

Stewart to miss Australian XI match

HOBART, Dec 18 (Reuters/Internet): Captain Alec Stewart will miss England's four-day match against an Australian XI containing 10 Test players starting in Hobart on Saturday. Former captain Michael Atherton will lead the Australian side while Warren Hegg will take over the wicket-keeping duties.

The match, described by former Australian captain Allan Border as the "sixth Test", is England's last before the fourth Test starting at the Melbourne Cricket Ground on December 26.

England have rested several key players for the match including vice-captain Nasser Hussain and pace bowlers Darren Gough and Alan Mullally. England manager Graham Gooch said the tourists were keen to do well ahead of the Melbourne Test.

"It's a game we need to win to get confidence," Gooch said. "We need a good performance so we are in the right heart for the fourth Test."

The powerful Australian XI side, which Border is coaching, includes Matthew Elliott and Greg Blewett, who have both scored test centuries against England.

"With the quality of the players we've got, it's basically the sixth Test of the summer," Border said.

"Our blokes are going to approach it with that much intensity. They have plenty to play for. When those little windows open up a bit, these are the guys who are going to jump through it."

TEAMS
ENGLAND: Michael Atherton (captain), Mark Butcher, John Crawley, Mark Ramprakash, Graeme Hick, Ben Hollis, Warren Hegg, Dominic Cork, Alec Tudor, Angus Fraser, Peter Such.
AUSTRALIAN XI: Darren Lehmann (captain), Adam Gilchrist, Matthew Elliott, Greg Blewett, Corey Richards, Stuart Law, Michael Bevan, Brendon Julian, Gavin Robertson, Paul Pfeffel, Michael Kasprzowicz.

'Biggest crisis since 1817'



They are literally swinging round the hot and steaming whirlpool of their own making. It's irony of fate! You dig holes for others to fall, instead you fall in it headlong. What a tragedy! Yes, you are right. I am referring to the two hiterto 'bright stars' of Australian cricket — Mark Waugh and Shane Warne — who had ultimately opened the long-hidden 'cricket gate' of Australia and have fallen heavily with a big bang with their 'confession' made recently at Adelaide (Australia) before a press conference that they had accepted illegal money from an Indian bookie in exchange of supplying 'weather information' and 'field reports' during Australian team's visit to Sri Lanka and Pakistan in September 1994. The unexpected 'explosion' has come after a slight 'leakage' in some of the Australian deals about their under-hand 'deal', hitherto kept secret.

The two self-confessed 'shooting stars' made this earth-shaking admission before the press in their respective written statements in which they also said that they were 'naive and stupid' to accept the money and since then they had not chewed any 'forbidden fruit'. What an attempt to put a brave face! They had fallen from grace before their own people at home as well as the cricket fans all over the world. It is not known when and how the shattered image of not only Australian cricket but also of world cricket, would be restored to its original pedestal. 'Australia mourns as the game falls from its pedestal', laments Sydney Morning Herald.

Cricket's Biggest Crisis
In fact, the two most highly paid cricketers have made history by accepting such a small amount — Waugh 6,400 US dollars and Warne 5,100 US dollars only — for which they had to pay a high price. A crime is always a crime and a criminal is always a criminal whatever may be the nature and dimension of that crime. Mathew Engel, a renowned cricket writer of Australia, has pointed that "this may be the cricket's biggest crisis since 1817" when bookies were banned (until 1873) to save cricket from becoming a "corrupt and a gambling game" in England.

The 'confession' of the two cricketers came like a bolt from the blue, after it was kept as a 'holy secret' by their 'angel-guardians' — the Australian Cricket Board (ACB), who later came to know about the 'offence' and 'fined secretly' the two offenders in 1995. And after informing the International Cricket Council (ICC), the ACB asked it to keep it a secret. Former Australian captain Kim Hughes accused both ACB and ICC of making 'matters worse by sweeping the issue under the carpet for more than three years'. So, along with the two offenders, both ACB and ICC committed offence by their tacit support. All of them are now on the dock.

