

Pakistan in driving seat

Cricket

AFP, Karachi

Opener Mohammad Hafeez's painstaking half-century helped Pakistan tighten their grip on the third Test and the three-match series against the West Indies in Karachi on Wednesday.

Pakistan built up a solid 174-run lead with eight wickets in hand at stumps on the third day at the National Stadium, with Hafeez on 57 not out and Mohammad Yousuf unbeaten on one.

The home team reached 130-2 when bad light stopped play 15 overs before schedule.

The home batsmen were checked by some tight West Indies bowling after the tourists fought hard to score 260 runs in their first innings, conceding a 44-run lead.

Pakistan lead the series 1-0 after their nine-wicket win in the first Test in Lahore. The second Test ended in a draw at Multan.

Pakistan lost opener Imran Farhat (20) after a slow start to their second innings. Farhat played a rash shot outside the off-stump off pacer Daren Powell and was caught by wicketkeeper Denesh Ramdin.

The West Indies bowled to a tight line and length to keep Pakistan in check as they managed just 61 in the two-hour second session.

But Hafeez and vice-captain Younis Khan continued to stretch the home team's lead in the last session. Hafeez crawled to his fourth Test half-century in 213 minutes, hitting five boundaries.

He added 79 runs for the second wicket with Younis.

Hafeez said strokeplay was difficult on the slow-paced wicket.

"We had to see off the new ball and that was why we were cautious initially. Moreover it was tough to play strokes on this pitch. It has eased up slightly but it's still not good," said Hafeez.

The West Indies' fielders -- who dropped seven catches in the first two Tests -- were once again fumbling as Dwayne Bravo dropped Younis off his own bowling when he

was on 19.

Younis, celebrating his 29th birthday, capitalised on the chance, hitting Chris Gayle for the first six of the match before the off-spinner trapped him in front of the wicket with a faster one for 38.

Earlier, Ramdin hit a gritty 50 to keep alive his team's chances of levelling the series. He added 44 runs for the last wicket with Corey Collymore (eight not out) to help

West Indies recover from 216-9 to 260 all out.

Ramdin was the last man out after he failed to make the crease at the non-striker's end while attempting a second run. He hit seven boundaries.

Despite dismissing the resolute West Indian opener Daren Ganga (81) early in the day, Pakistan wicket-keeper Kamran Akmal

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PHOTO: AFP
Pakistan opener Mohammed Hafeez raises his bat after reaching his half-century against West Indies during the third day of the third and final Test at the National Stadium in Karachi on Wednesday.

Magical trio in FIFA top three

REUTERS, Zurich

Newly-crowned European Footballer of the Year Fabio Cannavaro of Italy, Brazil's Ronaldinho and retired French playmaker Zinedine Zidane have been shortlisted for the FIFA World Player of the Year award.

FIFA said on Wednesday the three were nominated after a poll of coaches and captains of national teams around the world whittled down the number on the shortlist from 30 contenders.

The winner will be named on Dec. 18 when the World Player Gala is held at Zurich's opera house with "Football meets Mozart" as its theme to commemorate this year's 250th anniversary of the birth of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

The gala will also see the presentation of a number of other awards.

In addition to the FIFA Presidential Award and the FIFA Fair Play Prize, the outstanding performers in this summer's World Cup will also be honoured.

The tournament's three best players -- Zidane, Cannavaro and Andrea Pirlo, and three top scorers -- Miroslav Klose, Hernan Crespo and Ronaldo -- will be presented with awards as will the outstanding goalkeeper (Gianluigi Buffon) and the two teams with the best disciplinary records: Brazil and Spain.

The three contenders for the Women's award are Kristine Lilly of the United States, Renate Lingor of Germany and Marta of Brazil. They have been selected from a shortlist of 20.

Real hopeful of Becks accord

INTERNET, undated

Real Madrid sports director Predrag Mijatovic is confident that the club's serious challenge for honours this season will convince David Beckham to stay on in Spain.

The former England captain has not won a major trophy with Real since moving from Manchester United in 2003, as the club suffered a downturn in fortunes.

"He hasn't had much luck in the last three years because when he arrived at Real he thought he was going to win many trophies," Mijatovic said in an interview with Serbian radio station B-92 and the BBC.

"Now the situation is different and I think he is conscious of this."

With a new team of president Ramon Calderon and coach Fabio Capello installed, Real are looking a much stronger proposition this season.

They are third in the Primera Liga, three points behind leaders Barcelona, and still in the Champions League and the King's Cup.

