

All set for a unique Test

Hasan Masood



The final of the inaugural Asian Test Championship between Pakistan and Sri Lanka gets underway at the fourth strip of Bangabandhu National Stadium this morning.

The first ever Test match being played at a neutral venue starts at 9:30 pm (BST).

Star Sports pay channel and Bangladesh Television will telecast the match live.

Both Pakistan and Sri Lanka had their final nets at the venue yesterday morning and looked pretty confident as per their body language. After the two-hour long practice, both the Pakistan and the Sri Lankan skippers, Wasim Akram and Aravinda de Silva, expressed their guarded optimism about the match, which will be played on the pitch where the world record breaking ODI match, the Independence Day Cup final between India and Pakistan, was played early last year.

"It's going to be an exciting match and, of course, there will be a lot of pressure as this is the final. The Sri Lankans have their two players, Aravinda and Vaas, back in the side and I think they will be geared up as much as we are geared up. We really have to work hard in this

game. The weather conditions are not suitable but I believe it's for both sides. We can't take the game easy at all because they are a very good side," said Pakistan skipper Wasim Akram while talking to a crowded press immediately after the nets.

When asked about the pitch, Akram said that it looked to be a good Test wicket so far.

There is grass. It's a bit soft but hopefully it will be harder by tomorrow morning. I think this is the best available pitch they have here and we have to play on that. It does not matter," said Akram.

It will help spinners more than the pace bowlers. We are going to have a meeting in the evening and then we will decide whether to play three spinners or three seamers. I will still wait for the morning to see the pitch and then name the first eleven," said Akram. He how-

ever confirmed that young right-hander Wajahatullah Wasti would open the Pakistan innings alongside veteran left-hander Saeed Anwar.

"Wajahat has scored back to back centuries in the last match as opener and I think he deserves to remain at the position," Akram commented on the 23-year old new find.

He also revealed that new fast bowling sensation Shoaib Akhtar was likely to open the bowling attack along with him. When asked about his feeling on playing a Test match at a neutral venue, Akram said that he expects a good crowd to support both the sides.

The ground looks beautiful, the facilities are very nice. We always get looked after well here in Bangladesh and it's like a second home to us," said Akram while praising the Bangabandhu National Stadium.

While Akram was stentorian, his Sri Lankan counterpart Aravinda de Silva was cool and composed when he talked to the press after their practice.

"The wicket is good and it will be an absorbing match," said Aravinda, who is leading the islanders in the absence of their regular captain Arjuna Ranatunga, who is nursing an injury.

When asked whether the wicket will suit the pacers or the spinners, Aravinda replied indirectly. "I think you got to bowl well to get wickets and I think it will behave fairly with both nature of bowlings."

About his expectation, Aravinda said they came here to win. "We are going out there to try our best and win the game," he added.

SQUADS

PAKISTAN: Wasim Akram (captain), Saeed Anwar, Wajahatullah Wasti, Ijaz Ahmed, Inzamam-ul-Haq, Yousaf Youhana, Shahid Afridi, Moin Khan, Shoaib Akhtar, Saqlain Mushtaq, Arshad Khan, Azhar Mahmood, Shahid Nazir and Imran Nazir.

SRI LANKA: Aravinda de Silva, Avishka Gunawardena, Russell Arnold, Mahela Jayawardena, Marvan Atapattu, Hashan Tillekeratne, Romesh Kaluwitharana, Chaminda Vaas, Promodya Wickremasinghe, Ruwan Kalpage, Upul Chandana, Sajeeva de Silva and Ruchira Perera.

Umpires: David Shepherd (England) and Douglas Cowie (New Zealand).

Third umpire: VK Ramaswami.
Match referee: Cammie Smith.



WASIM AKRAM



ARAVINDA de SILVA

The means to the end

Rabeed Imam



MATCH ONE: INDIA vs PAKISTAN
VENUE: EDEN GARDENS, CALCUTTA
DATE: FEB 16-20

No one could have dreamed of a better setting for the opening match of the Asian Test Championship. India versus Pakistan — epitomising the true meaning of bitter rivalry — at the Eden Gardens, a fabulous ground oozing with anxious anticipation of the battle royale.