From 'Heroes to Zeros'
The most amazing part of whole episode is that after pocketing the bribe-money themselves, the two offenders started shouting 'thief', 'thief', accusing the then Pakistan Captain Salim Malik as offering them 200,000 US dollars 'through the match against Pakistan in October 1994. Certainly this is not cricket, as the expression is used to mean 'unfair', or 'infringing code of fair play'. They were romping around the world after committing the crime, like real 'heroes' until they were exposed by their own media, reducing them overnight from 'heroes to zeros', as put by an Australian daily. 'Things are not always what they seem. What they had 'confessed' may not be the whole truth. And half truth is always the whole lie. There may be more to it. More 'revelations' may be in store. The cricket world might have a glimpse of the tip of the iceberg. Therefore,

the simple question is: who is going to believe the 'duo' when they say they had refused to accept the bribe-money of 200,000 US dollars each, offered by Salim Malik, when their own written 'confession' confirms that they didn't hesitate to accept much smaller amounts from the Indian book-maker. As they say a 'liar' must have a good memory. So they were trying to put up a 'brave face' now and establish their honesty, integrity and credibility by declaring that they had the guts to refuse such a huge amount, or, as they were guilty conscious themselves, they wanted to discredit Pakistani players. There is smell of a rat somewhere. And that's why one of Australia's biggest betting agency has said that the information, claimed by the 'duo' to have given to the Indian bookie, is 'largely overpriced', as, according to the agency spokesman, they could have obtained such information just by dialing the local weather bureau by spending only 80 cents!

One Skeleton Found: What else?
An Australian sports writer had said: "Unfortunately, one skeleton has been found. What else is there?" To bring out the 'whole truth', a thorough enquiry is needed. Neither ACB, nor ICC can follow a good-old policy of 'Hear all, see all, say nothing'. That would be suicidal for the cricket as a noble game. The self-confessed culprits must be given exemplary punishment by banning them from playing cricket for the rest of their life. This would send a strong and meaningful signal for other players to take a lesson from their guidance. And if agreed, the 'bookies' should be banned as was done in 1817, which was in vogue for over five decades. This is needed for the healthy growth of cricket, free from becoming a 'money-making machine' and a 'gambling game'. Cricket has been 'crucified' by the two 'stupid and naive' fellows. It must be resurrected to its full glory.

Media group prepare to buy Newcastle

NEWCASTLE, December 18 (Reuters/Internet): Media and telecommunications group NTL has emerged as the front runner to buy Newcastle United after announcing it had bought a six per cent stake in the club. The broadcasting group also said it had reached an agreement with Newcastle's main shareholder Cameron Hall Developments under which CHD will sell its majority stake in the club to NTL if the broadcasters make an offer.

NTL has bought nine million shares in Newcastle at 111.7p a share from Cameron Hall, representing 6.3 per cent of the club. Under the agreement Cameron Hall has agreed to sell its remaining 51 per cent to NTL at the same price if the broadcaster decides to launch a takeover bid.

NTL said its decision on whether to make a bid for the club will depend on the outcome of the Monopolies and Mergers Commission's investigation into BSkyB's bid to buy Manchester United. The share price of 111.7p values Newcastle United at £160million. Shares closed at 102p yesterday. Cameron Hall Developments is owned and run by Douglas Hall, the director of Newcastle United who along with Freddie Shepherd resigned from the board of the club earlier this year after they were taped making insulting comments about Newcastle supporters. Last week the pair used their controlling stakes in the business to engineer their return to the board. The move prompted the resignation of Newcastle chairman Dennis Cassidy and directors John Josephs and Tom Fenton. Newcastle United's stockbrokers BT Alex Brown also resigned their contract with the club. Newcastle first announced they were in talks with a potential bidder on Tuesday, but did not name it. Media Group Time Warner was tipped as the favourite to buy the club. The agreement between Cameron Hall and NTL is pending on both companies until March when the MMC's report on the BSkyB bid for Manchester is due to be released.



