



Will the Lankan Tigers rule at Lords?



THE 'OLD MAN' IS ALL SET: A chopper flies over the 'Old Man Time' weathervane at Lords yesterday during a rehearsal for the opening ceremony.

—Reuters/Internet photo.

Carnival to get off on casual note

LONDON, May 13 (AFP/Internet report): Cricket World Cup organisers said here on Thursday they had decided to cut out the razzmatazz and get on with the game when the event starts here on Friday.

They have opted for a low-profile start to the tournament, which begins with England's match against holders Sri Lanka in front of a sell-out crowd of 30,000 at Lords.

Tournament director Michael Browning said: "I don't think people are interested in a big send-off - they just want to get the cricket started."

He said there would be plenty of colour but added: "I think most people who are coming to the game would rather it was done this way than have a ceremony which goes on and on and becomes rather boring."

Prime Minister Tony Blair is expected to open the tournament, and a flypast by helicopters is planned.

At the 1996 World Cup, the opening ceremony in Calcutta lasted several hours and included fireworks and a laser show. Many people later criticised it as a waste of money.

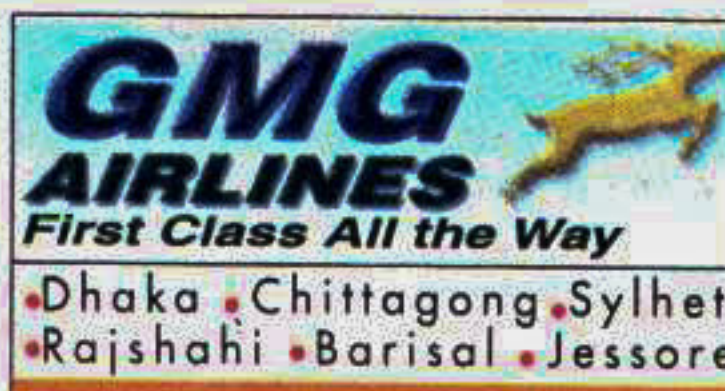
Friday's programme will last just 15 minutes before the game starts.

The approach is likely to go down well with the players, who are bursting to get into action after a week of low-key practice games.

He admits to being gripped by a mixture of "nervousness and anxiety" as the opening match draws nearer but he remains confident that, weather permitting, this summer's tournament will be heralded as the "carnival" that has dominated the advertising for the event.

"I'm convinced this tournament is going to be a success because it's been a long time since England have had the world's best players in their country all at the same time and it could be a while before it happens again," said the Australian.

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WC CHIPS

NEW DELHI, May 13 (AFP): Indian police have cracked down on sports manufacturers who have taken advantage of World Cup cricket fever by flooding the market with fake brand bats, press reports said Thursday.

Police said they had uncovered 6,000 cricket bats with fake foreign labels in recent raids on three factories in the northern state of Punjab.

"We picked up cricket bats sporting popular international labels such as Sunridges, BDM, Larson and Sanspriel Greenlands from small manufacturing units," one police official was quoted as saying by the Asian Age.

The haul also included thousands of duplicate stickers and foreign labels.

"Some think sticking a foreign label on their product is the easiest way to get a better price," the police official said.

CATCH 22

COLOMBO, May 13 (AFP): A Sri Lankan company is marketing the Cricket World Cup by giving away free video recorders, but there is a catch.

The offer is open to those

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Murali the menace



LONDON, May 13 (AFP): Surprisingly, Muttiah Muralitharan is neither bitter nor vengeful.

Considering his ordeal of the past four years, it would be understandable if the Sri Lankan spent every waking hour away from the cricket field busily sticking red-hot needles into wax effigies of Australian umpires.

To his credit, he has concentrated instead on doing what he does best - dismissing batsmen.

Muralitharan, the victim of an almost freakish bowling style, was almost drummed out of the game in 1995.

Unable to fully straighten his right arm because of a birth deformity, and with a double-jointed wrist, the Sri Lankan looked so odd that a small minority - most of them living in Melbourne and Brisbane - decided he threw the ball and should be banned.

For the vast majority, he is an extraordinary, unconventional talent, a finger spinner somehow able to make the ball fizzle like a top.

The South African spinner Paul Adams was once famously described as having a "frog in a blender" action. Muralitharan, who bowls with staring eyes and a painfully contorted face, is more toad in a tourniquet.

Exhaustive trials-by-video

by the International Cricket Council have declared Muralitharan legal, his 'throw' an optical illusion promoted by his peculiar physical attributes.

But the mutterings continue.

Last year, England coach David Lloyd suggested he had misgivings. South African match ref-

Former West Indian great Sonny Ramadhin, himself a spinner, said recently that he was convinced Muralitharan threw whenever he tried to impart extra spin on the ball.

The Sri Lankans, understandably frustrated by the continuing whispers despite the ICC's stamp of approval, have not helped the defence by reacting with rage rather than cold reason.

A finger-wagging Arjuna Ranatunga even marched his team off the pitch in Adelaide in January after his spinner was called again, earning himself a suspended ban.

