

Bevan makes NSW proud

It was a cruel blow for Michael Bevan personally but an inadvertent act of generosity to New South Wales when the Australian cricket tour selectors opted for Ricky Ponting for the Headingley Test against England in Leeds last July, according to a report of Sydney Morning Herald.

Twelve Tests later, a period in which he appeared in only the Sydney Test against South Africa for modest returns of 12 and 2-74 while acclaimed as Australia's greatest limited-over international batsman, Bevan has provided New South Wales with urgently needed stardom in the batting order.

Now, for the second time in his 18-Test career, Bevan has received the Fosters Lightcatcher trophy for NSW cricketer-of-the-year. He received the award Saturday night at a special dinner at the Sebel of Sydney. The gifted left-hander was also named NSW batsman-of-the-year after scoring three centuries — against Queensland, Western Australia and New Zealand — and three half-centuries for a first-class aggregate of 700 runs at 87.50 from seven games.

Bevan enjoyed his golden summer in 1993-94, hitting five centuries and eight half-centuries for NSW from 12 first-class games. His 1,312 runs at 77.17 launched him into the international arena for Australia and earned him his first cricketer-of-the-year award for NSW.

Cruzeiro crash

RIO DE JANEIRO, May 3: Defending champions Cruzeiro were knocked out of the South American Libertadores Cup on Saturday after being held to a goalless draw at home by fellow Brazilians Vasco da Gama in a dire match full of petulance, fouls and time-wasting, reports Reuters.

The result in Saturday's second round, second leg means that Vasco went through 2-1 on aggregate and will face Gremio, the third Brazilian team in the tournament, in the quarterfinals.

Vasco, who qualified by winning last year's Brazilian championship, packed their entire team into the last third of the field for the whole match and made no effort whatsoever to do any attacking.

Cruzeiro, who had qualified automatically for the second round as holders, dominated the game, winning ten corners to Vasco's none, but lacked the guile and creativity to break down their opponents' massed defence.

There were 57 fouls, eight yellow cards and numerous instances of players making injuries, pretending to have been fouled and arguing with the referee.

Vasco joined Gremio, Colon of Argentina, Bolivar (Bolivia), Cerro Porteno (Paraguay), Barcelona (Ecuador) and Penarol (Uruguay) in the quarterfinals.

The last place will be taken by either River Plate of Argentina or America of Mexico.

Justin Fashanu dead

LONDON, May 3: Soccer player Justin Fashanu, wanted in the United States for a sexual assault on a 17-year-old youth, has been found dead, a police spokesman said today, reports Reuters.

Police sources said Fashanu's body was found hanging around noon on Saturday in a lock-up garage under a railway arch in east London, and his death was being treated as suicide.

Police in the US state of Maryland said on Wednesday they were hunting the 37-year-old former striker, brother of the better-known John Fashanu, on a charge of sexual assault.

Ageing heroes gasping for last hurrah



SOFIA, May 3: (Reuters) Like their Balkan neighbours Romania, Bulgaria travel to France with an ageing team.

Coach Hristo Bonev's squad have even more to live up to than the Romanians. They shocked the world by reaching the semifinals at USA '94, beating Germany en route in one of the biggest upsets of modern times.

Bonev believes the poor standard of the national league is to blame for the paucity of talent coming through the ranks.

"The Bulgarian championship has for years been of an unenviable standard and when we play at international level you can see that we've fallen behind the rest of the world," he said.

If, as seems likely, Bonev sticks with his old stars, then motivation may be a problem for a generation of players who could hardly improve on their showing in 1994.

One of Bonev's biggest problems has been the fact that nearly his top players are based abroad in the richer leagues of Europe.

Not only does it make it difficult to assemble them for any length of time, but many — most notably Stoichkov at Barcelona this season — have struggled to hold down regular places, meaning they are lacking match sharpness for internationals.

The coach will therefore have been delighted by the decision of several key players to return to Sofia prior to the finals in order to prepare better for the tournament.

Stoichkov, defender Ivanov and striker Kostadinov have all returned to CSKA Sofia in order to ready themselves.

