

SL set to play Murali in third Test

ADELAIDE, Jan 23: Sri Lanka off-spinner Muttiah Muralitharan, the man who has been at the center of controversy throughout his team's cricket tour of Australia, may be recalled for the third Test, which starts on Thursday at the Adelaide Oval, reports AP.

Team manager Duleep Mendis said Tuesday that reports from an expert on biomechanics, medical opinion and video footage had cleared Muralitharan of having an illegal bowling action.

Mendis said the medical reports and the video would be rushed by the Cricket Board of Control for Sri Lanka to the International Cricket Council in London in a bid to have Muralitharan officially cleared to play in the third Test.

Muralitharan was called for throwing seven times by Australian umpire Darrell Hair in the second Test in Melbourne and also was called in a World Series match in Brisbane. He was thought unlikely to make another tour appearance.

Mendis said selection of Sri Lanka's Test team would be delayed until the last possible moment because of the tight schedule of having Muralitharan cleared, and injuries to captain Arjuna Ranatunga, vice-captain Aravinda de Silva and batsman Roshan Mahanama.

Ranatunga has a hand injury, while de Silva has an injured thumb and Mahanama is troubled by a hamstring strain.

"I am waiting for clearance from Colombo about whether to go ahead with Murali in the Test," Mendis said. "I would love to have him play."

Lee, Fleming get the nod

ADELAIDE, Jan 23: Test opener Michael Slater was Tuesday recalled to a 14-man Australian squad to contest next month's World Cup cricket tournament, reports AP.

Slater, who was dropped for the second half of the recent triangular World Series tournament because of poor form, was included ahead of veteran Dean Jones and Greg Blewett.

Jones and Blewett were named in Australia's provisional 18-man squad, along with off-spinner Tim May and fast bowler Michael Kasprovic who also were left out.

All-rounder Shane Lee was named in the squad, along with Victorian seamer Damien Fleming, who did not play in the World Series matches.

Lee won his spot ahead of Kasprovic, while May was omitted when the selectors decided two specialist spinners were not required for the tournament.

Mark Waugh had success with his part-time off-spin during the World Series.

"I have a lot of confidence in these players," said Australian captain Mark Taylor. "We are a young side but there is still a lot of experience in there."

Jones, who has scored 6,068 runs in 164 one-day internationals, last played for Australia on their tour to South Africa two years ago but forced himself into contention with a series of high scores in domestic Sheffield Shield cricket.

The 34-year-old middle-order batsman will be a reserve for the World Cup.

"I don't know if it's the end for Dean," said Taylor. "There is always the chance of injuries in a tournament like this, so it's up to those who missed out to hang in there."

SQUAD

Mark Taylor (captain), Ian Healy (vice-captain), Michael Bevan, Damien Fleming, Stuart Law, Shane Lee, Craig McDermott, Glenn McGrath, Ricky Ponting, Paul Reiffel, Michael Slater, Shane Warne, Mark Waugh, Steve Waugh.

England names WC squad

PORT ELIZABETH, Jan 23: Mike Atherton has given his England side "no chance" of winning the World Cup — if they continue to play like they have in South Africa over the past three weeks, reports AP.

Atherton's stark warning came after yet another defeat in the final one-day international against the South Africans, and after the confirmation of England's 14 for the World Cup, which starts in mid-February.

Dermot Reeve, Mike Watkinson and Mark Ramprakash were the players, who, predictably, will not figure when England travel out to Pakistan and India on February 3.

But for the next 11 days after they return home, England's players must recharge their batteries and somehow regain confidence, spark and a belief in their ability to play one-day cricket.

SQUAD

Michael Atherton (captain), Alec Stewart (vice captain), Dominic Cork, Phillip DePreitas, Neil Fairbrother, Darren Gough, Graeme Hick, Richard Illingworth, Peter Martin, Jack Russell, Neil Smith, Robin Smith, Graham Thorpe and Craig White.

Of the unpredictable



NEW DELHI, Jan 23: Pakistan defend their World Cup title next month after the worst year in their cricketing history, reports AFP.

So bet against them at your peril.

No other side in the world could recover in time from a series of historic defeats, disastrous scandals, wholesale sackings and outbreaks of civil war among the players.

