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Bangladesh's middle-order batsman Naimur Rahman, who made a useful 45, sets off for a single. — AFP photo

Champs' back against the wall

WORCESTER, England, May 21: Reigning World Cup champions Sri Lanka have nothing more than history to inspire them when they take on buoyant Zimbabwe in their make-or-break match here on Saturday, reports AFP.

Arjuna Ranatunga's beleaguered team must win to stay in contention for the Super Six second round after losing their first two matches.

It's a task made difficult by their wretched form - 16 defeats in the last 20 matches - and Zimbabwe's growing confidence after beating Kenya and India.

A win for Zimbabwe will also see them survive the preliminary round in a World Cup for the first time in their history.

Ranatunga, however, has the memories of 1992 on his side. In that tournament, Zimbabwe appeared to have the match sewn up after amassing 312 for four from 50 overs at New Plymouth in New Zealand.

Ranatunga, however, smashed 88 off 61 balls as the Sri Lankans reached the target with four deliveries to spare.

And in the 1996 World Cup, Zimbabwe travelled to Colombo and were thrashed by six wickets with 13 overs to spare.

Zimbabwe had won just three of their 25 World Cup matches before this tournament but came to England believing they were contenders for the first time after putting together what they believe is their strongest side ever.

Two defeats against English counties in warm-up matches, in which they were accused of playing "schoolboy cricket" by coach David Houghton, only seems to have inspired them.

Alistair Campbell's men overcame poor fielding against Kenya to win comfortably by five wickets. They then held their nerve in a tense finish to overcome India by three runs on Wednesday as paceman Henry Olonga grabbed the last

three wickets in one over.

Campbell is quite happy to let the big guns like South Africa and Australia hog the spotlight.

It's okay to be described as the underdogs," Campbell said. "But just as favourites do not always win, underdogs cannot be counted out either."

"The other teams know we are not a bad side. They will not take us lightly."

The Sri Lankans certainly won't, struggling as they are to come to terms with the damp English weather and poor batting form.

The batting has not clicked for a long time," Ranatunga said. "I can't pinpoint the reasons, but I know we must turn around quickly if we are to stay in the tournament."

The biggest worry is the form of 1996 World Cup hero Aravinda de Silva, who has lost just 12 balls in the two matches so far, scoring just a single.

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RAIN, KEEP AWAY: A spectator of the Bangladesh-West Indies match waiting for the rain to stop so that the game can get underway in Dublin yesterday. — AFP photo

Bookies increasingly edgy

LONDON, May 20: British bookmakers were sweating at the prospect of major losses here on Thursday as bowlers in cricket's World Cup continued to send down an avalanche of wickets, reports AFP.

"We have a Top 10 disasters chart in our office and this has shot straight in at number three and could go even higher," says Wally Pyrah of Sporting Index, a leading London spread betting firm.

"We thought we got it right when we said there would be between 240 and 260 wickets in the entire competition. But we have been caught out horribly."

That figure has already been surpassed on Thursday, halfway through the 10th of 42 matches.

"We suspected we might have miscalculated when we put the figure on the market a week before the tournament," says Pyrah. "That morning, we had a

flood of calls from our clients racing to place money. We have since revised our estimate to between 840 and 880 wickets."

If the revised total proves correct, a punter who placed 10 pounds (16 US dollars) per point when the original estimate was made stands to make more than 6,000 pounds (around 10,000 US dollars).

The explosion in wickets continued on Thursday when Scotland sent down an extraordinary 33 during their 50 overs against Pakistan at Chester-le-Street, the most in a single innings to date.

One over from Gavin Hamilton - who plays professional cricket for Yorkshire - took 11 balls to complete and included one no ball and four sides.

When he finally managed to complete it, Hamilton punched the air in mock triumph.

Many commentators have

blamed a combination of the white Duke balls being used in the tournament - said to swing more than the traditional red ones - and England's early summer conditions.

But some players admitted appalling bowling should also take the blame.

India conceded 51 extras, including 21 wides, on their way to defeat against Zimbabwe on Wednesday. Zimbabwe responded with 24 wides of their own.

Zimbabwe skipper Alistair Campbell said: "If the ball swings more, then you should prepare for that. It's ridiculous to ball so many wides - and what's the ball got to do with all the no balls being sent down?"

No one, however, has yet threatened the 18 balls it took former England England pace bowler Gladstone Small to finish one over for county side

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SL shellshocked

COLOMBO, May 21 (Reuters/Internet): Sri Lanka is in mourning after two defeats at the cricket World Cup.

