

Acme youth hockey

Three teams — Faridpur, Dhaka Education Board and BKSP — won their respective matches in the Acme 17th national youth hockey championship at the Maulana Bhasani National Hockey Stadium yesterday, reports UNB.

In the first match, Faridpur DSA smashed Sylhet DSA 7-0 goals after leading the first half 3-0.

Mizanur Rahman netted three goals while Firoz Miah scored two and Tariqul Islam one for the winners.

In the second match, Dhaka Education Board defeated Rangpur DSA 6-3 goals after leading the first half 2-1.

Selim made a hat-trick for the winners while Shakil, Raihan and Emon netted one goal each.

Mahsin, Jamal and Molnu scored one goal each for the losers.

In the day's last match, BKSP earned a massive 7-0 goal victory over Rajshahi DSA after dominating the first half 2-0.

Maksud Alam of BKSP made a hat-trick while Imtiaz and Mazharul netted two goals each.

Shane's being realistic about Boxing Day

MELBOURNE, Dec 15 (Reuters/Internet): Shane Warne said on Tuesday his hopes of playing in the fourth Ashes cricket Test against England were fading.

Leg-spin bowler Warne has not played in any of the first three Ashes Tests as he continues his comeback from shoulder surgery in May.

Warne has taken just six wickets at the unflattering average of 62.83 in three appearances for Victoria in Sheffield Shield competition since his return and admits time is running out.

"It is getting a bit tight for Boxing Day," Warne said of the fourth Test, which starts on December 26 in Melbourne.

"I've only got one game between now and then and I guess go in that next game."

Victoria take on New South Wales in a Sheffield Shield match in Sydney, starting on Saturday.

It is another blow for the Australian leg spinner, whose standing has been tarnished by the bookmaker scandal involving him and fellow Australian cricketer Mark Waugh.

Warne said he had not given up hope of playing some role in this international season.

"I'm trying to get back as soon as I can," he said. "I've just got to be patient with it, keep bowling and when I'm right I will make myself available for selection."

Australia has already secured the Ashes for the sixth consecutive series without the man who is one of only two Australians to take 300 Test wickets. The West Indies tour in late February is now looking like a more realistic goal for Warne.

But his replacements, leg-spinning understudy Stuart Gill and veteran left-arm spinner Miller, have been major contributors to the home side's unbeatable 2-0 lead.

Barca to keep Van Gaal

BARCELONA, Dec 15 (Reuters/Internet): Coach Louis van Gaal won the backing of Barcelona's board of directors on Monday following a three-hour meeting to discuss the Dutchman's future.

Van Gaal's position had been placed in doubt after a fourth successive league defeat against Villarreal Sunday left the club 10th in the Spanish first division, nine points behind the leaders Mallorca.

A crowd of 70,000 waved white handkerchiefs in the traditional Catalan protest and chanted for van Gaal and president Josep Luis Nunez to go as the club now sits in its worst position in the table for 19 years.

But the Barcelona board decided at its scheduled monthly meeting on Monday to ignore those calls for change, opting instead to back Van Gaal.

Juventus eyes on Dugarry

MARSEILLE, France, Dec 15 (Reuters/Internet): French World Cup striker

Christophe Dugarry could return to Italy to play for Juventus despite a previous unhappy spell in Serie A with AC Milan and his current success at Olympique Marseille.

Although Marseille deny having been approached by Juventus, looking for cover for the injured Alessandro Del Piero, Dugarry said on Tuesday: "The only thing I can say is that, in fact, they are interested. But for the time being it is uncertain."

Marseille coach Roland Courbis said: "There has not been the slightest approach (from Juventus)."

But he did not rule out the French club considering a good offer from the Italians, saying: "It depends on the price, the possibility of replacing Christophe Dugarry and the player's choice."

Courbis said he was sure Dugarry was on a list of players who could interest

Juventus and that Dugarry's friend Zinedine Zidane, the Turin side's playmaker, would push for the striker to be signed.

