

'Let's talk Beckham'

LONDON, Oct 30 (Reuters): Forget the Falklands — what about David Beckham's red card?

The question of whether the young England soccer player really deserved to be sent off in a World Cup match against Argentina this June was on the agenda when Prime Minister Tony Blair and Argentine President Carlos Menem met on Thursday.

Beckham was dismissed after aiming a seemingly innocuous kick at Argentine captain Diego Simeone, who collapsed dramatically. England, pushed onto the defensive, held out till extra time but lost on penalties.

Beckham was pilloried by the British tabloid press, but Simeone also came in for a great deal of criticism in Britain for allegedly overreacting to the foul.

The talks between Blair and Menem, on the first visit by an Argentine leader since the two countries fought a 1982 war over the Falklands, focused mainly on trade and bilateral ties.

"They also discussed David Beckham's red card," a Blair spokesman said tantalisingly, but declined to elaborate.

The soccer-mad Menem sported a badge backing Britain's bid to host the 2006 World Cup during his two hours of talks with Blair, who thanked him for his support.

Menem said on arrival that he wanted if at all possible to see a soccer match this weekend.

Poelman jailed

AUCKLAND, Oct 30: New Zealand Olympic decathlete Simon Poelman was today jailed for five and a half years for importing ecstasy pills with a street value of 200,000 NZ dollars (100,000 US), reports AFP.

Poelman, 35, who competed at the September Commonwealth Games in Malaysia while on bail, was found guilty earlier this month of importing 1,990 tablets of the Class B drug.

His reaction to the jail term was a "complete sense of relief that it's over," defence counsel Peter Kaye said.

The case arose from a visit Poelman made to the Netherlands and Belgium in September and October last year.

During a three-day trial earlier this month, the crown alleged Poelman, while in Antwerp, sent a toy rabbit filled with the drugs to an unsuspecting businessman friend in Auckland.

The athlete denied buying the drugs or putting them in the rabbit and said he handed the parcel containing the toy to a Dutch friend to post.

Justice Peter Salmon said the courts had emphasised the need for deterrence when sentencing drug offences.

The reason these offences take place is a desire to make a large amount of easy money without regard to the consequences of those actions on other people," the judge said.

Prosecutor Ross Burrell said deterrence should be the main factor in sentencing and the fact that Poelman was a prominent sportsman should make him no different from any other person convicted of drug smuggling.

Beyond the boundary

Rain — Gatecrasher And Spoilsport

By Shakil Kasem

Until 5 pm, the only cricketers in action yesterday were the Aussies, playing golf at KGC. That spoke volumes for the way the day was turning out to be. Cricket took a backseat as overnight drizzle rendered the Bangabandhu Stadium quite inhospitable. And when our three-ball, with only Manu zoor Ahmed and yours truly under the umbrellas got caught in the rain on the 12th hole, things were looking increasingly dicey. Apprehensions of the match being reduced to a shoot-out raised their ugly heads.

Why a cricket match should be decided by someone trying to knock down an inanimate object boggles the mind somewhat. That's a question that must soon be answered at some point in the near future. A player's skills ought to be pitted against an equally adept opponent, capable either of defending or attacking, and thereby influencing an outcome or a decision.

In the end a semi-final that

lived up to its billing did set the pulse racing for a packed house. South Africa raced to 240 in 39 overs. A stuttering start and Darryll Cullinan not being able to carry on from where he left off still saw the Sri Lankans on a right royal chase for the leather. Jacques Kallis, an imposing figure in his own right, made his presence felt with a blitzkrieg hundred. Arjuna Ranatunga used four spinners and Kallis hit them to all parts of the ground and beyond.

Hansie Cronje pattered around, not quite his normal controlled self, making a scratchy 20 odd. Kallis it was who shouldered the innings and posted South Africa's daunting challenge to Arjuna's men. In any match played on a reduced format, fielding is the key to keep matters under control. For some strange reason the Sri Lankans were woefully short of ideas in the field. The slippery outfield could be made the villain, but the Sri Lankans perhaps paid heavily for some shoddy work themselves. South Africa were faced with

worst nightmare staring them in the face, immediately after the innings ended. Remember the 1992 World Cup where they were asked to score 23 runs off one ball, after the calculations were made when the rain came then? It was a shame that after two clinical performances in this tournament whilst batting, Hansie Cronje should be faced with the prospect of being done in by the rules, and not by cricket.

