

500 on Murali's mind

DURBAN, South Africa, Dec 31. Sri Lankan offspinner Murali Muralitharan took his 500th Test Saturday...

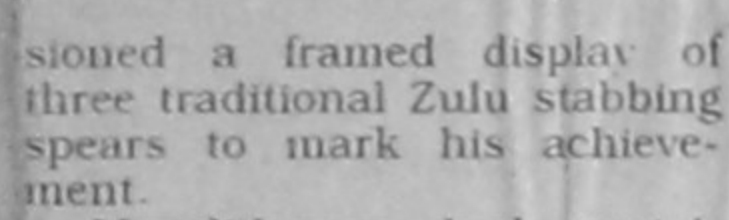
Muralitharan took six for 39 in ten overs as South Africa went for their shots before declaring on the final day.

He reached 300 wickets when his fourth victim, South African captain Shaun Pollock, was given out caught at silly point.

Muralitharan, 28, said: 'We are playing a lot of Test cricket nowadays. If I can play for another five or six years I can reach 500.'

Lakshman Kirielia, the Sri Lankan minister of tourism and sport, made a presentation to Muralitharan during the tea break.

MURALITHARAN



tioned a framed display of three traditional Zulu stabbing spears to mark his achievement.

Muralitharan had match figures of 11 for 161 to take his total of Test wickets to 302.

He said: 'I did not expect to do it here. I thought I would do it in the second Test in Cape Town.'

The world record of 492 is held by Courtney Walsh of the West Indies.

Muralitharan reached the milestone in the second lowest number of matches in history. He was playing in his 58th Test.

Muralitharan is the 17th player to achieve the feat. The bowler was mobbed by his teammates as umpire Riazuddin's finger went up to signal that Pollock was out.

Muralitharan has been Sri Lanka's star bowler since making his debut against Australia in Colombo in 1992/93. No other Sri Lankan bowler has yet reached 150 Test wickets.

The spin bowler, who achieves prodigious turn on almost any surface because of his freak ability to rotate his wrist, went on to claim his fifth wicket of the innings when Irfan Pathan was caught at mid-on.

It was his 24th five-wicket haul and completed his fifth bag of ten wickets in a match. Muralitharan's best figures of nine for 65 against England at the Oval in 1998 were the eighth best figures in Test history and his match figures of 16 for 220 in the same Test were the fifth best.

Muralitharan has also claimed the best figures in one-day internationals, seven for 30 against India in Sharjah earlier this year. He has taken 211 one-day international wickets.

Lizarazu opens stadium named to him. HENDAYE, France, Dec 31: French international defender Bixente Lizarazu, the subject of an extortion attempt by Basque separatists, inaugurated a stadium named after him in the French Basque country on Saturday, reports AFP.

Last Test starts tomorrow Windies await whitewash



SYDNEY, Dec 31: Just four days after one of their heaviest defeats, the beleaguered West Indies back up for more against Australia here Tuesday trying to avoid being marked down as the Caribbean's worst-ever team, reports AFP.

The West Indies, who have never before suffered a 5-0 pounding by Australia, have five days at the Sydney Cricket Ground to fight off the ignominy of a series whitewash.

The odds do not look good. Steve Waugh's champion Australian team crushed them by 352 runs in the fourth Melbourne Test last Friday to lead the series 4-0. Their match-winning streak stands at a record 14 Tests.

The humiliation down under has come on the back of the West Indies' series defeat to England in the northern hemisphere summer, their first in 31 years.

Skipper Jimmy Adams can only shuffle the squad of players at his disposal to come up with a combination that won't readily show the mental scars so prevalent through this one-sided series.

Fast bowler Mervyn Dillon is one who won't be there as he is having ankle surgery on Tuesday, opening the way for the return of Marlon Black, dropped for the Melbourne Test, or possibly the first use of legspinner Mahendra Nagamootoo.

