



(Clockwise) Italy captain Fabio Cannavaro lifts the glorious football World Cup in Berlin on July 9; German legendary driver Micheal Schumacher waves goodbye to his fans after signing off from Formula One in Sao Paulo; Swiss superstar Roger Federer had a brilliant year even by his standards in 2006; Australian legend Shane Warne waves to the MCG crowd after taking his 700th Test wicket against England on December 26; French legend Zinedine Zidane head-butts Marco Materazzi of Italy in the World Cup final, thus taking this moment to the folklore of football forever.

PHOTOS: AFP FILE

A year of inevitability

QUAZI ZULQUARNAIN ISLAM

It can possibly be put down to our very Third World sentiment that come sporting events of any magnitude we find solace and identification with the success of the underdog and not the superpower. We may support the Brazils and the Argentines, the Australias and the Federers but that does not stop us rooting and holding a special place in our hearts for the Ghanas, the West Indies and the Sania Mirzas. The tag of underdog carries with it a certain characteristic of romance whose glam is undeniable and to whose prey we all fall. We rejoice at their victories and feel the pain of their defeats. And the year just past shows it better than anything else. 2006 will go down as the year of the underdog—almost.

In a year when astronaut Mikhail Tyurin teed off into the emptiness of space for what is certain to be the

longest golf shot ever made by a human being, normalcy prevailed in almost every sporting event held in the calendar year. Why the mention of the underdog then, you ask? Because in almost all of the mentionable events of the year things had shaped up to be so different. Journalists had been ready, pen poised to write of David slaying Goliath, neutrals the world over had been biting nails in anticipation of upsets that looked on the cards. The setting was perfect for the formulation of stories you could tell your grandchildren.

The only thing that went wrong was that it never materialised.

Football provides the biggest example. Hardly inspiring imagination, Italy, doubtless solid, swept home the World Cup. But it's a script that wouldn't sell movies. Not to take anything away from the Italians but in a perfect world either the much-maligned France team

enthusied by the marauding Zinedine Zidane, or the German team riding the crest of a wave of nationalism, just sixteen years after reunification, would probably have won the World Cup. If for nothing else then at least to cater for much better stories for your grandchildren. Written off before the tournament both the French and the Germans played well above themselves and captured the fancy of the neutrals. But the Italians crushed both underfoot. While the Germans fell in the final four, Zidane at least looked like he would do something for the underdogs. In a fairy-tale ending, he would probably have scored the winning goal and disappeared into retirement as a national hero. But of course, the actual finale was a long shot from happily ever after. Headbut and all, Zidane rightfully passed off into the footballing folklore (for the wrong reasons), but at the end of the day a

river of tears flowed in France and Fabio Cannavaro it was who raised the World Cup into the Berlin night sky. Italy were the champions of the World—justly even if a little dreadingly. Zidane ended his career and lost were the sensationalist headlines that would have come with a shock triumph. Normalcy prevailed. In tennis, despite Rafael Nadal's thorough probing, Roger Federer consolidated his position as head and shoulders above the chasing pack, comfortably tucking away three of the four Grand Slams in his pocket. While Agassi embarked on his farewell season, Nadal looked like he would put up a challenge. He beat the Swiss on the hard courts of Dubai and prevailed in the French Open. It looked like the southpaw had bought his game up another level and he would seriously rival Federer this year. But then the normalcy curse struck. The Swiss master player 17 tournaments in

2006 and reached the final in 16 of them. He lost just five times the whole year—four of them to Nadal. He ended with three Grand Slams. The Spaniard had just the French to show for his efforts.

Australia continued their unabated domination of world cricket. The much-hyped English are in the process of being annihilated at the Ashes and the men from Down Under also captured the ICC Champions Trophy in India where they crushed a West Indies team that threatened to steal their thunder. People stood up in attention as Chris Gayle's nonchalant hitting propelled the Caribbeans' to what looked likely to be a historic upset. But just when you thought something out of the ordinary was on the cards Glenn McGrath did what he does best and the Australians reconfirmed their status as the best in the world. Anti-climatic, but then normalcy usually is.

In Formula One the world bid bye to the colourful and controversial Michael Schumacher in a season which turned out to be one of the most exciting in years. It was the old guard against the new kid on the block and the youthful Fernando Alonso had to use all his savvy to put off the challenge of the inspired German. For a while it looked like Schumi would bow out in a wave of glory but his heroic, season-long bid to secure an eighth world championship eventually ended in disappointment. The drama started in March when it looked like a sure-thing for defending champion Alonso and Renault. It ended some seven months later with Schumacher's Ferrari parked up at Suzuka, his car up in smoke, taking the driver's desire for one last entry in the history books with it.

