

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina rewarding South African skipper Hansie Cronje with the Wills International Cup.

— Star file photo

'98 cricket as we remember it

"Life is like a box of chocolates... you never know what you're gonna get."



Lenin Gani

Those famous lines of "Forrest Gump" seem very applicable to cricket this year.

The bombshell dropped by Australians Mark Edward Waugh and Shane Keith Warne laced with those smashing Sachin Ramesh Tendulkar 100s were unmistakable images that left their indelible mark on the international scene.

The admission in December by the Ws that they were offered money by an Indian bookmaker in exchange for pitch and weather information not only brought the 'gentleman's game' into disrepute but also undermined efforts by the sports governing body, the International Cricket Council (ICC), to give it a global appeal. A year, which saw successful debut of cricket at the Kuala Lumpur Commonwealth Games, the first-ever World Championship for the Blind at Delhi and a mini World Cup in Dhaka.

On the battlefield, Mark Taylor's Australians asserted their authority retaining cricket's oldest prize — the Ashes — for a sixth consecutive series dating back to 1989. The English with a new leader in Alec Stewart, arrived Down Under full of hope after coming from behind to defeat the South Africans at home in the Summer, but were soon on the receiving end. A freak electrical storm in the First Test only saved them from going back early as the tourists succumbed in the next two matches. They, however, managed to unearth a bowling sensation by the name of Alex Tudor. The Surrey speedster who made a dream start to his career claiming four wickets in the first innings of the second Test, incredibly, was promptly dropped.

In October Taylor became only the second Australian captain after Richie Benaud in 1959 to clinch a series on Pakistan soil. In years to come we will remember when the New South Welshman stood at the threshold of surpassing Brian Charles Lara's individual highest score of 375, only to give up the opportunity when within 41 runs of the mark. To be compared with the Don was ample reward for one of Australia's most successful post-war cricket skipper.

The Australians also whitewashed the hosts 3-0 in the one-day series. The ruthless efficiency with which they accomplished the task was characterised by successfully chasing a record-equaling 316 to win the third and final game.

Their only blemish was losing in India 2-1. Even "Wizard of Oz" Warne couldn't save them from Tendulkar's onslaught. The Bombay batting genius amassed 446 runs topping the averages for both sides with 111.50, while his adversary was left licking his wounds, having captured only 10 wickets for an average of 54/wkt. Unfortunately that was the last that the cricket world saw of "the leggy" who missed the tour of Pakistan and the first four Ashes contests because of surgery on his shoulder.

