

PCB crosses its fingers

REUTERS, Karachi

Pakistan cricket chiefs are confident fast bowler Shoaib Akhtar will soon be on his way to England after he failed to leave with the rest of the touring team on Wednesday.

"We have not got to a stage where we start thinking he will miss the tour to England. We are still confident he will leave very soon," Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) director Munawar Rana told this news agency from Lahore on Thursday.

Akhtar, dubbed the "Rawalpindi Express," failed to board the London-bound flight on Wednesday because of a stomach upset and dehydration.

He is set to miss the tour opener against British Universities starting at Trent Bridge, Nottingham, on Friday. The first Test of the two-match series against England begins at Lord's on May 17.

"Some tests were carried out on Thursday. But until the reports come, it is premature to speculate," Rana said.

He said the PCB would not be sending any reinforcements even if Akhtar failed to pass fitness and medical tests.

Rana clarified that Akhtar had been held back because of PCB policy on medical clearance on every player.

Gibbs guides

FROM PAGE 13

Antigua Recreation Ground

Wednesday.

WEST INDIES

	O	M	R	W
Garrison run out (Kallis)	16			
Gayle c Pollock b Klusener	50			
Lara c Pollock b Klusener	13			
Ghanderpaul				
run out (Dippenaar)	60			
Hooper c Ontong b Pollock	48			
Jacobs not out	13			
Samuels run out	3			
McGarrell b Kallis	3			
McLean c Gibbs b Kallis	0			
Dillon not out	1			
Extras: (b-1, lb-4, w-5, nb-3)	13			
Total: (For 8 wkt in 50 overs)	220			
Fall of wickets: 1-63, 2-80, 3-104, 4-190, 5-208, 6-214, 7-218				
Did not bat: Cuffy.				
Bowler O M R W				
Pollock 10 1 34 0				
Telemachus 9 0 50 0				
Donald 10 1 40 0				
Kallis 10 1 38 2				
Klusener 5 0 28 2				
Ontong 6 0 25 0				
SOUTHAFRICA				
Gibbs st Jacobs b McGarrell	104			
Kirsten b Cuffy	5			
Kallis not out	78			
Rhodes	21			
Extras: (b-2, w-2, nb-9)	13			
Total: (For 2 wkt in 45.5 overs)	221			
Fall of wickets: 1-11, 2-190				
Did not bat: H. Dippenaar, L. Klusener, M. Boucher, S. Pollock, J. Ontong, R. Telemachus, A. Donald.				
Bowler O M R W				
Dillon 6.5 0 39 0				
Cuffy 10 1 27 1				
McLean 4 0 40 0				
McGarrell 9 0 28 1				
Hooper 10 1 42 0				
Samuels 3 0 21 0				
Gayle 3 0 22 0				
Result: South Africa won by eight wickets and levelled the series 1-1.				
Man-of-the-match: Herschelle Gibbs.				
Next match: May 5, Grenada.				

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With the new football season is just around the corner, clubs have already started getting in on the game. Abahani had their first training session yesterday. Here a group of the club's players having a chat before their workout.

PHOTO: STAR

Laxman's focus on Zim

Cricket

REUTERS, New Delhi

India's new cricket hero Vangipurappu Laxman says he is determined to help his country end their woeful recent record in overseas Test series.

India, who have won just one Test abroad in the last eight years, leave on May 25 for Zimbabwe where they will play two Tests against their hosts and a one-day triangular series also involving West Indies.

"My immediate goal is the Zimbabwe series. As a team, we've been working hard and the object is winning matches abroad," Laxman told this news agency on Thursday. "I'll be thrilled if I can contribute to that."

The 26-year-old shot to fame with a record-breaking 281 that helped India to a 2-1 Test series win against the visiting Australians earlier this year.

"I have learnt a lot in various parts of the world," he said. "Not only technically, but even in the mental aspect I'm more sound than when I started playing."

Laxman has overcome adversity to cement his place in India's side. Unable to break into a middle-order that boasted Sachin Tendulkar, Rahul Dravid, Saurav Ganguly and Mohammad Azharuddin, he was forced to open the innings.

"That was the best decision I have ever made," Laxman said. "As an opener I wasn't playing my

best, he was forced to open the innings.

He did not perform well, though, and was heavily criticised for failing to make the most of his many chances.

"When the selectors asked me to open, I took it up as a challenge," he said. "But I realised

the decision paid off and he scored heavily in Indian domestic cricket. He was recalled to play against Zimbabwe in last year's two-Test home series, which India won 1-0.

Earlier this year, Laxman was promoted to number three in the second innings of the second Test against Australia after he scored a fighting 59 in the first innings.

His superb knock of 281 helped India win the Test after following on. He also became the highest Indian run scorer in an innings, breaking Sunil Gavaskar's 18-year-old record of 236 not out.

"I knew the team expected to lose from me when the captain Saurav Ganguly and coach John Wright told me to pad up as a number three in the second innings," Laxman said.

"I decided to settle down, play as long as I could. Luckily I hung on."

