

Nikki goes to Hollywood

SYDNEY, Oct 3: The teenage star of the Sydney Olympics opening and closing ceremonies, Nikki Webster, has signed a contract for a major role in a Hollywood children's film, an Australian newspaper said today, reports Reuters.

The Daily Telegraph said 13-year-old Webster, whose cute face and blonde curls charmed a worldwide audience, would star in the movie "Vanilla Corolla" to be filmed in South Africa in February.

The film is about an albino gorilla in captivity which uses sign language to communicate his plight to a young girl who befriends him. It is to be directed by Randal Kleiser, who was behind the movies "Grease" and "Honey, I Blew Up The Kids".

Nikki's manager Lisa Hamilton said the call from Hollywood came almost immediately after the opening ceremony was broadcast in the United States.

"They sent the script out immediately. I read it and Nikki read it and she absolutely loved it," Hamilton told The Daily Telegraph tabloid newspaper.

Webster first performed on stage at the age of five. She sang a duet with Michael Jackson during his 1996 Australian tour and has starred in Australian stage musicals "Les Miserables" and "The Sound of Music".

She is also planning to release a CD of her Olympic songs "Under Southern Skies" from the opening ceremony, and "We'll Be One" used in the closing festivities.

Greetings from the Queen

SYDNEY, Oct 3: Britain's Queen Elizabeth today sent her congratulations to all involved in staging the Sydney Olympic Games, which have been judged the greatest ever, reports AFP.

"Please convey my congratulations to all those who worked so hard at the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, not only the organisers, but all those who participated and ensured the event's resounding success," she said in a message to Governor General Sir William Deane.

"The result was a tribute to all that is best in Australia."

Prime Minister John Howard decided that Deane should open the Games rather than the Queen who, as Australia's head of state, should by convention have performed the ceremonial opening.

But the decision was made prior to the constitutional referendum last November when Australia appeared likely to vote in favour of replacing the queen with an Australian as its head of state.

An invitation to the Queen to perform the opening would have been seen as a highly controversial and provocative move.

Teen queens renew ties

FILDERSTADT, Germany, Oct 3: Martina Hingis and Anna Kournikova have renewed the partnership that last year took them to five titles, including the Australian Open and Chase Championships, and the final of the French Open, reports Reuters.

They beat Nicole Arendt and Manon Bollegraf 6-3, 6-2 in the first round of the \$35,000-dollar WTA Grand Prix on Monday, and announced themselves delighted that they had combined so well again so quickly.

"For our first match it was not bad," said Hingis.

"We played very well together before so we had no fear to go into it again. We know each other well and just had to find the feel again. Sometimes it freshens you up as a team when you haven't played for a while."

Neither Hingis or Kournikova harboured any regrets about their decision not to play in the Olympics. Kournikova spent a few days in Moscow, and then played in Luxembourg. Hingis relaxed and became a tourist in the Czech Republic.

"I was tired after the US Open and needed that break," said Hingis.

"It was a very good decision not to play. I spent a few days in the Czech Republic and was like a tourist in Prague for a couple of days. I also went to some soccer games and saw Arsenal against Sparta," and back home I saw Chelsea."