The tournament, which had been going on like clockwork until now, faced its first major hiccup, and this semi-final struggled to remain alive as a cricket match through the major part of the day. The weekend crowd gathered for this match, all 40,000 or more, were a great testimony to the good-natured behaviour of the Bangladeshi cricket lover. Whatever the outcome was, all across the world the images of a patient, expectant multitude willing a cricket match to breathe till late in the night did indeed have its own message. Cricket rules OK, in Dhaka.

Ashes not ultimate



SYDNEY, Oct 30 (AP/AF): Australian cricket captain Mark Taylor has opened hostilities in the traditional Ashes war of words by claiming the series is no longer the most important on the home side's calendar.

Ever since Australia first played England in cricket more than 120 years ago, the biennial series have been the highlight for fans and players alike. But the Australians, who have easily won every series played since 1989, are looking to other countries to provide challenges.

"I don't know about the Ashes being the ultimate," Taylor said.

"It's up there on a parallel with all the other series," he said.

"What we've done in the Australian cricket team in the last 10 years is try and put every series up there — not just say we want to win the Ashes or we would like to beat the West Indies," the Australian captain said.

"We want to win every series whether it's in India, Pakistan, the Caribbean, South Africa or wherever," he said.

"They're all different challenges in their own right and you need different approaches to all of them. I look at the Ashes as another challenge."

Taylor, who arrived home Thursday after his outstanding tour of Pakistan, where he

scored an unbeaten 334 in the second Test in Peshawar, rubbished suggestions England was heading for a flying start in this summer's series because of a better tour preparation.

"You could have said the same thing four years ago because we had the same tour to Pakistan," Taylor said.

"We came back and had a week before the first Test, which will happen again for half the guys, and we still won the first two Test matches quite convincingly," he said.

"So I don't really believe in the same thing four years ago because we had the same tour to Pakistan," Taylor said.

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"It's much nicer to have a few weeks in Australia but the professionals who will come back after the one-dayers — like Steve Waugh and Glenn McGrath — will handle the transition very well."

Taylor, Ian Healy, Stuart MacGill and Michael Slater have returned home while the remainder of the Australians have stayed on the subcontinent for the World Cup in Bangladesh and three limited overs games in Pakistan.

England selectors opted to send a second string side to Bangladesh in order to keep its Test squad together before the series opener.

Most of the Australians, including Mark and Steve Waugh and pace spearhead Glenn McGrath, will remain on foreign soil until just one week before the Brisbane Test.

The 34-year-old Healy, who broke the world record for dismissals during the 1-0 series win over Pakistan earlier this month, admitted the current England side had a host of talented individuals capable of pushing the Australians this summer.

However, he said while England had often fielded quality players in recent years they had not always performed up to expectations.

"But at some stage they're going to sneak up and bite us," Healy said Friday. "Individually their players are very good."

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Ravanelli to Marseille's rescue

PARIS, Oct 30: Substitute Fabrizio Ravanelli scored twice as Olympique Marseille came from behind to beat Lorient 3-1 away in the French First Division on Thursday, reports Reuters.

Marseille, the only unbeaten side in the top flight, fell behind when Ali Bouafia scored in the 25th minute.

His first was somewhat fortunate — a shot which deflected off a Lorient defender — but the second, a freekick which went in off a post, was superb.

Marseille had midfielder Daniel Bravo sent off in the 70th minute but stretched their lead four minutes from time.

Ravanelli, whose double took him level with Bordeaux's Sylvain Wilford as France's leading scorer on seven goals, made the decisive pass to scorer Robert Pires.

The victory put Marseille back on top of the standings on 27 points, but Bordeaux, who travel to Strasbourg today, could overhaul them should they win.

