

Beyond the capital : Rajshahi

Sports in Bangladesh has long been a victim of centralisation, and the divisions and districts outside Dhaka have not been able to develop. In the early 90s, the Mithu-Ainul Memorial Cricket Tournament, Baikali Sangha, a prominent local club, unofficially looked after the ground and, each year since 1987, it organised the Mithu-Ainul tournament.

In the early 90s the jail management began to stamp its authority and wanted to use the ground for their purpose. They started building structures inside the ground and the jail police had their drill there.

Baikali Sangha initiated a protest, which was supported by people from all walks of life.

There was even an unprecedented case of a one-day 'hartal' called by sports lovers in Rajshahi for the ground. After intervention from high-ranking government officials and following legal measures from both sides, the situation has now improved but is far from being solved.

Officials and players want to play on the field which is officially known as the 'Jail Ground', but the Central Jail authorities feel they should have the say in how that particular ground should be used.

General secretary of the District Sports Association Zafar Imam says, "There has been too much chaos and confusion regarding the Jail Ground. The legal owner of that ground is the Jail authority. There should be no doubts about that. The relevant documents, which now lie with the home ministry, clearly say that the ground is the property of the Rajshahi Jail."

"But, as this ground has traditionally been a popular place for all the sports loving people in Rajshahi, I feel whoever wants to use the ground should first come to an amicable settlement with the jail authorities."

The ground is now available for sports but permission has to be sought from the jail authorities. Unfortunately some people are reluctant to do that. It seems only ego is holding back the possibility of the ground returning to its glory days.



NOW AND THEN: The historic Central Jail ground at Manibazar is now being used by the jail police for parade and drills (top). This ground was an extremely popular venue for cricket until the dispute broke out. The picture at the bottom shows a cricket match in progress during the Mithu-Ainul memorial tournament in 1995.

With the popularity of the game in Rajshahi, the DSA, which manages to conduct the Division one and two leagues each year.

Diganta Prasari have won the First Division title nine times since 1975, a local record. However Rajshahi Abahani have been making big strides recently and are the defending First Division champions.

FOOTBALL

There is only the First Division league in Hockey, where eight teams participate. Baikali Sangha are the undisputed kings of local hockey. Baikali have won the league championship every year since 1987.

OTHER GAMES

The DSA organises basketball, volleyball, handball, kabaddi, swimming, chess, squash, athletics, karate, boxing, weightlifting, bodybuilding, table tennis and badminton leagues, and tournaments regularly.

The Manibazar crisis

Shortage of playgrounds has never been a problem for Rajshahi. Almost all the schools and colleges have own grounds, where youngsters can partake in the game of their liking.

But in the beginning of this decade a problem started developing regarding the use of the ground at Manibazar.

Documents suggest that the ground is the property of the Rajshahi Central Jail authorities. However, it has been long used as a popular venue for sporting activities, most notably for the

Britain to get tougher on hooligans

LONDON, Mar 31 (Reuters/Internet): Britain's efforts to stamp out soccer hooliganism took a step forward on Wednesday with the publication of proposals to stop convicted hooligans from travelling abroad and a clampdown on racist chanting.

The measures were in a key parliamentary report on football-related legislation.

"Millions of people each season enjoy going to football matches to watch our national sport," Home Office minister Kate Hoey said. "This enjoyment can be ruined by the destructive and selfish actions of a very small, but disproportionately high-profile minority."

Of the 29 proposals put forward, only two -- an alcohol ban and a new offence of likelihood to commit a breach of an order -- have been dropped through lack of support.

Plans to prevent people convicted of football-related offences from attending matches were strongly welcomed.

The proposals are based on a private member's bill put forward by opposition Conservative MP Simon Burns. It has cross-party support.

"The measures proposed in the...reflect the contents of our review on football-related legislation and the outcome of the public consultation exercise," Hoey said.

The legislation will do no harm to England's bid to stage the 2006 World Cup finals.