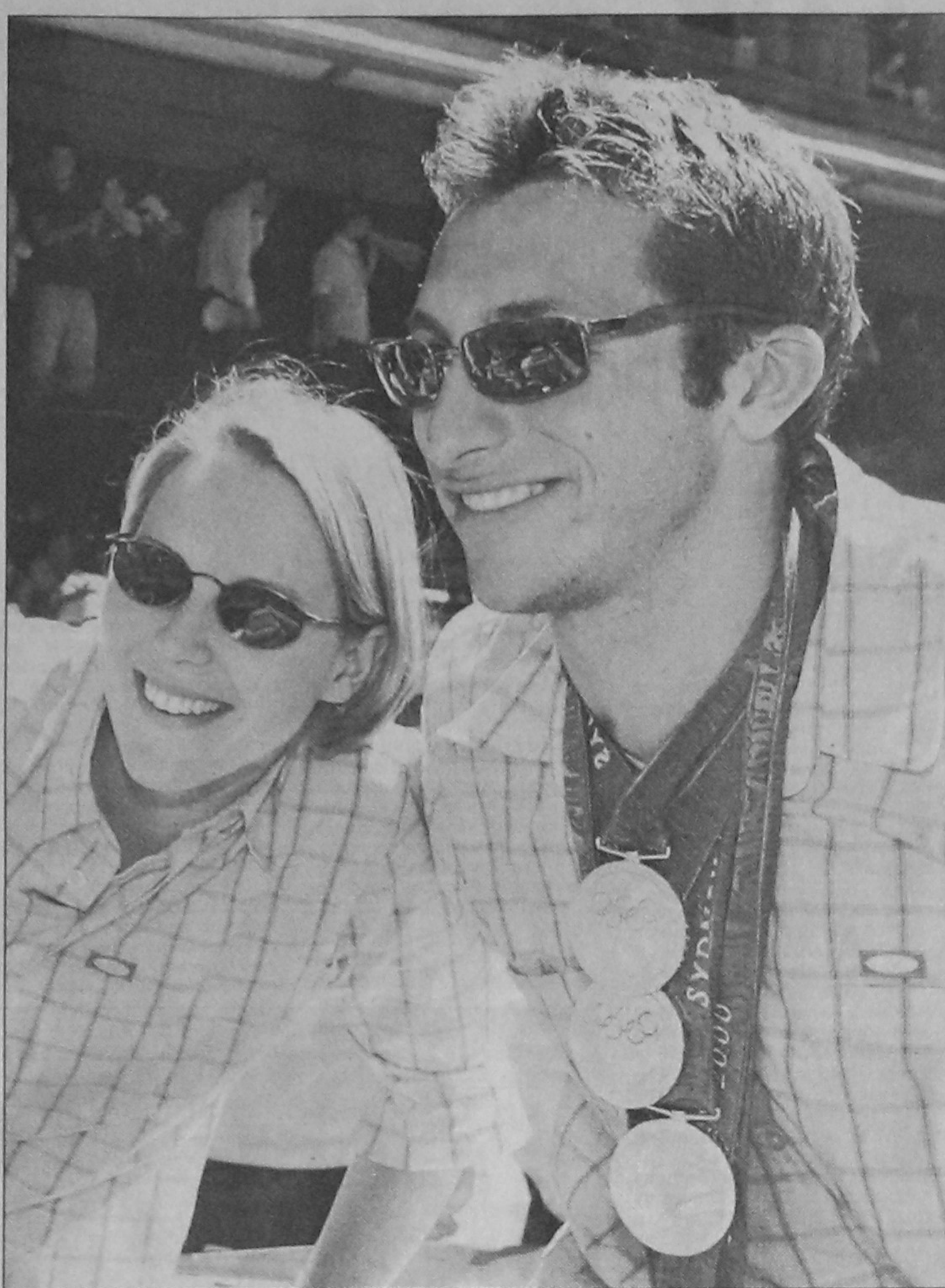
In singles play, fifth seed Amanda Coetzer was the only seed in action on the opening day.

She breezed past Croatia's Silvija Talaja 6-4, 6-0, and Patty Schnyder of Switzerland defeated Romania's Ruxandra Dragomir 6-3, 6-4. In the only other match, Zimbabwe's Cara Black claimed a 7-5, 6-1 victory over Barbara Schett of Austria.

Black made a good start in the opening game and then racing to a 5-2 lead. But she allowed the Australian into the match and to level at 5-5. Black, though, reassured herself and broke to lead 6-5 and then served out for the set.

In the second set, Black swept the first four games and this time stayed on top of her discouraged opponent.

"But I was happy with my ground stroke today. They really felt solid. I think I could have got to the net a little more, but I was just feeling so good at the back. It was a good match to win confidence-wise because I'm a little tired now at the end of the year."



COOL AUSSIES! Sensational swimmers Ian Thorpe (R) and Susie O'Neill smile during the ticker-tape parade to honour Australia's Olympic team in Sydney yesterday. — AFP photo

Sydneysiders salute 'em

SYDNEY, Oct 3 (AP/AF): Don't Stop!

After seven years of preparations and then two weeks of action-packed Olympic competition and partying, it seems Sydneysiders can't let go of the Olympics.

Two days after the 2000 Olympics concluded with a bang in a massive fireworks display on Sydney Harbour, hundreds of thousands of spectators lined city streets Tuesday from the landmark Opera House to Sydney's town hall to cheer the Australian team on a victory parade.

Before presenting the key to the city to the Olympic team, Sydney Lord Mayor Frank Sartor heaped praise on the Olympics and the Olympians.

"It was Australia's best ever performance, in the best ever Olympics and in the greatest city in the world," he said.