Pakistan, with home advantage and a line-up richly spiced with flamboyant talent, just might.

Upheavals in Pakistani cricket, after all, are almost a way of life. It's just a matter of getting used to them.

The 1995 crop, however — coming after the ball-tampering allegations of the tour of England in 1992 and claims of marijuana smoking in the West Indies in 1993 — take some beating.

First there were the shock retirements of 26-year-olds Rashid Latif and Basit Ali, later revoked, amid suggestions, never substantiated, that Pakistani players were throwing matches after betting on the results.

Then Salim Malik was accused by Shane Warne, Tim May and Mark Waugh of trying to bribe them last year. Malik, sacked as captain and suspended, was later cleared after the Australians players refused to travel to give evidence in Pakistan.

On top of that there has been the never-ending game of musical chairs at the head of the team.

Malik's departure was soon followed by the appointment and ditching of two more captains. Moin Khan and Ramiz Raja, before Wasim was reappointed for his second crack at the job.

Seven captains have been

found wanting since Imran Khan bowed out after the 1992 World Cup, whilst tour manager Majid Khan and cricket manager Mushtaq Mohammad were also sacked last year.

No wonder, with such commotion bubbling away off the pitch, that the team was losing on it.

They year began with a Waqar Younis injury and an unprecedented Test defeat to Zimbabwe, then another reverse against South Africa.

But now he believes they can reach the final in Lahore in March, arguing: "With the decline of the West Indies, Pakistan now have the most talented team in the world."

Former Test star Zaheer Abbas, meanwhile, says: "I see a new spirit in the boys, similar to the one that helped them win the last World Cup."

Wasim, Waqar and rejuvenated leg-spinner Mushtaq Ahmed certainly spell bowling talent, while the batting boasts explosive openers Amir Sohail and Saeed Anwar, strokemaker Inzamam-ul-Haq and Malik.

Veteran batsman Javed Miandad — yet another captain — has also joined the side at the age of 39 to become the first cricketer to take part in all the six World Cups.

Former Australian captain Ian Chappell says of them: "Individually, the Pakistanis are brilliant. It all depends on how well they click as a team. It would be foolish to write them off."

Anyone not convinced should look back to 1992.

Pakistan, bowled out for a paltry 74 in a group game by England and facing elimination from the tournament, were saved by the rain, snatched a crucial point and went on to win the trophy. In the World Cup anything, it seems, can happen.



WASIM AKRAM

But the real low point came in September, with a first-ever Test series loss to Sri Lanka, defeat in the one-day series and elimination from the Champions Trophy in Sharjah a few weeks later, during which Amir Sohail reportedly refused to play under Raja after a row over tactics.

The last few months, however, have seen a glimmer of hopes, with a consolation Test win against Australia and a victory over the admittedly struggling Kiwis.

Perhaps Wasim — himself

ousted as captain in 1993 after a players' revolt — will be able to weld a team spirit just in time.

Even Imran sees hope. Last year he branded Pakistani cricket "a shambles," adding: "The side is riddled with cliques, there's been this constant squabbling over the captaincy and other issues. The talent has been squandered. I don't see how they can rebuild in time for the World Cup."

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Rubin wins in a ding-dong duel

By Tawfiq Aziz Khan

Tennis buffs who love to see long rallies and longer sets should have watched the Sanchez-Rubin quarterfinal of the Australian Open Tuesday night. In an unprecedented encounter that rolled into the third set the number 3 women's seed was stretched to the limits of her endurance by 19-year-old American Chanda Rubin in front of a boisterous capacity crowd. It was a women's edition of Pete-Sampras and Mark Philippoussis drama.

In a grinding three-setter that lasted 3 hours 33 minutes, the ladies played out a total of 48 games which should constitute some sort of a record for the Australian Open, at least.

When the match started with Rubin taking the first set with ease there was hardly any indication of what was to follow. Sanchez-Vicario, a great fighter and a good 6 years older than Rubin came back very strong in the second set and took six games in a row to clinch the set.

Both players were victims of atrocious line calls and picked up argument with the chair umpire. This point was particularly emphasised by Rubin who called it "frustrating" at the end of the match.