Not many fans are smiling as the chances of Sri Lanka retaining the title they won in 1996 look remote by the day.

"I don't want to talk about cricket. I don't want to watch the matches anymore," said Sarinda Unamboowe, general manager of a supermarket chain.

"I now call myself a former cricket enthusiast."

The nation is in a despondent mood. The Lanka lion has its tail between its legs, "an editorial in the independent Island newspaper said on Friday.

Sri Lanka lost to hosts England by eight wickets in the opening match of the tournament last week.

On Wednesday they were beaten by favourites South Africa by 89 runs as the top Sri Lankan batsmen failed to live up to expectations.

In a country beset with a long-running ethnic conflict, which has claimed tens of thousands of lives, winning cricket

matches provides one of the few escapes to optimism.

"After two humiliating defeats, the cricket-mad nation now feels shy to talk about the game," the Island newspaper said.

It called for radical reforms in the ruling cricket board, which has been a cauldron of controversy over recent elections where rival contestants accused each other of intimidation.

The state-owned Daily News criticised Sri Lanka's batting and said the "spineless" performance against South Africa left much to be desired.

"Sri Lanka has performed worse than expected. There does not seem to be unity within the side," said Vishu Wickremasooriya, a construction contractor.

Sri Lanka need to win their remaining three matches to make it to the next round of the tournament.

They meet Zimbabwe in their third group match on Saturday before a crucial tie with India on May 26. Sri Lanka will play Kenya on May 30.

Captain Unwanted

NEW DELHI, May 21: Anger and disappointment at India's woeful start to the cricket World Cup in Britain honed on a single target Friday -- skipper Mohammed Azharuddin, reports AFP.



AZHARUDDIN

A questionable choice for captain before the tournament even began, Azharuddin has become the whipping post of the Indian press following India's defeat in its two opening matches.

"Azhar, come home," ran the title of an editorial in The Indian Express, which set the tone of the press coverage of India's dismal performance so far.

"If India are to stay alive in the tournament, Azhar has to go. Now," said the Express, which partly exonerated the rest of the team.

"They are only following their skipper, whose smiling banter with his team is confined to cola commercials."

While India's loss to

favourites South Africa in their opening match was a cause for mere disappointment, defeat at the hands of Zimbabwe on Wednesday has become a source of national humiliation.

The storm of criticism has covered the entire team, but the real venom has been reserved for Azharuddin, 36, whose tactics against Zimbabwe were held up as a major factor behind India's defeat.

"Leading the brigade of culprits was skipper Mohammed Azharuddin," said The Hindu newspaper.

"Azharuddin has always maintained that he does not mind being criticised for playing bad cricket and that was one occasion when he let himself and his team down."

The Times of India appealed to the Indian captain to set a better example to the rest of his players.

"If Azhar himself appears tense and panics, how can he stop his teammates from developing cold feet?"

Posters saying "Remove Azhar, Save the Country," were pasted up on the walls in Calcutta.

Former Indian Test star Sanjay Manjrekar also suggested that Azharuddin's time had come.

"Azharuddin clearly looks a shadow of himself... [his] luck seems to be running away from him on this trip," Manjrekar said.

Former Indian left-arm spinner Bishen Singh Bedi was characteristically blunt. "Seriously, I can't imagine how Azhar can look straight into the eyes of his colleagues, leave alone passing the buck," he said.

"India's biggest problem is their captain," former Pakistan captain Imran Khan said in Indian Express.

He described Azharuddin as "... a skipper whose face and body language shows he is incapable of solving his own problems... let alone anybody else's."

Worried Wasim

CHESTER-LE-STREET, England, May 21 (Reuters/AP): Pakistan captain Wasim Akram slammed the preparation of pitches at the World Cup on Thursday and said he was very unhappy with the facilities available to his team.

Akram had seen his side in real trouble at 92 for five against the seam attack of 1,000-1 outsiders Scotland before they recovered to 261 for six.

They dismissed the Scots for 167 but Akram was in no mood to celebrate after the match.

"The ball was flying all over the place out there, it was moving abnormally," said the former Lancashire all-rounder who is an experienced judge of English pitches.

"When we came here to practice," he said.

"We have had just one reasonable net, in Bristol. The net here was uneven and we need proper facilities - I'm very unhappy with them. I just hope we get decent nets at Headingley."

Pakistan's two warm-up games, scheduled for Durham and Manchester, were both washed out and they now face vital game against Australia in Leeds on Sunday with several players short of match practice.

