

Impressive Imran!

LAHORE, Mar 5: Pakistani Test debutant Imran Nazir stood well-placed for a good career Thursday, barely a month after he landed himself in trouble with the police here, reports AFP.

The 17-year-old hit an impressive 64 in the third Asian Test Championship match against Sri Lanka.

"I thought the world was finished for me when I was detained in a police station but I was given enough courage by my elders and now I am happy that I have started by international career with success," Nazir told the news agency.

He did not show the nervousness of a teenager and played his shots with confidence.

Nazir was released on bail after being detained for allegedly possessing an uncenced pistol, enabling him to play against South African under-19s.

He fired 136 and 43 not out in the junior Tests and followed with scores of 95 not out, 59 and 102 in the three limited-over games.

"The lad has confidence and goes places if he keeps his determination intact," Pakistan junior team coach, former Test star Mohsin Khan said.

Nazir termed the pistol incident a "trauma" and said more jealous person had planted the weapon in his bag.

Pakistani captain Wasim Akram said of Nazir: "He is really a talented player and his bonus point is his fielding."

The boy has shots, but he needs to improve the movement of his feet," former batting great of England Geoff Boycott said.

"I want to play more and more for my country and create batting records. I know it will be tough but I will do my best," Nazir said.

Srinath fit

MUMBAI, Mar 5: "I have completely recovered from the sore shin and an eager to play in the Asian Test Championship final at Dhaka," India's pace spearhead Javagal Srinath announced here yesterday, reports PTT.

Talking to reporters after the formal launching of his three-year tie-up with United Television (UTV) Sports, the gangling Karnataka pace ace said the brief rest from the hard grind of international cricket has done him a world of good.

"I wanted the rest as I thought it (shin soreness) was becoming chronic," the my sore-born Srinath, who was rested for India's last league match in the Asian Test series against Sri Lanka at Colombo, said.

Srinath, who bagged a superb eight for 86 in the second innings of the Asia Test series match against Pakistan at Eden Gardens to complete the first ten-wicket haul of his career, rated his career-best second innings figures of 6 for 21 against South Africa at Ahmedabad in the 1996 series as his better effort.

"The spell at Ahmedabad fetched India the victory and I rate that better than the Calcutta effort," Srinath said when queried on how he rated the two performances.

Barrera-Lloyd bout Mar 27

LONDON, Mar 5: Marco Antonio Barrera of Mexico is to defend his WBO super-bantamweight title against Englishman Paul Lloyd at Derby on March 27, the promoters announced Thursday, reports AFP.

The bout will be on the same card as an all-British WBO cruiserweight title bout between Carl Thompson and Johnny Nelson.

It will be Lloyd's second attempt at a world title after he was stopped in the second round by American Tim Austin when he fought for the IBF bantamweight crown in March last year.

Since then, Lloyd has successfully defended his British and Commonwealth crown against draw, doctored and also won the vacant European bantamweight title with a 12th-round stoppage of Italian Luigi Mancini. He has a 19-4 record.

Barrera, who had held the title previously, beat England's Richie Wenton for the vacant title in Atlantic City in October last year. His record shows 47 wins against two defeats.

Duran upbeat

BUENOS AIRES, Mar 5: The rescheduled bout between legendary Panamanian boxer Roberto Duran and Argentinian Omar Gonzalez was billed as "a question of honour" by organisers Thursday following the farcical events that led to the postponement of the first match last month, reports AFP.

Originally billed as "the legend continues," the fight, to be held at the seaside city of Mar Del Plata, was called off when former world champion Duran scaled in at the weigh-in at 83 kilograms, 6 kg over the 77-kg weight limit.

Journalists laughed throughout the weigh-in and the once proud Duran had to contend with jibes that the bout should have been called the "farce at the seaside." His nickname, "hands of stone" was also parodied as "double chin of stone."

This time around Duran, 47, says he is ready.

"I am much better prepared than the other time," he said. "I am sure I will win, although I think it will be a good battle."

"I am perfectly well, I have been working for some days and the weight will be no problem. They humiliated me like a delinquent and because of that I will fight all the harder in the

English counties get nick-names



LONDON, March 5 (Reuters/Internet):

In a move likely to generate a shoal of angry letters from the shires, English cricket authorities released on Friday a list of nicknames for county teams in the new Sunday league.

