

Taylor joining Channel Nine?

SYDNEY, May 9: Retired Australian captain Mark Taylor says he is on the verge of a big-money deal with a major Australian television company as his transformation from player to personality continues apace, reports AFP.

Despite Kerry Packer's Channel Nine cutting back on its sport content, Taylor said he was confident of a deal going through.

"I'm 99 percent sure I will be with Nine next year in some format," he said.

It is just one of numerous sponsorship arrangements he has made since retiring from Test cricket this year.

Recently voted Australian of the Year, Taylor has won a lucrative job promoting the Sydney 2000 Olympics and has slipped into the corporate speaking circuit with ease.

He told the Sunday Telegraph he was comfortable with his new life.

"I've had the best training of all and that is having to stand up in front of the cameras for five years and answer questions about tough issues."

Border's cause of concern

WORCESTER, May 9: Former Australian captain Allan Border today called on his fellow cricket selectors to stop players from signing up with English countries, reports AFP.

"We'll try to do everything we can to stop it," Border said after Shane Warne and Glenn McGrath, here for the upcoming World Cup, announced they would like to play in England next year.

Players of their calibre could command up to 240,000 US dollars for a five-month stint but Border, who himself played a year for Essex, cautioned against burn-out.

"Glenn McGrath, for instance, is such a vital part of the Australian team and they're playing so much cricket now," he said. "It'll be a tough call. We have allowed our batsmen to come across, but from now on the bowlers doing so. We're keen to protect them."

Twelve Australians are currently playing county cricket, most of them batsmen. But strike bowler McGrath argued bowlers should be allowed to exploit whatever opportunities were offered since their career was generally shorter than those of batsmen.

He also said playing throughout the year might help prolong his career by keeping him permanently fit.

Gooch not into it

LONDON, May 9 (Reuters/Internet): Former England captain Graham Gooch is not making himself a candidate to replace David Lloyd as team coach on a full-time basis when he steps down after the World Cup.

Gooch told The Times newspaper on Saturday that although he might do the job on a temporary basis while England officials seek a full-time appointment, he would rather serve the team as a senior batting coach.

Bob Woolmer, the ex-England all-rounder who is retiring as South Africa's coach at the end of the World Cup starting here next Friday, is being pursued to take over from Lloyd. However, Woolmer has said he wants a rest from the game and would not be available until next year.

Gooch, who managed England during the 1998-99 Ashes tour of Australia, told The Times: "My desire is to give something back to the game."

"I think I can do that best by doing what I really enjoy, which is helping other players to make the most of their ability... dealing one to one with other batsmen."

Aussies hungry for action

CARDIFF, May 9: Highly-fancied Australia shared the fate of their major World Cup rivals here on Saturday as their warm-up match against county opposition was wrecked by rain, reports AFP.

The Australians managed to bowl just 10 overs against Glamorgan before the game was wiped out.

South Africa, regarded as Australia's chief rivals for the trophy, did not even get on the pitch on Friday before their encounter with Sussex was abandoned.

Only two of six fixtures on Friday were completed. The West Indies' game against Gloucestershire on Saturday also failed to get beyond the opening stages.

Australia have had a busy lead-up to the World Cup, following the Ashes, a victorious tri-nations tournament at home and an away Test and one-day series against the West Indies.

But skipper Steve Waugh said his side were not jaded, adding: "We are disappointed but, as other teams have already found out, you can't do much about it. The guys have been jumping out of their skins to get going."

Seamers Damien Fleming and Adam Dale still had time to provide high-class spells, reducing Glamorgan to 21 for two. Strike bowler Glenn McGrath, expected to come on as first change, did not get a bowl.

The Australians will hope for better conditions in their next outings, against Worcestershire and Somerset on Monday and Wednesday.

They take their Cup debutants Scotland in their group B match on March 16 at Worcester.

Watch out for Zimbabwe



LONDON, May 9 (Internet): The vastly improved Zimbabwe squad could rattle a few cages during the 1999 World Cup, according to South African coach Bob Woolmer.

With the big money placed on South Africa and Australia as the sides most likely to lift the World Cup trophy at Lord's on June 20, it is Zimbabwe of all the other ten nations who are most likely to rock the boat, Woolmer says.

"I think if anyone is going to cause a major upset, it will be Zimbabwe because they have improved tremendously and are a strong unit. They have worked very hard and have a good coach in David Houghton. They understand what is required to win."