A smiling Fan Yun Jie shows her medal after winning gold in the Asiad women's football final against North Korea on December 17. —AFP photo

Euro soccer spotlight

PARIS, Dec 18: Italian would-be title pretenders AS Roma face a tough test this weekend when they face the might of a Ronaldo-inspired Inter Milan in the Serie A's most entertaining fixture, reports AFP. Under Polish coach Zdzislaw Zeman, Roma have topped the scoring charts with 27 goals in 13 games thanks to a potent attack comprising Francesco Totti, Marco Delvecchio and Brazilian Paulo Sergio. Inter will look to counter them with the San Siro crowd and their own strike force of Ronaldo and Youn Djourkoeff. Ronaldo is gradually recovering his form after injury and showed several flashes of his skill for the FIFA World Stars exhibition match in Rome. Roma, who are also currently providing Italian National coach Dino Zoff with his entire midfield in the shape of Damiano Tommasi, Eusebio Di Francesco and Luigi Di Biagio, are currently third — one point behind AC Milan and five behind leaders Fiorentina. But a win in Milan would show that Roma, who last won the title in 1983, are once again a force to be reckoned with. Inter are still in the process of settling down after the recent replacement of Gigi Simoni by Romanian Mircea Lucescu as coach. But they are still putting points on the board. Currently fifth, two points behind Roma, another victory on Sunday would take them back into the thick of the championship action. Fiorentina are away to Hidetoshi Nakata's Perugia and the leaders will again look to Argentine striker Gabriel Batistuta, who has scored 13 goals in as many games to keep their title challenge going at full-pelt. AC Milan travel to Sampdoria for what will be David Platt's first day in charge as 'coach' of the Genoa club. Platt will be at the wheel — but driving without a licence as the former England captain does not have a coaching qualification that entitles him to be officially called coach at Serie A level. FRANCE: Marseille are almost certain to go into the Christmas break as leaders after a 1-0 win at Montpellier in midweek put the former European champions on course for their first league title since 1992. They lead the table by three points from faltering Bordeaux,

who lost Tuesday at Auxerre, and lowly Le Havre are unlikely to halt the Mediterranean juggernaut at the Stade Velodrome. However, Marseille's success has a downside — already sides from across the border in Italy's Serie A are chasing their top stars with French Cup international striker Christophe Dugary admitting Thursday he had been approached by Juventus. Dugary, who made his name at Bordeaux before an unhappy time at AC Milan, only arrived a year ago from Barcelona. Although Juve vice-president Roberto Bettega has denied any move for Dugary, the French World Cup international striker Christophe Dugary admitting Thursday he had been approached by Juventus. Dugary, who made his name at Bordeaux before an unhappy time at AC Milan, only arrived a year ago from Barcelona. Although Juve vice-president Roberto Bettega has denied any move for Dugary, the French World Cup international striker Christophe Dugary admitting Thursday he had been approached by Juventus. Dugary, who made his name at Bordeaux before an unhappy time at AC Milan, only arrived a year ago from Barcelona. Although Juve vice-president Roberto Bettega has denied any move for Dugary, the French World Cup international striker Christophe Dugary admitting Thursday he had been approached by Juventus.

