

Atherton warns of England gamble

LONDON, July 30 (Internet report): Michael Atherton has hinted England would be taking a major gamble if they handed him a third Test recall as he admitted he is yet to make a complete recovery from his long-standing back problems.

Atherton has been tipped not only for a return but also to captain the side if Nasser Hussain fails to recover from the fractured middle finger he sustained during the nine-wicket second Test defeat by New Zealand at Lord's.

Despite scoring a career-best 268 against Glamorgan a fortnight ago and an unbeaten 95 in Lancashire's National League victory over Hampshire, he admits he will need plenty more cricket before both he and the specialists are convinced his rehabilitation is complete.

"I was told by the chairman of selectors that I would have to play a lot of cricket and to have no reaction to my back problems before they would consider me again -- I thought that was fair enough," said Atherton.

"I've not heard anything different from him and at the moment I have only played two or three matches. But I have not suffered any reaction so far and I feel good about my form."

After making his comeback against Surrey at The Oval in June, Atherton was forced on to the sidelines again for a fortnight with a slight recurrence before making his return against Sri Lanka A.

But his recent form -- and his freedom of movement -- has convinced the former England captain he may be finally on the road to a complete recovery, having missed both the World Cup and the final Ashes Test at Sydney because of the complaint.

Atherton said: "All I've been concerned with is going out into the middle and batting without any fitness problems -- it's just been nice to play again without the pain and the possibility of going into spasms that the pain brings."

"We seem to have found the root of the problem -- basically it was an inflamed disc -- and hopefully I can go on from here enjoying my cricket."

"But there is a long way to go before I am absolutely sure of being free of injury problems. I'm fine at the moment, and that is all I can go on. I feel 100 per cent."

Australia's tour of Lanka on

SYDNEY, July 30: The Australian Cricket Board has no plans to cancel the upcoming tour of Sri Lanka despite a bomb blast in Colombo which killed one of the country's politicians on Thursday, reports AFP.

During the 1996 World Cup, Australian cricketers refused to play in Sri Lanka because of security fears after 100 people were killed when a bank building in Colombo was blown up.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Eelam (LTTE) were responsible for that attack and have also been blamed for Thursday's suicide blast, in which moderate Tamil politician Neelan Thiuruchelvan was killed.

However, ACB chief executive Malcolm Speed said he had been in contact with the Australian High Commission in Colombo and his counterparts on the Sri Lankan board and the tour, scheduled to begin next month, will go ahead.

Their advice is that we proceed subject to the usual security precautions," Speed told.

The current situation is quite different from the previous one and the advice we've had from the High Commission is the tour should go ahead."

Speed said the players selected for the tour were not concerned by the news of the bomb blast and accepted it as "part and parcel" of being a professional cricketer.

Australia's tour of Sri Lanka begins on August 22 with a triangular one-day tournament also involving India. The Australians will also play three test matches there in September and early October.

Miller ponders Victoria return

MELBOURNE, July 30: Australian cricket's versatile international bowler Colin Miller is considering a surprise return to play Sheffield Shield with Victoria where his career began, reports AFP.

Miller, who has been a revelation at Test level since breaking into the Australian team on the Pakistan tour last year, wants to return to Victoria where he began his first-class career in 1985 from Tasmania.

Victorian cricket operations manager Shaun Graf said Friday the Victorian Cricket Association had offered 34-year-old Miller the chance to play for the state after learning of his desire to return to Melbourne.

"We know he is definitely buying a house here but whether he returns this year or after that we're not sure," Graf said.

Cloud over Akram's career

KARACHI, July 30: Pakistan cricket captain Wasim Akram will remain excluded from the national team until he can prove his innocence of match-fixing charges, reports AFP.

Pakistan's new cricket boss said on Thursday there was no timeframe for how long Wasim, Salim Malik and Ijaz Ahmed would be kept out of the team or for how long the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) would be suspended.