'It's not going to be easy, but it's something we have to face and we have to try to deal with it,' Adams said. 'I can't speak for everybody in the team, but what I will say

is that this (playing Australia in Australia) is the biggest challenge in international cricket. 'I think as a player, this is what you should want, to be tested to the limit,' said Adams.

Steve Waugh knows he's got the beleaguered West Indies where he wants them with their second innings demise for 109 in Melbourne having a feeling of inevitability about it.

'Mentally we've got it over the West Indies at the moment but we're still playing really good cricket,' Waugh said. 'Our challenge is to keep ourselves going. We just really enjoy being out there and playing Test match cricket and to win 14 in a row is a great thing.'

'You can say what you want about the quality of the opposition but we want to be the best we can. That's why we play cricket.'

One bright spot for the tourists, for whom senior batsmen, Brian Lara (except for his 182 in the Adelaide Test), Sherwin Campbell and Adams, have been rank failures, is the emergence of 19-year-old Jamaican right-hander Marlon Samuels, who will be making only his third Test appearance in Sydney.

Samuels, playing without the scars of continual Test failure, showed the way for the future with his refreshing 46 in the second innings at the MCG. That followed his unbeaten 60 in the first innings in only his second Test since being summoned from Jamaica as an injury replacement for Shivnarine Chanderpaul early this month.

Samuels revealed his positive attitude when he said after the Melbourne Test: 'Test

cricket is difficult, right now it's not. 'It hasn't affected me in any way because I'm positive in everything that I'm doing. 'I've learned that I have to be focused on every ball at Test level.'

The Sydney Test also offers Australian legspinner Stuart MacGill the opportunity to hammer down his Test place before the return of Shane Warne.

MacGill has to perform against the West Indies to prove he can't be left behind when the Australian squad heads to the turning wickets of India on February 13.

Selectors haven't yet decided whether to take two or three spinners to India but offspinner Colin Miller appears the only certain selection at this stage following his outstanding season.

That could leave MacGill and Warne in a race for selection, with Warne, Australia's greatest Test wicket-taker, set to return to state cricket with Victoria on Tuesday after recovering from a broken finger which has kept him out of the current series.

'Someone like John Crawley, who has been on five A tours, will be desperate to get back in but some of the youngsters as well have huge ambitions to do well.'

'To go to somewhere like the West Indies is going to be a fantastic opportunity. We're here for 10 weeks and hopefully the quality of the players will shine through.'

England A are unbeaten in 36 first-class matches, but the Busta Cup should provide a stiffer test, and Moores knows he will have to rotate his players to get the best out of the squad.

'I will try to pick a side every time to win the game,' he said. 'By the time they come back all I want 16 players to feel they have had the opportunity to play and learn about conditions in the West Indies.'

The gruelling schedule should provide an excellent test of credentials, no more so than for skipper Alleyne. He has won five one-day trophies in two seasons with Gloucestershire but has struggled to make an impression at international level.

Moores, the Sussex coach, added: 'Mark has had tremendous success as a one-day player but he will also be desperately keen to get into the Test match team.'

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England A's Busta Cup mission

LONDON, Dec 31: England A enter new territory next week as they play their first match in the Busta Cup - the domestic West Indies competition in which the tourists have been included, reports AFP.

Skippered by Mark Alleyne, England's '2nd XI' will play seven four-day matches against six provincial sides and a West Indies development XI, and if successful go on to a possible semi-final and final.

Playing first-class sides in local conditions, starting against West Indies B in Grenada on Friday, will provide the stiffest of tests for England A, whose players will use the tour as a chance to stake their claim to place in the full England team.

Of the 16-man squad, only Lancashire batsman John Crawley has toured the Caribbean before - with the senior side three years ago - and England A coach Peter Moores believes every player will want to grasp their chance.

He said: 'It's an important trip for everybody. They all have ambitions to play for England and I know they are very competitive.'

