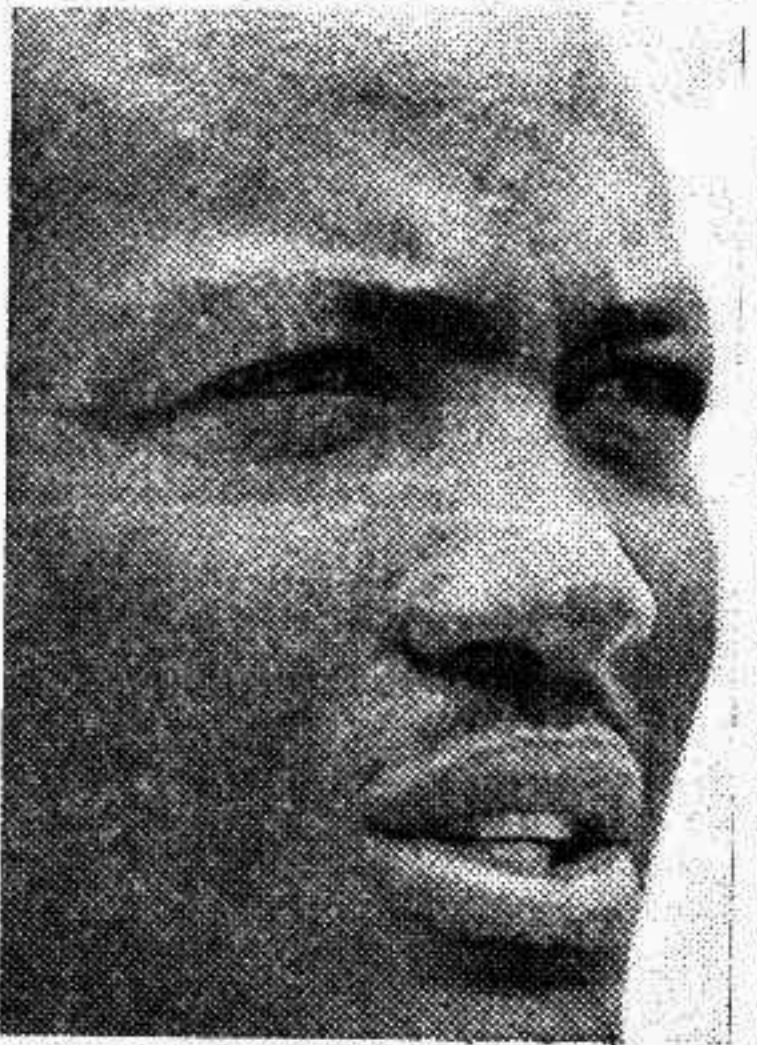


**Column One**  
SPORTS TALK

## Never say never



**Brian Lara**  
(West Indies captain)  
"The wrist is fine now."  
Talking on arrival in England for the World Cup.

LONDON, Apr 30 (AFP): You have to admire English optimism. Over the past season their cricketers have been variously described as rabbit stew (the Australian media), dead sheep (the English media) and sporting Teletubbies (Ian Botham) and still they believe they can win the World Cup.

Team tactics and selection seem to change by the week, their coach David Lloyd is given a vote of no confidence just before the tournament, most of their players are either old or infirm or unheard of. And still they talk up their chances.

The domestic game is a shambles. Schoolchildren prefer football. And the team has just lost eight of its last 10 one-dayers.

But ask Alec Stewart if his side can lift the 1999 World Cup and, wrapping himself in the flag of Saint George, he will confidently reply in the affirmative.

The hosts, it turns out, have a cunning plan. By staging the tournament in early summer, they hope to tailor it to English strengths. Pitches will be damp and green. Dew, humidity and cloud cover will be plentiful and the ball will swing and seam.

Hence the appearance of the likes of Mark Ealham and Ian Austin - a portly Lancashire professional with minimal international exposure - in the side.

Cannon fodder abroad, these purveyors of slow-medium deliveries that wobble and dip in the air will prove deadly - so the selectors hope - in home conditions.

England's cautious batsmen will also thrive, nudging ones and twos, while the rest of the world's exotic strokeplayers - the very same batsmen who dominated the 1999 World Cup in India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka - will be left swinging at thin air.

It's a nice idea. In theory. Wouldn't it be funny, though, if the sun shone?