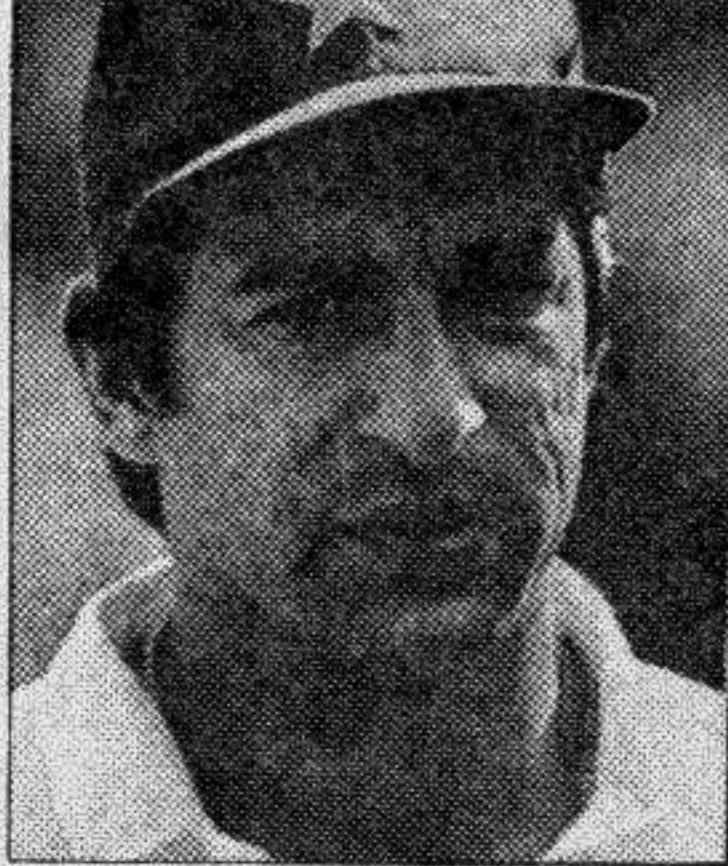
"It would be done when 'everything is sorted out' said Mujibur Rehman.

Rehman was appointed as the head of an ad hoc committee of the PCB after the board was suspended two weeks ago by President Rafiq Tarrar in the wake of Pakistan's humiliating World Cup final defeat to Australia. Tarrar is the patron of the PCB.

Akram, Pakistan's captain in the World Cup, former captain Malik and Ijaz were last Sunday barred from selection until the completion of a judicial probe into allegations of match-fixing, Rehman said that ban stood even though the

three, who deny the charges, have not been found guilty.

"I don't want any controversies on the team, so I told them 'until you are released or relaxed by the court I won't be



WASIM AKRAM considering you," he said.

A government-appointed judicial commission has been investigating corruption in Pakistan cricket since September.

No date has been set for the release of the commission's report.

Rehman said it was "too early to say" if there would be any penalties for the three, all of whom he has met this week.

"It was a very constructive meeting and he explained his point of view and he promised to cooperate," Rehman said of his meeting with Akram.

The Pakistan players' performances both on and off the pitch in the World Cup are also being investigated by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's accountability bureau which investigates corruption in Pakistan.

The bureau is run by Rehman's brother Saifur Rehman, but Mujibur Rehman said that was just a coincidence.

"What is the harm if he is doing an excellent job there and he is looking into this affair. If there is a coincidence I am chief of cricket, we are professionals," he said.

Rehman also said Pakistan was ready to compete against India in Toronto in September, and was just waiting to hear what the Indian cricket board decides at a meeting expected to be held next week.

PCB chief's caution

KARACHI, July 30: Pakistan's new cricket boss Thursday warned more cricketers could face suspension if the ongoing judicial probe on betting and match-fixing allegations implicated them, reports AFP.

"If anybody else is found involved he will not be spared. We want the game of cricket clear from the match-fixing disease," Mujibur Rehman, chairman of the ad hoc committee of the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB), told reporters.

The committee last week suspended skipper Wasim Akram, and star batsmen Salim Malik and Ijaz Ahmed.

The match-fixing and betting allegations had damaged national cricket like 'gangrene,' he said.

The one-man enquiry commission headed by Lahore High Court Judge Malik Mohammad Quayum is expected to submit its report to Pakistan President Muhammad Rafiq Tarrar, who is a patron of the cricket board, next month.

It is upto the judicial commission to decide but we will appeal to the commission to expedite the matter so we know

which players are available for selection," Rehman said.

Akram, Malik and Ijaz have been barred from playing in the national team until they prove



MUJIBUR REHMAN

their innocence.

The ad hoc committee suspended them after the government's anti-corruption bureau framed charges of match-fixing and betting against them.

They were implicated in match-fixing by a Pakistan Cricket Board probe committee in September 1998.

The committee also described teammates Waqar Younis, Moin Khan, Mushtaq Ahmed, Inzamam-ul-Haq and Saqlain Mushtaq as "benefactors in match fixing."

The anti-corruption bureau continued interrogating the suspended players on Thursday.

