the 1998 Asian Games title being an exception to the otherwise dismal scenario.

India finished 11th out of 12 at this year's World Cup promoting disgusted coach Vasudevant Bhaskaran to plead for a psychologist to help his players out of their defeatist mindset.

"Are our best playing their best? I doubt it," said Bhaskaran, who was captain when India won the last of its Olympic gold medals at the western-boycootted Moscow Games in 1980.

"The freshers seem to understand and improved match after match, but the stars let the team down. It seems the remedy lies in the mind."

Not surprisingly, both India and Pakistan have left out senior players from the Doha-bound squads in a bid to make a fresh start.

India dropped seasoned striker Gagan Ajit Singh and midfielders Vikram Pillay and Ignace Tirkey, while drag-flickers Sandeep Singh and Jugraj Singh are still recovering from injuries.

Pakistan sacked five seniors, including captain Mohammad Saqlain and penalty-corner expert Sohail Abbas, after they skipped a training camp to honour their lucrative contracts with foreign clubs.

Striker Rehan Butt, who was named the captain, dismissed fears that the absence of veteran players will weaken Pakistan.

"We will not miss the senior players because this team is capable of reaching the final," said Butt, adding that South Korea would be their toughest opponents.

At Busan, Pakistan lost to India in the semifinals and were beaten by Malaysia in the play-off for the bronze medal.

If India do not make the semifinals, Bhaskaran's head will be the first on the chopping block. Indian officials have begun talks with German Paul Lissek to take over

after the Asiad if Bhaskaran fails to deliver.

India are drawn with South Korea, China, Bangladesh and Oman in group B from where two teams will qualify for the semifinals. Group A has Pakistan, Malaysia, Japan, Hong Kong and Chinese Taipei.

Meanwhile, China will defend the women's title they won in Busan after a shock win over the Koreans. The Chinese finished 10th at the World Cup, the Koreans were ninth even as Japan surprised the field by taking fifth place.

India, Malaysia, Hong Kong and Chinese Taipei are the other teams in the seven-nation round-robin women's competition.

The gold and silver medalists in both events in Doha will earn direct spots in the 2008 Beijing Olympics. If the Chinese women finish among the top two, the third-placed team will make the trip to Beijing.

India-S Africa first ODI rained off

AFP, Johannesburg

Rain prevented any play in the first of five one-day internationals between South Africa and India at the Wanderers Stadium Sunday.

Players, officials and spectators endured a frustrating afternoon of intermittent rain before play was finally called off more than four hours after the scheduled start.

At one stage it was announced that a 43-overs match would be played instead but as had happened shortly before the originally scheduled toss, rain started to fall.

The rain stopped again and another inspection was planned only for more rain to fall, finally causing the umpires to call off the match.

With no reserve day scheduled, it was a blow for both teams in their build-up to the World Cup in the West Indies next year.

The second match will be a day-night match in Durban Wednesday.

Langer ready for bouncers

AFP, Brisbane

Justin Langer says he has no mental scars from the fearful head blow he took in his last Test match and is ready for any short-pitched England bowling in Thursday's Ashes Test opener here at the Gabba.

The senior Australian opening batsman, playing in his 100th Test match against South Africa in Johannesburg last April, collected a thudding blow from Makhaya Ntini on his helmet which left him in hospital with significant concussion.

Langer, who turns 36 on Tuesday, admitted Monday he thought for a short time about his future in the game after the incident, but he is not gun-shy about facing Steve Harmison's steely deliveries in the Brisbane Ashes Test.

"I've played a lot of cricket since it happened and I feel normal," Langer told reporters here Monday.

"I've been playing for 15 years so I don't feel anything different about Thursday than I ever have.

"As a 5ft 8in opening batsman I've faced a lot of short-pitched bowling in my life and I'm not sure if I will get more of it in the series.

"If England decide to bowl short to me I'll find out maybe on Thursday morning."

Dav at odds

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about Ashrafal inclusion in the World Cup simply strengthen the whispering as it is difficult to find a reason to deny the cricketer a chance to play in the only international commitment before the biggest cricket show on the earth.

"He (Whatmore) had once branded Al Shahrar, Hannan (Sarker) and Alok (Kapali) as the best batsmen in the country but without any explanation he simply threw them away. Is it the turn for Ashrafal?" questioned a very influential member of the team on condition of anonymity.