Dugarry said he would not be against a third foreign experience despite spending the greater part of his time at Milan and then Barcelona over the last two seasons sitting on the bench.

Indians warm up well



WELLINGTON, Dec 15 (Reuters/Internet): An unfinished partnership of 146 between Rahul

Dravid and elegant left-hander Saurav Ganguly sped India to a morale-boosting eight-wicket win over Wellington on Tuesday.

It was the last match before the tourists' first Test against New Zealand, starting on Friday in Dunedin.

India began the final day of the four-day match at 30 for one, needing another 144 to win. They had trailed the province by 49 runs after the first innings, but clinched the match on Tuesday in the second over after lunch.

Ganguly, who dispelled a crisis in the first innings with a score of 93, was unbeaten in the second with 79. Dravid, who came in on Monday when Wellington's bowlers were on top, was 66 not out.

The only blow India suffered on the final day came in the fourth over when Venkat Laxman, until then very circumspect, rose to the bait of a bouncer from Carl Bullfin and hooked to be caught at long leg.

On a clear morning, Wellington's two main seam bowlers, Bullfin and Robert Kennedy, found conditions less helpful than on the previous evening, when the ball moved about quite freely. But they stuck to their task with steady line and length.

Despite this, 51 runs were scored from 14 overs in the first hour. Ganguly and Dravid were skilful at placing the ball and kept the scoreboard ticking with singles.

Runs were more abundant when Mark Jefferson, the left-arm spinner, came on after the drinks break.

At one stage, Ganguly hit three fours and a six off successive balls. It was during this flurry of brilliant shots that the left-hander passed his second 50 of the match, scored off only 63 balls.

At the finish, he had faced 77 and hit nine fours and a six. Dravid, whose main role was that of anchor, batted more sedately until Wellington captain Roger Twose, with defeat inevitable, withdrew his front-line bowlers and put on the part-timers, including himself.

Dravid made hay at their expense and had 10 fours in his 86, which was made off 98 balls. The 136 runs that the pair put on came off only 148 balls, and that despite a quiet start.

India's coach, former Test batsman Anshuman Gaekwad, highlighted the difference with his team's batting performance in the opening match at Napier.

"At last we managed to free ourselves from the habits of one day cricket and get into Test cricket mode. Our batting is quite ready for the Test match."

And he dismissed any concerns about lack of runs from Navjot Sidhu and skipper Mohammed Azharuddin.

"Sidhu and the captain have not made runs on the tour so far, but they're experienced batsmen and I'm certain they will be all right."

Gaekwad indicated that 10 names are already pencilled in to the team sheet for Friday and that the only place open is between a third specialist seamer -- Ganguly will serve as a fourth -- or a spinner, depending on the nature of the Carisbrook pitch.

SCOREBOARD
Scoreboard at the end of the last day of the four-day cricket match between India and Wellington at the Basin Reserve on Tuesday:
WELLINGTON: First innings 317
INDIA: First innings 268
WELLINGTON: Second innings 124
INDIA: Second innings (overnight 30 for 1)

Jadeja lbw b Bullfin 11
Laxman c Kennedy b Bullfin 14
Dravid not out 66
Ganguly not out 79
Extras: (b-1, lb-3, nb-1) 5
Total: (For two wickets) 175
Did not bat: N Sidhu, J Mongia, A Kumble, S Joshi, J Srinath, D Mohanty, R Singh
Fall of wkts: 1-18; 2-39

Bowler
Bullfin 11 2 36 0
Kennedy 13 3 36 0
Larsen 1 1 0 0
Petrie 7 1 21 0
Jefferson 5 0 37 0
Wells 2 0 17 0
Twose 1 0 16 0
Boyer 1 0 8 0
Result: India won by eight wickets.