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A military policeman carrying an injured young woman to safety after a fence collapsed during the Brazilian championship final at Rio de Janeiro. - AFP photo

70 hurt in Rio fiasco

RIO DE JANEIRO, Dec 31: Seventy spectators at the Brazilian League championship

final were injured, three of them seriously, when a fence surrounding the pitch at the Sao Januario stadium collapsed here on Saturday, a medical source said, reports AFP.

Several people with spinal injuries and concussion had to be evacuated to hospital by helicopter - 30 of the 70 injured fans were later allowed to return home.

One of the seriously injured fans, a five-year-old boy, was set to undergo an operation on his abdomen but was said not to be in danger.

The second leg meeting of Vasco da Gama and Sao Caetano was halted and then eventually abandoned by referee Roberto Godoi on the orders of the Governor of Rio de Janeiro Anthony Garotinho after 23 minutes with the score at 0-0.

However, his decision was greeted with fury by Vasco da Gama president Eurico Miranda, who had argued for

the match to continue. 'The military police chiefs were prepared to encircle the pitch so none of the fans could interrupt the match restarting,' he said.

'However the governor, who is a weak-willed incompetent man, decided to have the match abandoned. 'He has no authority over the club and the decision makes no sense,' added the president bluntly.

The two men look sure to clash again as Garotinho claimed that the reason such an important match was being held at a stadium that only holds 35,000 people was because Vasco directors had turned down the opportunity to have the game played at the much larger Maracana Stadium - which is now closed undergoing repairs.

Vasco authorities muddled the waters even more when they declared themselves champions by virtue of the 1-1 away draw in the first leg.

Vasco's legendary Brazilian striker Romario, who had to go off in the 21st minute with a muscle tear, said he would have preferred to win it over 90 minutes.

However, Vasco's board were put firmly in their place when the organisers of the competition - the 13 Club - announced they were to meet on Tuesday to decide whether to replay the match.

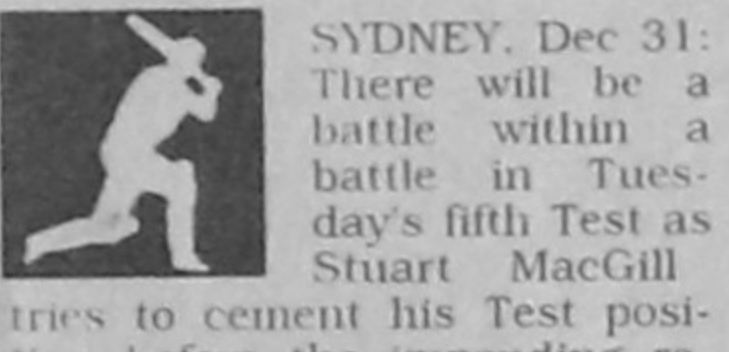
Under the competition rules a match can be replayed either from the moment it was stopped or else replayed in its entirety if the match has been abandoned due to goings on off the pitch.

According to television images the panic began when there was a fight in the upper part of the stand and the fans ran forward to escape the brawl, causing the fence separating the spectators from the pitch to give way as fans were pitched against it.

Ambulances came on to the pitch where several of the shocked spectators told reporters that they had feared they would be crushed to death.

The stadium has a capacity of 35,000 spectators but witnesses claimed there were more than that inside the ground for a match that would usually be held at the Maracana Stadium, which is currently closed for repairs.

War of the leggies



SYDNEY, Dec 31: There will be a battle within a battle in Tuesday's fifth Test as Stuart MacGill

tries to cement his Test position before the impending return of legspinner rival Shane Warne, reports AFP.

MacGill has to perform against the West Indies in the fifth Sydney Test to prove his credentials when the Australian touring team heads to the turning wickets of India on February 13.

Selectors haven't yet decided whether to take two or three spinners to India but offspinner Colin Miller appears the only certain selection at this stage following his outstanding summer, culminating with his 10 wickets in the third Adelaide Test.