As the players tied 6-6 in the final set the drama gradually unfolded itself. Each of them continued to hold on to her service game. Both the players appeared tired but never gave up. Rubin had the advantage of serving first and that always gave her the lead. She had a better first serve than Sanchez-Vicario and her second serve was not weak either. As a teenager she was more fleet-footed compared to her opponent who is currently number 3 in the world to Rubin's ranking of 13. With Rubin leading 15-14, Sanchez-Vicario committed a couple of silly mistakes in her service game and eventually lost 4-6, 6-2, 14-16.

Chanda Rubin will play Monica Seles, World Number One (jointly with Graf) and Number One seed of the tournament.

Chang cruises to semis



MELBOURNE, Australia, Jan 23: Michael Chang blew Swedish giant-killer Michael Tillstrom off the court to storm into the semifinals of the Australian Open here Tuesday, reports agencies.

The fifth seed needed only 76 minutes to take apart Tillstrom, victor over third seed Thomas Muster in his previous match, 6-0, 6-2, 6-4.

Chang, who lost in last year's semifinal, now plays

tournament favourite Andre Agassi or eighth seed Jim Courier.

The Chinese-American had little trouble with his 23-year-old opponent from Gothenburg, who reached the quarterfinals in his first Australian Open campaign.

Chang, deadly consistent as ever, broke Tillstrom's serve six times and did not lose his serve as he won with ridiculous ease.

Chang, who has built up a huge following in Asia, was first serving around 185-190 kmh (115-118 mph) and finished with eight aces.

The first set took just 22 minutes and the second 24 minutes as Tillstrom spluttered with 45 unforced errors to Chang's 13.

Chang broke the Swede in the opening game of the third set when Tillstrom's forehand found the net at advantage.

The world number five had little trouble holding on to his serve and the break to wrap up his fifth Grand Slam semifinal appearance.

Chang became the youngest Grand Slam champion when at the age of 17 years three months when he beat Sweden's Stefan Edberg in the final of the 1989 French Open. He lost to Australia's Thomas Muster in the final of last year's French Open.

Meanwhile, Andre Agassi's quarterfinal match against Jim Courier, which will decide Agassi's number one ranking, was delayed early on Wednesday until later in the day because of rain.

The eighth-seeded Courier was leading 5-4 late tonight when a sudden downpour stopped the match and forced officials to postpone it until later on Wednesday.