What the cricket world saw over the next five days was nothing short of a classic, a masterpiece and a shame.

Pakistan captain Wasim Akram won the toss and rather surprisingly decided to bat on a green-top wicket.

And the veteran fast bowler must have been cursing his wisdom once the Pakistanis slumped to 26 for six with Indian opening bowlers Javagal Srinath and Venkatesh Prasad showcasing their menace.

There had to be a fightback. It came at the right time, in the form of Moin Khan, the champion of grit, and seasoned Salim Malik who gave the innings some sort of mediocrity taking it to 185.

India started off promisingly but once express tearaway Shoaib Akhtar uprooted the stumps of the composed Rahul Dravid and the brilliant Sachin Tendulkar with two out of this world in-swinging yorkers, the home side were promptly restricted at 223. India's 'stars' could well have taken lesson from the wonderful mentality of Sadagopan Romesh who again impressed with a cultured 79.

Pakistan needed something special in batting and Saeed Anwar decided it was about time he got involved into the thick of things. The left-hander stroked to a career best 188 not out and at one time it looked as if the tourists were going to run away with an imposing score but in stepped Srinath.

The lanky Karnataka speedster demonstrated his mettle by slicing through the Pak batting with figures of eight for 86. India were left with a victory target of 279 and they were cruising comfortably at 145 for three. What happened next is now a part of history.

Tendulkar ran into Shoaib Akhtar (Again!) who was backing up behind the stumps, and the split second obstruction allowed a throw from substitute fielder Nadim Khan hit the stumps — India's biggest hope was given run out by the third umpire. A section of the Calcutta crowd couldn't digest the verdict and there were familiar

scenes of disturbances at the Eden. Play was stopped and a dejected Tendulkar had to come out of the dressing room following requests from the ICC chief Jagmohan Dalmiya. The master-bat tried his best to calm things down by walking around the field and requesting for patience.

However on the last day of the Test, sensing a Pakistani victory, the fans went on rampage as India slumped rapidly. Bottles, missiles were thrown into the ground. Security personnel beat-up spectators in a vain attempt to calm things down. Play had to be halted for three hours. After much deliberation, the stands were vacated and the match could resume with Pakistan needing just one wicket to win.

Shoaib finished it in style by knocking the stumps of Prasad. Pakistan got 17 points (12 points for the win and five

bonus points for bowling India out within the first 100 overs). India got five bonus points for bowling out Pakistan in 100 overs.

Srinath and Anwar shared the Man-of-the-Match laurel.

MATCH TWO: SRI LANKA vs INDIA
VENUE: SINHALESE SPORTS CLUB, COLOMBO
DATE: FEB 25-29

Arjuna Ranatunga, the Sri Lankan skipper asked the Indians to bat first on as flat a track as you will see anywhere in the world and by the end of the day, that decision proved to be more of a show of local hospitality rather than of ingenuity.

India finished the opening day with maximum batting

points after scoring 353 for nine and the ever-improving Sadagopan Ramesh completed his maiden Test hundred. Rahul Dravid also hit a ton as the tourists blasted the classless home attack to all parts of the SSC.