The main stumbling block to Beckham signing a contract extension is the fact that the 31-year-old has dropped out of favour with Capello. He has started only three out of 12 league games this season.

"As far as I am aware, Beckham is happy here in Madrid. At the moment he isn't in the starting line-up but that's not to say that the situation won't have changed in a couple of weeks' time," Mijatovic said.

The former Yugoslavia striker believed a decision on Beckham's future would be reached in another month and a half.

Beckham is out of contention at present with an inflamed cartilage in his left knee.

India recall beckons Ganguly

Cricket

REUTERS, Mumbai

Former India captain Saurav Ganguly is likely to be recalled for next month's Test series in South Africa when the selection committee meets in New Delhi on Thursday.

The move has been prompted by uncertainty over skipper Rahul Dravid's fitness for the opening Test in Johannesburg (December 15-19) due to a finger injury and a string of poor batting displays by the team in one-day cricket.

Ganguly's return is expected to bolster the side's brittle middle-order, especially after left-hander Yuvraj Singh had been ruled out of the three-Test series with a knee injury.

The side has come under intense pressure following two

crushing defeats in the five-match one-day series in South Africa after the opening match was washed out.

"Ganguly's name will surely be discussed," selector Ranjib Biswal told Reuters on Wednesday.

"But to say rightaway he will be picked would be speculation," Biswal added.

The committee was to originally meet in Mumbai, but the venue was shifted to the capital at the request of board president and federal minister Sharad Pawar who wanted to speak to the selectors. Dilip Vengsarkar had said after taking over as chairman of selectors two months ago that he was open to the idea of Ganguly's comeback provided he proves form and fitness in domestic cricket.

Ganguly was sacked as skipper and one-day player last October and dropped from the Test squad

in February after a long batting slump and a row with coach Greg Chappell.

But the 34-year-old left-hander, who has scored 5,221 Test and 10,123 one-day runs, scored a century and bowled incisively in domestic cricket this season that has triggered a public demand for his recall.

The Bengal captain, who had a spell with English country Northamptonshire this year, is also harbouring hopes of playing his third World Cup in the Caribbean next year.

Also working in the left-hander's favour is that he is a proven performer on the bouncy South African pitches, having scored 292 runs at an average of 32.44 in five Tests spread over two tours.

India have not won a test match in three previous trips to South Africa.



PHOTO: AFP
Real Madrid captain and UN goodwill ambassador Raul Gonzalez (C) controls the ball during a friendly football match with students of the district at the Rebus field in Dakar on Tuesday.

Cannavaro unfazed by criticism

Football

REUTERS, Madrid

Newly crowned European Footballer of the Year Fabio Cannavaro has said he is unfazed by criticism from several leading figures in the game about the decision to give him the prestigious award.

"It's not my problem, people seem to have a very short memory," the Real Madrid and Italy player told a news conference on Wednesday.

"I won two titles at Juventus and at the World Cup everyone said that I was the best defender in the world, but now some people are saying they shouldn't have given the award to a defender."

France coach Raymond Domenech, Olympique Lyon boss Gerard Houllier and former AC Milan manager Arrigo Sacchi were amongst the high-profile figures who said they would not have given Italy's World Cup-winning captain the award.

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger (1976) and Germany's Matthias Sammer, who was also playing as a sweeper when he won it in 1996.

Cannavaro, 33, though, is the first recognised centre-back to win the honour and has also been shortlisted for FIFA's world player award together with Barcelona's Brazilian forward Ronaldinho and retired French playmaker Zinedine Zidane.

However, Cannavaro, who is carrying a minor muscle injury and is suspended for Real's next game at home to Athletic Bilbao, admitted that he had suffered a dip in form since his move to the Spanish giants.

"Since I arrived my level hasn't been the same as it was at the World Cup," he said. "If you look at how I played at the World Cup it is not surprising that people say I'm not playing as well now."

"It's usual for this to happen when a player changes team and city. It's always difficult after a World Cup... But the league is long, we are still in the Champions League and I'm not worried. All I'm thinking about is working hard."

has said that his striker Thierry Henry should have won the prize.

But a smiling Cannavaro was clearly unconcerned by the comments.

"Houllier said it was madness," he said. "I respect his opinion, but the Ballon d'Or is now in my house."

"For me the whole thing is a dream as I never thought I'd win the Ballon d'Or. It's very difficult for a defender to win this award and it's an important recognition for this category of players."

"Defenders of the quality of (Paolo) Maldini, (Franco) Baresi, (Fernando) Hierro, (Marcel) Desailly and (Lilian) Thuram never won this award, but deserved it. A defender has the same value as a striker. You win matches because defenders defend well."