Warne not worried to go there



SYDNEY, Dec 15 (AFP/Reuters/Internet): Shane Warne said Tuesday he was ready to testify

before a Pakistan inquiry into match-fixing if summoned by the Australian Cricket Board.

The star Australian leg-spinner confirmed he would go to Lahore if the ACB agreed to Warne and Mark Waugh testifying at an inquiry into former Pakistan captain Salim Malik trying to bribe them to throw a match in 1994.

"That's probably the way to go," he said Tuesday.

Nothing has changed. The same thing still happened -- he offered us money to throw a game and we said no," Warne said of the Malik affair.

He expected the ACB to decide on whether they would testify in the next 48 hours.

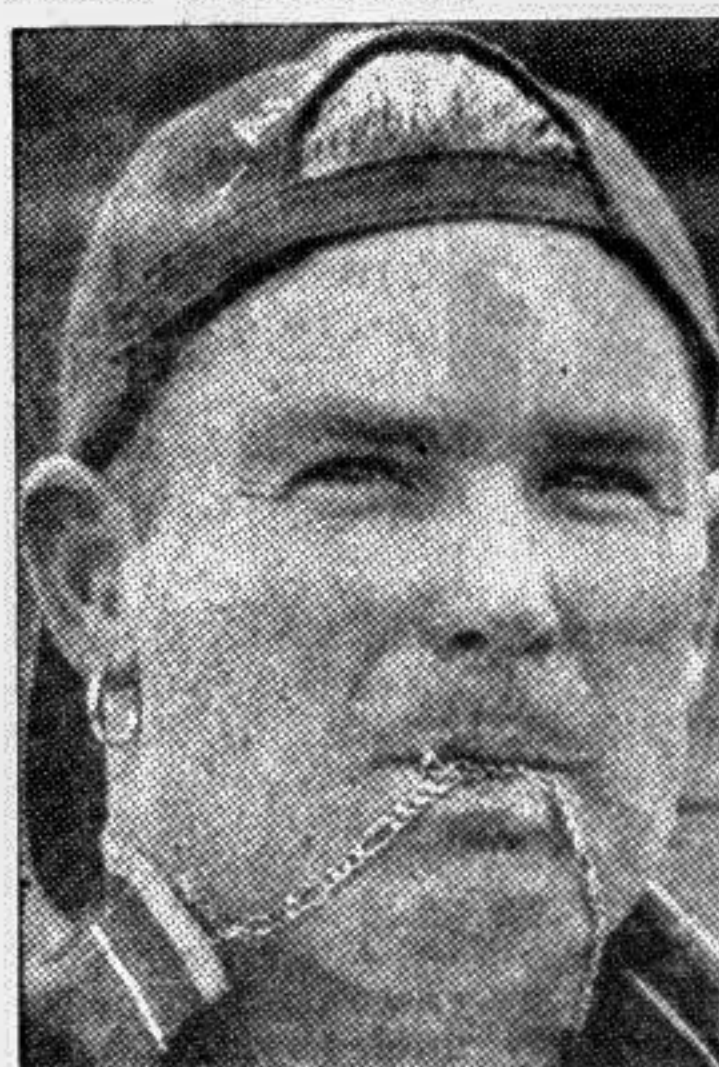
But captain Mark Taylor said on Tuesday it was unlikely Warne and Waugh would travel to Pakistan to appear before a betting and match-fixing inquiry.

Taylor said he believed it was unnecessary for Warne and Waugh to return to Pakistan as they had given all their evidence. "There is no change to that evidence that was given some six or eight weeks ago," Taylor said. "So the evidence that anyone can give now would only be very much along the same lines as that," he said.

The only thing that has happened between then and now is we know that Mark and Shane have taken a certain amount of money from a bookmaker in Sri Lanka in 1994.

"I would be very surprised if they go after what happened in Pakistan last time," he said.

