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ALIVE AND REALLY KICKING : Shane Warne in full flow against Somerset at Taunton on May 12. —AFP photo

Richards 'best of our time'

LONDON, May 13: Vivian Richards, who helped West Indies to victory in the first two World Cup finals, has been voted 'best-player-of-our-time' in a poll to mark the 20th anniversary of Wisden Cricket Monthly magazine, reports Reuters.

Richards, 47, who is in England to commentate on the World Cup, was being presented with a crystal trophy at a lunch in London today.

Botham, who was making the presentation, said of Richards: "There has never been a better player."

Change in Caribbean anthem

GEORGETOWN, Guyana, May 13 (Reuters/Internet): Guyana has forced a change in the West Indies official anthem just days before the start of their World Cup campaign.

Guyana Cricket Board president Chetram Singh said the second line of the anthem's first verse will now read 'brought us here to these homelands' instead of 'brought us here to these islands'. Guyana is on the mainland of South America.

The anthem was released in early March and is an adaptation of the popular 'Rally round the West Indies' which had been an unofficial anthem of local cricket fans for many years.

It is played at all official events and by West Indies at World Cup matches. West Indies play Pakistan on Sunday.

William's money on Mark Waugh

LONDON, May 13: Indian star Sachin Tendulkar, who scored more runs than anyone else in the last World Cup, is not favoured to repeat the feat this time by British bookmakers, reports AFP.

William Hill have Australia's Mark Waugh at 11-1 as the tournament's likely leading run-getter, followed by West Indian captain Brian Lara at 12-1. Tendulkar is regarded as the best batsman currently playing the game and who made 523 runs in 1996 at an average of 87.16 -- and Jacques Kallis of South Africa are joint third at 14-1.

Another Australian, Glenn McGrath, tops the bowlers' list at 9-1 with leg-spinner Shane Warne sharing third place with Shaun Pollock of South Africa at 14-1.

Young Pakistani Shoaib Akhtar, regarded as the quickest bowler in the world, is a surprise second behind McGrath at 12-1.

Hansie Cronje's South Africans, meanwhile, remain the bookmakers' favourites at 5-2 to win the World Cup.

Australia are second at 100-30, followed by Pakistan (4-1), England (5-1), West Indies (9-1), and India and defending champions Sri Lanka (10-1).

New Zealand are placed at 20-1, Zimbabwe 80-1, Bangladesh and Kenya 500-1 and Scotland rank outsiders at 1,000-1.

In the first round, the bookmakers favour South Africa (10-11) and England (11-4) to take the first two spots from Group A, with India and Sri Lanka fighting for third at 11-2 each.

In Group B, Australia are favoured to finish top at 11-10, followed by Pakistan (2-1) and the West Indies (9-2).

Warne-ing the world

LONDON, May 13 (AFP/Internet report): The rest of the World Cup hopefuls have been warned - the game's greatest leg-spinner is in the mood to do something special in the competition.

Shane Warne took 3-35 to help Australia to a 32-run victory over Somerset under the Duckworth-Lewis method in their warm-up game at Taunton.

"It was a case of offering a bit of variation in pace when the seamers didn't run through Somerset. I feel in good rhythm and confident for the World Cup games ahead," he said.

"I'm feeling great and just love playing in England. There is so much history to the game over here, and it's wonderful to be back."

"I have so many happy memories of playing here and hope to add a few more in the coming weeks. I felt that on the

West Indies tour, I bowled as well in one-day games as I have ever done."

The Aussies reached 243 for five off 50 overs, Michael Bevan leading the way with 68. Somerset battled to 201 for nine when rain stopped play after 44 overs.

Somerset's Tasmanian skipper, Jamie Cox, who recorded a second-ball duck against his fellow countrymen, backed up Warne's words.

"I thought Shane looked in great shape and excellent form. His three wickets helped to turn the game," said Cox.

"Australia are favourites for the World Cup as far as I am concerned, and a fit Shane Warne is going to be a massive weapon for them."

Warne however believes his sacking from the Australian Test team was the best thing that could have happened to him ahead of the World Cup.

Warne hasn't looked back since, regaining form and confidence in time for Australia's

first match against Scotland at Worcester on Sunday.

"Looking back, being dropped from the Test team in the West Indies (in March) might have been the best thing that ever happened to me," the blond leg-spinner said.

"I was pretty disappointed, and I suppose when you get disappointed it tests your character."

Warne had initially responded to his first demotion from the team in seven years by suggesting he could retire.

Warne feels his old armoury of tricks is finally back, having struggled to regain them after a long absence following shoulder surgery last year.

"I'm turning the ball, the straight one's coming out well. There's the curve and the spin and the dip. I think that's all there," he told the Australian Associated Press.

"If I can keep that up I think I can cause the batters a few troubles."

Kalu: Demolition man

LONDON, May 13 (AP): Beware Romesh Kaluwitharana. The role of the Sri Lankan opener has perplexed many cricket fans just as much as his daredevil batting has stunned his opponents.

Kaluwitharana is by no means an overnight sensation. In the eyes of world cricket, he is a diminutive right-handed batsman and wicketkeeper who blossomed in the shadows of his more illustrious opening partner Sanath Jayasuriya as Sri Lanka built up to winning the 1996 World Cup.

But those who affectionately call him 'Kalu' knew the prodigious cricketer was destined for great deeds in cricket from an early age.

Kaluwitharana, like Jayasuriya, made a name for himself with attacking and adventurous batting.

The pair transformed the style of one-day cricket with tactical revolutions and such ferocity that it set a new benchmark for limited-over cricket with instant global acceptance.

The pinch-hitting style was

regarded as one of the greatest innovations in cricket and teams have been copying and scoring that extra 50-75 runs in the first 15 overs.