Hoey harked back to the World Cup in France last summer when English soccer hooligans ran amok in Marseilles, battling Tunisians, police and locals ahead of a match. Vivid television footage broadcast the violence around the world.

The bill will make it easier to ban hooligans from grounds and extend those bans to up to 10 years for domestic and international matches. It will also make racist remarks by one person an offence. At present police can intervene only when a group of people chant racist abuse in unison.

Zafar Imam: The 'revered' organiser

Bangladesh Olympic Council (BOC) secretary-general Zafar Imam is also the general secretary of the Rajshahi Divisional and the District Sports Associations.

Zafar, who is a reputed and respected sports organiser both at home and abroad, has used his influence at the centre to uplift the image of Rajshahi's sports scene. Whatever development the district has seen over the years has largely been due to his outstanding dedication and efforts.

Now based in Dhaka because of his obvious commitment to the Olympic Council, Zafar manages to keep touch with his hometown at every possible opportunity.

The Daily Star caught up with the energetic gentleman in his sixties at the Rajshahi Tennis Complex recently.

Daily Star Sports (DSS): You are regarded as a legend here. Does this image put pressure on you?

Zafar Imam (ZI): Throughout my career, I have tried to put Rajshahi's name on this country's sports map. I have tasted success as well as failures in this quest. Still I should say I have given my utmost over the years and perhaps the locals appreciate that. But the image has both positive and negative effects.

DSS: Can you elaborate...?

ZI: Everybody in Rajshahi's sports arena has become dependent on me for everything. Whenever a problem arises, they straight away run to me for a solution. Well, I don't mind that, but look at me I'm not getting any younger. If the local sports organisers don't start taking responsibilities, they will never learn and they will be all at sea once I leave, which may be very soon.

DSS: Does that mean you are planning to retire?

ZI: In a sense, yes! I have been the general secretary of the divisional and the district sports associations for God knows how long. I've almost made up my mind that I shall not run for the post in the upcoming elections and let somebody new take up the challenge. It will not be easy. As a matter of fact, the (new) general secretary will find it extremely difficult and face adversities, but he will learn. I shall be there to guide and help him, but away from the limelight.

DSS: What problems does the DSA have to face?

ZI: The financial aspect is the main stumbling block. The National Sports Council provides a sum, which is highly inadequate to run the leagues and the competitions. We get around take three lakhs for the divisional sports association and two lakhs for the district sports association every year. Now you tell me, is it possible to conduct sporting activities throughout the district and division with that amount?

DSS: What about local sponsorship?

ZI: Economically Rajshahi is not a prosperous region. Therefore, there is hardly any local sponsorship.

DSS: Then how do you plan to overcome this problem in future?