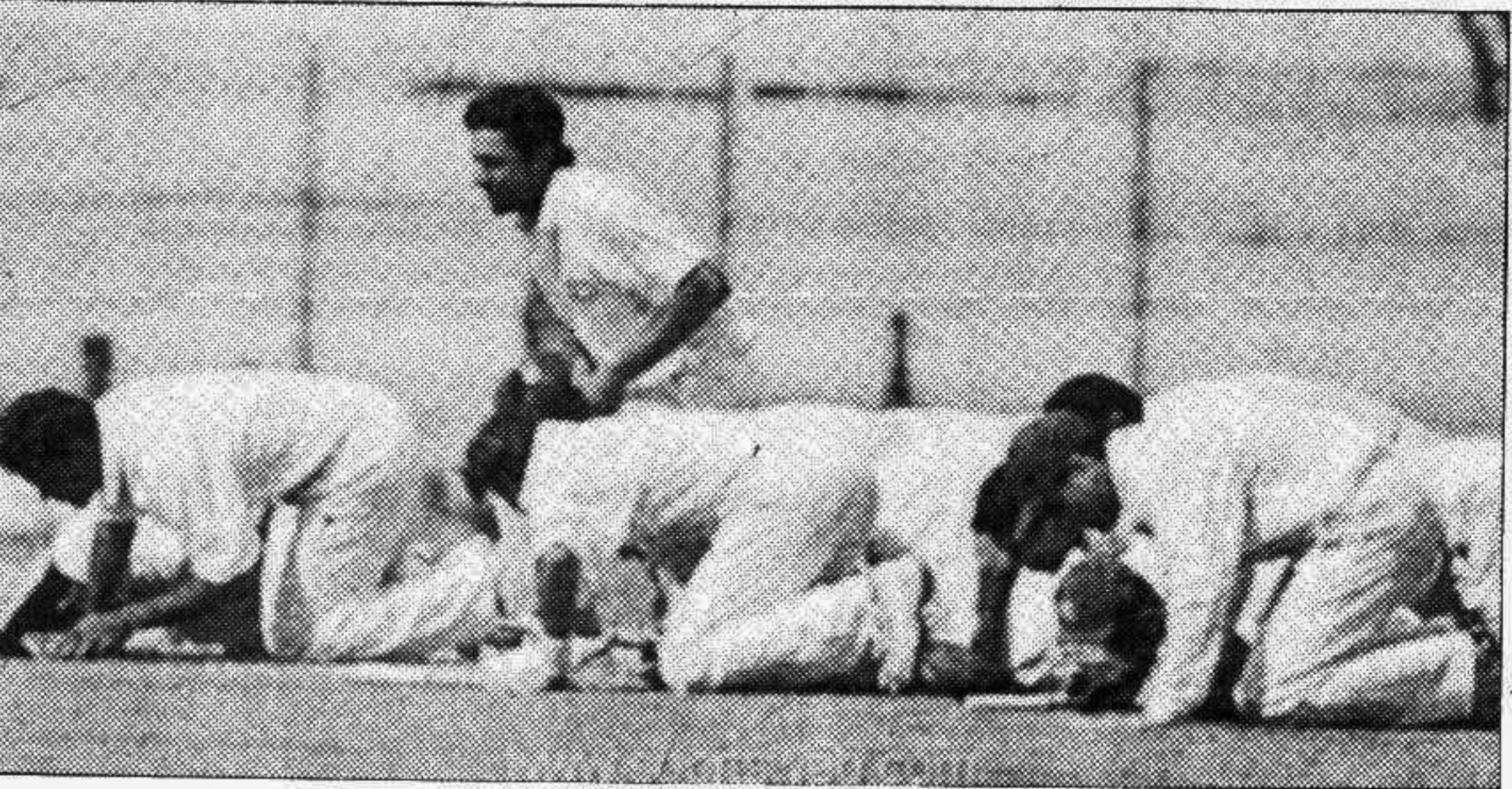
India declared at 518 but by then it was pretty clear that unless the Lankans did anything stupid, the game would end in dead draw.

Mahela Jayawardene, one of the fresh batting talents in Sri Lanka, made a marathon 242 in the team total of 485 all out.

With nothing more to play for, India waited until Sachin Tendulkar reached his 19th Test hundred before both captains decided to call it quits.

Sri Lanka managed four bonus points while India added another five to the points they received from the first match.

Jayawardene was declared Man-of-the-Match.



SEEING IS BELIEVING: Security personnel chase spectators after the fans went wild during the opening Asian Test Championship match at the Eden Gardens (top) and jubilant Pakistan players kissing the ground after victory was achieved. —Star file photo



JUST TO HAVE A GLIMPSE OF THE STARS: People crowd in front of the Shaheed Mushtaq Gate at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday as the Sri Lankan and Pakistani teams arrive for practice. —Star photo

Feasting at a neutral venue

Nizamuddin Ahmed

Bangalees by nature are fond of appending the word 'first' to any event in order to draw more importance to the occasion. But, in case of the Asian Test Championship, we can be forgiven, for truly the Final at the Bangabandhu is the first ever in over hundred years of Test match history when two countries will play a Test match on a neutral venue.

Although Bangladesh are as yet not a Test-playing country, by a twist of political record, Dhaka has been host to seven previous Test matches. And, more recently, to a bevy of cricket beauties in the form one-day internationals.