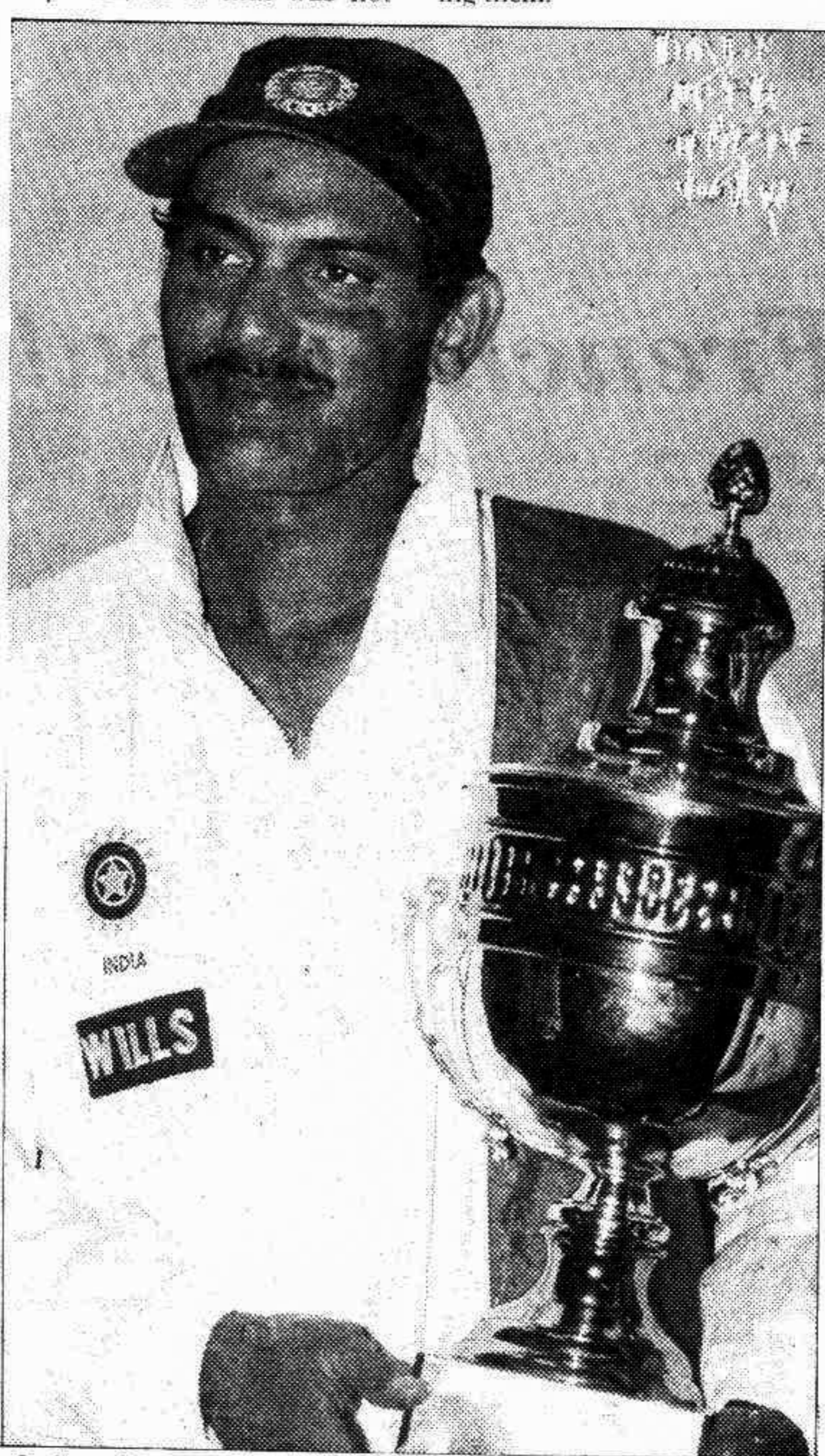
Tendulkar hit the headlines once again when he surpassed Desmond Haynes' seventeen limited-overs hundreds, although at the beginning of the year it seemed that the honour would go Saeed Anwar of Pak-

istan. The southpaw and holder of the highest score in the abridged version, completed his fifteenth century during the historic third final of the Silver Jubilee Cup in Bangladesh. But as we all know even after making 314-5 in 48 overs it didn't stop their arch rivals India from replying with a last ball 316 for six.

Anwar's form dipped after a series of injuries and illnesses. Tendulkar began his year losing the captaincy to Mohammad Azharuddin prior to Dhaka event. However, it proved to be a blessing in disguise for the 25-year-old, who managed two centuries throughout 1997 when he replaced Azharuddin.

At the April Coca-Cola Cup in Sharjah he hammered 142 and 134 in the space of two days respectively to tie with Anwar. By the end of May he had gone past the Pakistani with an unbeaten 100 against Kenya in Calcutta. Two months later, while the rest of the planet was engrossed in football mania; the pocket-sized maestro equalled the record with 128 at Colombo. And on September 26 in Bulawayo he claimed the title outright blasting 127 not out off hosts Zimbabwe. Presently, he has 21 to his credit.

No tale about India is complete without a little word on the man from Hyderabad. Apart from lifting a number of trophies, Azhar became the first cricketer to appear in 300 ODIs during the Wills International Cup and, as if that was not



India skipper Mohammad Azharuddin with the Independence Cup at Dhaka.

— Star file photo

enough, took over from Haynes as the game's leading run-scorer at Sharjah in November.

Asia's other powerhouse, the island nation of Sri Lanka, had a pretty wretched time. After winning the one-off Test against England at The Oval, where off-spinner Muttiah Muralitharan wreaked havoc recording the seventh-best bowling figures, and the triangular Emirates Trophy involving the hosts and South Africa, the world champions lost their way in Dhaka and were eliminated from the Sharjah Champions' Trophy. Not even master-bowler Sanath Jayasuriya could instill his will on the opposition bowlers.

Zimbabwe raised its profile in 1998 as the most improved side notching up maiden series victories over the mighty Indians and Pakistanis.