That could leave MacGill and Warne in a race for selection, with Warne, Australia's greatest Test wicket-taker, set to return to state cricket with Victoria on Tuesday after recovering from a broken finger which kept him

out of the current Test series against the West Indies. From next week, Australian players will not have any first-class cricket available to them before the touring squad is selected for India.

They will have to push their claims in one-day matches, with Warne hoping to squeeze back into the Australian squad for the triangular series against the West Indies and Zimbabwe.

But MacGill could have the golden chance to perform in the Sydney Test against the tourists who have yet to prove they can handle Australia's spinners.

MacGill was relegated to 12th man in the fourth Test but he shapes as a likely starter in Sydney at the expense of paceman Andrew Bichel if the SCG wicket lives up to its early promise to assist spinners.

MacGill took 12-107 in his last Test appearance in Sydney against England two years ago and another hefty haul would certainly help his cause to push ahead of Warne for India and the prized 2001 Ashes tour to England.

But national chairman of selectors Trevor Hohns said it was too early to speculate on the tours until Warne - Australia's greatest Test wicket-taker - returned from injury.

'That's all in the future because Shane has to get some cricket under his belt,' Hohns said Sunday. 'We're obviously going to take more than 12 (players) to India for the Tests and it's fair to say there will be a couple of spots up for grabs.'

'We've got a fair idea of the type of player required for India

and the type of player who can perform there.'

MacGill and Warne both made the last Indian tour along with offspinner Gavin Robert, who played in all three Tests.

Selectors will have plenty to consider this summer with Indian captain Sourav Ganguly

already declaring the Test wickets will take plenty of spin when the Indians try to end Australia's remarkable winning streak, now at 14 Tests.

The world-record streak should extend to 15 when Australia administers the last rites in the Sydney Test to the hapless West Indies after thrashing them by 352 runs in Melbourne.

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Hooper serious about comeback

GEORGETOWN, Guyana, Dec 31: Former West Indies vice-captain Carl Hooper, who quit Test cricket in 1999, wants to return to the international stage, reports Reuters.

Hooper, who arrived in Guyana on Thursday to complete preparations for the 2001 Busta Cup, said he had already notified the selectors of his availability.

Hooper said he was looking forward to playing well in the Busta Cup to enhance his claim for selection for the home Test series against South Africa starting in March.

But Hooper, who since ending his international career has been playing grade cricket in Australia's Gold Coast Chronicle Sport he did not want to wait too long for an answer from the national selectors.

'I'm not going to sit around after two or three Tests and wait,' he said. Hooper played 80 Tests for West Indies, scoring 4,153 runs at an average of 33.76. He also appeared in 182 one-day internationals.

West Indies' pedigree as a Test nation has continued to decline since he quit. They currently trail Australia 4-0 in a five-match series.

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Premiership

MU sitting pretty

LONDON, Dec 31: Reigning champions Manchester United remained eight points clear at the top of the English Premiership despite throwing away two points in a hard-fought 1-1 draw away to Newcastle on Saturday, reports AFP.

However, second-placed Arsenal missed a brilliant chance to close the gap when they were held to a 2-2 draw at home to Sunderland after being 2-0 up.

United manager Sir Alex Ferguson vowed that his side would be hard to catch if they can add a victory over West Ham to their tally on New Year's Day.

'I would say that, if we're eight points clear on New Year's Day, the shape of the league takes place and then we'll see where the challengers come from,' he said.

'But I think we'll improve in the second half. I think there are some things that are encouraging, like the return of (Andy Cole) (Teddy) Sheringham and (Dwight) Yorke, for instance.'

(Jaap) Stam, (Ronny) Johnsen, those players are all on their way back, Quinton Fortune should be fit for Monday, and when you add it all together, it's a much stronger pool of players to choose from.'

That said, Ferguson was happy with a point at St James' Park after seeing David Beckham's first-half penalty cancelled out by substitute Stephen Glass - one of three men sent on with 15 minutes left as Newcastle manager Bobby

Robson played his final card. Glass struck nine minutes from time to set up a frantic finish in which the home side could even have snatched victory.