Division one will feature the

Essex Eagles and the Lancashire Lightning while the Durham Dynamos and the Somerset Sabres will fight for promotion from the second.

The only team among the 18

counties to escape a soubriquet is Kent, whose name has yet to be decided.

The new competition, which replaces the one-division Sunday league, was announced at a news conference by the chairman of the English and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) Ian MacLaurin.

Speaking little more than two months before the World Cup opens at Lord's, MacLaurin

said the new league was necessary to lift England's standards in the one-day game.

"The National Cricket League is essential to our plans," he said. Gambling with the unpredictable English climate, the English and Wales Cricket Board plans 20 floodlit matches and squad numbers will be introduced for the players.

"Day-night matches attract new spectators," MacLaurin said.

In line with the proposed new county structure, two divisions have been introduced with nine teams in each section. Three teams will be promoted and relegated each season.

Matches will be played over 45 overs rather than 40, moving closer to the standard 50 overs used in one-day internationals.

The league will be sponsored by insurance group CGU, which will pump 6.3 million pounds sterling (9.7 million dollars) into the competition over the

next four years.

A collection of leading England internationals, dressed in the new National League kit, were introduced by former England captain David Gower, who made a wry reference to the cold, grey London day which he said was perfect for pre-season training.

Gower had not been a prominent advocate of net training in his playing days, as Surrey Lions and England batsman Graham Thorpe pointed out when asked how his preparations were going for the forthcoming one-day tournament in Sharjah.

The best performance, though, came from Darren Gough who struggled to keep a straight face as he described how the Yorkshire Phoenix were named after the legendary bird who rose from the Ashes once every 500 years.

Hopefully, Gough quickly added, one-day success would come sooner for Yorkshire.

To raise Calypso spirits

UNDATED, Mar 5 (Reuters/Internet): West Indies have turned to a cartoon crustacean to revive their cricket fortunes.

Clarence the Walt Disney-designed crab has been adopted by the West Indies Cricket Board (WICB) to inspire more children to become involved in the game.

"He's small, he's lovable and he's here to get kids in the West Indies more involved in cricket," the WICB said.

The West Indies, who lost the Test series 5-0 and the one-day internationals 6-1 on their recent tour to South Africa, have also adopted a new Calypso anthem to create a sense of unity among the Caribbean people.

The WICB said Clarence would make his television debut during the Test series between the West Indies and Australia starting in Port-of-Spain this Friday.

"Clarence will celebrate on-screen whenever a West Indian batsman hits a four or a bowler takes a wicket, thus drawing the children closer to the game," the WICB said.

Clarence, developed by the WICB at the Walt Disney studios, will be used as a "kids' mascot" to anchor the WICB's marketing and development programme for under-10s in the Caribbean.

"The popularity of cartoons in this age group is evidenced by the phenomenal success and worldwide recognition of ... famous characters such as Mickey Mouse, Bugs Bunny and Donald Duck," the WICB said.

The anthem, written by Trinidad and Tobago Calypso composer David Rudder, was released ahead of the first Test after an initiative started by the WICB almost two years ago.

Adapted from a recording entitled "Rally Round the West Indies," an unofficial anthem of Caribbean cricket fans for many years. The new anthem is to be played at WICB events and will be used by West Indies teams wherever they play.

Rudder believes the anthem could help create a sense of unity among the Caribbean people and also hopes it will be a source of inspiration to the cricket team.

According to one report in Gazzetta dello Sport, a substitute pleaded with one club official to make Malesani change the line-up when Parma were trailing Bordeaux.

Just two weeks ago, star striker Chiesa publicly lambasted his boss after he was inexplicably dropped for a home match with Venezia, Italy mid-fielder Dino Baggio is reportedly not on speaking terms with the coach.

Despite a stormy relationship with his players, Malesani places so much importance on the outcome of the game with Fiorentina that he controversially rested several first-team players for Tuesday's UEFA Cup quarter-final in Bordeaux.

Although the Fiorentina manager is unlikely to risk playing Batistuta before next week's Italian Cup semifinal second leg with Bologna, Trapattini said merely the sight of their inspirational captain sitting on the sidelines would give their last four matches.

After last week's victory over Perugia, the coach said his team had finally recovered from the psychological blow of a 3-1 home defeat to Lazio -- inspired by Roberto Mancini's superb backheeled goal -- last January.

"We have finally got that goal out of our minds. It is only right that we too can think of the title now," said Malesani.