Captain Habibul Bashar looked disturbed by the decision but understandably declined to make any comment and rather wanted to focus on the coming series.

But the premier Bangladesh batsman said that he would desperately want Ashrafal in the World Cup team.

"Everybody should understand that he is a rare talent. I think the selection panel took the best decision for the betterment of Ashrafal. But it is my personal view that we can try him at number six position in the future. The numbers four to six are flexible for any batsman but it is not the case for opening slot," said Bashar.

"I am desperately looking for his return to the team," he added.

Taylor turns it around

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boundaries in his 42.
The 28-year-old Barbadian then dismissed Kamran Akmal (17) with another slip catch to Bravo to leave Pakistan at 333-7.

Taylor returned for his second spell to trap Shahid Nazir leg before for seven but Abdul Razzaq and Gul defied the West Indian bowling for 40 minutes. Taylor changed ends to dismiss Gul (seven) with another slip catch.

Last man Danish Kaneria was run out for nought, leaving Razzaq unbeaten on 16.

SCOREBOARD

Scoreboard at stumps on the second day of the second Test between Pakistan and the West Indies at Multan Stadium on Monday:
PAKISTAN: First innings (overnight 263-4)
Hafeez c Ramdin b Taylor 36
Farhat c Lara b Bravo 74
Younis c Morton b Taylor 56
Yousuf c Lara b Gayle 56
Inzamam c Ramdin b Taylor 31
Malik c Bravo b Collymore 42
Razzaq not out 16
Akmal c Bravo b Collymore 17
Nazir lbw b Taylor 7
Gul c Bravo b Taylor 7
Kaneria run out 0
Extras: (b-9, lb-4, nb-2) 15
Total: (All out in 124 overs) 357
Fall of wickets: 1-83, 2-125, 3-212, 4-250, 5-269, 6-315, 7-333, 8-346, 9-357

Bowler	O	M	R	W
Taylor	26	6	91	5
Collymore	31	9	67	2
Powell	14	4	50	0
Gayle	22	6	52	1
Bravo	19	6	41	1
Mohammed	11	1	39	0
Morton	1	0	4	0

WEST INDIES: First innings
Gayle not out 87

Ganga not out	59
Extras: (lb-4, nb-1)	5
Total: (For no loss in 57 overs)	151
To bat: Lara, Morton, Chanderpaul, Bravo, Ramdin, Collymore, Powell, Taylor, Mohammed	

'Shoaib, Asif victims of grudge'

PTI, Karachi

Former Pakistan captain Hanif Muhammad feels banned pace bowlers Shoaib Akhtar and Muhammad Asif were the victims of the personal grudge by the cricket board appointed appeals committee, which was not neutral.

"The way the national cricketers have been punished was a source of embarrassment for all. If both players were at fault, they should be punished but the punishment should not be so severe that it could bring their career to end," Hanif said.

"I can say with full confidence that most of the batsmen in the world are fearful of Shoaib Akhtar. He is the fastest bowler in the world.

"In the absence of these bowlers, it would be hard for the Pakistan cricket team to reach the second round in the next year's World Cup," he was quoted as saying by the Daily Times.

He also said Pakistani's victory against the West Indies in the Lahore Test should not blind them as Brian Lara was in excellent form and could pose serious threat to the Pakistani team.

Shoaib was banned for two year and Asif for one after the duo tested positive for banned steroid nandrolone in the PCB's internal dope test before the Champions Trophy.

Sri Lanka honour record-breaking four cricketers

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's cricket chiefs honoured four 286-run world records at a ceremony here on Sunday night attended by 400 invitees.

Captain Mahela Jayawardene and Kumar Sangakkara were feted for their record partnership of 624 during the first Test against South Africa at the Sinhalese Sports Club here in July.

Openers Sanath Jayasuriya and Upul Tharanga were celebrated for their 286-run stand against England at Headingley in June, the highest partnership for the first wicket in one-day cricket.

"It has been an amazing few months for our cricket and for these four players in particular," said Sri Lanka Cricket (SLC) secretary K Mathivanan at the ceremony.

"To break world records it takes a very special effort and they don't come all that easily."

The cricket chiefs had earlier gifted both Jayawardene and Sangakkara a luxury car each for their Test record.