Stoichkov is now 32 and may be past his peak but he has always been a big-match player and his presence alone inspires the rest of the team.

He knows France is probably his final bow on the biggest stage of all and is determined to be ready.

"I must work hard to achieve good form for the World Cup finals and I think I have enough time for that," Stoichkov said.

Lechkov, the balding, mid-fielder whose headed goal beat Germany in the 1994 quarterfinals, is a cause for concern, however.

The 29-year-old walked out on Turkish side Besiktas in February without giving any reason, prompting Bonev to ask: "If he is not playing anywhere, what's the point including him in the team?"

Ivanov, whose headed goal against Russia clinched qualification, is adamant the old guard can prove a real force four years after their finest hour.

"We have played together for six years and I think that the concern, however,

though April's 2-1 win over fellow finalists Morocco will have steadied a few nerves.

Several newcomers have been tried out, including 22-year-old Georgi Bachev from Slavia Sofia, 22-year-old Ivailo Petkov and 19-year-old Svetoslav Todorov from Litex Lovech.

CSKA Sofia's Milen Petkov, 24, and Marian Hristov, another 24-year-old who plays for German club Kaiserslautern have also been given their head but Bonev knows that this year's World Cup will probably come too soon for most of them.

"I am looking at young players but time is short and results cannot be achieved in a day," he admitted.

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World Cup bribery scare

LONDON, May 3: The 32 countries in the summer's World Cup in France will be given detailed warnings about bribes from officials of FIFA, the world governing body of soccer, reports AP.

FIFA's acting general secretary Michael Zen-Ruffinen, quoted in London's The Sunday Times, said security teams would be placed in the hotels of players and referees.

But he admitted detection would be difficult.

"If you bribe a defender and he provokes an unnecessary penalty, nobody will know," the newspaper quoted Zen-Ruffinen as saying.

The most serious problem we have had so far was in the under-17s World Cup competition in Qatar in 1995," he added.

"We were contacted by coaches in the hotels who said some of their players had spent time in rooms with people coming to them offering gifts. They weren't asking for anything in exchange."

The newspaper said gangs behind the potential bribes were based in Asia, where millions will be bet on every game.

The quarterfinal game are believed to be particularly susceptible, the newspaper said.

Peter Velappan, head of the Asian Football Confederation, said match-fixing syndicates had targeted the quarterfinals of the 1994 World Cup in the United States.

The newspaper said referees would be placed under guards in their hotels. It said referees traveling to matches outside Paris would be accompanied by FIFA officials.

J-League roundup

TOKYO, May 3: International striker Masashi Nakayama's remarkable streak of hat-tricks ended at four games when his Jubilo Iwata side lost 2-1 on Saturday to Shimizu S-Pulse, reports Reuters.

Nakayama had the sole goal in the loss as a rain-soaked field slowed down play with the goal. Nakayama took his tally to 17 in the last five games and remains one of the most potent strikers in professional soccer.

The loss also dropped Iwata out of a share of the J-League lead.

The old men of Japanese soccer, Verdy Kawasaki, took over the top spot in the standings with a 3-1 victory over Sapporo Kawasaki has the oldest starting line-up in the league with an average age of just over 30.

Kashima Antlers were able to keep pace in the standings with a 1-0 victory over Bellmare Hiratsuka.

Masayuki Okano and Kenji Oshiba scored as Urawa Red Diamonds passed Hiratsuka with a 2-0 victory over Gamba Osaka.

The typically anaemic Yokohama Flügels offence had an uncharacteristic strong game in beating Cerezo Osaka 4-1.

Yokohama Marinos beat Kyoto Purple Sanga 2-1.

Agassi moves into final

MUNICH, May 3: After waiting five hours for play to start, Andre Agassi wasted no time in reaching the Munich Open final by crushing Spaniard Galo Blanco 6-4, 6-4 on Saturday, reports Reuters.

Showing the kind of form which once made him world number one, eight seed Agassi relied on astonishing returns and powerful groundstrokes to dispatch his unseeded semifinal opponent.

The American's final opponent is seventh seed Thomas Enqvist, who moved past fellow Swede Magnus Gustafsson in straight sets in the other semifinal of a rain-delayed programme.