Australia, a sports-loving nation of about 19 million people, placed fourth on the medal tally with 58 medals, including 16 gold.

Almost 48 hours after the closing ceremony, the athletes were still basking in glory. And the plan is for the party to continue with similar parades in the inter-state capitals of Melbourne and Brisbane.

On a perfect Spring afternoon, the Australian team marched or rode on the back of cars through city center as a flag-waving crowd crammed into every vantage to get a glimpse.

The parade was televised live

on TV for those who couldn't make it.

Almost 600 athletes and hundreds of officials filed through in the alphabetical order of their sports, with archery gold medalist Simon Fairweather in the leading car.

Some of the biggest cheers rang out for swim star Ian Thorpe, who was a 13-year-old hopeful standing behind the barricades during the reception for Australia's Atlanta Olympians four years ago.

"I guess things have changed," he told reporters as he sat in an open-topped car, proudly wearing his three gold and one silver medal.

"It's amazing to see how many people have all come out to give their congratulations to the Australian Olympic team."

Australia's Olympic Committee president John Coates, who was also a key member of the Sydney organising committee, sat between track stars Cathy Freeman and pole-vaulter Tatiana Grigoreva in another car.

Freeman was among the most relieved athletes on the team after taking gold in the women's 400 metres to cap a memorable Olympics for her.

A proud Aborigine, Freeman lit the Olympic cauldron at the opening ceremony in a gesture of reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians.

"I'm so proud... I'm so relieved, you guys are heavy," said Freeman, explaining that she was happy to no longer have the hopes of the host nation riding on her shoulders.

"This has given me memories that I'll treasure forever," she added.

Freeman was judged by her Australian peers as the most popular female athlete at the Sydney Games.

In a tribute to Australia's new queen of the track, New South Wales state premier Bob Carr, whose government bankrolled the Olympics, dropped to one knee as he kissed Freeman's hand before she spoke to the crowd.

Australian team captain Andrew Gaze, who has represented Australia at basketball in five Olympics, accepted a symbolic key to the city — Sydney's highest civic honour — from Sartor.

Australia's newspapers were still full Tuesday of Olympic news and pictures of celebrating Australians.

Photos of Prime Minister John Howard "crowd surfing" at the athletes' party Monday night were splashed across the front page of Tuesday's Australian newspaper.

In bold letters above photos of Freeman, Grigoreva, swimmer Ian Thorpe and long jumper Jai Taurima, the Sydney Morning Herald carried the headline: "Thanks for the Memories."

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Organisers snubbed

SYDNEY, Oct 3: The man behind the planning of Olympic Games hailed as the best ever staged has been denied the IOC's top honour on the orders of Olympics Minister Michael Knight. It was reported here today, says AFP.

Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games (SOCOG) chief executive Sandy Holloway received the silver Olympic Order instead of the gold after Knight intervened personally to block the top honour.

Cutting IOC sources, the Sydney Morning Herald said Knight had told International Olympic Committee (IOC) president Juan Antonio Samaranch he would not accept an honour himself if the IOC granted Holloway its highest award.

The man responsible for the opening and closing ceremonies, Ric Birch, who has also won international praise for brilliant planning and choreography, received nothing.

Birch, who was known to have had a poor working relationship with Knight, was reported last week to have said he "didn't give a damn about Knight".

The slight to Holloway and Birch is seen here as reminiscent of the backbiting and scandal that pervaded the organisational team before the games started on September 15, but which appeared to have been wiped away by the success of the games.

Holloway had been progressively sidelined by Knight, who in the last month before the Games appointed the head of the Olympic Coordinating Authority, David Richmond, as SOCOG director general over Holloway.

Then on the day of the opening ceremony Holloway was told there was no place for him in the prestigious seating known as the tribune of honour, although Richmond and his wife were there with Knight.

Richmond received the gold Olympic Order at a breakfast attended by several hundred Olympic staff and volunteers at which IOC officials paid tribute to the Sydney Games, which Samaranch on Sunday described as the best ever.

Birch, the Australian-born maestro of ceremonies who also planned the opening and closing ceremonies at the Atlanta games, described Richmond last week as "a public servant obsessed with process".

Anita DeFranz, one of the IOC's four vice presidents who sit on the IOC's ruling executive board, confirmed to ABC radio on Tuesday that someone had blocked their unanimous wish to give Holloway the gold award.