**FIXTURES**  
England Group A  
First-round  
May 14: v Sri Lanka, London (Lord's)  
May 18: v Kenya, Canterbury  
May 22: v South Africa, London (The Oval)  
May 25: v Zimbabwe, Nottingham  
May 29: v India, Birmingham

England should certainly fare better at home than abroad (they should also do better than three years ago, when they won just two games - against Holland and the United Arab Emirates) but the propaganda should not obscure the facts.

One - and despite home advantage - this is a very mediocre English side. And two, many overseas stars, from Wasim Akram to Alan Donald to Sachin Tendulkar to Aravinda de Silva, have played in English county cricket in recent years with conspicuous success.

On a good day, England could certainly beat anyone. Stewart, Graeme Hick and Graham Thorpe are world-class batsmen and Darren Gough's pace will trouble the best.

The rest of the side, however, will not keep the rest of the world awake at night. The all-rounders - Adam Hoolioake, Ealham, Austin and the improving Andrew Flintoff - do not belong in the same class as Jacques Kallis, Shaun Pollock of South Africa, or Australian Steve Waugh or Wasim Akram of Pakistan.

The lack of spin - Robert Croft bowls a tight line but is not considered threatening enough for Test cricket - is another weakness, as are the abundance of grey hairs.

England, indeed, will field the oldest side in the tournament, with only one player under 27. The medical staff will be praying that Thorpe's back holds up - Atherton's has already given way - and that Neil Fairbrother's hamstrings do not twang again. Things might have been different. At the end of 1997, England put Hoolioake in charge of a young, vibrant, experimental team packed full of all-rounders, pinch-hitters and new faces. The team duly won the Champions Trophy in Sharjah to great acclaim.

But when things turned sour, Hoolioake and his innovations were ditched.

The old guards were recalled, but with conspicuous lack of success. Their most recent outings saw them outclassed by Australia in the final of a tri-nations tournament at the start of the year, then miss out against India and Pakistan in Sharjah, recording one win out of four. Hardly the stuff of champions.

This will be the fourth World Cup to be staged in England. The home team have yet to lift the trophy, making it to the semi-finals in 1975, the final in 1979 and the last four again in 1983.

Could this be their year? Some Englishmen think so. You have to admire their optimism.

### M'singh cricket County Club, Shapla Chakra joint champs

MYMENSINGH, May 4: County Club and Shapla Krira Chakra emerged joint champions in the local First Division cricket league, reports UNB.

Both teams have earned 26 points each from 14 league matches that concluded today.

In the day's last league match, Shapla KC smashed Mukul Foug Green by 8 wickets at the Circuit House ground.

Batting first, Mukul Foug were all out for a paltry 56 runs in 18.3 overs. Sohail picked up four wickets for 17 while Saiful and Prince took two wickets for 14 and 15 runs respectively.

In reply, Shapla KC reached the target of 57 runs losing two wickets in 16.1 overs with Shahjada scoring 25 and Nadim 13 runs. Masud took two wickets for 24 runs.

**Ctg take on Rajshahi in first semifinal**  
JAIPURHAT, May 4: Chittagong will take on Rajshahi in the first semifinal of the Biman Cup (under-14) national football tournament at the local stadium tomorrow, reports APB.

In the day's group matches, Jaipurhat and Narayanjan posted victories over their rivals.

Jaipurhat, who earlier confirmed their semifinal berth as Group-B champions, trounced Faridpur 7-0. The winners dominated the first half 4-0 in the one-sided affair.

Rabiul and Nannu netted twice each while Rinku, Pankaj and Happy scored one goal apiece for the winners.

Jaipurhat will play against Nilphamari in the second semifinal on Thursday.

Narayanjan earned a 2-0 win over Pataukhali after leading the first half by same margin.

Sharif scored both the goals in the 18th and 34th minutes for the winners.

### Nazrul centennial National team turns Dhaka XI in Calcutta

An exhibition football match will be played between Dhaka Eleven and Calcutta Eleven at the Salt Lake Stadium in Calcutta on May 7 under the auspices of the West Bengal Government to mark the Centennial birth anniversary of National Poet Kazi Nazrul Islam.

Bangladesh national football team, who won the runners-up trophy in the recently concluded SAFF Football Championship at Goa (India) and are now in Calcutta will play the match under the banner of Dhaka Eleven. The team was scheduled to return home yesterday but now that will be delayed. According to a Bangladesh Football Federation press release yesterday, the national team will return home on May 8.

The Calcutta Eleven will comprise of a good number of Indian national players, who play in the Calcutta league.