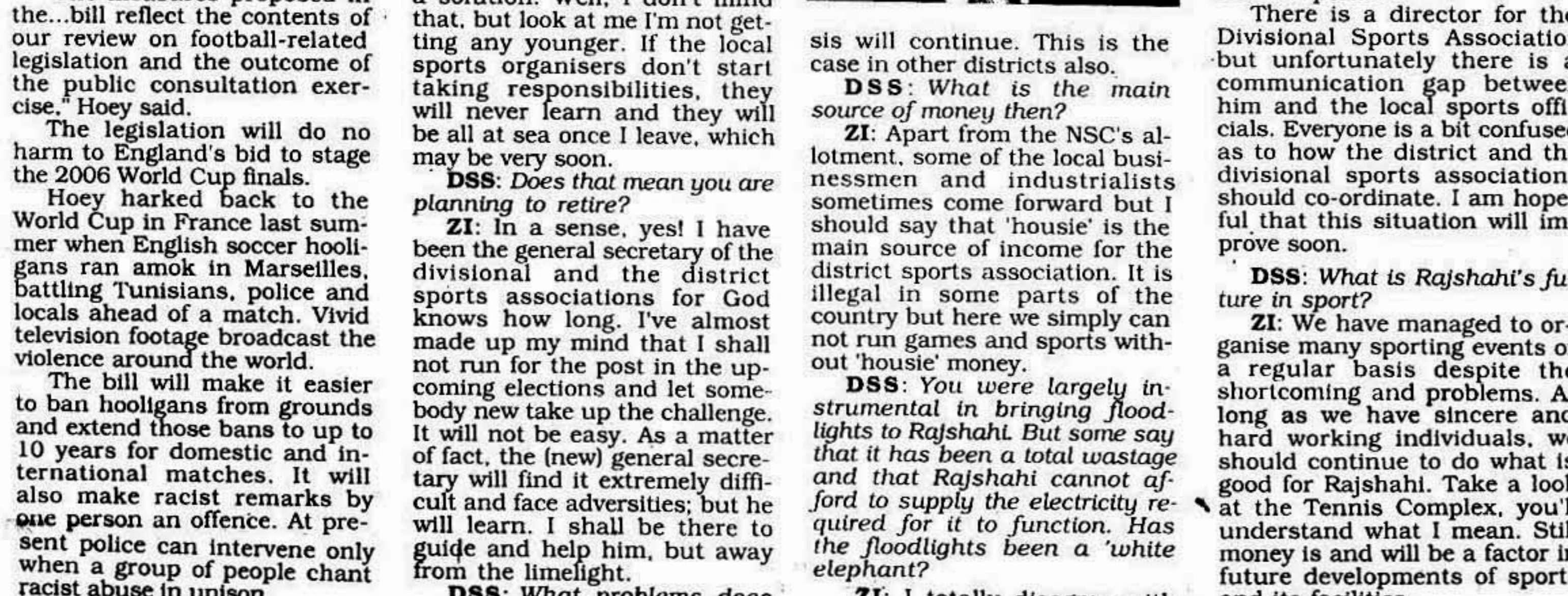
ZI: Unless the government and the National Sports Council start co-operating, this crisis will continue. This is the case in other districts also.

DSS: What is the main source of money then?

ZI: Apart from the NSC's allotment, some of the local businessmen and industrialists sometimes come forward but I should say that 'house' is the main source of income for the district sports association. It is illegal in some parts of the country but here we simply can not run games and sports without 'house' money.

DSS: You were largely instrumental in bringing floodlights to Rajshahi. But some say that it has been a total wastage and that Rajshahi cannot afford to supply the electricity required for it to function. Has the floodlights been a 'white elephant'?

ZI: I totally disagree with



SOCOG wants more power

SYDNEY, Mar 31: Sydney Olympic organisers want the IOC and international sports federations to give them extended powers to drug test athletes before they compete at the 2000 Olympics, reports AP.

Under previous rules, athletes are the responsibility of their sports federations until the start of a Games, when the IOC takes over.

SOCOG will carry out testing for the IOC at the Sydney Games but wants the IOC's new anti-doping agency to give it the power to test the world's athletes federations to allow it to go ahead.

"I don't know what the target number of tests would be pre-Games but it's not something we've budgeted for," said SOCOG board member John Coates. "We would be asking international agencies to assist with that."

Coates said swimming's governing body FINA use just prior to last year's World Championships.

He said the plan had been outlined in an Australian Olympic Committee report on drugs presented to the IOC last year. He said SOCOG would further pursue it with a new anti-doping agency.

But confusion remains over who will take control of the anti-doping agency, but details on the structure, mission and financing were put off for up to three months.

Officials said the goal is to have the agency, which would supervise worldwide drug testing and policy and have an initial budget of US \$25 million dollars, up and running before the Sydney Games.

Meanwhile SOCOG's board will meet Thursday minus two of its 15 members. Embattled IOC member Phil Coles will continue to stay away from SOCOG business while the IOC investigates claims from his exile that he received expensive jewelry from a man connected to Athens failed bid to host the 1996 Summer Games.

Coates said he expected Coles to return to his full responsibilities at SOCOG if cleared by the IOC -- despite other board members calling for Coles to resign immediately.