"And now I'm one of the candidates for the World Player of the Year award, it's incredible."

Only three defensive players have ever won the European award -- Soviet Union goalkeeper Lev Yashin in 1963, West German sweeper Franz Beckenbauer (1972,

1976) and Germany's Matthias Sammer, who was also playing as a sweeper when he won it in 1996.

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Ultimate ignominy

REUTERS, London

Donating part of his salary to charity will not have hurt Argentina striker Carlos Tevez as much as being forced to wear a Brazil shirt in training.

The 22-year-old Tevez was handed both punishments by his West Ham United teammates for storming out of Upton Park on Saturday after his substitution in their 1-0 home win over Sheffield United, British media reported on Wednesday.

The Sun tabloid even had former Corinthians striker Tevez in the colours of Argentina's arch-rivals Brazil in a photomontage on their back page.

Following an apology on Monday by Tevez, manager Alan Pardew decided to defuse the incident by letting the squad decide on the punishment.

Having asked him to donate part of his wages to the Great Ormond Street Hospital for children, the players had a final laugh when they presented Tevez with a Brazil shirt and said he must wear it in training two weeks.

Valencia put high tag on Villa

INTERNET, undated

Valencia president Juan Soler insists Chelsea have not made an offer for Spain striker David Villa and warned any interested clubs they will have to start negotiations at 100 million pounds.

Reports in the English press on Tuesday suggested Villa is at the top of Jose Mourinho's wish-list during the January transfer window but Soler is adamant Los Che will only let him leave if the player's buy-out clause of 100 million pounds is met.

Soler said: "Officially we have not received any interest or an offer from Chelsea for Villa."

"I met (Valencia sporting director Amedeo) Carboni this morning and he didn't mention anything regarding any possible interest from Chelsea for our striker."

"We have heard rumours but that is all it is."

"We have no intention of selling him. But should any club be interested, they could sit down and negotiate his buy-out clause, which is currently worth 150 million euros (100 million pounds)."

Villa scored 25 goals in Primera Liga last season and was reportedly the subject of a failed 15 million pounds bid from Chelsea in the summer.



PHOTO: AFP
Qatar archer Nada Zeidan (C) carries the Asian Games torch in Doha on Wednesday ahead of the tournament that begins on December 1st.

Football

REUTERS, Johannesburg

The increasing emergence of talented, young footballers who have their roots in Africa but have been schooled in Europe is creating friction between the two continents.

African and European countries are jostling to persuade several prodigious players to commit their international futures to their respective causes, in most cases causing an emotive pull on the heart strings.

In recent weeks there have been accusations of underhand dealings and a growing animosity as countries turn up the pressure for the best talent.

Ibrahim Afellay of PSV Eindhoven, for example, is the subject of a tense tussle between Morocco and the Netherlands.

The promising midfielder, born in the Netherlands to immigrant parents, has played for the Dutch at junior level but can still, before his 21st birthday in April, opt to play for Morocco.

FIFA regulations allow players with dual nationality to change their international allegiance before the age of 21 if they have not won a full international cap.

Afella recently told Dutch television he was still undecided despite persistent wooing by Netherlands coach Marco van Basten and his Moroccan counterpart Mohamed Fakhir.

Earlier this month, PSV accused the Moroccan federation of seeking to sway Afellay and the 18-year-old Ismail Aissati to their cause with generous offers of cash.

"The Moroccan federation have let it be known they will do anything to get these youngsters on their side," Afellay's agent Ed van Stijn told the Voetbal International magazine on Nov. 8.

The Dutch have also been involved in two other high-profile cases with young African talent. Their bid to entice Salomon Kalou was thwarted by their own government, who refused the Ivorian striker a passport ahead of this year's World Cup finals.

They missed out on Amsterdam-born prodigy Mbarck Boussoufa, who enthusiastically opted to play for Morocco in May. The Anderlecht midfielder is now a regular in the north Africans' line-up.

France moved swiftly last month to cap two other talents who had both been called up by African countries.

Habib Bellaid and Issiar Dia are French-born but have roots in Tunisia and Senegal respectively and were invited by them to play in African Nations Cup qualifiers in October.

Instead they featured for the French under-21 side in recent matches against Israel and Sweden.

Nancy striker Dia, 19, told France Football last week that he was still keeping open his options.

Bellaid, who played for Racing Strasbourg in Ligue 2, said he still held out hopes of playing for Tunisia where his parents had returned in recent years.

"But I had to honour the call-up from the French coach out of respect for my club and for my coaches," the

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