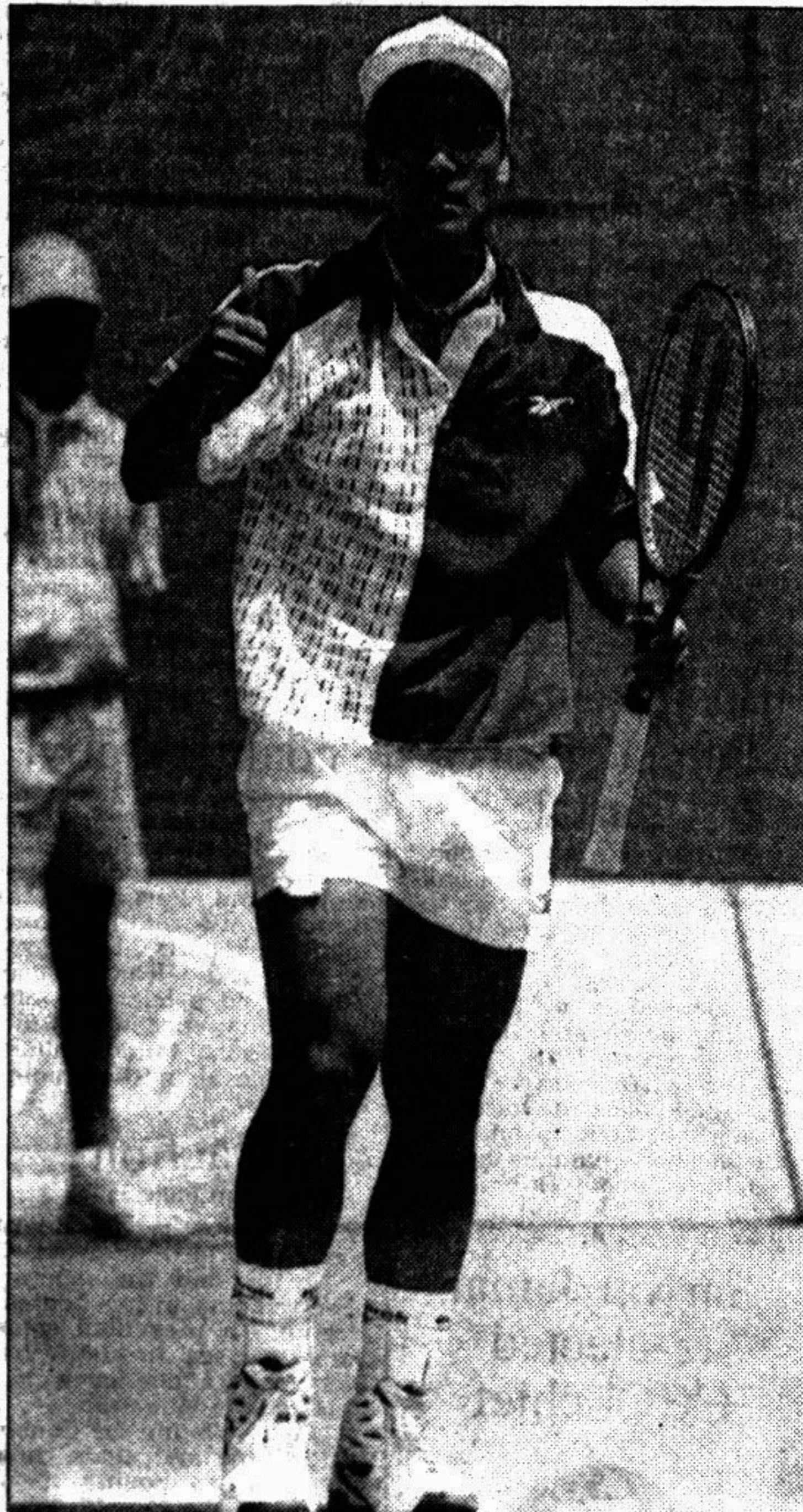
The match was meant to be the feature of tonight's Centre Court action at Flinders Park, but it was pushed back to 11 pm (1200 GMT) by a record-breaking three-and-a-half-hour epic women's quarter-final won by American Chanda Rubin.

Second seed Agassi had fought back from an early break in the fourth game and was serving to level the set at 5-5 when rain bucketed down 35 minutes into the match.

Tournament officials closed the stadium's roof while ball boys used skimmers and towels to dry the court, but shortly after midnight Tennis Australia president Geoff Pollard told a packed 15,000-strong crowd that the match had been delayed.

The match will resume at Centre Court on Wednesday, sandwiched between the remaining women's quarterfinals and the men's quarterfinal between German fourth seed Boris Becker and Russian sixth seed Yevgeny Kafelnikov.

If Agassi beats Courier, he takes over the top ranking from compatriot Pete Sampras who was knocked out of the third round in a stunning three-set upset by Australian teenager Mark Philippoussis.



Michael Chang of the USA jubilates after recording a thumping win against Sweden's Michael Tillstrom in the quarterfinals of the Australian Open in Melbourne on Jan 23.

For the fabulous shirt



JOHANNESBURG, Jan 23: South Africa have a simple ambition — to do-

able President Nelson Mandela's collection of World Cup winners' shirts, reports AP.

Mandela proudly donned Francois Pienaar's No 6 shirt when the Springboks hoisted aloft the rugby World Cup in Johannesburg last year, in the process unifying the nation's sporting public.

Hansie Cronje's cricket shirt would be the perfect addition to the presidential wardrobe.

Many feel they deserve to do the whole way after being robbed of the chance to reach the 1992 final at the first attempt in the most perverse of fashions.

Kepler Wessels side, going well and needing 22 off 13 balls to beat England in the semifinals, fell foul of a controversial rain ruling which saw the target reduced to 22 off seven.

By the time the batsmen had regained the middle, their disappointment turned to disbelief as the public announcer blared, without a hint of humour, "South Africa's new target ... 22 off one ball."

