

WADA contests pace duo

AFP, Karachi

The World Anti-Doping Agency said Friday it has filed an appeal against Pakistan's decision to lift doping bans on fast bowlers Shoaib Akhtar and Mohammed Asif.

Akhtar was banned for two years and Asif for one year in November after they tested positive for a banned steroid. Both won their appeals and the bans were overturned by a committee headed by a retired judge earlier this month.

"WADA has filed an appeal against the decision of lifting of bans against Akhtar and Asif in the CAS (Court of Arbitration for Sport) in Lausanne, (Switzerland)," the agency's media manager Frederic Donze said in an email.

Donze said appealing against the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) decision was WADA's right.

"WADA has exercised its independent right to appeal, provided in the World Anti-Doping Code, to the CAS against the PCB's appeal panel decision to overturn the sports sanctions of two athletes who recently tested positive for performance enhancing drugs," said Donze.

The International Cricket Council (ICC), which hailed the bans and termed their overturning as inconsistent with PCB policy, had backed WADA's decision to challenge the decision.

"WADA has determined that it has the right -- and the duty -- to appeal in the circumstances in the interest of doping-free sport and the uniform application of the code in all sports and for the protection of athletes," Donze added.

There was no immediate reaction from the PCB but its chairman has previously said that he regards the matter as closed.

However the WADA appeal may keep Akhtar and Asif out of Pakistan's tour of South Africa next month and the 2007 World Cup in the West Indies. Both have been named in Pakistan's preliminary squad for South Africa.

Donze said it would be up to the ICC to decide whether they could still play in international matches "since it relates to eligibility rules in cricket."

Botham urged

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watching Ashes cricket and dreaming I'd be part of it one day. It's been good going to India and other places, but I've always really enjoyed playing against England. Australia against England is what it's all about."

"A lot of people said to me over the years that you know when your time's up, but I doubted what they meant. Now I understand exactly."

"As my final Melbourne Test gets closer, it's amazing how it's all worked out, with me needing just the one more wicket for 700 in Tests."

"It'll be a chance for me to say thank you to the Victorian cricketing public who've given me such great support over the years."

"It was at the MCG 14 years ago that I finally knew I belonged in Test cricket when I took seven for 52 to help us beat the West Indies. Since then, it's been a wonderful ride -- I really could not have scripted it any better."

What's eating

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is a great thing, but at some point you have to think of renewal. Take Gilardino out of the mix and there have been no significant arrivals since Kaka and Cafu joined in the summer of 2003. No top side in Europe has been trading water for so long.

Part of the problem is that the bulk of Milan's signings have been disappointing. Marek Jankulovski and Daniele Bonera were supposed to provide depth at the back, but both have been busts. Yoann Gourcuff looks promising, but he's just 19 and very much the exception. The Shevchenko money is still sitting there, waiting to be used, but given Milan's recent transfer judgment (chasing Ronaldo over the summer, for example), you've got to wonder if it will do any good.

Giggs wants

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has told Arsene Wenger he must keep faith with the club's young guns.

Wenger's side host Blackburn knowing that their title hopes are effectively over before Christmas after being held five times in nine league matches at their new Emirates Stadium.

The French coach's decision to give several of the club's talented youngsters their chance at the same time has been blamed for that lack of consistency.

But Clichy insists there is no reason to use age as an excuse for the Gunners' inconsistent results.

"We do not need to hide behind the age of the team. We are young, we know that," the 21-year-old French left back told Arsenal TV online.

"If we want to be top players then we have to play like top players."

"So all of us, the older players too, we have to carry on and work hard."