Moya confirms Chennai Open participation

PTI, New Delhi

Former world number one and two-time champion Carlos Moya of Spain has confirmed participation for the 400,000-dollar Chennai Open 2007.

Moya, a crowd favourite in Chennai and the winner of 2004 and 2005 editions of the tournament, will make his fifth appearance in six years in the event to be held at the SDAT Stadium in Nungambakkam, Chennai, from January 1-7, according to a press release.

"This year Moya, winner of 19 ATP titles, was deprived of a hattrick of Chennai Open titles by eventual winner Ivan Ljubicic of Croatia."

McGrath rejects retirement talk

BBC ONLINE, undated

Glenn McGrath has dismissed suggestions that he is contemplating retirement after the Ashes series.

"The claim was made by former Australia paceman Geoff Lawson, but McGrath insisted he was "still hungry" to play Test cricket.

"I play Tests because I love the game, I don't see myself as too old. I feel I've still got a bit to achieve," the 36-year-old commented.

"I don't remember feeling this fresh my whole career."

McGrath, who has not played a Test since January, says modern conditioning techniques have prolonged his career.

"Playing at 36 is just a natural progression for the way cricket is going. "With technology and the way we train and prepare, who knows, in another 10 or 15 years guys could be playing at 45, 46?"

McGrath is determined to avoid a repeat of the 2005 series in England when he missed two Tests because of injury and both of them ended in defeats for Australia.

"Sitting on the sidelines knowing I can't do anything to help the guys, that was the most frustrating thing I have done in cricket," he said.

Kaka reflective

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Kaka also criticised Brazil's World Cup preparations in Switzerland, where paying crowds of around 5,000 people watched their training sessions.

"One thing which got in the way was the number of people during the preparations, it affected the concentration of the players and is something which could be improved in the future," he said.

Mega deal

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"This agreement is a landmark in the history of this institution as it constitutes the most important audiovisual contract for any sports club in the world," they said.

Real's television rights are currently owned by Sogecable, through Audiovisual Sport, who also hold the rights for most of the Primera Liga and second division clubs.

The present agreement, which runs until 2008, is reported to be worth around 55 million euros a year, but the new deal will see Real almost triple that figure and earn over 157 million each season.

Publicly-run regional television station Telemadrid also bid for the rights.

Mediapro, an affiliate of WPP group, signed a similar deal with Real's arch rivals Barcelona several months ago which was reported to be worth around 1,000 million euros.

The company then reached an agreement with Sogecable to exploit the rights on their pay-TV platform.

Ricky learnt his lesson



AFP, Sydney

Ricky Ponting's captaincy will be under scrutiny in his jousts with counterpart Andrew Flintoff after being derided as the Australian skipper who lost the prized Ashes to England.

Perhaps no Australian player absorbed more of the blame for last year's Ashes loss after 16 years than Ponting.

Ponting, who inherited an ageing Australian team after golden eras under Mark Taylor and Steve Waugh, was lambasted for his tactics and consensus approach to the captaincy as England ran the show to win the epic series 2-1.

Constant reminders over the last 14 months of his unwanted place in Australian cricket history have spurred the 31-year-old Tasmanian to declare the lessons have been learnt and now it's time to retrieve the urn.

"We will be a better team this time around. We've looked at ourselves closer than before the last Ashes. We've identified what might have held us back last time," Ponting said.

"I don't think there's going to be too much drastic change -- we just made a lot of mistakes last time."

"The no-balls we bowled, we put a lot of catches down, when we had partnerships going, we managed to make a mistake that got England

back into the game, or Andrew Flintoff came on and got a wicket.

"They're things we won't allow to happen again. It's at home, and we play very well at home."

Ponting, earlier this month crowned the ICC Test Player of the Year and Player of the Year, says he will remain consultative, despite doubts from outside about whose team it is.

"I've done that since the first one-day game I captained and won a World Cup undefeated doing that sort of stuff," he said.

"I'm not going to keep everyone happy all the time. That's what I know and realise. As long as I'm keeping this team happy -- that's what matters to me."

Captaincy apart, Ponting is a prime member of this all-star Australian team.