It was not the ideal way for a team to be eliminated from its first major tournament after an exile of over 20 years.

Opponents will underestimate the men from the rainbow nation this time at their peril — as Mike Atherton has just discovered.

The touring English expected to dominate the South African batting line-up

but instead came away from a 1-0 Test defeat and a one-day series massacre.

More worrying still, the side were set seven victory targets at the start of the season by skipper Hansie Cronje — including the Hong Kong series and Tests against New Zealand and Zimbabwe — and have now fulfilled six of them ... with the World Cup on the agenda.

Any team with the likes of pace bowler Allan Donald and

as a source of energy — and the back-up staff.

Supremo Bob Woolmer, one of the world's top cricket thinkers, has drawn together a team of coaches, physiotherapists, biokineticists, nutritional consultants and motivationalists to help things along.

Some of the players were less than convinced by the former Warwickshire coach's state-of-the-art antics when he took over but there are few doubters now.

All Bacher, the managing director of the United Cricket Board of South Africa, says: "I doubt there is a better technical coach in world cricket than Bob. He's bursting with ideas and sometimes I have to hold him back."

But the real bonus of the England series was the discoveries of Adams, the 18-year-old coloured wrist-spinner with the extraordinary action, pace bowler Pollock, with a glorious all-rounding heritage and brilliant future, and classy middle order batsman Jacques Kallis.

The loss of ever-present wicketkeeper Dave Richardson with a broken finger just before the competition is the one blow the team has suffered.

The double series victory over England, however, will give the side plenty of confidence in Group B, where they will face Pakistan, New Zealand, Holland, the United Arab Emirates ... and England.

A quarterfinal spot is all but guaranteed, after which the lottery knock-out stages come into play. Putting your shirt on South Africa, however, looks like a pretty astute gamble.

land can boast one of the best openers in the world. In Jack Russell a fine wicketkeeper with real — if unconventional — batting talent and in Dominic Cork a swing bowler that could get in most sides.

But, Cork excepted, the rest of the attack looks as menacing as a pop gun without the Cork, while the absence of a quality wrist spinner also does not bode well on the slow, low wickets of the east.

The batting looked inconsistent in South Africa as well. Alec Stewart's footwork has gone absent without leave. Graeme Hick and Graeme Thorpe have flattered on Monday only to deceive on Tuesday. Mark Ramprakash has lost the plot altogether while Robin Smith, a man not known for technique, has battled gamely back from a smashed cheekbone.

Illingworth has not been convinced by them for some time. "Buggers can't be trusted," the Yorkshireman offered during the summer. And when asked to diagnose the problem, he responded gruffly: "Aye, they bloody well keep on getting out."

Yet despite all this, no side will face the English with total confidence.

He will add — with a grain of wishful thinking — that the limited-over defeats in South Africa were caused in part by experimentation.

Then he will add that forlorn hope — that bridesmaids — eventually — will have their day.

At least in Atherton Eng-



M. ATHERTON

Aberration of Azhar

NEW DELHI, Jan 23: The day he was named as the captain of the Indian squad for the World Cup, Mohammed Azharuddin allegedly assaulted a newspaper photographer, news reports said Tuesday, says AP.

Azharuddin, who was in the southern city of Bangalore for a pre-selection training camp, lost his temper Monday and grabbed the camera out of the hands of a photographer who tried to shoot him walking with a famous Indian actress.

Venkatesh, a photographer with the newspaper Eenadu, filed a complaint with police in the southern city of Bangalore on Monday, police said.

In his complaint, the photographer said he had snapped pictures of Azharuddin strolling along a Bangalore street with actress Sangeeta Bhatnagar.

He alleged that Azharuddin grabbed his camera, pulled out the film and exposed it to the light.

Venkatesh said the Indian cricket captain asked him what newspaper he worked for and said "I can get you sacked in half an hour."

Police have not taken any action against Azharuddin, who was named as the skipper of the 14-man squad for the championship that begins next month.

Illy won't quit

LONDON, Jan 23: England cricket manager Ray Illingworth says he is determined to keep his job, despite the dismal tour of South Africa, reports AP.