"They beat Pakistan in Pakistan which has given them confidence and while they are a small nation with few reserves, they have a hard core of 15 cricketers who can perform at the top level so they are a side that must be watched carefully in this tournament."

"Personally I don't see them



BOB WOOLMER has not necessarily been an advantage and they have the ability to play good cricket. They have some very fine batsmen and although I would question

going all the way but I do hope it is a Zimbabwe vs South Africa final.

"England have a home advantage though in the past that their mobility in the field, they have decided to go the route of having specialist players as their way of attacking this particular World Cup."

Woolmer is cautious about flagging South Africa as tournament favourites: "In the World Cup, there is no such thing as favourites but any team that has a 75 per cent success rate over a period of two years has a good chance of winning it."

"If you perform well on each day and have a bit of luck, you can expect to do well. The rest we have had since our New Zealand tour has been very beneficial. We had a great week-end in Cape Town before we came here where we did some sailing and kayaking which was fun, so the guys are ready to play and hungry for success."

"There is a great sense of determination in the team and they are confident but are also realistic and understand what is required to win."

"Australia are a very dangerous side but we will not be taking any side lightly. We have played most of the sides in the past 18 months so we have had a chance to study them," he said.

Tag may weigh heavy on SA



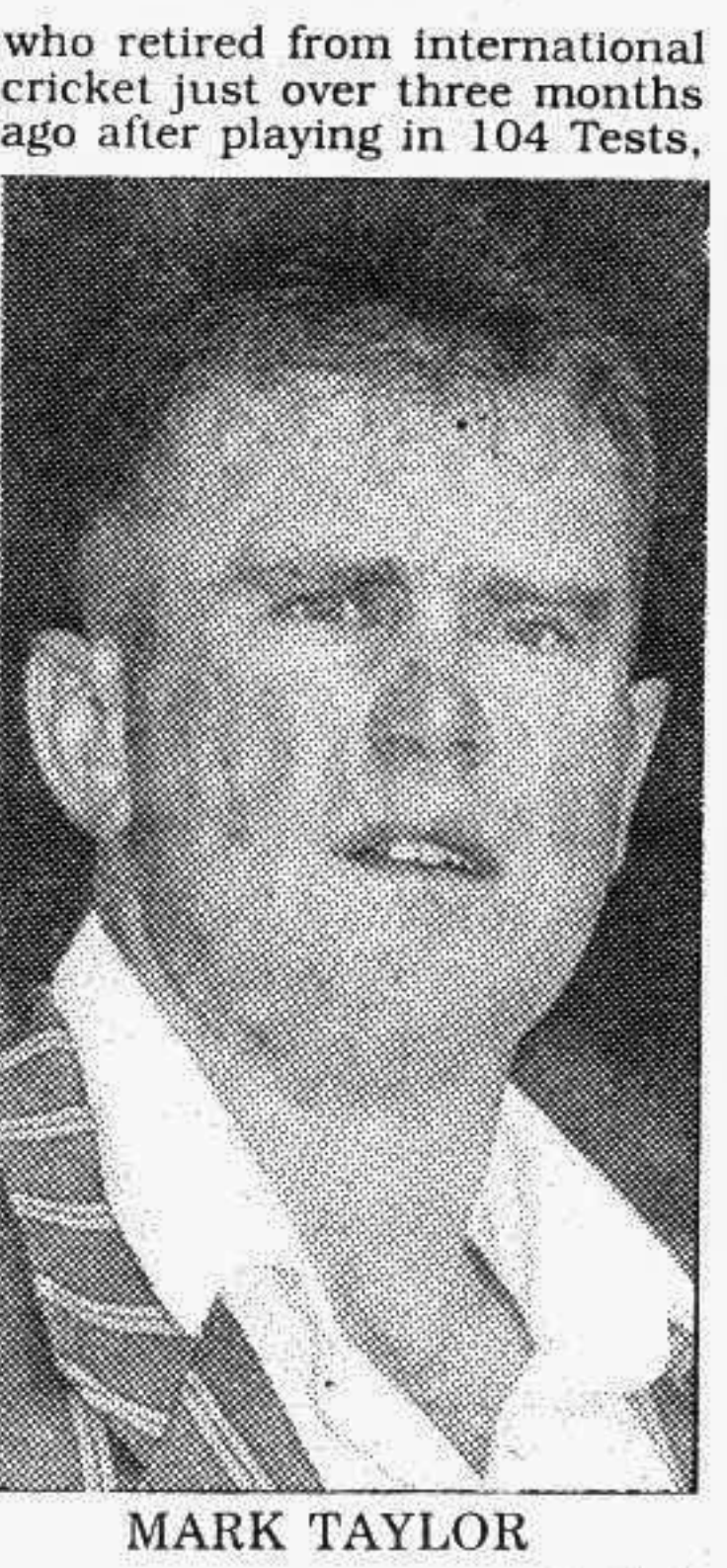
LONDON, May 9: Australia's former Test captain Mark Taylor believes South Africa's tag as World Cup favourites could hang heavy around their necks, says a report on the internet.