Muralitharan, in contrast, has retained a quiet dignity which has won him many friends.

The 27-year-old from Kandy currently boasts 203 wickets in 42 Tests - a mark he has reached as fast as Shane Warne - and 151 victims in the one-day game.

The prodigious turn he extracts from all surfaces - he could even find spin on England's M4 motorway, according to team manager Ranjit Fernando - make him a huge threat in both of the game's formats.

He should be comfortable at the World Cup, with England already a happy ground.

In August, in a one-off Test against the tournament hosts, he took 16 wickets, including nine in the second innings, to

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Clash of the captains: Sri Lanka v England

LONDON, May 13 (AFP/Internet): Hosts England and reigning champions Sri Lanka will launch the 1999 cricket World Cup at Lord's here on Friday in an enthralling clash of cricketing cultures.

To add to the drama, this will be curtain-raiser laced with bad blood and personal enmity.

It is also a contest neither side can afford to lose.

Rival captains Alec Stewart and Arjuna Ranatunga will wear forced smiles when they toss up before a 30,000 sell-out crowd but their bitter relationship is well documented.

Stewart believes the Sri Lankans present themselves as happy-go-lucky, but in fact take gamesmanship to the very edge.

Ranatunga, the man who lifted the 1996 trophy, believes the England skipper does not

know what he is talking about. Whoever wins this opening group A fixture - the first of 42 matches expected to attract a world-wide television audience of two billion - the two are unlikely to exchange a beer after the game.

The teams' deteriorating relationship dates back to an encounter during a tri-nation tournament in Australia earlier this year, when Sri Lankan spinner Muttiah Muralitharan was called for throwing.

Ranatunga, later given a six-match suspended ban for his behaviour, first led his team off in protest, and then gave the umpire a finger-wagging lecture.

Stewart allowed himself to be drawn into the controversy and was caught on a stump microphone calling the Sri Lankan captain a disgrace. That was followed by several more confrontations between players.

According to the bookies,

England go into Friday's game as the favourites but it is hard to compare the sides.

England have packed their eleven with one-day specialists and medium-paced seamers. It is a functional, workman-like team short on world-class talent. Pace bowler Darren Gough is their only proven wicket-taker.

The Sri Lankans are all about flair, relying on the exotic spin bowling of Muralitharan and the extravagant, top-bracket batting of Sanath Jayasuriya and Aravinda de Silva.

The home team are unlikely to surprise anyone with their

wisdom on its head, taking advantage of flat batting wickets and early-over fielding restrictions to attack from the very first ball.

Here, with damp wickets likely to favour the bowlers, they may experiment instead by opening their attack with Muralitharan rather than their pacemen.

Defeat is unthinkable for either side.

Group A is likely to be dominated by tournament favourites South Africa, leaving a tough four-way fight between England, Sri Lanka, India and Zimbabwe for the last two



Seize the moment, AKTEL it.



WHAT'S HE POINTING AT? Alec Stewart, the England skipper, finds something amusing during a practice session at the Lords yesterday.

—Reuters/Internet photo

tactics. They will play 'conventional' cricket, starting their innings cautiously and trying to build momentum, with Graeme Hick and Andrew Flintoff hitting out when needed.

Sri Lanka, in contrast, have, according to their captain, "a few tricks up our sleeve."

At the last World Cup they turned the game's conventional

qualifying places.

Neither team has been playing well in the run-up to the World Cup and their morale would be badly deflated by an early loss.

England have won only one match in their last seven one-dayers - although they came out on top in their latest confrontations with Sri Lanka, winning

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HEAD-TO-HEAD

Their last Test came in August 1998, when Sri Lanka won the one-off game at the Oval by 10 wks. Muttiah Muralitharan took 16 wickets for 220 in the match and Sanath Jayasuriya scored 213.

In their last seven one-day encounters, England have won four. In August 1998, in a tri-nation event also featuring South Africa in England, both sides recorded a win each but Sri Lanka's victory came in the final of the event, Marvan Atapattu scoring 132 not out.

In January and February 1999, the sides met five times in a tri-nation tournament in Australia. England won three to reach the final but then lost to Australia.

World Cup

The sides have met six times, England winning five, in 1983 (twice), 1987 (twice) and 1992. Sri Lanka won in 1996 on their way to the title.

Players to watch:

Sri Lanka - Muttiah Muralitharan: In his last one-dayer against England here, he dismissed five of the first six batsmen.

England - Graeme Hick: He scored three centuries in four innings in the tri-nations tournament in Australia at the start of the year, one of them - 126 not out in Adelaide - against Sri Lanka.

Venue: Lord's, regarded as the home of English cricket and dominated by a weather vane depicting Old Father Time. The home of Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC), the International Cricket Council (ICC) and English county side Middlesex. The site was established in 1814. The ground slopes from one edge to the other by seven feet. Capacity 30,000.

Good Luck to all the participating Cricket Teams in World Cup '99

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