Agassi lined up two breaks in succession to open a 4-1 lead in the first set.

Blanco, who wore a bandage around his right ankle, woke up in the second set by winning brilliant rallies, but the Spanish baseliner, ranked 64th in the world, then lost his serve again to go 3-2 down and had to let Agassi cruise to a comfortable victory.

"I played well but there are still a few little things I can improve," said Agassi, who last year slumped to 141 in the ATP Tour rankings but has climbed back to 20th in the world.

Agassi, warming up for the French Open starting on May 25, confirmed he would not take part in the Hamburg Open starting on Monday.

"It's too cold up there," he said.

Dosedel, Meligeni to fight it out

PRAGUE, May 3: Czech Slava Dosedel, ranked 47th in the world, seized the opportunity of the absence of all eight seeds to win through to a final against Brazil's Fernando Meligeni in the 340,000 dollars Czech Open tennis tournament on Saturday, reports Reuters.

All of the seeded players crashed out early in the tournament.

Dosedel wore down Ecuador's Nicolas Lapentti in an evenly-matched semifinal to win 3-6, 6-3, 6-2.

Meligeni who knocked out Russia's Andrei Chesnokov in the quarterfinals, beat Romania's Dinu Pescariu 7-6, 7-6 in the other semifinal.

FRANCE '98 SIDELINES



UNDATED, May 3 (AP/Reuters): The Saudi Arabian squad is currently training in Sainte-Maxime, France, ahead of series of friendlies against French First-division club Cannes, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago.

With Al-Naitif's arrival, Saudi Arabia has three goalkeepers for the World Cup. The other two are Mohammed al-Dayee and Hussein al-Sadiq.

Saudi Arabian coach Carlos Alberto Parreira will announce his team for the World Cup on May 22.

GAZZA LAUDS YOUNG GUNS

Wait until four years from now.

That's the word from England's controversial midfielder Paul Gascoigne, who says soccer talent is getting deeper and deeper in England.

There are so many talented young kids it's incredible," the Middlesbrough midfielder said. "England coach Glenn Hoddle's very fortunate with the young kids he has."

"Believe me, we will go to the World Cup and we want to win it (this year). And if we don't do so well, I would put money on it that in four years' time England will do it."

The young talent that's coming through is absolutely frightening — and it's going to keep me on my toes for a while.

BATISTUTA ON THE MOVE?

Gabriel Batistuta could be making his final home appearance for Fiorentina on Sunday when the Serie A club hosts Brescia.

The Argentine striker has indicated he wants to play for a winner and has said he will decide whether to switch clubs after the World Cup.

"We'll see at the end of the season," Batistuta's agent, Settimio Aloisio, told reporters Saturday. "In any case, it's too soon to say the game against

Brescia will be Batistuta's last in Florence. ... Right now, there is a 50 percent chance Gabriel will stay with Fiorentina."

Batistuta, 29, was expected to start Sunday's match despite the thigh injury he suffered in Argentina's 1-0 win over Brazil on Wednesday in a World Cup tuneup.

SCARY THOUGHT FOR IRAN

Forward Ali Daei, a key player on the Iranian national team, is in danger of missing the World Cup after breaking his cheekbone Saturday in a Bundesliga match.

Daei, who plays for Arminia Bielefeld, suffered the injury in his team's 2-1 victory against FC Cologne during a collision with defender Dirk Schuster. He was operated on Saturday and is expected to be sidelined at least several weeks.

Bayern Munich, Germany's most renowned club, is reportedly interested in the 29-year-old. He has scored seven goals — some spectacular — for relegation-bound Bielefeld this season.

Konsel may miss WC

ROME, May 3: Austrian keeper Michael Konsel's status for the World Cup is in doubt after he injured himself during practice with his club, reports AP.

Konsel, 36, pulled a muscle in his lower left leg at the end of AS Roma's training session Saturday, making a misstep as he dived to block a shot. He was held out of Roma's match against AC Milan Sunday and is likely sidelined for the rest of the Serie A season.

The veteran's injury could take as long as a month to heal, the Roma team doctor said.