aided Villareal. After that debacle, a newspaper poll of fans showed 93 per cent wanted his head while almost half wanted a return for former coach Johan Cruyff. The 'Sport' daily said that Van Gaal, who received a vote of confidence 'is piling on the agony for a team whose spirit is broken.' Barcelona, out of Europe, lie just 10th in the table, nine points behind surprise leaders Real Mallorca. Mallorca host struggling Racing Santander on Sunday while second-placed Celta Vigo play at Real Sociedad. Fourth placed Deportivo la Coruna set the ball rolling in Saturday's game at home to Real Betis. Atletico Madrid, standing fifth, host ninth placed Zaragoza, hoping that growing tension between coach Arigo Sacchi and Brazilian star Juninho will die down. Former Middlesbrough favourite Juninho has been linked with a move back to the English Premiership and slammed Sacchi for playing him out of position. "Never before has a coach doubted my capabilities," stormed Juninho. "I think I'm no form but maybe I'm not playing at my best. But it's at times like that that players need support. "I don't need to talk with the coach — I'll let my talent do the talking on the pitch," said Juninho. Atletico's city rivals Real Madrid travel to Oviedo hoping to close a five-point gap on Mallorca, although the European champions have a match in hand. GERMANY: Leaders Bayern Munich host a much-improved VfL Wolfsburg on Saturday safe in the knowledge that they cannot be dislodged from top spot of the Bundesliga. Bayern extended their lead over second-placed Bayer Leverkusen to six points Wednesday as they won 2-0 at struggling Borussia Dortmund's Borussia Monchengladbach. But fifth-placed Wolfsburg will not prove easy prey having lost just one of their previous 11 fixtures. Reigning champions Kaiserslautern, who blew their chances of setting a club record of eight consecutive wins Wednesday by losing at Duisburg, host 1860 Munich, who have not won at Kaiserslautern's Betzenberg Stadium since 1967.

Does becoming friends?

BANGKOK, Dec 18: A joint North-South Korea football team for the 2002 World Cup is a step closer to becoming reality, South Korea sources revealed here Thursday, reports AFP.

Chung Mong-joon, head of the South's Korean Football Association and a vice-president of FIFA, met top official in Pyongyang on Monday to discuss the plan. Chung cancelled a planned visit to the Asian Games to go to the North Korean capital. "I think we will see a joint team for 2002," a South Korean Games official told AFP. "Things are moving in the right direction," he added.

Chung's move to involve the North in 2002 got an added boost from FIFA president Sepp Blatter during a recent visit to Seoul.

Blatter, who earlier this year had ruled out any chance of the North being involved in the 2002 finals being co-hosted by South Korea and Japan, has now softened his stance.

During his visit he said that while it was not possible to change FIFA statutes to allow North Korea to formally host games, if the South as co-hosts made its own contacts with the North, FIFA would not close the door.

"We are open to any dialogue," said Blatter. Blatter also revealed that he would visit the North next year and he is expected to discuss their possible involvement in the World Cup. Chung is hoping the creation of a joint team will ease tension on the divided Korean peninsula, which has been technically at war since the 1950-53 Korean conflict.

Platt takes over at Sampdoria



GENOA, Italy, Dec 18 (Reuters/Internet): David Platt was officially confirmed as the new coach at Italian Serie A club Sampdoria on Thursday, even if his job title remains unclear. Speaking at a news conference in Genoa, Sampdoria President Enrico Mantovani said that 32-year-old former England international midfielder had been appointed "overall supervisor" for all the Sampdoria teams.

Under Italian Football Federation regulations, Platt does not have the necessary qualifications to coach a Serie A side, thereby obliging Sampdoria to appoint him as "supervisor" rather than "coach". "To all intents and purposes he'll be our coach... We'll try to find a bureaucratic solution to this, working in collaboration with the relevant authorities," said Mantovani.

In an attempt to circumvent federation regulations, Sampdoria have also appointed 59-year-old Giorgio Veneri as assistant to Platt. Veneri, formerly coach of third division sides Lefte and Prato, holds necessary "category one" licence.

However, there is much opposition to the move, with Azelegio Vicini, chairman of the Italian Managers' Association, saying: "As far as we are concerned Platt is not even qualified to manage Sampdoria's youth team."

Whatever his title, Platt is the youngest and least experienced coach in Serie A and faces a tough baptism against AC Milan on Sunday — although it is still not clear whether he will be allowed to take his place on the bench. Platt said his new role was a challenge. "It is a sensation I quite like because it brings the best out of me," he said.



