

DHAKA FRIDAY, JUNE 18, 1999 Email: dssports@bdonline.com

Man of the moment

OLD TRAFFORD, England, June 17 (AFP): Forget Sachin Tendulkar or Brian Lara, Pakistan's Saeed Anwar is the best batsman in the world in the eyes of his admiring World Cup captain Wasim Akram.

The left-hand opener justified his skipper's faith with two back-to-back centuries — 103 against Zimbabwe, which carried Pakistan into the semi-finals, and then an unbeaten 113 versus New Zealand, which lifted his side into the final.

"Saeed was brilliant," Akram said after Pakistan's nine-wicket romp in the semi-final here on Wednesday. "I have always said he is the best batsman in the world." Vanquished Kiwi skipper Stephen Fleming conceded: "If Anwar does not fire, you can put pressure on Pakistan."

Akram was so confident of Anwar's ability that he was actually delighted when the opener struggled at the start of the tournament with a top score of 28 in the first four matches.

"I'm glad Saeed isn't getting runs," Akram had said. "It will mean he will get runs in the Super Sixes ... we know there's more to come."

Akram, who has played for more than a decade for Lancashire in English county cricket, told Anwar not to chase the swinging ball in the early overs. The advice went down well.

His solid batting in the semi-final inspired young opening partner Wajahatullah Westi during a World Cup record opening stand of 194.

The pair looked good to overtake New Zealand's 241 for seven on their own when Westi, driving at Chris Cairns, skied the ball to Fleming at mid-off after making 84.

They overtook the 186 by South Africans Gary Kirsten and Andrew Hudson against Holland at Rawalpindi three years ago.

Anwar, however, stayed till the end to lead Pakistan into their second World Cup final.

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Australian opener Mark Waugh fails to play the ball on the on side against Shaun Pollock yesterday. —AFP photo

Wasim fears none

MANCHESTER, June 17 (AP/Reuters): A star of Pakistan's 1992 and only World Cup triumph, team captain Wasim Akram said he never thought he'd be playing in another final.

Now he's on the verge of realising his dream.

Wasim, 32, won the World Cup as a member of Imran Khan's champion side seven years ago but was on the fringe of quitting international cricket last year, pained by allegations of being hand in glove with bookmakers in fixing matches.

A strange twist of cricket politics six months ago brought him back to lead the Pakistan side for the third time. Entering the final after seven years of winning the World Cup again, "I never imagined that I'll be playing in another World Cup final," Wasim said after Pakistan crushed New Zealand by nine wickets in the semifinal at Old Trafford. "We are just a step away from winning the title and realising a dream."

"If we play to our potential,

which we are doing at the moment, winning the World Cup is not a distant dream anymore."

Pakistan's opponent in Sunday's final will be the winner of Thursday's Australia-South Africa semifinal at Edgbaston.

Wasim said he was not bothered by which opponents comes through to the final. Pakistan beat Australia in a preliminary group match but lost to South Africa in the Super Six clash.

"I don't mind any side through from the other semifinal," Wasim said. "We can tackle both of them. My boys want to think we are better."

"We'll obviously be looking at the other semifinal, but I don't want to predict who will win there. Anything can happen in cricket."

"Wasim said his players were now in peak form.

"Our side is full of talent and things are now falling into place," he said. "The opponents would be getting worried now that we've showed that we can chase fairly big targets. Chasing six runs an over against us is going to be difficult for any side."

Pakistan team's body language now conveys the confidence of going the full distance. We needed a boost in chasing targets and we've got that in the semifinal."

Wasim said winning the semifinal at Old Trafford was an emotional moment for him as he had recently finished his decade-long stint with Lancashire.

"This was perhaps my last game at Old Trafford and was an emotional moment. It's like my second home," he said.

The Pakistan skipper said his players were so charged up for the game against New Zealand that they could barely sleep last night.

"We just couldn't get enough sleep as all boys were charged up for the semifinal. Look at Shoaib (Akhtar), he couldn't get a wink," Wasim said. "The boys have already begun dreaming of the World Cup. It's not beyond us."

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