"People like Shoaib Akhtar have suffered a lot from lack of match practice. It takes me a few games to put my length right and I'm experienced with these conditions," said Akram.

The Pakistan captain also said his team will have to play much better if it is to succeed in the World Cup.

"In the end it was good runs ... but we can't do this every game. We have to be careful. We have to be consistent. In the World Cup we have to be 100 per cent in every department," Akram said.

He said Pakistani batsmen still suffer from the tendency to impart suicidal jabs at outswingers.

"We have to learn to leave the ball," he said.

He called his team's fielding "very average" and blasted the large number of extras the bowlers and fielders gave away.

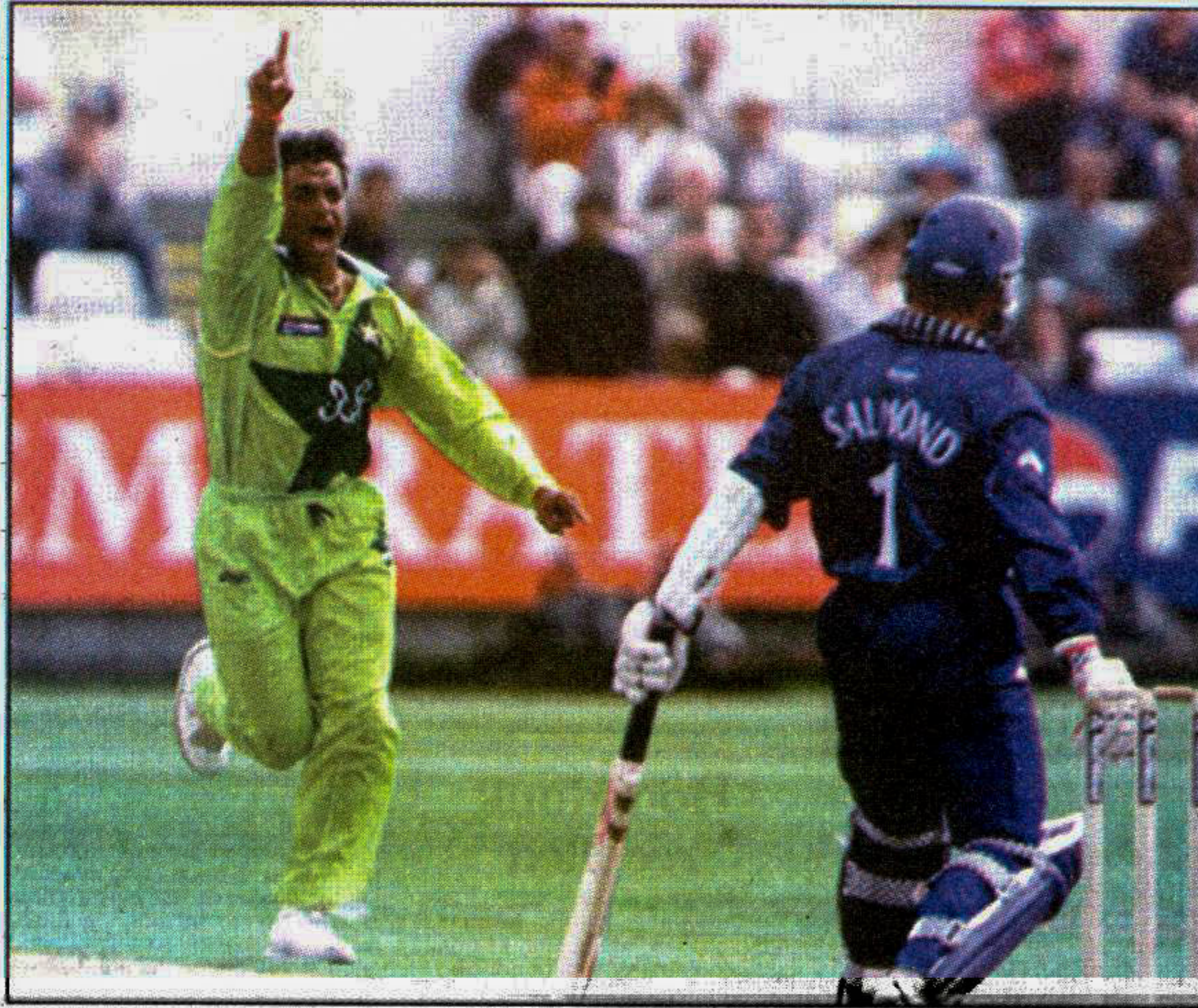
"I am not satisfied. The whole team is not satisfied," he said.