The legendary skipper and opening batsman will be strictly an observer for this summer's tournament in which the Aussies begin their campaign with a first-round tie against Scotland.

Australia were dished the same degree of bad luck for their opening warm-up tie against Glamorgan at Cardiff yesterday - with it also washed out like the South Africans' game against Sussex at Hove on Friday.

Taylor, however, has opened up a psychological can of worms as he reckons the bookmakers' decision to go with South Africa as favourites is likely to count against them.

"Consistency over the past two years means they are deserved favourites," said Taylor.



MARK TAYLOR who retired from international cricket just over three months ago after playing in 104 Tests, captain for 50.

"The thing about the World Cup is that not too many favourites win - that's probably one thing South Africa have against them."

"It's really the side that gets it right in the last two weeks that will win the World Cup."

For Australia, though, after a recent gruelling schedule, Taylor reckons his former team-mates need to click from the off to avoid an early exit.

The Aussies have been involved in a nine-month spell of Test and limited-overs matches since last September's Commonwealth Games in Kuala Lumpur.

Taylor, who led his side to the World Cup final in 1996 when they lost by seven wickets to Sri Lanka in Lahore, said: "The fact they've played a lot of cricket is the greatest danger."

"After June 20 the guys will have a break, but the hardest thing for the Australians is not to look around the corner at the break and think about that."

"They've got to think about playing well over the next few weeks to win the World Cup."

Charlton's great escape act



LONDON, May 9: Charlton manager Alan Curbishley was reaching for the sedatives after his side came within seconds of being relegated from the English Premiership on Saturday, reports AFP.

An 89th-minute deflected winner by Danny Mills gave the Londoners a stunning 4-3 win at Aston Villa to preserve their top flight status - a draw would have sent them down because Southampton beat Wimbledon 2-0 at Selhurst Park.

"We can take few sedatives and get ready for next week," admitted Curbishley, whose side must beat visiting Sheffield Wednesday in their final game next Sunday to have any hope of overhauling Southampton.

Charlton led three times through a Gareth Barry own goal, Clive Mendonca's turn and shot and a John Robinson effort controversially adjudged to have crossed the line.

But Villa hit back three times, Charlton had goalkeeper Andy Petterson sent off and then Villa's Steve Watson was also red carded for hauling back Martin Fringle.

From the free-kick the ball was played to Mills and his drive careered off a defender and in for a sensational winner.

Curbishley, a former Villa player, added: "I was adamant that I would not go down at my former club today, although it was getting a bit tight with only a few minutes to go."

"But we have now given ourselves a chance after most people predicted that we would be relegated by Christmas."

Fourth-bottom Southampton now have 38 points with one game left, Charlton have 36 with one to play and Blackburn Rovers have 33 with two matches remaining, both of which they must win to stay up.

Rovers look doomed after a desperate 2-1 home defeat by already relegated Nottingham Forest, who played the second-half with 10 men.

They must now beat title challengers Manchester United at Ewood on Wednesday and win at Cup finalists Newcastle in their last game to have any hope of staying up.

Rovers manager Brian Kidd pulled no punches afterwards, accusing his players of lacking courage and heart.

"No one wanted to take responsibility or had the courage for it," he said. "No one wanted to lead."

"They looked frightened to death to me and they didn't want it enough."

"I can't keep making excuses because it was spiritless."

"It's like a bunch of individuals who don't hurt enough and a lot of them are rubber dinghy men. The ship's going down, they're saying 'I'll go for help' rubber dinghy men."

"I think the inmates have been running this club for too long."