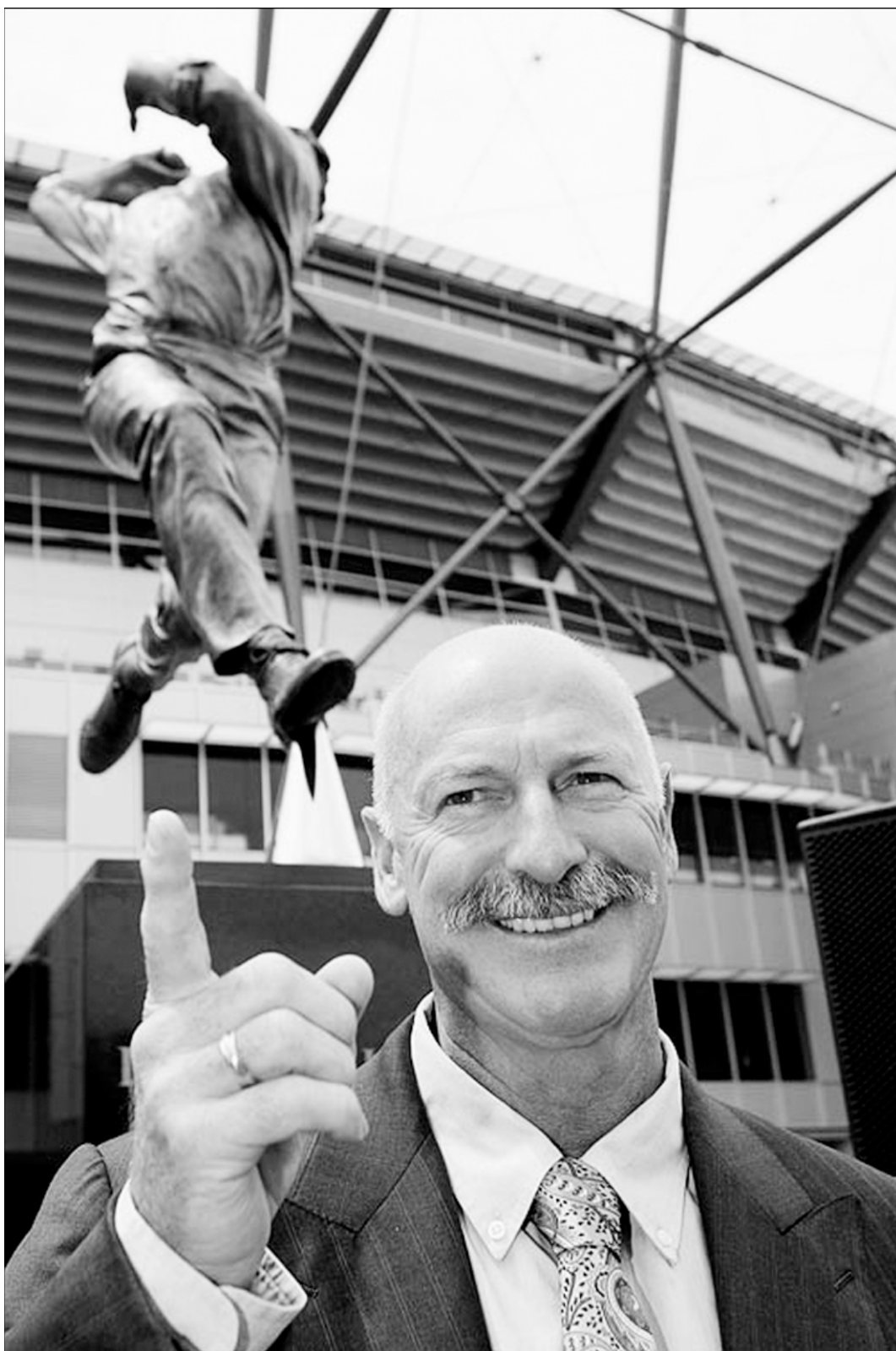


PHOTO: INTERNET

YUP, THAT'S ME! Australian legend Dennis Lillee gestures after he unveiled a statue of his smooth bowling action as part of the 'Walk of the Champions' vicinity at the Melbourne Cricket Ground on Friday.

The fighters' year



AFP, Paris

France's Amelie Mauresmo finally shed her choker's tag as she claimed her first Grand Slam titles in 2006, but it was battling Belgian Justine Henin-Hardenne who stole the show, ending the season as world number one.