On Sunday, Fiorentina will be determined to prove Parma's coach wrong for the second time in a week.

GABRIEL BATISTUTA

J-League special no more



TOKYO, Mar 5: Japan's professional soccer league kicks off on Saturday

lacking the big-name superstars of yesteryear but with officials quietly confident the worst is over regarding an alarming slump in attendances and income reports Reuters.

Last season, on the back of World Cup fever following Japan's qualification for France, the average attendance rose from the 1997 low to 11,992, suggesting the market had finally bottomed out.

"If you sit down and think calmly, we now have a normal situation," says Stakehiko Sano, of the J-League's planning department.

The first few years were something crazy, like the bubble economy, and the players were not just footballers, they were icons. But anyone could tell you that the people who have left the game did not like soccer in the first place. The

high school girls, college girls, men in their 40s and 50s who love beer and baseball...they are all gone."

Two years ago, people started shouting that the J-League was in crisis. We have had our troubles and still do, but the popularity among teens and men in their 20s and 30s is still strong. If the young generation lose interest, that is really a crisis.

Sano said the revenue from merchandise and attendances were loosely linked, and markets were now restricted to the home towns of the respective clubs.

At the beginning, people who lived in Tokyo bought merchandise of Nagoya Grampus Eight, and people who lived in Fukuoka bought the merchandise of Kashiwa Antlers. There was no logic to that: They just wanted to be associated with the best players or with the J-League in general."

Then the football bubble burst, the schoolgirls stayed at home to feed their tamagotchi virtual pets and the corporate cash started running out as the economy slumped into recession.

The average league gate in 1997 was down to 10,131, and total sales of J-League goods



Marcelo Salas being greeted by Atletico Lombardo after the Chilean scored a goal against Panathinaikos of Greece in the European Cup Winners' Cup on March 4.

— Internet photo

Mastercard, FIFA renew deal

ZURICH, Mar 5: Mastercard International on Tuesday signed an agreement with the world soccer body FIFA to renew its sponsorship deal for the World Cup competition, reports Reuters.

FIFA and Mastercard officials declined to discuss financial details of the arrangement. But one source familiar with the deal said Mastercard is paying about 40 million dollars to be a sponsor, almost double the 23 million dollars paid last year.

The company also plans to devote some 135 million dollars to the event over the four-year period leading up to the 2002 World Cup, the source said.

FIFA president Sepp Blatter told a news conference that two of the 12 top sponsors of the 1998 competition — General Motors Corp (GM), N. Andmara Inc — had decided not to renew, but six others were already committed and he expected to total of 14 top sponsors for the 2002 World Cup.

"I am much better prepared than the other time," he said. "I am sure I will win, although I think it will be a good battle."

"I am perfectly well, I have been working for some days and the weight will be no problem. They humiliated me like a delinquent and because of that I will fight all the harder in the

end."

"Apart from the season that I played for Ascoli, I've also been through some really bad times with the national side when I was in competition with (Uli) Kirsten, even though I was scoring important goals."

"But in the end," he said. "I won."

Gazza's grand total

LONDON, Mar 5: Middlesbrough's former England midfielder Paul Gascoigne was Thursday given a one-match suspension and fined 2,000 pounds by the Football Association after reaching 11 bookings this season, reports AFP.