India clinched the Test and went on to win the series.

"A lot of people say I inspired the side, but I'm not all that sure. I think it was a team effort. But there's no denying that knock has had a great impact on me."

Vangipurappu Laxman

after my experiences as an international opener that it was a specialised job."

Last year he declined to open the innings.

"That was the best decision I have ever made," Laxman said. "As an opener I wasn't playing my

best, he was forced to open the innings.

He brought up his century by pushing England off-spinner Robert Croft into the off-side for a single but in the next over he was run out.

At Headingly a sparkling stand of 150 in only 24 overs between Australia's Greg Blewett and Saurav Ganguly rescued a Worcestershire side chasing Glamorgan's 228-9 from an uncertain 46-3 in the 18th over and guided

Nottinghamshire have now won their first two North Division games and one reason behind their early season success has been the form of Blewett who has made 133, 59 not out and now 84 in his first three innings for them.

Unsuccessful as Yorkshire's overseas player two years ago, he returned to Headingly to blast them to defeat with 10 boundaries in his 84 from 102 balls.

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Their Australian, Darren Lehmann, had a comparative struggle for runs but fought his way to 41 from 58 balls before falling to an athletic leg-side catch by wicketkeeper Chris Read off scamer Richard Logan.

In a rain-marred match at Grace Road former England fast bowler Devon Malcolm took three for 13 as Lancashire, chasing a revised target of 118 were bowled out for 90 by Leicestershire (193 for seven).

Yorkshire, who lost the toss and were sent in, probably had the worst of the conditions and were restricted to 194 for seven in their 50 overs.

Their Australian, Darren Lehmann, had a comparative struggle for runs but fought his way to 41 from 58 balls before falling to an athletic leg-side catch by wicketkeeper Chris Read off scamer Richard Logan.

"It is a major concern but hopefully when Pakistan arrive here they will get the same situation and play in rain affected games as well as it equals out," said England coach Duncan Fletcher.

"We want our guys to be prepared for the first Test but this is something that happens every year with the weather playing its part."

"It's not ideal preparation by any means and apart from the odd one-day game the contracted players will probably play from here on in until the Test."

Most of the contracted players are expected to feature in next week's round of County Championship games in a desperate attempt to gain match practice before the opening Test against Pakistan at Lord's on May 17.

The weather-hit start to the new season has restricted opportunities for England's 12 centrally contracted players with only five — Marcus Trescothick, Dominic Cork, captain Nasser Hussain, Michael Vaughan and Matthew Hoggard — playing any first class cricket.

Graham Thorpe, Alec Stewart and Michael Atherton were denied their chance last week when Lancashire's Championship match with Surrey was washed out at Old Trafford and England are now desperate for all their players to feature next week before they assemble at Lord's for the start of a long international summer.

"It is a major concern but hopefully when Pakistan arrive here they will get the same situation and play in rain affected games as well as it equals out," said England coach Duncan Fletcher.

"It's good to see him playing again even though he is not yet at full pace, he'll be a useful contributor especially at this stage of the season in England," confirmed Fletcher.

But before England make any plans for the opening Test, they must await results of scans performed on Hoggard and Warwickshire left-arm spinner Ashley Giles to determine their availability.

Squillari in last eight

AFP, Munich

The no-nonsense dietary habits of two-time champion Franco Squillari may be partly responsible for the South American's red-hot 12-match win streak at the Iphitos club Wednesday, dispatching German Christian Vinck 6-2, 7-5.

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'England will run short of runs'

REUTERS, New Delhi

England will not score enough runs to beat Australia in this summer's Ashes series, according to former Australian coach Geoff Marsh.

"Australia will win the Ashes. If we get Brett Lee, Jason Gillespie, Glenn McGrath and Shane Warne all bowling well, England won't make enough runs to beat Australia," Marsh said in India on Thursday.

Australia, who begin their three-month England tour on May 29, will play five Tests against England after a triangular one-day tournament also involving Pakistan.

Marsh predicted that leg-spinner Warne would dominate the England batsmen despite struggling in the recent 2-1 Test series defeat in India.

"He is a world class bowler. He will come back. He will terrorise the English again," Marsh said.

Warne, who holds the Australian Test record of 376 victims, managed only 10 wickets at more than 50 runs apiece in the three-Test series against India.

Marsh's skipper, who epitomises the mental strength that is one of the key elements of his side's success, will not want to be the man who lets slip his country's grip on the Ashes they have held since 1989.

That is just one reason why England's revival under skipper Nasser Hussain and coach Duncan Fletcher — who have won four Test series in a row — is set to be confronted by the ultimate challenge.

Marsh, who has dominated English batsmen since bowling Mike Gatting with a perfectly pitched leg break eight years ago, his first delivery of the 1993 Ashes series at Old Trafford.

Marsh said England were an improved side after their recent Test series wins in Pakistan and Sri Lanka, but felt such performances would not be good enough against the world champion Australians.

"They have improved no doubt. But to us there are not too many different players," he said. "Australia will do their homework well."