The two players met in three major finals during the season.

And 27-year-old Mauresmo, so often condemned for big occasion meltdowns, opened her season with a first Grand Slam at the Australian Open, seven years after reaching her only previous major final in Melbourne.

Doubts remained, however, about her ability to win when it counts after her victory came when 24-year-old Henin-Hardenne retired through gastrointestinal illness when 6-1, 2-0 down.

An early exit followed once again at her home tournament in Roland Garros.

But Mauresmo had her chance to hit that winning point in Wimbledon just weeks later when she became the first Frenchwoman to lift the women's singles title since Suzanne Lenglen 81 years ago.

"I don't want anybody to talk about my nerves any more," said Mauresmo after her 2-6, 6-3, 6-4 win over Henin-Hardenne.

But while Mauresmo had the best season of her career winning four titles and holding the world number one ranking for most of the year, Henin-Hardenne came in at the death to take the number one slot.

True to her battling image the Belgian came back from an injury-

plagued season to win six titles, bringing her total to 29.

She reached the final of all four Grand Slams to become the seventh player in the Open Era to achieve the feat and the first since Martina Hingis in 1997.

She won her third French Open title but lost the US Open to Russian Maria Sharapova.

And after missing the past two editions of the WTA Championships because of injury she won that title for the first time, beating Mauresmo 6-4, 6-3.

The hardship of the past year has only made her appreciate the number one ranking even more than when she first took it in 2003.

"It's the best season of my career," admitted Henin-Hardenne, whose retirement with a knee injury in the doubles of the Fed Cup at home Charleston in September had handed the title to Italy.

"I've had an exceptional season and I think that yes I deserve this."

"I was the most consistent player. Of the 13 tournaments I competed in this year I reached the final in ten. And it's not easy to reach the finals of four Grand Slams. I feel really proud to have been so solid."

Nineteen-year-old Sharapova, meanwhile, proved the most consistent of the Russian contingent, who made their breakthrough in 2004 by winning three of the four Grand Slam titles.

The Russian revolution has however run out of steam since then, but Sharapova added to her collection, beating Henin-Hardenne to win the US Open, two years after winning Wimbledon.

Her defeat to the Belgian in the WTA Championship meant she missed the chance to end the

season as the world number one.

But having matched her best season in winning five titles, including a Grand Slam, and having doubled her career prize money, Sharapova was pleased.

"Not being number one is not really a disappointment," said the number two ranked Russian after the WTA Championship.

"I've had a fantastic year. I'm really pleased with the way I played these last few weeks. I hope to continue like that in 2007."

Meanwhile, US veteran Martina Navratilova once again bid farewell to the circuit after winning a 59th Grand Slam title, the US Open mixed doubles with Bob Bryan, just a month before turning 50.

Her countrywomen had however one of their worst seasons in tennis history, as they failed to reach the semifinals of any of the Grand Slams.

And for the first time since rankings began there is no US woman in the season-ending top ten.

To add to the gloom their highest-ranked player, Lindsay Davenport, the world number 25, announced that she is to hang up her racket as she is expecting her first child.

As Davenport bows out and Belgium's former US Open champion Kim Clijsters says she is ready to retire at the end of next season, former world number one Hingis rediscovered her killer instinct four years after she was forced to quit the game because of foot and ankle injuries.

The five-time Grand Slam winner returned to win titles in Rome and Kolkata, bringing her total to 42, and finishing the year as world number seven.

The Australian team, dubbed "Dad's Army" by Ian Botham ahead of the Ashes series, is facing a generational change with the departure of Warne and the likely loss of McGrath in the near future.

Speaking in Melbourne, wicketkeeper Adam Gilchrist said Australian cricket officials had been preparing for years for the departures of the oldest members of the team.

"I think Cricket Australia's been very aware of it -- it's not like we all woke up and we were 35," he said.

Gilchrist, who smashed a century in the third Test off just 57 deliveries, said Warne and McGrath would be "very tough shoes to fill".