'It's a point gained, I have to say that, a good point,' added Ferguson. 'I don't think many teams will win here. 'They showed an incredible energy and desire, hunted every ball, fought for everything, and I don't think we deserved any more than we got.'

The only thing I'm disappointed with - apart from the performance because I think we should be better than that - was that we had the chance to finish them off after half-time.

'We missed three terrific chances and we've suffered now because of that. If we'd have scored the second goal, we'd have won the game comfortably.'

If the United boss was pleased with his side's return, opposite number Robson was delighted to see his men scrap their way to a draw to add a point to the three they collected against Leeds on December 26.

'When the goal went in, I said to my staff that will do me, if we don't lose this one, we'll settle for a point,' said the former England manager. 'And I think at that stage, Alex would have settled for a point as well because he would have been thinking that they could lose it.'

'At the end of the day, it was a diplomatic result. I think it was fair.'

At Highbury, France's World Cup and Euro 2000 winner Patrick Vieira struck in the fifth

minute and then his countryman Thierry Henry's pace took him past the Sunderland defence and his cross was turned in by Lee Dixon in the 40th minute for a rare goal from the full-back.

Sunderland hit back in the second half as a Kevin Phillips penalty. Six minutes from time Sunderland drew level through Gavin McCann.

Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger admitted: 'Our physical level just seemed to drop in the second half. 'I give Sunderland some credit because they raised their own game but the problem was more that we let ours drop.'

Elsewhere Ipswich moved into third with a 3-0 win at Portman Road over a dreadful Tottenham, who have not won away in 11 matches.

Town manager George Burley claimed the win was evidence of the new boys' desire to do more than merely survive in the top-flight.

'I said to my players before the game that it's nice to be up there but are we going to push on and finish in the top half of the league?' said Burley. 'This performance showed that we want to do that,' he added. 'I think 3-0 was a fair reflection, when we got our noses in front we were going to be very difficult to beat. We got the goals at the right times.'

Burley's fellow Scot and opposite number George Graham described his team's performance as 'our worst of the season' and apologised to the Londoners' travelling supporters.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS 38 Small stones 1 Movie 5 Part of H.R.H. 8 Mid-June honoree 12 Garfield's pal 13 Performance 14 Author Wiesel 15 Exodus 16 Commemoration 17 Prouberance 18 Color 19 Blue-pencil twilder 21 Broadier 24 Equitable 25 Caesar's final day 26 Poor man's loupee? 30 1773 jetsam 31 'Boxcars' 32 Drop from the payroll 33 Morning-after woe 35 Ph scissors 36 Writer 37 Sharpens

3 Fleur-de-bilgwig 4 Networks types 5 Possess 26 News-making event of the '60s 27 Barn roof 8 'Cape Fear' adornment 9 Billions and billions 10 Lover Aeneas 11 Crystal-gazer 16 'Gang' 20 Right of possession 21 Accompanying star 38 'Cabaret' star 39 Marathon, e.g. 40 Acknowledgement 41 Engaged in animal husbandry 44 Pay with plastic 45 Book-binding abbr. 46 Self 47 Seance sound

Cryptogram grid with numbers 1-11 and letters J G O X G M B X E B P X U V V A P Q G U P Y M X Q G V I P V J P Y O W M H E W M B T A P Q L E P X M J X E Y M W J T A L X M V P X X

CRYPTOQUIP J G O X G M B X E B P X U V V A P Q G U P Y M X Q G V I P V J P Y O W M H E W M B T A P Q L E P X M J X E Y M W J T A L X M V P X X Yesterday's Cryptogram: I MADE LOTS OF MONEY IN OIL, AND THEN STUPIDLY LET IT SLIP THROUGH MY FINGERS. Today's Cryptogram Clue: X equals S The Cryptogram is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will require O throughout the puzzle. Single letters, short words and words using an apostrophe give you clues to locating vowels. Solution is trial and error.