Twose triumphed over 'bullies'!

CARDIFF, May 21: New Zealand's Roger Twose, fresh from a match-winning 80 not out against Australia in the World Cup here on Thursday, said he was delighted to have helped beat Steve Waugh's "bullies," reports AFP.

Twose, who shared in a fifth-wicket stand of 148 with Chris

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Pakistan speedster Shoaib Akhtar exults after getting rid of Scotland captain George Salmond. — AFP photo

Show-stopper Shoaib

CHESTER-LE-STREET, England, May 21 (AFP): Shoaib Akhtar, the world's fastest bowler, could not wipe the smile off his face.

It wasn't malicious, nor arrogant.

For just a second, he seemed to find himself astonished by the extent of the talent with which he has been blessed.

Scotland's all-rounder Gavin Hamilton was rubbing his bruised leg, after being caught by one of Akhtar's near 100-mile-per-hour deliveries, and the Pakistani bowler gave him a friendly tap on the helmet as he walked back to his mark, as if to say: "Isn't it amazing? I don't even know how I manage to bowl so fast myself."

In truth, it was men among boys when Pakistan unleashed Akhtar on the Scots in Durham on Thursday.

The Scottish seamers, most of them gallant amateurs, had done themselves credit in restricting Pakistan to 261 for six, despite a spate of wides, no

balls and 59 extras. They had also fielded with gusto.

But they had never seen anything like the 23-year-old from Rawalpindi.

Employing a 35-yard run-up reminiscent of his hero Waqar Younis, Akhtar caused instant panic. His first four overs earned him three wickets for six runs.

He clean bowled Michael Smith with a superb inswinger that smashed the off-ball into two, trapped Iain Philip leg-before with a toe-crushing yorker and had Salmond caught behind by Moin Khan with a ball that moved away.

Scotland were soon 19 for five and on their way to a 94-run defeat.

If Wasim Akram had continued with Akhtar after his initial six-over burst, Scotland might have been dismissed for less than the World Cup record low of 45, posted by Canada against England at Old Trafford in 1979.

Akram, however, perhaps in fairness to the outclassed Scots

or perhaps in fairness to his other bowlers, decided to ease up. The spinners, Saqlain Mushtaq and Shahid Afridi, were given an outing, as were the medium pacers.

Akram, the man of the match in the 1992 World Cup final, himself took three wickets. More impressive still, however, was his form with the bat. Against the West Indies, he had saved Pakistan with 42 runs off 28 balls. This time it was 37 off 19.

Yousuf Youhana, like Akhtar a member of the new emerging generation, also impressed with 81 not out. When he walked off, his delighted captain put an arm around his shoulders in congratulation.

Pakistan, with two consecutive wins, next take on Australia - who suffered a shock reverse to New Zealand on Thursday - at Headingley on May 23.

Steve Waugh's side are unlikely to struggle as much as the Scots but they will have a real battle on their hands to deal with Pakistan's new blood.

Beaming Black Caps

CARDIFF, May 20 (Reuters/Internet): Stephen Fleming however believes his New Zealand dark horses have declared their intentions and stepped into the World Cup spotlight.

The Kiwi skipper feels that his team's impressive five-wicket victory over Australia could be the turning point.

On three occasions in the last six tournaments New Zealand have got through to the semi-final stage, only to fall by the wayside as also-rans.

But this time out, under the captaincy of Fleming and the coaching skills of Steve Rixon, the Kiwis have a real chance of going all the way.

New Zealand are now level on points with Pakistan at the

head of Group B with two wins from two games, and their next match sees them up against an out-of-sorts West Indies at Southampton.

Fleming feels his side proved against Australia that they have the character and ability to upset the formbook this summer.

He said: "It is situations like this one where you are 49 for four and you come back and win, that's what makes a good side."

"You are seeing a team that's now hardening up so that day in and day out we are going to be competitive."

The Australian side has been well backed to lift the trophy themselves and Fleming knows they are no push over.

He said: "You can never think of an Australian side as vulnerable, when Australia are hot they are very hot, and when they're not they're still a very good side."

"You can never underestimate them because they've got such world class players throughout their team with bat and ball."

Match-winner Twose was also delighted to be able to put one over the Australians, who he feels treat New Zealand with disdain on occasions.

He said: "They're seen as bullies in one sense because of the way they try and suppress us."

"In their body language and their aggressive fields and with a few words they try to suppress

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New Zealand's Roger Twose drives through the covers during his match-winning 80 not out against Australia on May 20. — AFP photo