"But we've been without them before -- and at the same time -- and we've still been able to win but maybe it's not been quite as comprehensive, it's been more of a fight," he said.

The 35-year-old said his own departure was not imminent.

Warne, for one, would agree.

Sreesanth learning

PTI, New Delhi

Firebrand paceman Shanthakumar Sreesanth, whose famous war dance has now become a symbol of India's historic Test triumph against South Africa in Johannesburg, says he will try to keep his aggression in control to ensure that he is not penalised in future.

Sreesanth said that he would continue to be aggressive as a bowler but will be careful not to overdo it and risk inviting the attention of ICC Match Referees.

"I know that if I do something similar again, I could miss a game. It is my duty that I do not do anything stupid," he said.

The Kerala seamer, who was fined one-third of his match fee for his reaction after dismissing Hashim Amla in the second innings, said he had learnt his lesson and would not violate any code of conduct.

Sreesanth also disclosed what had transpired between him and Andre Nel which prompted him to break into a jig after hitting the lanky South African paceman for a six.

"As soon as I walked in to bat, Nel said 'I can smell blood, I can smell blood,'" the Kerala bowler, who took a match haul of 8-99 to script India's first Test victory in South Africa, was quoted as saying in 'Outlook' magazine.

"Then after beating me, he said 'You don't have the fire, man. You should have a big heart to play. You are like a bunny to me.' He turned back and said it again 'You are a bunny man and I will get you next ball,'" Sreesanth recalled.

Tigers to play

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Mahbub also confirmed England A team's tour to Bangladesh in next February as the second string English side will arrive in Dhaka on February 14 to play a three-day warm-up match and two four-dayers besides three limited-over matches.

He also said that the meeting discussed on specialist bowling and batting coaches for the national team but the final decision will come in mid-January.

In another significant move the cricket committee has decided to invite national team skipper in it's future meetings to get more knowledge about the players.

"We have decided to invite the national captain to our meeting as we thought that he would be the right man to raise the players' well being or problems because of his close association with them," the bearded organisers said.

Big guns fire

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Result: Victoria won by seven wickets. CITY CLUB: 182-6 in 20 overs (Mushtaq 84, Sonnet 39, Hasan 2-32).

PARTEX: 124-5 in 20 overs (Arif 46, Rajan 2-21).

Result: City Club won by 58 runs. MOHAMMEDAN: 170 for 4 in 20 overs (Mtiyaz 76, Junaid 27, Saju 2-37).

BROTHERS UNION: 163-2 in 20 overs (Shahriar 72, Hannan 45). **Result: Mohammedan won by seven runs.** KALABAGAN: 107-7 in 20 overs (Nahidul 24, Mahmud 2-13).

OLD DOHS: 108-2 in 17.2 overs (Mehrab 60*)

Result: Old DOHS won by eight wickets. INDIRA ROAD: 101 all out in 20 overs (Sumon 28, Sharif 3-16).

SONARGAON: 102-1 in 17 overs (Ejaz 54*)

Result: Sonargaon won by nine wickets.

McGrath not

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previous years, I haven't said I'm looking forward to the Test in eight months or 12 months so, for me, it's just another day at the office.

"I'm still enjoying it. I'm still loving playing and I've still got a lot of cricket in me."

McGrath, who debuted in 1993 in New Zealand, has taken 555 wickets in 122 Tests, averaging 21.65.

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"But we've been without them before -- and at the same time -- and we've still been able to win but maybe it's not been quite as comprehensive, it's been more of a fight," he said.

Vaughan wary of rivalry



BBC ONLINE, undated

Michael Vaughan believes there are three candidates for the England captaincy for the Commonwealth Bank one-day tournament in the New Year.

Vaughan told BBC Radio Five Live: "There's myself, there's Andrew Flintoff and there's Andrew Strauss to think of as being the captain."

"Andrew Flintoff was given the job for the whole of the Test series and he seems to be doing a good job."

"Let's see how we go in the next two games then they'll make a decision."