Dhaka (then Dacca) did its *haalkhaata* as a Test venue with the drawn match between Pakistan and India in the winter of 1955. It is now a little over thirty years when the last Test match was played with bowlers running up from the Pavilion and the Paltan ends. The last match in November 1969 between Pakistan and New Zealand was also a tame draw.

In fact, only two Tests were decisive at today's Bangabandhu. One went in favour of the visiting Australians in November 1959, when Pakistan were drubbed by 8 wickets. Earlier, in March 1959, Pakistan recorded their only Test win at Dhaka, defeating West Indies by 41 runs.

But, finalists Sri Lanka may require more than history on their side to counter the brimming confidence of Akram and Company.

Also against Sri Lanka will be the catalogue of head-to-head Test results between the two countries. Since 1981, when Sri Lanka were admitted as full ICC members, Pakistan had won two home series, one in 1981-82 and another in 1985-86 without a single Test loss, before Sri Lanka pounced back with a eight-wicket win at Colombo to level the second 1985-86 three-match series. Pakistan then took the 1991-92 and the 1994-95 series. Sri Lanka finally came of age in the 1995-96 series which they won 2-1. Both Tests in the 1996-97 series ended in draws.

However, the Kerry Packer revolution in the late 1970s and subsequent World Cups have so dominated the game, thanks also to television, that today cricketers are somewhat compelled to approach even a Test match in the spirit of limited-overs matches. Although this may have resulted in wholesale



MURALITHARAN

debacles for many teams, West Indies being the latest casualty, such a disposition is a joy for cricket's large following.

The Dhaka crowd would blame neither the Pakistanis nor the Sri Lankans if they just bent a little of their austere Test principles and went out there to entertain what could be described as perhaps the most learned of cricket crowds in the world. And, even if the finalists are hesitant, the bonus points



WAJAHAT WASTI

rule will be on the side of the vibrant Dhaka crowd.

Bogged to some extent by the bribery scandal (one can only hope we have heard the last of it), Pakistan arrived for the Final with youthful exuberance amid hardened experience. Wasti is not wasting any time and Akram looks as hungry as ever. Their recent wins against India in India can only act as a booster. Their followers from Khyber Pass to Karachi will be

praying that limited success in the longer version does not turn their head. They would prefer their seamers and spinners to find some turn on Dhaka's lively wicket. But, then, the supplication of their opponents would not be any different.

The Sri Lankans will approach the Final perhaps without any added pressure, what with captain Ranatunga and 'magic fingers' Muralitharan not being able to make the team due to injuries. They still have fathoms in their batting that will be led by the new skipper, the ever patient, the least pretentious Aravinda de Silva. In Vaas they have to find a match-winning bowler if the islanders expect to prove the pundits wrong. And many have been the occasion when the know-it-all experts had to eat their hats.

It cannot be denied that India's miserable performance at the Eden Gardens and lack of the killing urge at Colombo will reflect on attendance and interest in the Final. An India-Pakistan match, be it in cricket, hockey or *bagaduli*, can generate vigorous polarisation all over the sub-continent, often reducing sportsmanship to fanaticism, as some would rightly argue. The abridged crowd at the Bangabandhu will, however, feast on some of the World's greatest and who knows, a great could be born at Dhaka.

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MATCH THREE: PAKISTAN vs SRI LANKA

VENUE: GADDAFI STADIUM, LAHORE
DATE: MAR 4-8

With seven points to topple India and win a final berth, arguably the weakest Sri Lankan Test side ever arrived in Lahore under the captaincy of Hashan Tillekeratne. There was no Arjuna Ranatunga, no Aravinda de Silva, no Sanath Jayasuriya and no Muttiah Muralitharan — all were sidelined through injury or fatigue.

It was largely the apparent apathy of Wasim Akram and his men that enabled Sri Lanka to get what they wanted — bonus points in batting and bowling.

After winning the toss, hosts batted without any threat to reach 398 all out — new opener Wajahatullah Wasti starred with 130, his first Test hundred.

In the later part of their innings, the Pakistanis virtually threw their wickets away thus allowing Sri Lanka to get the bowling points. However, the lion hearted effort of paceman Promodya Wickremasinghe (six