South Africa put their disappointing tours of Australia and England behind them by capturing the Commonwealth, the World Cup for the Blind and the Wills International crowns. Currently they are leading the historic five-match Test series against West Indies 2-0. The fact that it is taking place is remarkable to say the least. I'm referring to the pay dispute and a comedy of errors by the West Indies Cricket Board when they decided to lay down the law; sacking skipper Brian Charles Lara and his deputy Carl Hooper for refusing to attend a meeting, and then bowling to them.

Cricket said goodbye to some familiar characters. They included South Africans Dave Richards and Fanie De Villiers, Australian Dean Jones (actually retired in 1994) but said he was quitting competitively too and India's Sanjay Manjrekar.

At the same time it was welcoming the arrival of Australian leg-spinner Stuart MacGill, who was instrumental in plotting Pakistan's downfall, and West Indian pacesman Nixon McLean.

As in any competition there are bound to be those unforgettable achievements or moments, which one would like to cherish. Some will be good, some will be bad and some will be ugly. Obviously the list is endless, yet the names of Ian Healy, Courtney Walsh, Wasim Akram, Shaun Pollock come to mind.

Healy edged past compatriot Rodney Marsh's 355 dismissals. Walsh became the third highest wicket-taker of all time replacing Ian Botham. Akram captured his 350th Test scalp while Pollock joined an elite group in scoring 1000 runs and claiming 100 wickets.

Prominent among the bad was the abrupt end to the First Test at Sabina Park, Jamaica, involving England and West Indies. The match was abandoned after just an hour's play on Day One. The court case against television commentator Geoffrey Boycott was another story that made headlines for all the wrong reasons.

Suspect actions and racism were the ugliest topics. Sri Lanka's Kumara Dharmasena and India's Harbhajan Singh were made examples of by the ICC. Happily their careers were not endangered. England coach David Lloyd got into hot water following his racist remarks about Muralitharan. The dismantling of apartheid has not prevented the media from urging the United Cricket Board of South Africa to advise the provincial sides to include more coloured players. The press argued, as a result of this neglect, that not enough non-white players were entering the Test team.

Off the field there some historic happenings too. Sir Donald Bradman turned 90, the Marylebone Cricket Club voted to accept women members into the world's oldest men's only club and the English Cricket Board decided to pull the plug on sixty years of cricket on BBC Television by switching to rivals Channel Four.

Next year promises to be an exciting one, starting with Pakistan's tour of neighbours India. It will be the first time in eleven years that such a series will be fought. There will also be an Asian Test tournament, a prelude maybe, to an eventual World Championship of Test-playing nations. And, of course, the main event — World Cup '99 (in England) — where Arjuna Ranatunga's feisty Sri Lankans will be defending their crown against the world's best. But above all, for the first time the entire cricket loving population will watch a new breed of players in action... Bangladesh sets foot into a major international tournament. Let us all look forward to next year and await its surprises — the past has repeatedly witnessed "underdogs" and "Cricketer" to have "astounding effects" when mixed together.

That was a 'bad' year that was



Nizamuddin Ahmed

'Bad', not as in Michael Jackson's 'Bad'. Emphatically speaking, 1998 was not a good year for our sport. Despite the lump of cow-dung, the good news is that year-end stocktaking can be easy if there is not much in the pile.

Cricket-wise, surfing on the crest of the ICC Trophy euphoria from the year before, we fell on all fours in English meadows and Scottish dales last summer, and made an ass of ourselves against Northern Ireland (do they play cricket?) at the Commonwealth Games. We were so eager to lose to the Test-playing countries that we forgot to win against the secondary. As for our status in World cricket, we are fighting for breath in the tertiary lane.

We concluded a disastrous year by having to pay heavily to watch the G-9 play on our own front-yard. In the Wills Trophy, at the Bangabandhu, we were grounded. We also paid heavily in terms of national pride and the inability to avail of the experience of the much-illustrated visitors. That one extra game that the organisers could not fit into the 'busy' schedule of Test teams was played at the BKSP against England. Surprisingly, to a packed house of ten thousand Savarians and some pilgrims from the city, we did quite well against Holloake and Company.

Belated over-zealousness with the England-bound World Cup team almost cost us also the Dhaka cricket league. We had already lost football. Sincerity on the part of all concerned played well to swerve a careering BCB from the brink of a deep ravine called 'ego'.