### Bundesliga almost Bayern's

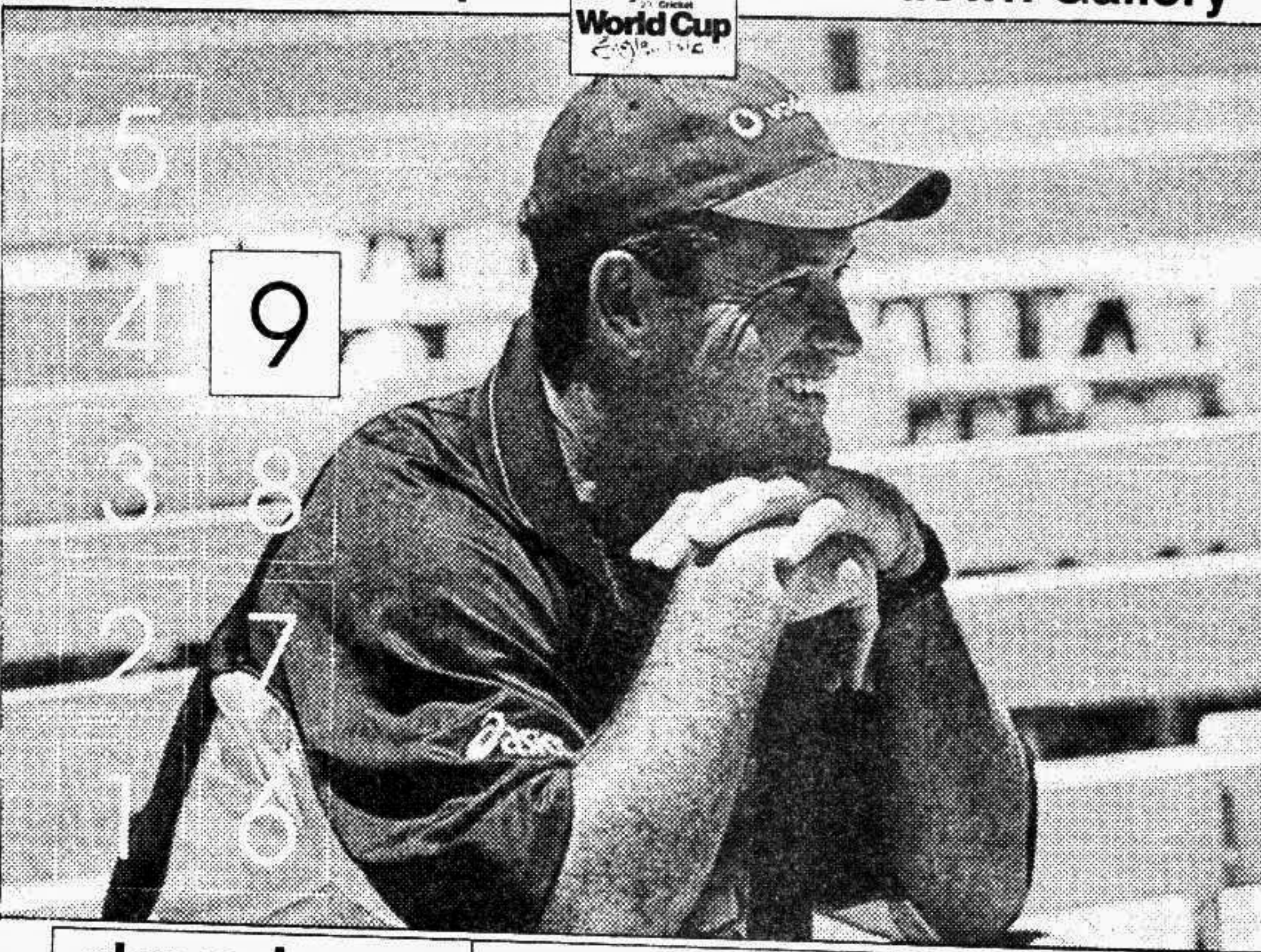
BONN, May 4: Bayern Munich could have won the Bundesliga by Wednesday night if results go their way for their first trophy in an unprecedented treble of European Cup, domestic league and cup, reports AFP.

Should Bayern win on Tuesday at VfB Stuttgart and second-placed Bayer Leverkusen lose at Nuremberg on Wednesday, Bayern will have earned their 15th league title.

Bayern, who currently have a 10-point lead over Leverkusen, would thereby have an unassailable 13-point lead with four matches to go.