Vaughan took over as England captain from Nasser Hussain in 2003, and has brought huge success in the Test arena.

But he has been less effective as a leader in one-day cricket, where his batting form has also struggled.

This year, Vaughan has been out with a knee injury, with the captaincy passing to Flintoff, and in the summer to Strauss when Flintoff was injured.

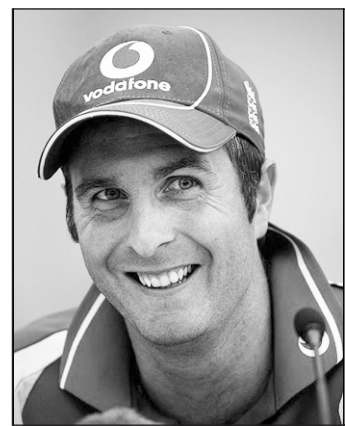
But Vaughan said he did not have a knee injury to be captain.

He said: "I'm happy to be back playing. If the captaincy comes my way then of course, but I'm just happy to be back in the squad."

"I'm quite cool. If people want me

to do something they'll come and ask me. I will never go saying to you guys (journalists) that I should be England captain."

"It's a very prestigious position and something I love doing. It's something Andrew Flintoff loves doing and something Andrew Strauss loves doing and I'm no different from them."



MICHAEL VAUGHAN

Vaughan has denied that his presence in Australia has distracted Flintoff's ability to captain the side in the Ashes.

"I really have tried to stay as far away from it as I can," he said.

"I know some people have said I've been a distraction but I haven't really been around the grounds."

Vaughan said it was frustrating not being able to have an influence

in the Ashes series.

He said: "I've been in Perth working with the Academy and medical team there and I've enjoyed being around groups of lads aspiring to play for England."

"Hopefully being with them, a little bit of my input will help their careers as well."

Vaughan could make his England comeback in the first Commonwealth Bank Series match on 12 January against Australia in Melbourne.

He is confident his knee will be able to cope with the rigours of international one-day cricket.

"I wouldn't put myself up for selection if I didn't think I could get through it," he said. "I'm very positive with the way it's gone."

"Sometimes you train in the gym harder than you do on a cricket pitch and I've got through all that with no reaction and hopefully it will carry on like that when I play a few more games."

"There were always little periods where I didn't think I was going to get to represent my country again."

"There is still a fair way to go before I do that, but I've just got to continue to work hard."

"I'm probably going to have to work hard on my right knee for the rest of my career, but it feels different to the last time I tried to play cricket, which is a good sign."

Aussies try to regroup



AFP, Melbourne

The farewell appearances of cricketer Shane Warne threaten to sidetrack Australia's bid to chase history against England in the fourth Ashes Test at the Melbourne Cricket Ground on Tuesday.

The master leg-spinner's shock decision this week to retire from Test cricket after the fifth Sydney Test next month has dominated the lead-up to the Boxing Day contest, in part because Australia have already regained the Ashes.

Warne, 37, is poised to become the first bowler to capture 700 Test wickets in the fourth Test, his 144th. He needs just one wicket before his hometown fans to achieve that target.

Warne, who has tormented England batsmen with 186 wickets in 34 Tests over 13 years, is expected to receive an emotional send-off in Melbourne and Sydney.

The Australians meanwhile are trying to emulate Warwick Armstrong team's 5-0 Ashes sweep here 85 years ago.

The showpiece Test of Australian cricket is likely to create a new world record for a single day's attendance.

All tickets have been sold for Boxing Day to surpass the 90,800 for the second day of the fifth Test against the West Indies at the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) in February 1961.

Warne says the job is half-finished as Ricky Ponting's Aussies eye a humiliating series sweep.

Ponting was shocked



AFP, Melbourne

Australian cricket captain Ricky Ponting admitted on Friday he was "shocked" and "saddened" after Test cricket's greatest bowler Shane Warne decided to quit.