DAVID PLATT

"I'm really pleased to have a club and a group of supporters I know very, very well. I'm glad to be here because ever since I left Sampdoria as a player four years ago, I never stopped hoping that I would one day come back. "I didn't manage to do it as a player but I have as a coach and that's a great source of satisfaction."

During a 14-season professional career, Platt played for four years in Serie A between 1991 and 1995, spending one season with Bari and Juventus and two with Sampdoria before returning to England with Arsenal. He said his situation was very similar to that of former Sampdoria team mate Gianluca Vialli, who became player-coach of Chelsea with no coaching experience. "I know that he and I have been through similar things and we get on well. I can phone him at any time and I'm sure he'll be a great source of advice."

Platt expressed his confidence in Sampdoria's ability to radically reverse their recent poor run of results. Following a 5-2 drubbing by Lazio on Sunday, a result which prompted the sacking of Platt's predecessor Luciano Spalletti, Sampdoria sank to fifth from bottom in Serie A, just one point above the relegation zone. "I've seen Sampdoria play once this season, against Juventus in Turin (a 2-0 defeat) and I've seen them lots of time on TV."

"Overall the squad strength is good even if the side perhaps lacks a bit of personality," Platt said. He declined to define the tactical approach his Sampdoria would adopt, saying only: "At the moment, players count a lot more than tactical schemes."

Zolas happy in London



LONDON, Dec 18 (Reuters/Internet): Italian international Gianfranco Zola said on Thursday that he intends to see out his career at Chelsea as he and his family are so happy in London. Zola, 32, England's footballer-of-the-year two years ago, said that recent speculation he was going to return to Italy "were wrong". "I am happy at Chelsea and my family are happy in London. I will be 36 at the end of my contract and I want to see out that contract. "It is going to be difficult to carry on playing at that stage and I want to finish my career here at Chelsea, nowhere else."

Zola, who scored Chelsea's equaliser in their 1-1 draw against Manchester United at Old Trafford on Wednesday, has been in sparkling form recently with six goals in his last seven matches. Ba can't take it anymore. CARNAGO, Italy, Dec 18 (Reuters/Internet): French striker Ibrahim Ba said on Wednesday he was fed up with being on the substitutes' bench and could leave AC Milan for English club Newcastle in January. "I know Milan has already talked to the English managers. I've had a chat with (Newcastle coach) Ruedi Gullit. I'd be ready to go in January." Ba told reporters at Milan's training ground. Media reports have speculated for some time that Ba wanted to leave the Italian club because he was unhappy with manager Alberto Zaccheroni. Ba has often been on the bench this season.

United manager Alex Ferguson praised Zola's performance while the player himself believes his new-found zest is a result of being left out of the Italian World Cup squad in the summer. "The break from football in the summer meant I came back for the new season refreshed." Zola was a member of the Napoli team that won the Italian League eight years ago and believes Chelsea can sustain a realistic bid for the English title this season. "We have a belief in ourselves and confidence in each other. We feel we can make a real challenge for the championship," he said. Zola has played almost 400 league matches in Italy and in England scoring 165 goals. He played 34 times for Italy, scoring nine goals.



President Bill Clinton and First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton listen to a speech by Eunice Kennedy Shriver on the 30th anniversary of the Special Olympics at the White House on December 17. — AP/UNB photo

Remembering the Special Olympics

WASHINGTON, Dec 18: A tuxedoed President Bill Clinton and his wife, gowned in black velvet, played host Thursday night to a celebrity-studded White House gala honouring the 30th anniversary of the Special Olympics, reports AP.

The dinner was consigned to a heated pavilion at the end of the long south drive, but the 300 guests — actor David Hasselhoff, and comedian Whoopi Goldberg among them — took no offence. "For more than 200 years, no president has ever chosen to honour the contributions of people with mental retardation at a dinner in this great house until tonight," said Special Olympics founder Eunice Kennedy Shriver.