Lorient, promoted to the First Division this season, are still chasing their first home win.

Monaco, beaten last week in Metz, boosted their morale ahead of their UEFA Cup second leg tie against AC Graz on Tuesday with a convincing 3-1 victory over Nantes.

Frank Gava, Belgian international defender Philippe Leonard and Nigeria's Viktor Ikpeba scored Monaco's goals in a one-sided tie.

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England-W Australia tie from today



PERTH, Oct 30 (AFP/AP): England's batsmen have the chance of a run rampage against Western Australia when their initial first-class encounter of the Ashes tour starts here Saturday.

Western Australia are the reigning Sheffield Shield champions but the four pace bowlers who carried them to the crown in their showdown victory over Tasmania will be missing.

Captain Tom Moody, Jo Angel and Mark Atkinson are sidelined with injury, while Brendon Julian is a member of the Australian one-day side in Bangladesh.

The four replacement bowlers them have only 31 first-class outings among them, ranging from Sean Cary's 19 to Shane Jurgensen making his senior debut. Kade Harvey has played nine first-class matches and Matthew Nicholson three.

Western Australia will also be without two mainstay batsmen apart from all-rounder Moody, with Adam Gilchrist and Damien Martyn with the Australian one-day team.

Three of England's senior batsmen found early form in the tour opener when the tourists scraped home Thursday by one run against an Australian Cricket Board Chairman's XI.

Mike Atherton, skipper Alec Stewart, John Crawley 64 all scored half centuries, led by Atherton's 88. But Mark Butcher and Mark Ramprakash

had limited time in the middle and will be kept for an extended stay at the crease.

Vice-captain Nasser Hussain and left-hander Graham Thorpe will be playing in their first game on tour.

This is an important game for Thorpe who needs early success to boost his chances of a return to the Test line-up for the first international starting on November 20 in Brisbane.

A combination of loss of form and back surgery cost him his Test place in the past English summer, allowing Crawley back into the side for the one-off Test against Sri Lanka in August, in which he made an unbeaten 156.

England will also take a four-pronged pace attack into the game with Angus Fraser and left-hander Alan Mullally, who played 15 games for Western Australia almost a decade ago, making their first appearance of the tour supported by Darren Gough and Dominic Cork.

Off-spinner Robert Croft comes in for his first tour match, but can expect no favours from a wicket anything but spinner-friendly.

Test player Justin Langer promises his Western Australia side will do England no favours.

Acting state captain Langer, who returned from Australia's tour to Pakistan on Thursday, said Western Australia wanted to make life as difficult as possible for England.

"Winning is a habit and if we can stop England from having a good preparation for the Test series then we will have done our job," Langer said.

"We'll go out to play good, tough cricket and hopefully give them a hard time."

Stewart was Friday passed fit to be wicketkeeper after not fielding against the ACB side because of back stiffness.

The England skipper said tour selectors were certain to prune one batsman from the 12-man squad for the match.

Stewart said Thursday's victory further enhanced the spirit of his charges.

"People say it's only a festival game but we came here to win it and if we had lost I would have been disappointed," he said.

"The fighting spirit is good and improving all the time and the other thing is we are learning how to win. Wherever a game is played over here, I have said we have got to win it."

The Perth game is one of three first-class fixtures before the battle for cricket's most famous prize gets underway in three weeks.

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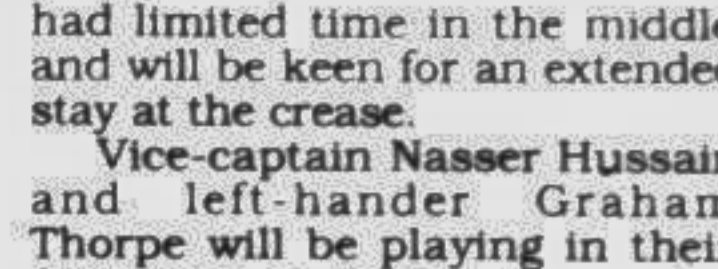
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