Bougie Freedman volleyed Forest in front early on at Ewood Park but the home side were level thanks to a delicious chip by Scottish international Kevin Gallacher after 25 minutes.

Forest dominated but Blackburn should have gone ahead right on half-time.

Steve Chettle got in a dreadful mess and brought down Gallacher to concede a penalty and earn a red card.

Gallacher hit his spotkick well but Forest's Mark Crossley superbly tipped it onto the post and the visitors escaped. Crossley has now saved four penalties in his last 12 games.

A man down, Forest should have wilted after the interval but stunned the home side by retaking the lead in the 56th minute when Chris Bart-Williams crowned a flowing move with a low drive past John Filan in the Blackburn goal.

Southampton created the better early chances at Wimbledon but needed the intervention of substitute Matt Le Tissier to

take the lead 18 minutes from time.

The former England forward delivered a free-kick into the area and James Beattie, scorer of a superb winner last week against Leicester, flicked the ball into the net.

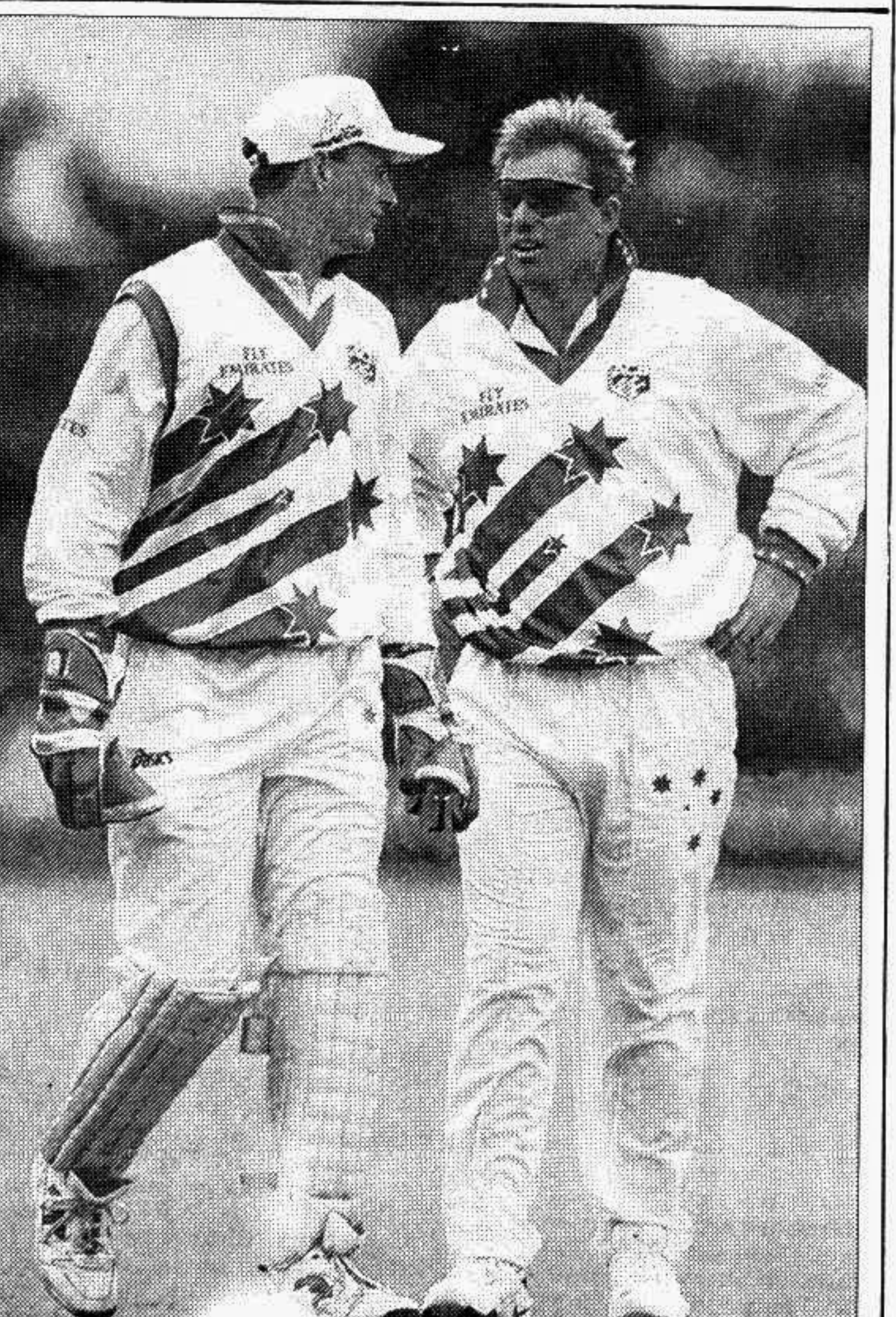
Le Tissier then scored direct from a corner all but assure the Saints of Premiership football next season. Victory at home to Everton next Sunday will keep them up.