In his first comments since Warne stunned the cricket world with his announcement he was retiring from International and Australian cricket, Ponting however revealed that he did not try to change his teammate's mind.

Ponting said he was saddened to lose such a good teammate but respected the spin king's decision, and vowed that it would not change the team's determination to complete a 5-0 Ashes series whitewash against England.

"I think I was a bit shocked a bit saddened like everybody else was -- not that he made the decision because he'd obviously thought long and hard about wanting to retire," Ponting said.

"But because of the fact I played with him for so long and he's a really good friend of mine and I've learned a lot from him about the game."

"Whenever you lose someone you've been close to for a long period of time it's sad."

"But he's obviously made that decision on other things he wanted to do in his life so I didn't at any stage ever try to talk him out of it," Ponting said.

Warne on Thursday revealed that he had broken the news to Ponting as the team celebrated clinching the

"As far as I'm concerned we've got two Test matches to play and I just want to finish the series on a high," Warne said.

"I think if we can win 5-0 that would be a fantastic achievement for a great team."

But coach John Buchanan is anxious the commotion over Warne's exit may prove an unwanted distraction.

"With a range of news around us it might be a bit of a distraction but hopefully we are a better team than that," Buchanan said Friday.

"That's something we will talk about at training -- dealing with the distractions that will continue over the next two Test matches, and really try to finish on a high note."

"Our mission here is not only to win the Ashes but also establish a huge gap between us and England."

Australia took just 15 days to seize the Ashes, rebounding spectacularly from last year's series loss in England where they relinquished them after 16 years.

The much-anticipated series has been a huge let-down with Australia romping to massive wins over Freddie Flintoff's England team in Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth.

Australia have only been dismissed twice in six innings, highlighting England's inability to take 20 wickets after terminating the Australians' innings eight times in the 2005 series.

The sorry England performance has triggered recriminations. Coach Duncan Fletcher is under intense scrutiny over the team's preparation and selection, amid conjecture that his job will be under

review. One casualty is likely to be wicketkeeper Geraint Jones, who registered a pair of ducks in Perth and has scored only 63 runs at 10.50 in the series. Chris Read is expected to be behind the stumps in the fourth Test.

Skipper Flintoff is determined his side will bounce back in the Melbourne and Sydney Tests.

"It hurts a lot, but we have to get over it and we've got two big Test matches still to play," he said.

"There are a lot of lads who want to prove they can win a Test match in Australia and prove they can play against Australia."

The Ashes series may be over as a contest but that hasn't dampened an insatiable appetite for cricket fans.

Officials are anticipating a record attendance for an entire Test.

Crowds of 95,000 are likely over the opening three days' play and the record of 350,354 -- set in the vast arena in the third Test of the 1936/37 Ashes series in the Don Bradman era -- is under threat.

England, sensing a changing of the guard with Warne likely to be followed by great pace bowler Glenn McGrath into retirement, are looking to regroup for future Ashes battles.

"We've got another two years before we play these guys and it's kind of starting now," batsman Paul Collingwood said.

"I'm sure the boys in the dressing room will want to put their hands up and see where they've gone wrong individually, and regroup and restart, starting in Melbourne."

Razzaq to miss 2 Tests in SA

REUTERS, Karachi

Pakistan all rounder Abdul Razzaq has been ruled out of the first two Tests in South Africa because of fitness concerns and appears likely to miss the entire series, a Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) official said on Friday.

Razzaq injured a calf muscle in the final one-day international against the West Indies in Karachi on Dec.16 and PCB director of cricket operations Saleem Altaf confirmed that the player had a grade two tear.

"Doctors say he requires at least four weeks of complete rest and cannot train. That rules him out of the first two tests," Altaf told reporters.

"He will be lucky to be fit for the final Test."

Pakistan play three Tests at Centurion (Jan 11), Port Elizabeth (Jan 19) and seven days later in Cape Town.

They will also play a Twenty20 international and five one-day internationals in February before travelling to the World Cup in the West Indies.

BDR, Police win

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh Police and Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) won their respective matches in the Design Zone First