The Pakistan Cricket Board asked Warne and Waugh to appear after the ACB admitted last week it had covered up the fact Warne and Waugh took 11,000 Australian dollars (6,600 U.S.) from an Indian bookmaker for information about the state of the pitch and weather before a match in Sri Lanka.



The players were fined 19,000 Australian dollars (11,400 U.S.) for the offence which came just before the tour of Pakistan during which Warne, Waugh and off spinner Tim May revealed that Salim Malik offered them 200,000 U.S. dollars each to throw a match.

Waugh appeared before Lahore inquiry, headed by Justice Malik Mohammad Qayyum, in October but did not inform the court of his involvement with the Indian bookmaker.

"Yes, Mark and I were involved with a bookmaker but nothing has changed between

what happened between Salim Malik, myself, Mark Waugh and Tim May," Warne said.

Warne said he was annoyed his indiscretion had been linked to match-fixing.

"I think the thing that has most disappointed me is the link between what we did and match-fixing, which is two completely separate issues," Warne said.

"That seems to have got lost a little over the past week."

Since the news broke Warne has lost lucrative contracts with both The Mirror newspaper in London and The Age newspaper in Melbourne and there has been talk he could lose the vice-captaincy of the Australian limited-overs side.

But he said, "I've still got a smile on my dial."

"There is a lot of talk going around but so what, there is always going to be rumour and innuendo."

"I'm still the same person I have been for 29 years and people that are close to me still know what sort of person I am."

"But in these sorts of situations I suppose you work out who your real friends are, who aren't and who is on your side and who isn't."

However, Taylor said the final decision on whether Waugh and Warne would give further evidence rested with the two players.

From the transparency point of view, I think everyone knows what is going on now. As far as I know, the full story is out now," he said.

Taylor said it was up to the Pakistani judge to decide whether the admissions by Waugh and Warne over the bookmaker scandal had affected the credibility of the earlier evidence.

Albania's dream of a better tomorrow



TIRANA, Dec 15 (Reuters): When Albanian midfielder Altin Lala won his first international cap in a friendly against Turkey this year, he was unheard of in his own country.

Twenty-two-year-old Lala plays for German club Hannover 96 and has lived in Germany since he was 15. Lured away from his volatile homeland by the prospect of a more prosperous and peaceful life abroad.

He is not alone. After the collapse of the communist regime in 1990, many Albanian players were quick to move abroad and cash in on the European club market.

Of the current Albanian team, 10 players belong to foreign clubs.

"At the moment there is no team with 11 really good players," Football Association (FA) secretary general Sulejman Starova said of the Albanian domestic leagues. "There are some with three or four, but no more than that."

The FA receives one million dollars a year from the government, less than many players earn in a year in the west and a fraction of the transfer fees paid at big European clubs.

The soccer body also has to divide this paltry sum up between three divisions and the national team.

Soccer players in Albania earn an average around 150-dollar a month, Starova said. A top rate English Premier League player can easily earn 30,000 dollars a week.

The net result is that the best players go abroad, which makes it expensive for the FA to assemble a national team, which means it doesn't have much spare cash to invest in the domestic game, which means the best players go abroad.

Starova is trying to stop the haemorrhaging of talent.

"The solution is the privatisation of the clubs," he said.

The FA has asked the government to privatise Albania's

16 top division clubs in an effort to attract some much needed investment into the game -- ideally from abroad.

Privatisation is expected in the next year.

In the meantime, the FA has sought to unlock as much value as it can form the national game by striking a deal with German television company UFO.