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Samaranch points to Athens

SYDNEY, Oct 3: Within hours of hailing the Sydney Games as the best ever, IOC president Juan Antonio Samaranch put Athens on notice to speed up preparations for the 2004 Summer Olympics.

Samaranch said the Greek government needs to do more to overcome three years of chronic delays in construction of venues and other projects.

"I think with the new organising committee things are going much better," he said in an interview Monday with The Associated Press.

But we need another step forward. The cooperation of the government must be much more important. The government must be more involved in the Games."

Samaranch warned earlier this year that the Athens Games were in danger because of the delays. Since then, Gianna Angelopoulos-Daskalaki, who led the Athens bid, was brought back to run the organising committee, and Premier Costas Simitis has assumed government control over the Games.

But Samaranch said Athens should go a step further and follow the model of Sydney, where the head of the organising committee was also a government minister.

Angelopoulos-Daskalaki has complained the government has not done enough to cut through red tape and must work faster. Greece's public sector is notorious for its lack of organisation and slow pace in completing construction works.

"A huge work like the organisation and carrying out of the Olympic Games cannot be done at the pace of the Greek public sector," Angelopoulos-Daskalaki told the Greek daily newspaper Ethnos.

Government spokesman Dimitris Reppas on Monday denied rumours the flamboyant head of the Athens Organising Committee had threatened to resign because she was frustrated with bureaucracy.

The morning after the flame was extinguished in Sydney, Samaranch took a few moments to reflect on the emotions he felt closing his 10th and last Games as head of the International Olympic Committee.

"I wasn't sad, but I was emotional," he said. "I had 20 years behind me as president of the IOC. I was thinking I was very lucky. I was very lucky the last games were the best games ever in Olympic history."

The 80-year-old Spaniard still has 9½ months to go before he hands over to his successor at the IOC session in Moscow in July.

"Until the last day until the last minute, I will work as the full president, executive president," he said.

Samaranch said he expects there will be a maximum of three candidates.

The two top contenders are considered to be Jacques Rogge, the IOC executive from Belgium who oversaw the Sydney Games, and Canada's Dick Pound, who negotiates Olympic television rights and heads the World Anti-Doping Agency.

Other possible candidates include Australian IOC vice president Kevan Gosper and South Korean executive board member Kim Un-yong.

Samaranch had disappointed Atlanta in 1996 when he described the Centennial games only as "most exceptional." But he gave Sydney and Australia the ultimate accolade at Sunday night's closing ceremony.

"These are my last Games as IOC president," he said. "They could not have been better. Therefore, I am proud and happy to proclaim that you have presented to the world the best Olympic Games ever."

Samaranch said Sydney met the two main conditions he always sets for the success of the Games: superior organisation and great performances by

the home team. Australia won a national record 58 medals.

"It's incredible, the fourth country in the medal table, a country of 19 million people," he said. "I think it's something that helped a lot the success of the Games."

At the opening ceremony two weeks ago, Samaranch received a call advising him that his wife of 45 years, Maria Teresa, was gravely ill in Barcelona, Spain. He flew home the next morning, but she died before he arrived.

Samaranch returned to Sydney a few days later for the remainder of the Games, all the while keeping his emotions to himself.

"It's very personal for me," he said Monday. "If I have to cry, I cry."

These Games were crucial for Samaranch and the IOC to rub off the lingering stains caused by the bribery scandal centering on Salt Lake City's bid for the 2002 Winter Games. Ten IOC members were ousted for receiving cash, gifts and other favors.

He cited the induction of eight athletes as IOC members, including Ukrainian pole-vaulter Sergiy Bubka's election to the ruling executive board, as a defining moment in the IOC's reform process.

"It means the reforms of the IOC are not only words, they are facts," Samaranch said.

Malik pleads with Gen Zia

KARACHI, Oct 3 (Internet report): Disgraced former Pakistan captain Salim Malik has appealed to Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) chief Tauqir Zia to reverse the life-ban he received for his suspected involvement in match-fixing.

According to Karachi-based newspaper Dawn sources Malik met General Zia after failing to satisfy the PCB's show cause notice for the second time.

Malik is also concerned that his ban will prevent him from turning out for his side Habib Bank who appear to be threatening disciplinary action against their captain if he is unable to play.

Malik was also believed to have pointed out to Zia that the games and series in which match-fixing supposedly took place were in fact won by Pakistan. However, he left the meeting without the assurances he was looking for as General Zia merely advised him to make his reply to the show cause notice more specific.

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