Kaluwitharana's limited-over strike rate of 88 runs per 100 balls ranks him among the world's elite, behind Pakistan's Shahid Afridi (111), Jayasuriya (91), South Africa's Lance Klusener (90), Pakistani Wasim Akram (90) and Australia's Adam Gilchrist (89).

Kaluwitharana was first recognised when he was selected for the World Youth Cup in Australia as part of the country's bicentennial celebrations in 1988.

Four years later, he made his Test debut at 21 against Allan Border's Australians with a pugnacious innings. He hit an unbeaten 132 off 158 balls inclusive of 26 boundaries.

His Australian counterpart Ian Healy, reduced to a mere spectator like the rest of his teammates, recalled: "We nicknamed him the Don, after Don Bradman because that's how well he timed the ball."

He played and missed five balls in a Craig McDermott over

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High on Hick

LONDON, May 13 (Internet report): Hick will be a target for world cup bowlers Zimbabwe coach David Houghton has warned Graeme Hick that he will come in for special treatment from bowlers who will view him as England's prized scalp in the World Cup.

Houghton knows better than most about Hick's qualities - they were former team-mates for Zimbabwe.

Hick then qualified to play for England and was reunited with Houghton when he spent four years as Worcestershire coach before taking up his current role in 1997.

Hick has sometimes failed to live up to the huge expectations placed on his shoulders at international level since being hailed as England's Messiah on his debut in 1991.

But Houghton is adamant that he will be targeted as England's most potent weapon especially after his trio of centuries in the recent one-day series in Australia.

Houghton, who played for Zimbabwe for nearly 20 years,

said: "Graeme Hick is one of the best batsmen in the world - especially when it comes to one-day cricket."

"You can rest assured that everybody - including us - will be targeting him in the World Cup because they know that if he gets going he can destroy an attack and the best-laid plans."

"He is the guy you want out early and you know that if he stays in for any length of time that the runs will pile up."

"He is certain to be established in the top three or four in the batting order after the way he performed so effectively in Australia."

"But that will be the one thing that might give us a chance against him because if the wicket is doing a bit early doors you have always got a chance of getting him out."

"That is exactly how we view things when we come up against India and Sachin Tendulkar. He is another great player but he does give you hope if the ball is moving about a bit early in the innings."

Houghton has great faith in Hick and always maintained that he would regain his Eng-

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Terrific-dulkar

LONDON, May 13 (AFP/Internet report): There are not many players in the modern era who can be described as a genius, but if Sachin Tendulkar successfully shrugs off his back injury to perform in the World Cup then this summer's audiences will discover why he is so revered on the sub-continent.

Tendulkar is still only 26 years old yet already a veteran of 21 one-day internationals.

The expectations of a cricket-frenzied Indian nation have weighed heavily on his shoulders ever since he first emerged as a 16-year-old of incredible talent.

Already one of the most highly-paid cricketers in the world, his profile will grow to incredible proportions if he lives up to his publicity this summer in England, one of the few countries where he is yet to produce consistently despite a season of county cricket with Yorkshire.

Such is the wealth he has accrued during his brilliant career, he was able to reject an offer of £350,000 from an Indian television company to have his

wedding broadcast live four years ago and his various sponsorship deals continue to break records.

But it is cricket milestones rather than financial highs that Tendulkar craves, and he is already third on the all-time list of one-day international run-scorers behind Indian captain Mohammad Azharuddin and West Indian Desmond Haynes with 7,801 runs.

He has also scored an astonishing 21 one-day centuries - more than any player in history - and another 43 half-centuries and with a further 10 years ahead of him providing he steers clear of serious injury he is on course to be one of the most prolific batsmen ever.

That consistency has increased expectations to an unprecedented level, with Indian fans almost regarding it as a failure if he does not reach three figures.

"I realise that people expect me to do well all the time; that's to be expected because everybody follows cricket in India," he conceded.

"I try to do my best but I don't let it weigh on my mind or let it bother me - what is most impor-

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Whatmore on weather

LONDON, May 13 (AFP/Internet report): Sri Lanka here today got a timely warning from their former coach not to un-

derestimate World Cup hosts England on the eve of their tournament opener - especially if the cold, wet weather continues.

Day Whatmore, the man who led the Sri Lankans to the 1996 crown, said he thought Alec Stewart's team, despite home doubts over their chances, had enough quality to go a long way in the event.

"I expect England to have a big say in whoever does win it," he said. "There are usually cold conditions and the ball does behave differently here than it does for players in countries like India, Sri Lanka and Pakistan."

Weather forecasts suggest Friday's game will be played in cloudy conditions, with showery rain a threat. The game will be extended into Saturday if necessary. Temperatures, meanwhile, are expected to be between eight and 18 degrees Celsius.

England's World Cup strategy has largely been based on

the weather, so much so that the media have dubbed them a 'wet-weather' team. They have filled their team with accurate medium-paced seamers expected to thrive in moist, cloudy conditions.

The Sri Lankans, whose bowling relies more on spin, are also more used to temperatures of around 35-40 degrees Celsius at this time of year.

Whatmore said that Sri Lanka would do well to target England's lack of mobility in the field.

"Fielding is a part of the game which isn't highlighted enough and it is very important - and that is one weakness I see in England's side because I'm not sure they have the ability to be tigers out in the field," he said.

England, the oldest team of the event, are fielding a squad containing just one player under 27 years of age.

Meanwhile West Indies team manager Clive Lloyd believes England's unpredictable weather will dictate the scoring with 300 plus scores unlikely if the sun doesn't shine.

"Big scores will only emerge if the sun comes out and dries the wickets," Lloyd said.

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