Stuttgart have not won in their last eight matches and their lowly confidence could play into Bayern's hands.

### The Daily Star Sport Countdown Gallery



days to go Hick is batting like Hick. —Star file photo

## Hoping for no 'Hickup'

LONDON, Apr 30 (AFP/Internet): When Graeme Hick first headed for the England changing room almost a decade ago, little did he realise he was about to step into a revolving door which is still spinning today.

On May 14, however, Hick looks certain to line up against Sri Lanka in the opening game of the 1999 World Cup. Barring another selectorial rethink.

To a degree, he has been the author of his own fate.

For years, as an emerging county player, he had terrorised bowlers with nonchalance bordering on disdain. In 1988, playing for Worcestershire against Somerset, he bludgeoned Somerset's attack for 405 runs. West countrymen still wince at the memory.

The selectors could not wait for the powerful Zimbabwean right-hander to qualify for England.

When he did, however, he was quickly exposed. Hick, it became clear, when probed by

genuine pace, had the footwork of a hippopotamus. Worse still, his self-confidence proved as robust as cracked glass.

He was duly dropped, returned to Worcester, scored runs, was re-selected, re-exposed and dropped again. Hick's dizzy dance has been continuing ever since.

Often he did as well - or as badly - as his teammates, only to be dropped first because expectations of him were so high.

Indeed, his very county success became the target for derision. Hick became known as a "flat-track bully", a hero with feet of clay who could not translate his talents into success among the big boys or when it mattered. His commitment to his adopted country was also questioned.

The debate goes on, even though Hick is currently being lauded as one of England's few potential match-winners during the World Cup.

Last season saw more of the same. In May, he celebrated his hundredth first-class hundred - only Sir Donald Bradman and Denis Compton had reached the

landmark more quickly - on the same day that he was left out of the team to play South Africa.

Later recalled after a two-year exile, he failed only to be retained for the ensuing one-day tournament. He impressed against Sri Lanka and South Africa, then scored 107 against Arjuna Ranatunga's side in a one-off Test. When the Ashes squad was announced, however, Hick missed out again only to be called up as a replacement.

He finally cemented his World Cup place by punching out three one-day centuries in four innings against Australia and Sri Lanka at the start of the year.

Hick, a fine close fielder and a useful if occasional off-spinner, argues his much-publicised failings are behind him.

"The mental side of it... I find much easier to handle now," he says. "I've got confidence now." His footwork, he says, has also improved.

This will be his third World Cup for his adopted country. England expects. So do the selectors. Again.

## Onus on tough Gough

LONDON, Apr 30 (AFP/Internet): Darren Gough is a rarity in English cricket. He's genuinely quick, he's world class and he's a match-winner.

If the hosts of the World Cup are to get close to satisfying their supporters' fervent hopes during the tournament, they will have to lean heavily on their broad-shouldered 28-year-old from Yorkshire.

Gough has taken a long time confirming his promise since his international debut five years ago.

Things had begun ridiculously well. Armed with raw pace and the brash swagger of

youth, the boy from Barnsley took six wickets and plastered 65 runs on his Test debut against New Zealand.

Shortly afterwards in Sydney, he rolled over six Australians for 49 before clubbing his way to an outrageous Ashes half-century.

Inevitably, Gough became the latest English unfortunate to be saddled with the greatest of expectations as he was prematurely declared the new Ian Botham.

Smiling irrepressibly, he lapped up the praise only for injury to spoil the party. A broken foot cut short his Ashes tour. Gradually, realism set in.

Gough, it emerged over the next few seasons, was no Botham. He wasn't even an all-

rounder, as subsequent short-lived innings proved beyond doubt.

True, he was a bowling talent, but as raw as sandpaper and injury-prone. Besides, slowly his form, his confidence and his late swinging yorker slipped away.

Last year saw the turning point. Gough began 1998 with a knee operation which deprived him of a place on England's ill-fated tour to the West Indies.

During the English summer, however, he managed to stay fit at last, taking 17 wickets in four Tests during the victorious series against South Africa.

His good form continued in the Ashes.

Barrelling in at Melbourne, he took five for 96 to set up England's lone win, then, in Sydney, became the first Englishman to take a hat-trick this century. He ended up with 21 wickets despite his teammates spilling chance after chance off his bowling.

He also showed he could blend pace with control in the tri-nation one-day tournament against Australia and Sri Lanka.