"When you've got someone of his quality with the dead ball in your side you always know you can do it," said Southampton manager Dave Jones.

Elsewhere Kevin Campbell put Everton one up at home to West Ham and it was 3-0 before half-time thanks to a Michael Ball penalty and a Don Hutchison strike.

Campbell, on loan from Trabzonspor, made it 4-0 with his eighth goal in five games early in the second half. His hat-trick soon followed and Francis Jeffers completed a 6-0 thrashing for West Ham, who lost 5-1 last week at home to Leeds.

Everton manager Walter Smith said he was desperate to hang on to Campbell.



Ace Australian leg-spinner Shane Warne and wicket-keeper Adam Gilchrist exchanging ideas during their warm-up game against Glamorgan at Cardiff on May 8.

India lift Legends Cup

KATHMANDU, May 9 (AFP): In a high-scoring match, India Veterans beat the World XI by six wickets here Sunday to lift the Tempo World Legends Cup.

Electing to bat first after winning the toss, World XI amassed a seemingly unassailable 263 runs in 33 overs.

Earlier, the 45-over encounter was curtailed due to an overnight shower.

When the in-form opener and Saturday's century-maker Atul Wassan was out early for 34 runs, most of the 5,000-odd spectators at the Tribhuvan University Ground thought it was all over for India whose asking rate was very stiff.

But Praven Amre (76) and Sunday's man-of-the-match Ashok Malhotra had other ideas.

In a stand of 174 runs, they turned the game around. Malhotra made unbeaten 104.

Earlier, the World XI batsmen were in belligerent mood when they smashed the ball around the park, with Ravi Ratnayake top-scoring with 55, which included five sixes out of the team's 14 sixes.

The man-of-the-series award went to the Indian pinch-hitter Wassan, who compiled a mammoth 160 of 101 balls on Saturday.

Sri Lankan Ravi Ratnayake and David Kapel of England did some lusty hitting late into the World XI innings to increase the run rate.

Kapel's 33 came in 14 balls.

India's win Sunday in the Legends Cup is the first by the team batting second.



Mark Boucher sweeps during his hundred against Kent in South Africa's practice match at Canterbury on May 9.

World-less World Cup!



LONDON, May 9 (Reuters): Whisper it softly: The World Cup is coming to town and nobody outside the cricketing world has been told.

In five day's time hosts England meet defending champions Sri Lanka to launch the biggest edition of the World Championship.

There are no banners in the streets, no posters on the walls and even the World Cup theme song, 'All Over the World' by Dave Stewart, is not due to be released until two weeks into the tournament.

The former Eurythmics singer and songwriter is hardly at the cutting edge of contemporary pop music and attempts this year by the England and Wales Cricket Board to widen the game's appeal have the same dated feel.

Anneka Rice, a sometime television celebrity who would struggle to make most people's B list, was present at a launch of the England team's snazzy new kit.

She is unlikely to be asked back.

"The game is run by a club which has only just decided to let women in," Rice told reporters, referring to the Marylebone Cricket Club's vote to overturn a century of entrenched misogyny and admit women members.

Attempts to borrow ideas from major American sports appear similarly misguided.

Teams in the Sunday one-day league have been renamed in line with US football, basketball, baseball and ice hockey teams.

The titles range from the vaguely appropriate to the frankly bizarre and Darren Gough found it difficult to keep a straight face as he tried to explain the derivation of Yorkshire Phoenix at the launch of

the new league.

Gough is one of the few Englishmen with genuine star quality and his performances with the ball are essential to England's progress through the tournament, which climaxes with the final at Lord's on June 20.

Neville Cardus would have approved of the doughty Yorkshireman, recognising the qualities which he believed made cricket one of the supreme forums for revealing character and individuality.