The entire assembly stood in sustained applause when Mrs Shriver, with a mention of all the "uncertainty" in Washington, went on. "Even if there were 300,000 people on the White House lawn tonight, Mr. President, you would find no greater loyalty and no greater faith in your leadership than right here among us tonight."

Clinton shook his head. "You've got to stop the applause. The show must go on!" Goldberg and musicians Tracy Chapman, Eric Clapton, Sheryl Crow, Run D.M.C., John Poppers, Mary J Blige, Jon Bon Jovi and Vanessa Williams were performing after a dinner of seared salmon and pheasant consommé. The concert was being taped for broadcast Sunday on TNT.

For his part, Clinton recalled a time — before Mrs Shriver and her husband Sargent Shriver started Special Olympics with summer camps in their backyard — when people with disabilities were discounted. "It would have been nice for him to make his big entrance at the MCG (Melbourne Cricket Ground) for the fairytale comeback, but it doesn't look like it's going to happen."

Warne still uncertain



SYDNEY, Dec 18 (Reuters/Internet): Shane Warne is almost certain to miss the remaining two Tests of the Ashes series with England despite recovering from his shoulder injury, national selector Allan Border said on Friday. Border said Warne was improving steadily but was still well short of his best form. "He's probably just a few weeks from bowling somewhere near his best so that will probably count him out of the test series," Border said. "It would have been nice for

him to make his big entrance at the MCG (Melbourne Cricket Ground) for the fairytale comeback, but it doesn't look like it's going to happen."

Border said any pressure on Warne to make a hasty return had been lifted after Australia retained the Ashes by winning the third test in Adelaide. Border also said the selectors were lucky to have such a creditable replacement in leg-spinner Stuart MacGill. Warne has not played a test for Australia since the third match against India in March after undergoing shoulder surgery. He returned to first-class cricket last month and will

play for Victoria against New South Wales in a Sheffield Shield match starting at the Sydney Cricket Ground on Saturday. MacGill, who plays for New South Wales, withdrew from that match on Friday because of a niggling hamstring injury but is certain to be ready for the fourth Test. Warne was expected to make his Test return in the fourth Ashes Test at the MCG starting on December 26. "If he misses that match, he is almost certain to miss the fifth and final Test which starts in Sydney on January 2."

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS
1 "Piano Man" singer
5 Luau bowlful
8 Trilled
12 Erstwhile
13 Grecian vessel
14 Hodgedodge
15 Hacker's purchase
17 Ms. Chanel
18 Owns
19 One
21 Less
25 Entreaty
26 Yellow pages?
30 Sleuth
31 Helen Keller's first word
32 Barcelona bravo
33 Bridge-tide item
35 Any time now
36 Count

DOWN
3 Booty
11 Suitable
16 Corn spike
20 At hand
21 Charlie Brown's expletive
22 One of the Baldwins
23 Texas city
24 Potpourri
42 Ship-to-shore call?
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48 Ground com
49 Aachen mouse link
7 Humored
8 Gregarious
9 Greatly
10 Riviera
52 Turf resort

Solution time: 24 mins.

35 Anaheim squad
37 Diving bird
38 Hacienda
39 Obsessed seaman
40 A few
41 Combo
44 Carnival city
45 Basilica
46 Literary collection
47 Trail

CRYPTOQUIP
O K P W G D P N K P H X I J X
X I P H W V C G P J X Y I W X W T
N J Y I P N V J D Y N W C P X W
G P O C T C P T J X O K P
Yesterday's Cryptoquip: FRANKLY, A LIKABLE BAKER WILL ALWAYS BE THE THOAST OF THE TOWN.
Today's Cryptoquip clue: K equals V
The Cryptoquip is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Single letters, short words and words using an apostrophe give you clues to locating vowels. Solution is by trial and error.