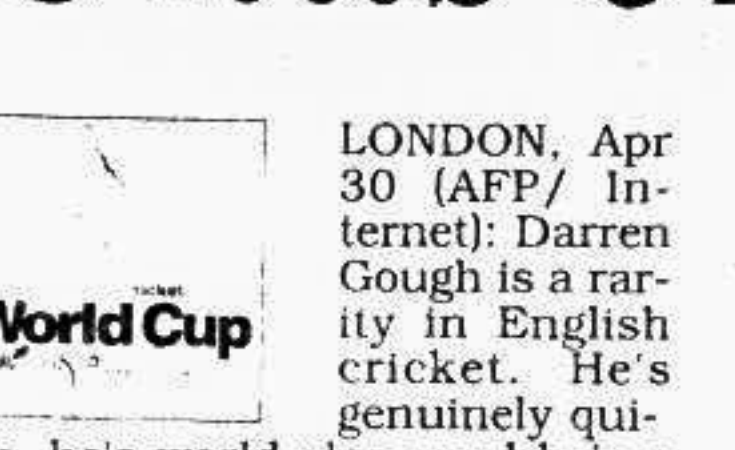
"Dazzler", as Gough is affectionately named (he also answers to Rhino and Leg, short for Legend), gives England's attack a cutting edge which has been missing since the days of Bob Willis. His genuine speed allows him to stand out in a land where medium-paced swingers and seamers dominate.

His character - Gough's most 'Bothamesque' trait - has also made him a special favourite. Like Botham, he is seen as a blue-collar hero, straightforward but fair, a spade's a spade.

Gough fizzles with life and enthusiasm on the pitch and will share a beer with any opponent off it. Not surprisingly, he and Shane Warne are good mates. And share a similar build ("Obviously, I'm not a stick... for some reason the TV makes me look big, I'm not fat. I'm well-built").

Gough's game, based on attack, once seemed tailored to Tests rather than one-dayers.

As he has matured, however, he has tightened his line and length without reducing his ability to take wickets. He rarely ends an opening spell without at least one wicket. When he does, England inevitably struggles.



Deadly Darren Gough is England's main weapon. —Star file photo

**Boost sports WHIZZ KID**  
COMPETITION FOR SCHOOL CHILDREN  
Competition-115  
Tick the Correct Answers  
Post to The Daily Star  
Win attractive prizes  
Competition closes at 8 pm  
May 7, '99 and draw shortly afterwards

1	Who will replace Bob Woolmer as South African cricket coach?	Ford	Stewart	Marsh
2	When England last hosted cricket World Cup?	1975	1987	1983
3	Umpire Steve Bucknor is a	Guyanese	Jamaican	Trinidadian
4	The final match of the 1999 cricket World Cup will be held at	Edgbaston	Lord's	Oval
5	The World Cup match between Bangladesh and Scotland will be played in	Edinburgh	Belfast	Cardiff

Name .....  
Class ..... Roll No. ....  
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### Jadukar Samad soccer

Suritola New Bengal Club and Paltan Ekota Boys Club reached the quarterfinals of the Jadukar Samad Kishore football tournament at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday, reports UNB.

In the day's first match, two brilliant hat-tricks by Jony and Rony helped Suritola to crush Sea Birds Sporting Club 7-0. Lucky scored the other goal for the winners.

In the second match, Paltan Ekota Boys Club beat National Football Training Club 2-0 with Sujon and Abdur Rahman scoring one goal each.

Wednesday's quarterfinal matches: Rayer Bazar Dragon Krira Chakra vs Sea Birds Sporting Club, and Suritola New Bengal Club vs Adamjee Chandu Sporting Club.

### Shalimar h'ball

Dhaka, Rangpur and Madaripur won their respective matches on the opening day of the Shalimar Print Saree inter-divisional women handball competition at the Sultana Kamal Women Sports Complex yesterday, reports UNB.

Dhaka beat Rangamati 8-7, Rangpur beat Rajshahi 20-8 and Madaripur defeated Chittagong 17-2.

Earlier, State Minister for Youth and Sports Obaidul Quader inaugurated the three-day meet.

Six teams from six divisions are taking part in the competition.

### Goran Young Star DDC h'ball champs

Goran Young Star Club clinched the title of the Dhaka DC handball league, beating Victoria Sporting Club 24-21 goals in the final at the Outer Stadium handball ground yesterday, reports UNB.

The match was locked 9-9 in the first half.