"I haven't put a recommendation (to Coles) because he's not the AOC's representative on the IOC, he's the IOC member in Australia," Coates said. "My position is that the Olympic charter says that he's entitled to be there."

"I'm from the Olympic movement and I think that he has an entitlement and I'm certainly not going to counsel him against that entitlement."

The opposition Olympics spokesman, Ron Phillips, lost his seat at last week's state government election and a replacement has yet to be named.

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Spain, France look to complete rehabilitation

LONDON, Mar 31 (Reuters/Internet): Spain can complete the resurrection of their European Championship campaign by leaping to top from second last of their group as another round of qualifying matches are played on Wednesday.

With 16 games being played, most teams will arrive at the halfway stage in their battle to reach next year's finals hosted jointly by Belgium and the Netherlands.

World champions France are another side who will be hoping to stamp their authority on their group after a less than impressive start to their campaign.

After surprisingly being held to a draw in their opening match away to Iceland, France are second in group four behind Ukraine who also held them to a draw in Paris last Saturday.

The French will be keen to make amends against Armenia on Wednesday although they are certain to be without their Juventus playmaker Zinedine Zidane, who is still nursing a knee injury.

But rather than replace him with another midfielder, coach Roger Lemerre looks set to play a two-pronged attack of young strikers Nicolas Anelka of Arsenal and Monaco's David Trezeguet, the first time they have been paired at senior level.

Spain, fresh from their 9-0 demolition of Austria at the weekend, are promising the same level of commitment against San Marino on Wednesday -- if not the same hatful of goals.

Barcelona defender Sergi Barjuan, who will take the captain's armband in the absence of suspended Fernando Hierro, warned his team mates: "We have to keep our feet on the ground against San Marino."

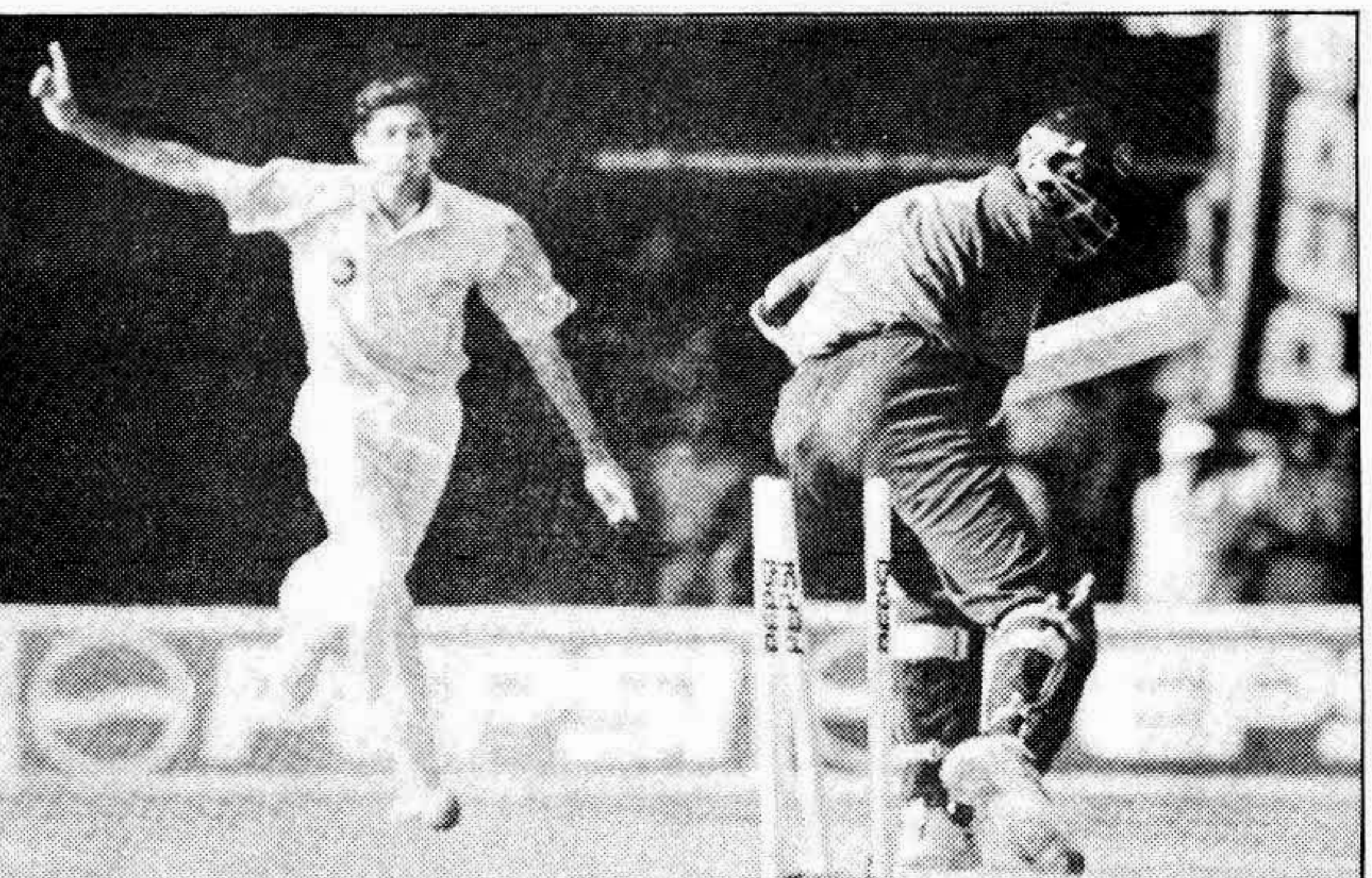
"We have to repeat the intensity and rhythm of Saturday without thinking about the supposed quality of our rivals," Joseba Etxebarria, the Athletic Bilbao forward, also warned against expectations of another goalfest.