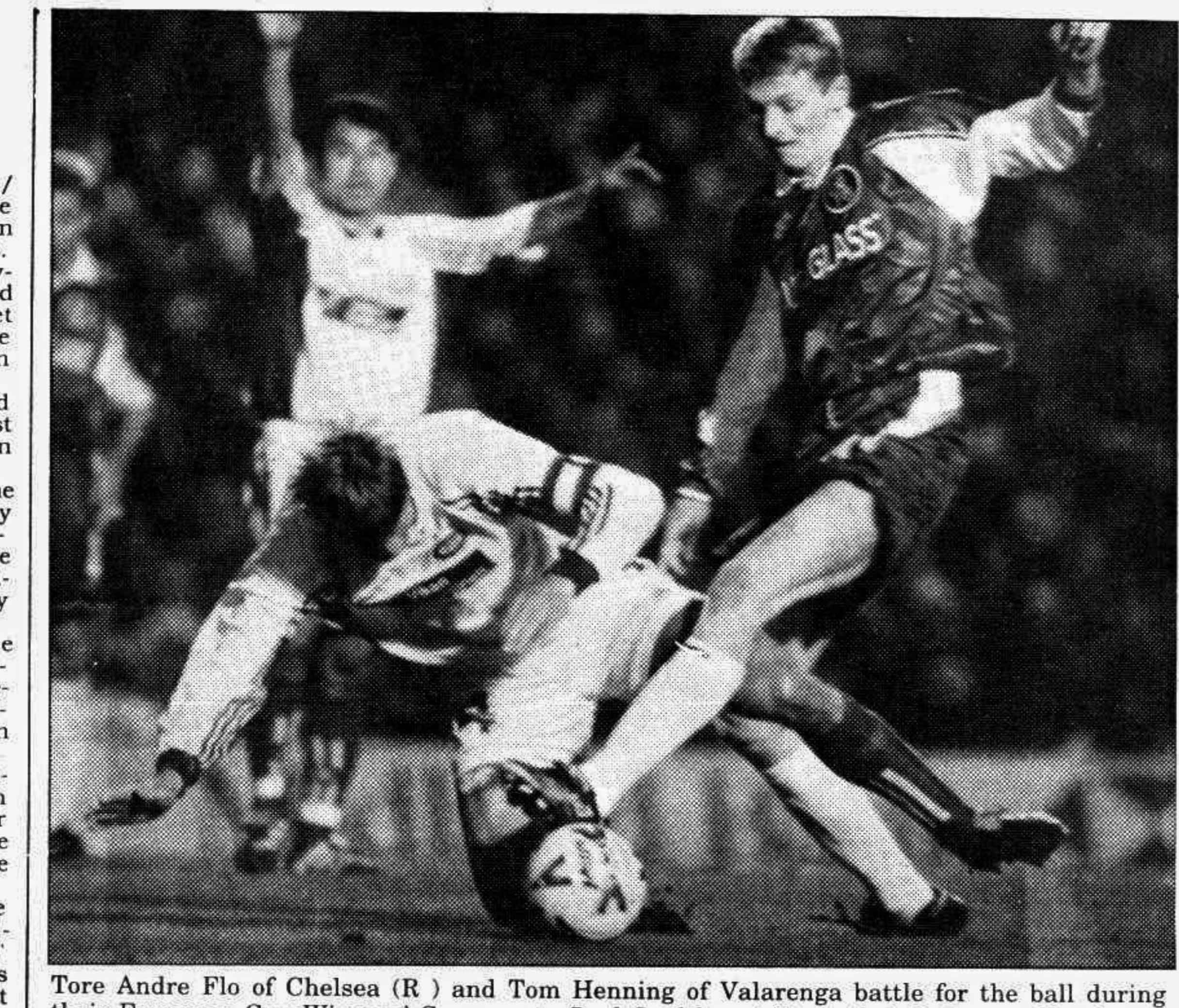
All four teams have qualified for the World U-20 Championships in Nigeria in April — Nigeria as hosts and Ghana, Cameroon and Zambia as semifinalists here — and will be joined by Mali who beat Guinea 4-1 in a play-off on Wednesday.

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Tore Andre Flo of Chelsea (R) and Tom Henning of Valarenga battle for the ball during their European Cup Winners' Cup quarterfinal final leg at Stamford Bridge on March 4.

— AFP photo

Chelsea, Lazio on target



LONDON, Mar 5: Holders Chelsea and Italian league leaders Lazio stayed on course to provide what

would be a great finale to the European Cup Winners' Cup when they both scored impressive quarterfinal first leg wins on Thursday, reports Reuters.

Chelsea brushed aside a poor

Valarenga team from Norway 3-0 in a largely one-sided match at Stamford Bridge, while Lazio, who lost last season's UEFA Cup final to Inter Milan, kept their sights firmly fixed on a second successive European final with an emphatic 4-0 victory over Panionios of Athens in Greece.

Lokomotiv Moscow also took a huge step towards the last four with a 3-0 home in over Maccabi Haifa, the first Israeli team ever to reach a European quarterfinal.

With the Cup Winners' Cup ending this season as part of the re-organisation of European club soccer, Chelsea are desperate to retain the trophy when the final is staged at Villa Park in Birmingham on May 19.

They ripped aside some

flimsy Valarenga defending when Nigerian Celestine Babayaro scored with a near-post shot after only nine minutes and virtually secured the tie with a second from Gianfranco