Rehman said the committee was ready to face any legal challenge against the suspension orders.

"I have done a fair deal because the evidence was against them," he said.

"We have not insulted any player," he said but warned that "no one is above discipline."

The ad hoc committee chairman, who last week held meetings with all 15 players who represented Pakistan in the World Cup, said: "I have the team in my mind."

He said the selection committee and new captain will be announced next week.

Give youth a chance

LONDON, July 30 (Internet report): A gut feeling, Nasser Hussain called it, the instinct about whether a young player has the ability to cut it at Test level.

When the selectors tomorrow thrash out the squad for the third Test the futures of Chris Read and Aftab Habib will be determined largely by gut feelings. And, on the evidence of the past decade, no one should be confident that they will get it right.

England selectors examining their gut feelings generally discover nothing more than a case of irritable-bowel syndrome, with the prime symptoms being stressful expressions and an undesirable amount of hot air.

County cricket, a breeding ground for young players, makes identification of the most talented players an onerous task. The fact that 66 players still involved in the county game have won Test caps and that 36 of them have played fewer than 10 Tests indicates the entrenched failures of successive selection panels.

Hussain is proving himself an intelligent captain, willingly debating issues in an astute and open manner that does him enormous credit. Everybody knows that Read and Habib will come under scrutiny. The skipper had the decency to admit it.

"It is a very difficult issue," he said. "The country is crying out for young players. The balance between giving them a long run and the cry for instant success by beating New Zealand is the area that will

take up most time in the next selection meeting. Do we stick with youth and persevere or do we have a gut feeling that they are not quite right?"

Read, the contention goes, has proved fallible when standing up to Phil Tufnell. What did they expect? That much was evident on the turning pitches of Sri Lanka on his maiden England A tour two winters ago, a tour managed by two current selectors, Graham Gooch and Mike Gatting.

As Read's county, Nottinghamshire, do not possess a spinner worthy of the name, that will only improve if he is given a long run by England. The gut feeling a month ago was that the 20-year-old, a nimble,

gifted keeper of composed temperament, would make the grade. This was a player whose perfectly decent

ambitions caused him to leave Gloucestershire and suffer a horrible character assassination in the process.

Good on him. What can possibly have changed?



NASSER HUSSAIN

The second argument is that he is a Test No 9 at best, not a Test No 7. His dismissal in the first innings at Lord's, when he ducked Chris Cairns' slower ball in the belief that it was a yorker which shattered his stumps, was described as "an embarrassment" by the former England coach David Lloyd.

But this should change nothing. The selectors surely know at the start of the series that Read was not yet a No 7 but they conveniently picked him there because it was the only way they

could balance the side. His second-innings resistance at Lord's at least revealed a willingness to take on the job. As for Cairns' slower ball, it ranks comparisons with the best.

To abandon Read because of the persistent under-achievement of England's top six would be to make him a seagat.

For Stewart to keep wicket might well better balance the side (if not offer Tufnell a better keeper standing up), but then the mention of Stewart's precise role is designed to cause the selectors to grab the Alka Seltzer.

Habib's prospects are perhaps lower than those of Read. Bowled through the gate -- and a farm gate, at that -- in his first two Test innings, a technical deficiency seems to have revealed itself.

His body language at the crease has also been discouraging. There has been a lack of purpose, an inability to fashion a response. Now the suggestion is that those discovered at 27 have left it too late. If Habib has failed, so have the more experienced top five. Nevertheless, that something is lacking in him is a feeling that is hard to resist.

Duncan Fletcher, England's coach-in-waiting, is one who would keep faith. "If you give them a fair crack of the whip not only do they get a boost, but the next young guy will feel confident about getting a long run."

Continuity. It is expected to underpin Fletcher's regime. It is a talent that England selectors of all whims and prejudices have lacked for years. Few expect them to start tomorrow.



Stephen Perrot of France during the course of his European record breaking 200 metres breast-stroke final in the European Swimming Championships at Istanbul on July 29.

Pakistan could skip Sharjah event

KARACHI, July 30 (The Dawn/Internet): The ad hoc committee of the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) is contemplating pulling out its team from October's Sharjah Champions' Trophy, informed sources said.

The Sharjah contest, to be played between October 13 to 22, will also be contested by former world champions Sri Lanka and the West Indies.

According to an agreement between Pakistan and the Cricketers Benefit Fund Series (CBFS), the team is bound to tour Sharjah at least once each year till 2000.

But the ad hoc committee has objected to the CBFS's decision to pay Pakistan a token money from the television rights it has signed with TransWorld International (TWI).