The theme holds consistent throughout almost all other events of the year. Tiger Woods sank to his knees at the British Open and secured his position at golf's pedestal and established himself as perhaps the greatest ever. Valentino Rossi hung back in Nicky Hayden's shadow for most of the year in Superbike only to soar ahead with one race to go. In the fag end of the season, Rossi looked a sure shot to close the deal. No points for guessing what happened next. He won pole in the last race but still managed to fail. Hayden got his win and Rossi was left licking his wounds with Zizou and Schumi. Whatever else He may be, the God of sport is not a dramatist. But 2006 has been engrossing for far different reasons. The best narratives thrive on tension and the ability to shake the audience out of passivity. And ever since sport has been elevated to the stage of drama, controversy has been the recipe for success. 2006 had more than enough of it.

Too much has already been written of Zidane and his head-butt but cricket had its fair share as well. Darrel Hair and Inzamamul Haq will be two names that will immediately spring to mind. When the Australian umpire accused the Pakistan captain of ball tampering, he merely seemed to reinforce his reputation as a maverick. Inzamam's amazing protest in walking off the pitch and declaring a forfeit however, set off a chain of events that forced the ICC to declare that Hair would no longer officiate in international matches.

Drugs also reared its ugly head. Shoaib Akhtar and Mohammed Asif found themselves banned for positive dope tests and even Tour de France winner Floyd Landis

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Proteas level series

Cricket

AFP, Durban

South Africa clinched a series-leveling win as India slumped on the fifth and final day of the second Test at Kingsmead Saturday.

South Africa won by 174 runs after India were bowled out for 179. South African fast bowler Makhaya Ntini took five for 48.

Mahendra Singh Dhoni provided a lone highlight in a poor Indian batting display. He made 47 before he was eighth man out, caught behind in the last over before tea after adding 59 for the eighth wicket with Zaheer Khan.

After only 4.3 overs of play were possible before lunch, the sun came out in the afternoon to give South Africa the opportunity to hit back after losing the first Test in

Johannesburg by 123 runs. There were still some anxious moments for the hosts before victory was sealed, however, as the light started to fade after tea. The umpires looked at their light meters before the last two wickets fell in the space of three balls after tea.

The third and final Test starts in Cape Town Tuesday.

India limped to 47 for four at lunch after Ntini dismissed both overnight batsmen, Sachin Tendulkar and Wasim Jaffer.

India, resuming on 38 for two, lost Tendulkar to the fifth delivery of the day. Ntini produced a virtually unplayable ball that cut back sharply and kept low to trap India's star batsman leg before for nought.

Jaffer followed nine balls later when he played an injudicious pull shot that looped gently to Andre Nel at mid-on. He made 28.

VVS Laxman and Sourav

Ganguly kept the South Africans at bay after lunch, putting on 38 for the fifth wicket. Ganguly made 26 but it was an unconvincing innings.

Three of his four boundaries were scored off edges before he was out tamely, steering a lifting ball from Ntini to Herschelle Gibbs at gully.

Laxman looked more solid but appeared to misjudge the length of a ball from Andre Nel. Going back deep in his crease he seemed to expect the ball to lift but it shot through at ball height to bowl him.

At that stage India were 85 for six. Dhoni was struck on the right hand by the first ball he received from Ntini. He had suffered bad bruising on the middle finger of the same hand while keeping wicket and told journalists Friday he was not sure he would be able to play in the third and final Test.

He received treatment and looked in pain but continued batting

without showing further signs of discomfort.

Dhoni and Anil Kumble resisted for 41 minutes. Andrew Hall, the fifth bowler to be used, made a breakthrough with his first ball when Kumble fended a lifting ball to Hashim Amla at short leg.

Dhoni then played some attacking strokes as he and Khan posted a half-century stand. But two balls before tea, Dhoni edged an extravagant drive and wicketkeeper Mark Boucher flung himself to his right to hold a good catch.

Khan and Shanthakumaran Sreesanth added 19 runs after tea before Khan was caught at third slip off Nel and Sreesanth was given out behind off Hall two balls later.

SCOREBOARD
Final scoreboard on the fifth and final day of the second Test between South Africa and India at Kingsmead Stadium in Durban on Saturday.



Man-of-the-match Makhaya Ntini of South Africa celebrates the wicket of Indian opener Wasim Jaffer on the final day of the second Test at the Kingsmead Stadium in Durban on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

Royal honour for Gerrard

INTERNET, undated

Steven Gerrard is 'absolutely thrilled' to be awarded an MBE in the New Year's Honours List.

The Liverpool captain has received the honour for services to football, 12 months after he was originally tipped to be recognised. Following The Reds' UEFA Champions League success over Milan in May 2005, Gerrard was expected to be awarded the MBE.

He has now been awarded the honour in the New Year list and offered his gratitude to those who have helped him to become one of the game's most famous players.

"I am absolutely thrilled and honoured to receive this recognition for playing a game I've loved all my life," said Gerrard.

"I'd like to accept this on behalf of all those people who have been

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