Ujjal scored 10 goals while Sumon and Zahid netted four each for Goran Young Star. Alam scored six while Moshir, Shaheen and Dipu three each for Victoria.

## Three-in-Stewart

LONDON, Apr 30 (Reuters): In the Test arena, England have never decided whether Alec Stewart is the true heir of Graham Gooch or Ian Botham.

Selected solely as an opening batsman, particularly against pace bowling on fast pitches, Stewart is the equal of Gooch as one of the most attractive and prolific stroke players in the world.

Picked as a wicketkeeper and batting down the order, he is the closest England have come to fielding a true all-rounder since Botham was pensioned off seven years ago.

What has been proven is that not even the endlessly willing Stewart is able to captain England, open the batting and also don the wicketkeepers' gloves in Test matches.

But for the World Cup, at least, Stewart will resume all three roles and it is no exaggeration to say that the host country's fortunes depends largely on how well he performs each function.

Stewart has predictably shown no outward concern at a slump in form after he recorded his first test century against Australia during the recent Ashes series.

"You always back your own ability," Stewart told reporters this week. "I've got a fair track record behind me. I've been through bad patches before and I've come out of them, it augurs well."

"Throughout the last few years I've been the leading run scorer in Test cricket and I like to think that by the World Cup I'll have turned it around."

Like Gooch in the latter stages of his career, Stewart has tightened his technique and worked hard to eradicate the

lapses of concentration which saw him getting out in unnecessary ways.

Unlike Gooch he is fallible against spin in the early stages of his innings, prone to pushing forward with feet firmly anchored and falling to catches close to the wicket.

happened." Even at the age of 36, Stewart is not bothered by the burdens of keeping wicket and opening the batting, at least in 50-over matches.

As a wicketkeeper, Stewart is much more than just a fielder with gloves and he has been every bit as effective as Jack Russell, regarded throughout the 1990s as the best specialist keeper in England.

"In one-day cricket I have done this for the majority of my career," Stewart said.

"As long as I am coping and doing okay I will keep doing it."

### Palmeiras world's No1 soccer club

PARIS, May 4: Brazilian side Palmeiras are the top club in the world, according to figures released by the International Federation of Football History and Statistics (IFFHS) on Tuesday, reports AFP.

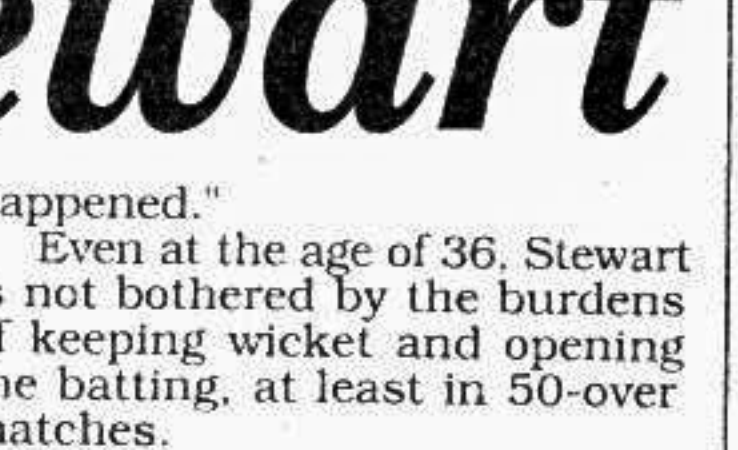
According to the IFFHS Club World Ranking system, the Sao Paulo club are the best in the world based on performances over the past 12 months.

Palmeiras, on 359.5 points, are ranked ahead of German giants Bayern Munich on 346 points and England Premiership side Manchester United on 334.

The rankings could change, however, following the European Cup final between Bayern and Manchester United in Barcelona on May 26.

**TOP TEN CLUBS**  
Palmeiras  
Bayern Munich  
Manchester United  
Bologna  
Parma  
Chelsea  
Inter Milan  
Glasgow Rangers  
Dynamo Kiev  
Real Madrid

### Alec Stewart



Alec Stewart

Batting at the top of the order this weakness should not be a problem during the World Cup and Stewart's ability to punish all but the very best bowling is a real bonus for England.

As a captain, Stewart leads from the front and his leadership is essentially conventional with no obviously blinding flashes of insight.

He has not been noticeably affected by the pressures of one of the highest profile jobs in British sport and, a year after taking office, retains a boyish enthusiasm.

"I have enjoyed it," he said. "I have had a lot of good times. I love playing for England and being captain is a huge honour."

A lot of good things have