"The CBFS has signed a 25 million dollars contract with TWI. But is paying just 225,000 dollars to Pakistan which is peanuts. We strongly object to this rational and are seriously considering to pull-out from the Sharjah tournament in protest," a top ad hoc committee official stated.

The official added that he would also be discussing the issue with the Indian cricket board officials and would seek their help. India will also be getting the same money.

The official, requesting not to be identified, added that the players have also lodged a serious complaint against the attitude of the CBFS officials.

The official said the players have reported that they have received cold-shoulder treatment on several occasions as they have not received things according to their entitlement.

He added that Pakistan cricket team was not a second-class team. He said the team was the second best in the world and the cricket board knew how to safeguard the interest of its players and reputation of the institution.

Asked if Pakistan withdraw from the Sharjah contest, the board can be taken to court for breach of contract, the official replied: "I don't care. We will fight the case in the court of law and even if we have to pay the damage, we will pay them but will not allow anyone to toy with us."

Leics 104/7 at lunch

LEICESTER, July 30: Leicesters were 104 for seven at lunch on the opening day of a four-day tour match against New Zealand on Friday, reports Reuters.

SCOREBOARD

LEICESTERSHIRE: First Innings
V Wells lbw b Allott 4
D Maddy c McMillan b O'Connor 16
I Sutcliffe lbw b Penn 18
B Smith c Croy b Penn 17
A Habib b Penn 5
D Stevens c Vettori b Penn 10
+P Nixon not out 19
J Dakin c Asle b O'Connor 10
S Boswell not out 8
Extras: (b-3, lb-5, nb-8) 16
Total: (7 wickets, 30 overs) 104
To bat: J Ormond, M Brimston

Fall of wickets: 1-4: 2-18; 3-49; 4-64; 5-64; 6-73; 7-90.

Bowler O M R W
Allott 8 2 26 1
O'Connor 11 2 23 2
Penn 9 2 41 4
Vettori 2 1 6 0

NEW ZEALAND

M Bell, *S Fleming, C McMillan, N Asle, C Harris, D Vettori, +M Croy, B Walker, A Penn, S O'Connor, G Allott.

Ronaldo's noble gesture

RIO DE JANEIRO, July 30: Brazilian international striker Ronaldo is to help provide sporting facilities for poverty-stricken youths in the shanty towns of Rio de Janeiro, reports AFP.

The Inter Milan player has announced he plans to finance the construction of sporting centres in three "favelas."

"I am realising the dreams of my childhood and it is great to be able to do something to help poor children," Ronaldo said.

The proposed facilities will include football pitches, swimming pools, gymnastics equipment and gym facilities.



Palencia of Mexico (R) executing a sliding tackle on Bolivia's Oscar Sanchez during their Confederations' Cup encounter on July 29.

Saudis turn on the style



MEXICO 1999

MEXICO CITY, July 30: Mexico a 1-0 victory over Bolivia here Thursday, advancing the hosts and Saudi Arabia into the FIFA Confederations Cup semi-finals, reports AFP.

Marzouk Al Otaibi scored four goals to spark Saudi Arabia past Egypt 5-1 in the other first-round match that completed Group A play.

The other berths in Sunday's semi-finals will be decided Friday in Guadalajara when unbeaten Brazil plays winless New Zealand and Germany faces the United States to complete Group B action.

SAUDI ARABIA-EGYPT
Al Otaibi scored in the seventh, 33rd, 77th and 84th minutes. The other Saudi goal came from Ibrahim Al Harbi in the 68th minute.

Egypt, which finished with only eight players, averted a shutout with Samir Ibrahim's goal in the 71st minute.

Egypt was trailing 1-0 when Abdesattar Sabry was expelled in the 10th minute. Hazem Enam followed him off in the 37th minute and goal-scorer Ibrahim was sent off in the 79th minute.