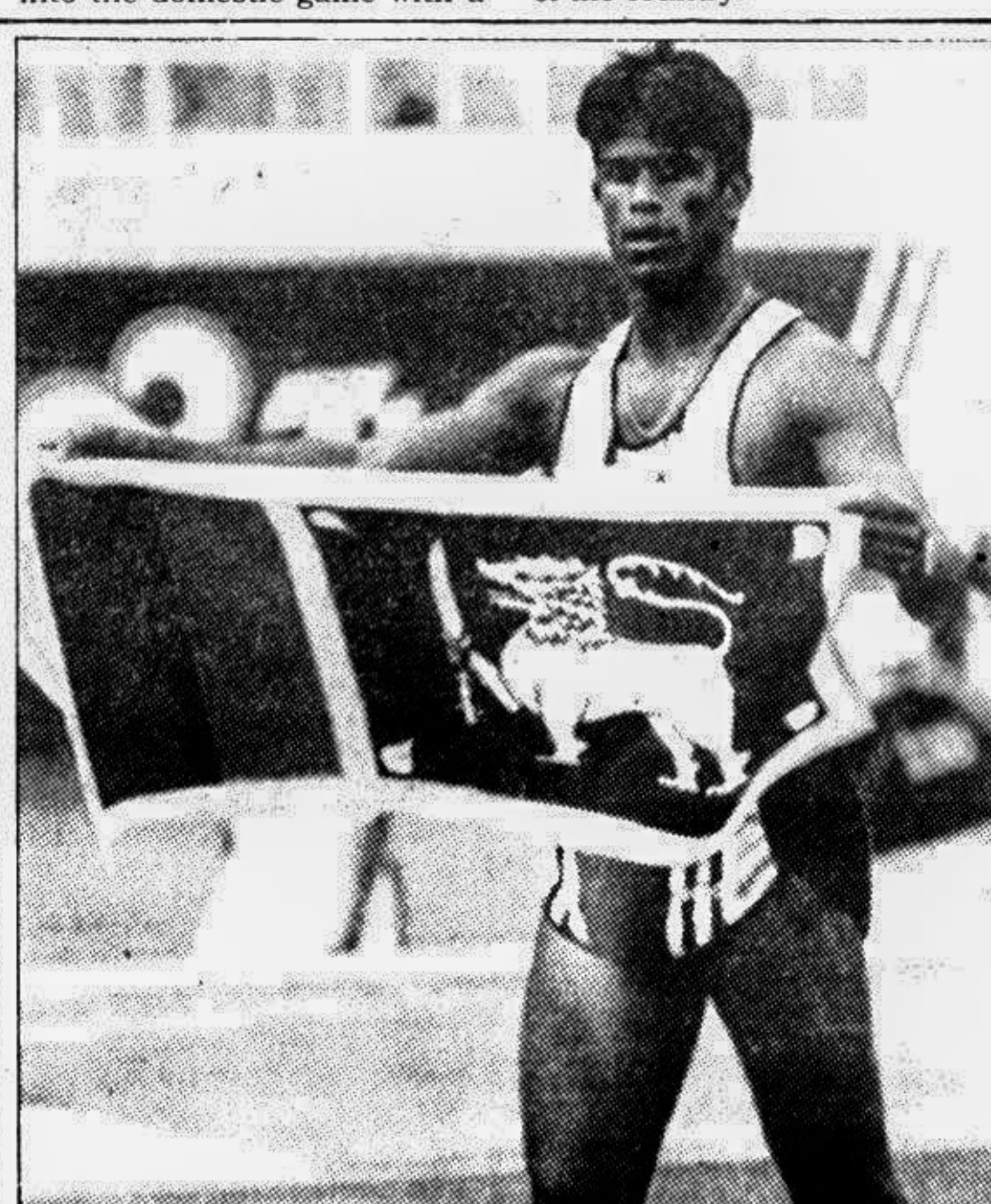
In return for 1.5 million marks (909,600 dollars) UFO will broadcast all the national side's European Championship matches until 2000.

The money will be ploughed into the domestic game with a

priority on the development of young players, whose raw talent and enthusiasm is in abundance.

"They are the future and if we can improve our facilities, we should produce better players, better teams and generate more interest in the domestic game," Starova said.

Soccer matches in Albania have often deteriorated into venues for gang violence in the aftermath of widespread civil unrest in the spring of 1997. The government has struggled to re-establish control in much of the country.