The peerless Manchester Guardian cricket and music writer disdained one-day cricket but as far back as 1953 he recognised an important truth still at the forefront of English administrators' minds.

Cardus had been at Lord's while Stanley Matthews was performing his magic at Wembley as Blackpool came back from the brink of defeat to beat Bolton Wanderers 4-3 in the FA Cup final.

"I felt pretty certain I had been attending a decaying contemporary industry which, but for the artificial respiration applied from time to time by the Australians, would before long pass into the hands of the brokers and gradually disappear, not greatly lamented into profound oblivion," Cardus wrote gloomily.

In the final months of the 20th century, soccer is even more of a threat to the English summer game and the mediocre performances of the England cricket team in both test and one-day games have not helped.

Gough apart, there is not much to enthuse about in the current team. On the wider canvas though, provided the unreliable English spring weather is kind, the World Cup promises a feast of sporting entertainment.

From a comparatively early stage in his career Cardus referred constantly and nostalgically to lost golden eras and lamented current standards.

He might not have liked one-day cricket but he would surely have recognised the quality of the current cast of international players who have propelled the game worldwide into a new golden age.

The individuals on parade next Friday will include Sri Lanka's wily and generously-proportioned captain Arjuna Ranatunga plus Sanath Jayasuriya, who redefined one-day cricket in the 1996 tournament with his explosive opening batting.

India boast Sachin Tendulkar, probably the finest batsman in the world in both the test and one-day arena, while Brian Lara, who played what might well have been the best test innings ever against Australia this year, leads former champions West Indies.

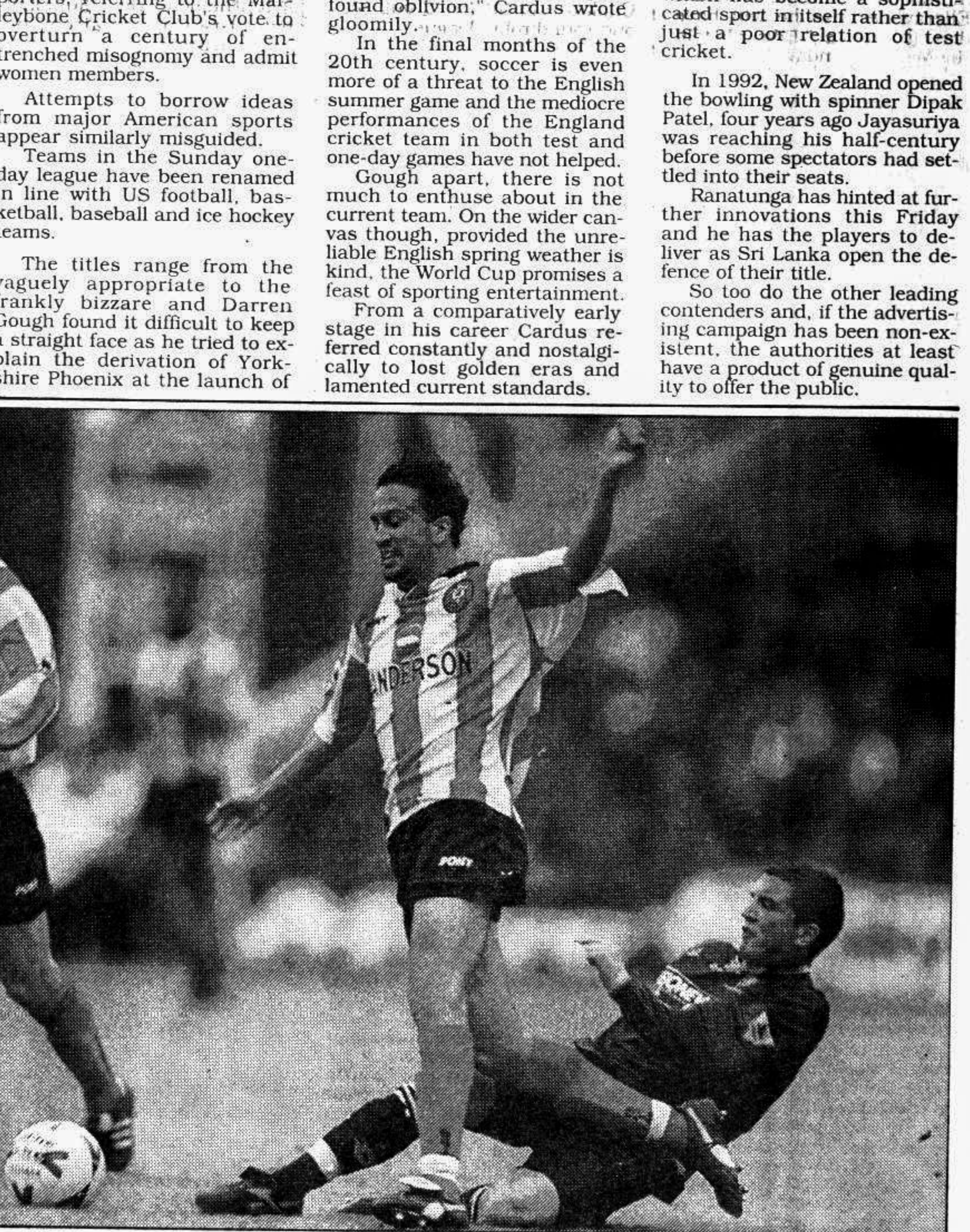
South Africa, the early favourites, and Australia have the strongest complements of class all-rounders; Pakistan the fastest bowler in Shoab Akhtar and a volatile team capable of reaching the heights.