Since the last Ashes series Ponting, batting at No.3, has scored eight centuries in 11 Tests and overall has amassed 31 Test hundreds in 105 matches, placing him fifth all-time behind Sachin Tendulkar (35), Sunil Gavaskar (34), Steve Waugh and Brian Lara (32).

He has accumulated 8,792 runs, the ninth all-time highest in Test cricket.

His 58.23 Test average is only bettered among his contemporaries by teammate Mike Hussey (75.93) and India's Rahul Dravid (58.76).

Ponting has led Australia in 30 Tests and lost only three, although two of those losses painfully came at Edgbaston and Trent Bridge last

year against England.

He has been accused of being too conservative. The nightwatchman and third man have returned, fieldsmen have been spread to the boundary, follow-ons are often not enforced.

"I don't know if I'm any less attacking or not. I try and go with the momentum of the game. If there's a chance for us to really attack then I'll do that, but if we're getting smacked around why have three slips, no third man and a short leg?" he said.

But where Ponting is like his predecessor Waugh is dallying in mind-games with his opponents.

"I think the pressure's probably on England," Ponting said ahead of the series.

"There's more questions being asked of them and their team and their fitness than there is of us. Our record this year has been very good, their's has not been so good."

"They've won five of their 13 Tests (since the 2005 Ashes) and we've won 11 of our 12."

But Ponting's dilemma is that he is in charge of a team that contains nine players aged 30 or more and several are expected to retire over the next six months leaving him with the monumental task of leading a generational rebuilding phase in Australian cricket.

The onus is on Freddie



AFP, London

No one-played a bigger role with bat or ball in ensuring England regained the Ashes last year than Andrew Flintoff.

Now, not content with leaning on the pace-bowling all-rounder for runs and wickets, England have decided the Lancashire hero is the man to captain the side as they chase their first Test series win in Australia for 20 years.

Making your leading man captain can be fraught with danger especially when, as in Flintoff's case, the player is returning from left ankle surgery.

One feature of England's 2005 success was the calm leadership of then skipper Michael Vaughan. But the Yorkshire batsman's knee problems mean he is unable to lead the team in the return campaign.

So now Flintoff must be his own guide on the field in making sure he doesn't overbowl himself -- or just as bad potentially underbowl himself -- while ensuring his batting and slip fielding are also given sufficient attention.

"I'm sure there will be demands on me," said Flintoff after he'd been named captain for the Champions Trophy and the Ashes in preference to opening batsman Andrew Strauss, who led England at home during their talisman's enforced absence.

"There is a lot of responsibility that goes with the job and that is something I'm aware of.

"But the one thing I concentrate on is playing cricket. Everything outside of that is pretty much out of my control.

"The one thing I can control is on the pitch. Everything else I will take in my stride."

And former Australia captain Steve Waugh was in no doubt about Flintoff's suitability for the job.

"The players respect him and one of the most important things is that he wants to do the job," said Waugh.

"He's an inspirational player, he's a great all-rounder and I have no doubt he'll be leading them with the idea they're here to fight. I know they'll follow him into battle."

"And one thing about this England team is they are coming to Australia to win, not just with the aim to compete, which a lot of their teams have done in the past."

Like his hero Ian Botham, Flintoff will compete until he drops. But when the match is over his sportsmanship is often evident, nowhere more so than at last year's Edgbaston Test when, after England had won by a mere two runs, he placed a consoling arm round the shoulder of not out Australia batsman Brett Lee.

Flintoff starts with a huge advantage over some previous England captains in that no-one can question he is worth a place in the team, his appointment as skipper more in the traditional 'Australian' than 'English' style.

The 28-year-old Flintoff's place in English cricket folklore was sealed by a series of superb displays that saw him score 402 runs and 24 wickets.

Gudjohnsen

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European football next season with a 2-0 home win over strugglers Osasuna as Javi Guerrero and Nigerian Ikechuckwu Uche bagged the goals.

In a basement battle Real Sociedad, champions in 1981 and 1982, still have not mustered a single league win after a goalless home stalemate against Real Betis which left the San Sebastian-based side on just three points.

In another encounter between two lowly sides Espanyol thanked a pair of goals from Raul Tamudo and a last-gasp effort from Walter Pandiani to see off Athletic Bilbao 3-2.

In the late game, Deportivo La Coruna were hosting Celta Vigo in a Galician battle of midtable outfits.