COMING BIG: Sugath Tillekeratne of Sri Lanka proudly displays his national flag after winning the Asiad 400 metres gold on December 14. Tillekeratne clocked 44.99 sec.

Akram longing to tour India

LAHORE, Dec 15: Pakistan's ace pace bowler Wasim Akram said today he was eager to play in India, as cricket officials prepared to leave for the neighbouring country to finalise a schedule, reports AFP.

"I love playing at Calcutta and New Delhi, people applaud every good performance. Eden Gardens is one of the liveliest places to play cricket," he said.

Wasim, who was in the team that last toured India in 1987, said he reckoned Sachin Tendulkar as the best batsman in the world.

"I don't have to say anything, his record speaks of his greatness and it is always a challenge bowling at him," Wasim said.

A delegation of cricket officials was due to leave for India later in the day following a go-ahead by the two governments despite threats from Hindu fundamentalists to disrupt the tour.

The two teams have not played a Test series for nine years amid tense political ties between the neighbours.

Pakistan and India have played one-day internationals in Sharjah, Canada, Sri Lanka, Singapore and Dhaka but their last Test series was in Pakistan in 1989-90.

The Pakistani team participated in India's Independence Cup while India paid a reply trip to play three one-day internationals last year.

"Besides taking two wickets in Test cricket my other wish is to tour India. I will love to bowl Sachin Tendulkar there," Wasim said.

"I don't know what the politicians think but I have always enjoyed playing and touring India without any fear, the people there have a sound knowledge of the game."

It is unfortunate that we are restricted to playing on neutral grounds, its time we sort out the problem," Wasim said.

Leeds earn full points

LONDON, Dec 15: Leeds United beat Coventry City 2-0 at Elland Road in a full-blooded match on Monday night to move into third place in the English Premier league, reports Reuters.

David Hopkins scored his first goal of the season for Leeds in the 40th minute after Australia's Harry Kewell and Irish international Ian Harte had carved open the Coventry defence.

Lee Bowyer made it four goals in his last three matches when he slotted past Swede Magnus Hedman to sew it up 2-0 in the final minute.

England midfielder David Batty made his debut for Leeds after re-joining them last week from Newcastle, and was booked after just five minutes for a late sliding tackle on the greasy pitch.

Newcastle approached by bidders

LONDON, Dec 15 (Reuters/Internet): Newcastle United Plc said on Tuesday it had received a preliminary approach which may lead to a 160 million pound (\$270 million) takeover bid for the English premier league soccer club.

The company did not name the potential bidder but said any possible offer would not be "significantly in excess" of 110 pence per share.

It also said that no offer would be made until after the Monopolies and Mergers Commission has reported on the billion dollar bid by pay TV giant BSkyB for Manchester United Plc.

The MMC has until March 12 to report on that bid, seen as a test case which will determine the regulatory approach to the takeover of British soccer clubs by media groups.

The Newcastle statement followed a report in the Daily Mail newspaper on Tuesday which said that Japanese electronics giant Sony Corp had offered 160 pence per share during talks with a Newcastle party last week.

Recent newspaper reports have also named U.S. media group Time Warner as a potential bidder for Newcastle, based in northeast England.

The club is coached by charismatic Dutchman Ruud Gullit and its squad includes England striker Alan Shearer. However, the team is currently languishing in 15th place in the 20-team premier league.

Di Canio out in the cold

LONDON, Dec 15: The Sheffield Wednesday future of absentee striker Paolo Di Canio remains uncertain, reports AFP.

The 30-year-old Italian player has failed to make the Premier League's deadline for his return from his homeland and time is running out if he is going to be able to play in Sheffield Wednesday's Boxing Day clash with Leicester.