The English spring and the probability of seaming pitches may demand more conventional tactics than in the previous two tournaments but nothing can be assumed in a game which has become a sophisticated sport in itself rather than just a poor relation of test cricket.

In 1992, New Zealand opened the bowling with spinner Dipak Patel, four years ago Jayasuriya was reaching his half-century before some spectators had settled into their seats.

Ranatunga has hinted at further innovations this Friday and he has the players to deliver as Sri Lanka open the defence of their title.

So too do the other leading contenders and, if the advertising campaign has been non-existent, the authorities at least have a product of genuine quality to offer the public.



Andy Roberts of Wimbledon makes a sliding tackle on Southampton's Hassan Kachlouf during their English Premiership clash at Selhurst Park on May 8. Southampton won 2-0.

Unpatriotic Observer

LONDON, May 9: England's hopes of being crowned the best one-day side in the world in the coming weeks were given short shrift by one leading English newspaper today, the Observer producing a list entitled "Ten reasons why England won't win the World Cup," reports AFP.

While most home commentators continue to try to unearth reasons why England might just take the title against more fancied sides like Australia, South Africa and Pakistan, the Observer all but wrote off Alec Stewart's team.

It began by pointing out that no side staging the tournament - England were also hosts in 1975, 1979 and 1983 - has ever won. It then turned the knife by pointing out "the batting doesn't add to much," the bowlers are "a bunch of pie throwers" and that Stewart's losing habit as captain was only exceeded by Zimbabwe's Alistair Campbell.

It also listed, among other reasons, the team's "pedestrian" fielding, poor form and lack of experience.

Williams, Pierce proceed



ROME, May 9: Venus Williams knocked defending champion Martina Hingis out of the Italian open in three thrilling sets on Saturday to reach her second successive final at the Foro Italico, reports Reuters.

The third-seeded American took one hour 28 minutes to win 6-4, 1-6, 6-4 and avenge both her own defeat by the world number one in last year's final in Rome and her younger sister Serena's defeat in the quarterfinals on Friday.

"My first three matches here I wasn't playing well. I knew I had to raise the level of my game or suffer the consequences," said Williams.

Hingis felt the roots of only her fifth defeat of the year - and her first on clay to Venus - lay in the ease with which she had eliminated the other half of the Williams family.

Using her lethal armoury of groundstrokes and the occasional drop shot, Williams pounded Hingis into submission, wrapping up the match by breaking her opponent's serve to love.

Even though Hingis counter-punched brilliantly after losing the first set to take eight of the next nine games, levelling the match and leading 2-0 with a break in the third, she never looked in control of her opponent or the match.

Pierce made light of the injury while defeating compatriot Amelie Mauresmo 6-7, 6-2, 6-4 in the day's first semifinal.

Asked about it, she said: "I'll have to find out what the trainer says. When you're out there playing you can just keep going because of the adrenalin and warmth."

"I hope I'm not going to cool down too much because at the moment it's hurting a little."

The match turned at the start of the second set as the fourth seed's abrupt change of strategy.

Instead of relying on powerful groundstrokes, Pierce started lobbing deep to the baseline, pushing Mauresmo out of court and out of the tournament.