Illingworth, also chairman of selectors, is set for brickbats when he returns from South Africa, where England lost the Test series 1-0 and the one-dayers 6-1.

"I know there will be people gunning for me when I get home. I suppose that's inevitable after the results we've had," Illingworth is quoted as saying in Monday's Daily Mail.

"But whatever happens in next month's World Cup, I want to stay on in the job."

And the Yorkshireman added: "I don't want to tour again — I've had enough of travel and hotel rooms — but I'd like to stay through next summer to keep some continuity in what we've been trying to do."

"If they decide to get rid of me I could just walk away from it. This job is not the be-all and end-all of my life. But I don't think they will gain anything by changing."

"Whoever came in would not be able to find two or three miracle players who would transform the team."

Illingworth also defended himself over a much-publicised feud with pacesman Devon Malcolm.

He admitted: "The Malcolm thing soured the whole tour. I can't talk about it in detail yet because the charge of breach of contract against Devon has already gone to the disciplinary committee which is in the hands of the lawyers."

Arantxa sent tumbling



MELBOURNE, Australia, Jan 23: Young American Chanda Rubin won a heroic encounter with Spanish veteran Arantxa Sanchez-Vicario which included a 30-game third set to gain a semifinal berth in the Australian Open here today, reports AP.

The 19-year-old Rubin, who took a 6-4, 2-6, 16-14 victory over the third-seeded Sanchez-Vicario, will meet world number one Monica Seles in the semifinals.

The exhausted 13th seed needed three hours 33 minutes for the victory.

The 24-year-old Spaniard was the beaten finalist here in 1993 and last year and also lost in the finals of the French Open and Wimbledon.

But her dogged backline game was no match for Rubin, who went ahead on the strength of her ferocious flat hit forehand and delicate volleys.

Earlier one more nagging injury struck Monica Seles, though it didn't slow her down a step Tuesday on the way into the semifinals.

Seles, beset by a groin pull after recovering from knee and ankle injuries and a mysterious virus, strained a tendon above her right ankle midway through a 6-1, 6-2 romp over Iva Majoli.

After streaking through nine straight games in pursuit of a fourth Australian Open title, Seles led 3-0 in the second set when she felt a twinge of pain between her ankle and calf.

A left-hander, she had trouble pushing off on her right foot serving because of the injury, and she dropped that game with a double-fault on break-point. But she shrugged off the pain to win in 58 minutes.

"I was able to finish the match pretty strong," Seles said. "I said to myself, 'That's OK.'"

In five matches, Seles has lost only 17 games — and that

without being completely healthy or in the best shape. She's slight overweight, she acknowledged, she's not as fast as she'd like to be, and her groin pull is annoying.

"On a scale of 10, it's about a 4," Seles said of the groin injury she's been taping and treating with anti-inflammatory pills. "It's not getting better. It's not getting worse, which is great. It's not going to get better until I rest."

"It's pretty tough, maybe impossible, to beat her," Majoli said of Seles. "I think the only one who can beat her is Steffi."

Trouble is, Steffi Graf isn't at the Australian. She's back home recovering from foot surgery, leaving the No. 1 Seles appearing unbeatable.

"She's going to win the tournament pretty easy," said the No. 7 Majoli of Croatia, who didn't notice Seles being bothered by any injury. "She hit some unbelievable shots when she was stretched."

Ticked off at dropping serve to begin the match when Majoli drilled back winners, Seles plunked down in her chair, lunged away a towel, then vented her frustration by taking the next nine games.

"The first game I was a little bit lost," Seles said. "I was expecting a slower pace, and all of a sudden here were these bazookas coming back."



World co-number one Monica Seles exerts every strength to return a serve of Croatia's Iva Majoli during their quarterfinal clash at the Australian Open in Melbourne on Jan 23. Seles cruised to semifinal with a 6-1, 6-2 consummate win.

Nordic bid to host 2006 WC

HELSINKI, Jan 23: Four Nordic countries are bidding to host the 2006 World Cup following a meeting here Monday between officials from the Danish, Finnish, Norwegian and Swedish football federations, reports AP.

For their bid to succeed, world body FIFA would have to amend its rule stipulating that single countries must host tournaments.