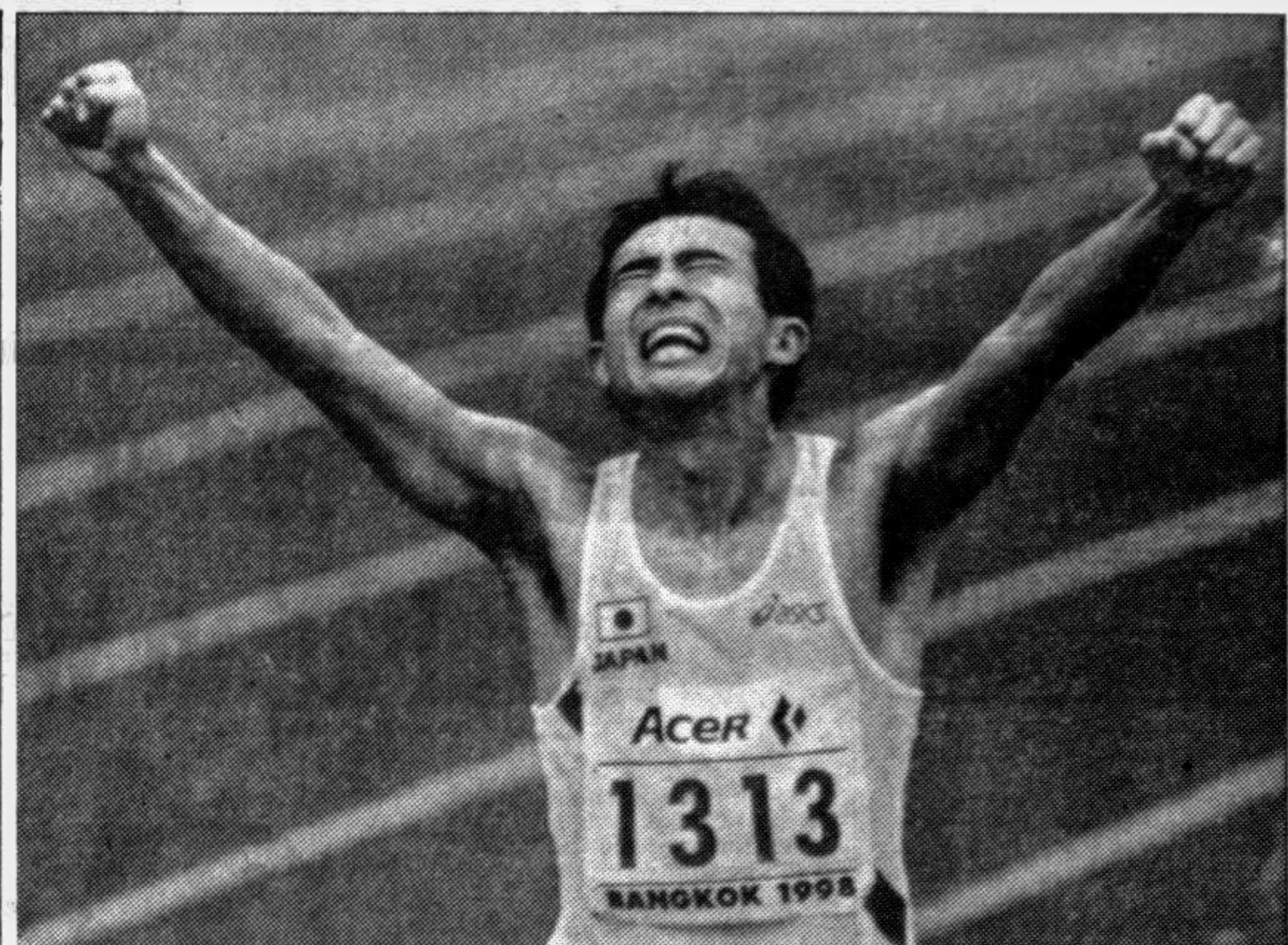
Di Canio has been serving an 11-game ban for pushing a referee and he is still in Italy after being granted permission to return home to see his family.