MEXICO-BOLIVIA

Mexico edged Bolivia to

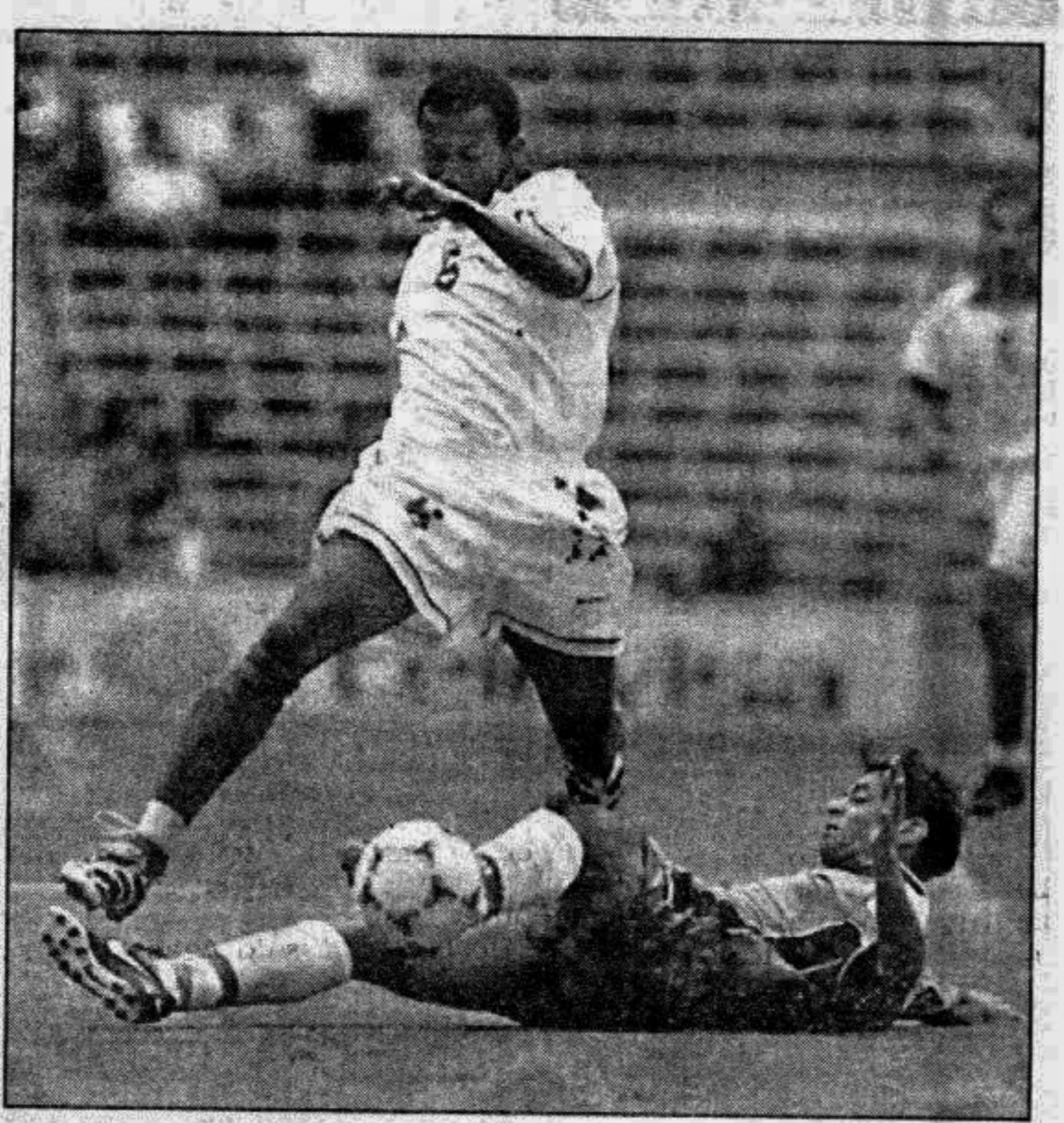
make sure of top spot in Group A of the Confederations Cup here.

More than 60,000 fans in the Aztec Stadium saw Francisco Palencia score the only goal with a header in the 51st minute and ensure Mexico will face either Germany or the

United States in the semi-finals.

STANDINGS

	M	W	D	L	G	A	Pts
Mexico	3	2	1	0	8	3	7
Saudi Arabia	3	1	1	1	6	4	4
Bolivia	3	0	2	1	3	2	2
Egypt	3	0	2	1	5	9	2



Saudi player Ibrahim Al-Harbi (L) skips past the sliding tackle of an Egyptian player in their Confederations' Cup encounter on July 29.

For a new look Serie A

MILAN, July 30: Italy needs more football on television and less violence at the stadium, league boss Franco Carraro claimed here on Friday, reports AFP.

Carraro launched two attacks as he unveiled the new Serie A fixture list, one on the critics of weekend-long football and the other on Italy's heel-dragging parliament.

The Italian tradition of playing football on a Sunday comes to an end this season, when at least two matches will be scheduled every Saturday (afternoon and evening) for the purposes of pay-TV.