Wonder why we are discussing cricket first when any-

one knows that football had traditionally ruled Bangladesh sport. Well, in the past year, there was practically no football. The Dhaka Football League, the very life that made Bangabandhu (erstwhile Dhaka) Stadium the heart of our national sports, never got off the launching pad in 1998 due to the insistence of football clubs and players, and the football federation (BFF) that the Bangabandhu was a 'must' if football was to thrive. Plans to hold the Bangabandhu (International) Football Cup also went up in smoke.

Bangabandhu Stadium was the apple of discord between the two most powerful games. The cricket board (BCB), because of its ICC success and World Cup 1999 qualification, earned its right of use. BCB became the nation's golden boy after the ICC triumph and the Bangabandhu was given exclusively to cricket for its World Cup preparations.

This offered football the alternative to play at the Mirpur stadium but the popular football clubs, citing poor crowd and insecurity there, put their foot down. They wanted to play at the Bangabandhu and nowhere else. The National Sports Council (NSC) offered both BCB and the BFF the Fatullah carrot by announcing that a new stadium would be built there. One BFF official was quoted as saying, "Stadiums can be built anywhere, but we will play football at the Bangabandhu". In fact, BFF will be given the National No. 1 stadium from May after the cricketers leave for England.

While the nation is quite pleased to shun football and pamper cricket in view of the impending World Cup, any amount of dismal performance in England will ricochet on cricket and the Bangabandhu will be handed over on a silver platter to football.

The only football seen last year was the tail of the 1997 football league. Muktijoddha Sangsad broke a quarter-cen-

tury of Mohammedan-Abahani shackles to lift the championship in style. Only to prove it was no accident or a result of anybody's clemency, the red-and-whites went on to bring home the prestigious IFA Shield from India. Over the years, Brothers Union had shown flickers of promise and had often seriously threatened the MSC-AKC domain but Muk-tis showed it was possible.

Hockey showed promise somewhere down the year. But, in the end, it was sunk as deep as the Titanic, another highlight of the year. Consuming over two dozen goals in four matches at the Asian Games has taught us a lesson or two, if not hockey.

The problem is every Bangladeshi participating in international tournaments abroad utters the cliché — they are going in it for 'the experience'. What an utterly expensive exercise! What can weightlifters, boxers, swimmers, golfers, athletes or, for that matter, anyone learn from participating in competitions abroad that they cannot possibly learn at home from top-grade coaches? And by sheer sweating? International sport is no roller coaster that you have to ride on it to feel the thrill. Abebe Bikila (1932-1973) did not need any experience or exposure before the lanky Ethiopian won the Olympic marathon, and in bare foot too.

There has also been some activity in other federations. Most of the events were held in a lacklustre manner and were means for federation officials to justify their very existence.

As in the past, foreign players have featured for local teams in cricket, hockey and chess tournaments. Barring chess, the aliens have dominated events in the other two. Perhaps not as much true for hockey as for cricket, that playing with the better players from abroad have helped to raise the confidence of our boys.

A welcome relief in 1998 was the historic democratisation of the sports arena. Elections were held to all major federations and a few minor ones. The National Sports Council, the government sports controlling organ, held on the leash by keeping the provision to appoint Presidents in an elected federation. The NSC also nominated one member and, by some go-gly, two in cricket.

To some extent, the purpose of the sports polls — to elect suitable persons to run the federations — was defeated when councillors of the District Sports Associations formed a forum. By sheer number, they demanded of the coterie that had been governing each federation for years a certain number of positions in the new committee.

Consensus single panel was the order of the day and, in federations (cricket, badminton) where elections were contested between two opposing panels, the panel, which had the support of the districts, won hands down. The system decentralised sport to some extent but it excluded some worthy workers and ushered in some opportunists. But then is that not what democracy is all about?

Our passion for sport can to some extent be gauged by the coverage it merits in every newspaper and the electronic media. Our appreciation for quality can be fathomed from the over-filled stands during the Wills. Needless to say, a nation that considers sport a passion years for some success from its lads.

So high is our expectations, so thorough our failure, that there seems to be the need for sweeping changes in each ingredient that constitutes our sport. We need changes in the system that govern our sport, not so much in the persons, but in policy matters. We need to ring out the old and bring in the new. Let that be our New Year's resolution. Not be broken on January 2.

From England

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