He was supposed to return to England last week but sent a medical certificate saying he was unfit to travel.

Di Canio has said he is suffering from stress and depression.

Sheffield Wednesday manager Danny Wilson confirmed Monday that Di Canio was still absent.

"There is little more than a week left before our Boxing Day game at home to Leicester. Paolo is available for that match after his suspension."



Japan's Yasunori Uchitomi is ecstatic after triumphing in the Asiad 3,000 metres steeplechase yesterday.

Asia's ultimatum to FIFA



BANGKOK, Dec 15 (Reuters/Internet): Asian soccer chiefs on Tuesday gave FIFA until March to avert a regional boycott of the 2002 World Cup in Japan and South Korea by giving Asia the chance of an extra place in the finals.

After emergency talks in Bangkok, the Asian Football Confederation said it was willing to sacrifice one qualifying spot because of FIFA's decision to choose two co-hosts.

But it said there would be a boycott -- with Japan and South Korea exempted -- if FIFA refused to give the third-placed Asian qualifier the chance to play off against the top team from Oceania.

"All spoke out in favour of a boycott," Peter Velappan, AFC general secretary, told a news conference.

If Asia's team won a play-off, Asia would have five places in the finals instead of the four, including two for the co-hosts, that FIFA proposed earlier this month.

"You must understand that this is a very reasonable request," Velappan said.

"Let us maintain the status quo, which is three and a half, and from this we are willing to sacrifice one for the hosts, which is two and a half."

"So therefore what we are now asking is to please restore the half seat that has been taken away from us."

But he said the 2002 finals would go ahead, no matter what the outcome of the dispute between an outraged AFC and FIFA over the world body's decision on December 4 to effectively reduce 44 Asian nations to competing for just two places in the finals.

"We will honour the responsibility of hosting the World Cup in 2002 in Japan and Korea," Velappan said. "Japan and South Korea will play. That is definite."

The delegates to the Bangkok meeting all said they agreed FIFA's position was unfair.

"Asia has one third of the world's population. We have 46 members in FIFA, one quarter of the total. If you want a World Cup without one third of the world's population properly represented, it's unfair," said Manilal Fernando of Sri Lanka.

Velappan said the AFC would write immediately to FIFA President Sepp Blatter explaining Tuesday's decision and send a six-member delegation to Zurich to try to persuade him of the seriousness of the Asian position.

"We wish to inform him not

to push us to take this drastic decision," he said.

Asia last boycotted the World Cup 32 years ago over a similar dispute, although rogue state North Korea ignored that boycott.

"The FIFA executive committee meets in March and we demand it rescind the (December 4) decision. If the (March) decision is not in our favour, the AFC executive committee will meet again to take the appropriate decision," Velappan said.

"Blatter must find a way of resolving the issue or he will push us to the wall," said Fernando.

Syrian delegate Farouk Bouzo said Asia was suffering from the decision to have co-hosts.

"Co-hosting was a FIFA decision, not one by the AFC, and you know what FIFA politics are like," he said. "We should not pay the expense of FIFA politics."

Sir Bobby in Bangkok

Asiad soccer semis today

BANGKOK, Dec 15: Football legend Sir Bobby Charlton will attend the 13th Asian Games football semi-final between Thailand and Kuwait tomorrow at Rajamangala Stadium, reports BSS.

The match will be preceded by the other semi-final between China and Iran.

British minister for sport Tony Banks, Sir Bobby Charlton and an adviser for England's 2006 world cup bid Alex McQueen arrive here tomorrow to see for themselves the Asian Games events.

The officials of Bangkok Asian Games Organising Committee (BAGOC) are expecting a huge crowd for the semi-finals as the hosts have made it to the last four by beating mighty South Korea.



Action from the Asian Games quarterfinal match between Thailand and South Korea on December 14. Thailand won 2-1.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

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