As before, clubs involved in European cup competition the following Tuesday or Wednesday will also be allowed to play on a Saturday.

The schedule, which includes a pay-TV match on Sunday night, has not been universally welcomed, even in soccer-mad Italy. Critics claim there is too much football on TV and too little family time.

But Carraro dismissed the objections, saying that Italy had to follow the likes of the English Premiership.

"Our market research showed that the average Italian is not averse to bringing forward matches (to Saturday)," Carraro said.

"I've been in football since the 1960s and every year there's been something new - followed by nostalgia for the past and accusations that football is reaching the point of exasperation."

"And every year, there has been a positive evolution of things. Now we have set out the immediate future of football with a more European outlook."

"In Spain, England and Sweden, teams play over the weekend. In Italy, they don't. But Europe is changing."

"We are faced with a new and broader society, yet people here still want to reject things that other countries have been doing for years."

However, Carraro rapped the national parliament for failing to get to grips with a bill put forward in February 1998 to help police clamp down on hooliganism.

"It allowed for the immediate arrest and trial of violent fans, but it hasn't been passed, despite two parliamentary sessions," he said.

"As a result, we are forced to start the new season with laws which are insufficient."

Italy, meanwhile, plans two other novelties for next season - one concerning T-shirts and the other celebrations.

The T-shirt controversy started when AS Roma's Francesco Totti scored a goal against Lazio in last season's derby and unveiled the slogan: "Vi Ho Purgato Ancora" ("I've purged/had you again"). Not only did it enrage the Lazio fans and spark the widespread manufacture of copies, it also led to other players sending messages in the following weeks.

Personal friends, fans and even God were thanked on goalkeepers T-shirts, a practice which officials will now try to stamp out with fines.

Meanwhile, Italy has asked FIFA if it can fine rather than book goalkeepers who run to celebrate in front of the fans, wasting time.

Critics point out that players in Turin and Rome, whose pitches are surrounded by an athletics track, have further to run and are therefore more likely to get booked.

Kovacs chases gold trail

ISTANBUL, July 30 (Reuters): World champion Agnes Kovacs, one Istanbul gold safely gathered in, eyed two more on Friday as she set the pace in the 200 metres breaststroke heats at the European Swimming Championships.

Kovacs, who turned 18 this month, faced a busy evening at the Atakoy Olympic pool, swimming first the 200 breaststroke semifinals and then the final of the 50 breaststroke, one of the six new sprint events added to the European programme this year.

Kovacs won her first two European titles in the 100 and 200 breaststroke at the last edition of the Championships in Seville in 1997, having pulled off an Olympic bronze in the 200 at only 15 years of age. But this time the target is a golden treble.

She retained her 100 title on Wednesday with plenty to spare, touching more than half a second ahead of Ukraine's Svitlana Bondarenko, who has now carried an unprecedented silver medal streak through five European Championships.

Kovacs, who won the 200 breaststroke title at the 1998 Perth World Championships, looked likely to dominate the four-length event again here after swimming well within herself to lead the 16 qualifiers for the evening's semifinals in two minutes 32.27 seconds.

Romania's Beatrice Caslaru, silver medalist in both the 200 and 400 metres individual medley, chased the Hungarian home in 2:32.54, while young Russian Ekaterina Kormacheva beat Polish veteran Alicja Peczek in the preceding heat in what turned out to be the third-best aggregate time of 2:32.66. The final is on Saturday.

But Kovacs looked to have her work cut out in Friday's 50 breaststroke final after Britain's Zoe Baker broke her own European record with a time of 31.43 seconds in Thursday's semifinals. The Hungarian won her semifinal in 31.89 and nobody else broke 32 seconds.

Britain's James Hickman, beaten into fourth place in Thursday's 200 metres butterfly final, continued his quest for an elusive European long-course medal in determined fashion by setting the fastest heat time in the 100 metres butterfly.

Hickman, who has won world and European short-course titles, ripped home in 53.08 seconds, with defending champion Lars Frolander of Sweden, the world short-course champion, second - quickest overall in 53.27.

France's Eposito of France and Denys Sylantyev of Ukraine, gold and silver medalists in Thursday's 200 butterfly, also qualified comfortably for the evening's semifinals.

Ralf Braun, World Championship silver medalist, led the way to the semifinals of the men's 200 metres backstroke in 2:00.68 ahead of Croatia's Goran Kozulj, silver medalist in Tuesday's 100 backstroke final, who clocked 2:01.32.