"It's great that everyone is expecting us to do well but we as a team have to go about things slowly," the Basque striker said. "We need to maintain our concentration."

Spain, who lost to current group six leaders Cyprus in their opening match, are fourth but can leapfrog into first place on goal difference by beating bottom side San Marino who have yet to earn a point and have conceded 14 goals in four matches.

In a tight battle in group seven, neither leaders Portugal nor second placed Romania can afford a slip-up away against the two weakest sides in the group, Liechtenstein and Azerbaijan respectively.

Portugal have nine points with Romania just one point adrift, but close on their heels are Hungary and Slovakia who both have seven points and meet in Bratislava on Wednesday.



An Ajit Agarkar delivery unsettles the stumps of Sri Lanka's Eric Upasantha during the Pepsi triangular match against India at Pune on March 30.

India ensure SL depart

PUNE, India, Mar 31: Ajit Agarkar played a captain's innings of 103 not out as India sent Sri Lanka crashing out of the three-nations series with an emphatic 51-run win on Tuesday, reports AP.

The Indians took advantage of good batting conditions at the Nehru Stadium to pile up 286-6 from 50 overs and then shot the sluggish world champions out for 235.

Sri Lanka ended their campaign with one win from four matches, setting the stage for a potentially explosive final between arch-rivals India and Pakistan at Bangalore on April 4.

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The Indians rattled up 104 runs in the last 11 overs as Jadeja raced from 50 to 103 off just 26 deliveries.

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India and Pakistan, who have two wins each, will warm up for the title clash during the last league match at Mohali on Thursday.

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Sri Lanka, needing a win to stay afloat in the series, went out of the reckoning when the experienced pair of Aravinda de Silva and Arjuna Ranatunga were run out off successive balls after a 62-run stand.

Young seamer Ajit Agarkar finished with 3-34 and Javagal Srinath and Robin Singh picked up two wickets apiece to hand the Sri Lankans their 15th defeat in the last 18 one-dayers.

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