

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 Munawwar 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

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Antigua Recreation Ground, Wednesday.

WEST INDIES

Garrick run out (Kallis) 16

Gayle c Pollock b Klusener 50

Lara c Pollock b Klusener 13

Chanderpaul

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 1

Dillon not out 0

Extras: (b-1, lb-4, w-5, nb-3) 13

Total: (For 8 wks in 50 overs) 220

Fall of wickets: 1-63, 2-80, 3-104, 4-190, 5-208, 6-214, 7-218

Did not bat: C. Cuffy.

Bowler

Pollock 0 M R W

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

SOUTH AFRICA

Gibbs st Jacobs b McGarrell 104

Kirsten b Cuffy 5

Kallis not out 78

Rhodes 21

Extras: (lb-2, w-2, nb-9) 13

Total: (For 2 wks 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

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.



PHOTO: STAR

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.

Laxman's focus on Zim

Cricket

REUTERS, New Delhi

India's new cricket hero Vangipur-rappu 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 Azhar-

ruddin, 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

natural game. I knew it may reduce my chances of playing for my country but I decided to enjoy my cricket and to bat only in the middle-order."

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 lot 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."

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

them to victory by five wickets with 16 balls to spare.

The Queenslanders scored exactly 100 off 116 balls with a six and 11 fours, his second 50 runs coming from only 34 deliveries.

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 Headingley a sparkling stand of 150 in only 24 overs between Australia's Greg Blewett and Paul Johnson took Nottinghamshire to a comfortable six-wicket win with 10.2 overs to spare.

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 his runs but fought his way to 41 from 58 balls before falling to an athletic leg-side catch by wicketkeeper Chris Read off seamer 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).

Lancashire's Sri Lanka off-spinner Muttiah Muralitharan earlier took two for 40.

At Taunton, a 73 from Zimbabwe's Trevor Penney guided Warwickshire to 178 for six and a four-wicket win over Somerset. Earlier Warwickshire medium-pacer Melvyn Best took career-best figures of four for 22.

Elsewhere Matt Windows' 108 not out was the backbone of holders Gloucestershire's nine-run win over Northamptonshire at Bristol, the hosts England A quick Jon Lewis taking three for 13.

Squillari in last eight

AFP, Munich

The no-nonsense dietary habits of the two-time champion Franco Squillari may be partly responsible for the South American's red-hot 12-match win streak at the 400,000-dollar BMW Open.

Argentine Squillari, 25, advanced his winning cause into the quarter-finals at the Iphitos club Wednesday, dispatching German Christian Vinck 6-2, 7-5.

AFP, Munich

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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.

But he 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."

Marsh, who coached Australia to their 1999 World Cup victory in England, said fielding would be another major factor in deciding the series.

"If the ball goes to an Australian fielder, he is out. They don't drop too many catches," he added.

Marsh said Steve Waugh's team would bounce back from the defeat in India, adding that the return of young fast bowler Brett Lee could be crucial.

Lee, who is vying for the tag of the world's fastest bowler with Pakistan's Shoaib Akhtar, missed the Indian tour following an elbow operation but has been named in the squad to travel to England.

Marsh, a former Australian vice-captain, is in India working as a consultant for the country's cricket board.

English in need of practice

AFP, London

England's contracted players are likely 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 so 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 at least one of this week's Benson and Hedges Cup games which precede the championship matches starting next Wednesday.

At least Fletcher can console himself with the return of Cork to action for Derbyshire having been sent home from England's tour to Pakistan before Christmas with a worrying back injury.

"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.

The ultimate Tests

Cricket

REUTERS, London

Waqar, Warne and the Waughes are lining up to Test resurgent England to the limit during a season offering the prospect of compelling, high-profile international cricket.

Waqar Younis' Pakistanis, who arrived in London on Wednesday for a two-month tour, provide a tasty appetiser but the main course comes in the shape of Steve Waugh's Australians.

Waugh's men land at the end of May for a five-Test tour that features one of the most eagerly-awaited Ashes battles in recent times.

Australia'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.

Waugh, who is leading his country in an Ashes assignment for the first time, anticipates a real scrap.

"Every time we come up against England they have been

good on paper but this time they've probably got a bit more. We're in for a tough time," he said.

Hussain's side won back-to-back Test series in Pakistan and Sri Lanka during the last five months but he is aware that will count for nothing what it comes to the Ashes.

"The last two series we won were because the opposition bottled it at the last minute and I don't think the Aussies will do that," England's captain said.

Pakistan launch the international programme with a two-Test encounter next month in which they will seek to bounce back from a rare home defeat by England late last year.

Hussain's team won the three-Test rubber 1-0 in thrilling style with a run chase that ended in near darkness in the final match in Karachi, giving England their first series win in Pakistan since 1961-62.

Moin Khan paid the price for that failure by losing the Pakistan captaincy to Waqar, who apparently created a good impression in his new role at the recent Sharjah tournament against Sri Lanka and New Zealand.

Waqar, a fast bowler with a proven track record on English pitches, faces the familiar task for a Pakistan captain of turning a group of immensely talented individuals into an effective unit.

Early season in England is likely to be a pace bowlers' para-

dise for the two Tests with Pakistan. The tourists may fare rather better than they did on the surfaces at home that seemed too slow for their vaunted spin attack in last year's series.

England's pace quartet — Darren Gough, Andy Caddick, Dominic Cork and Craig White — will also relish two Tests in May to underline the telling part they have played in the team's six wins in their last 10 Tests.

The decision this season to follow the Pakistan Tests with the 10-match triangular limited-overs series between England, Pakistan and Australia before the start of the Ashes provides a more streamlined format.

Last year, the one-dayers cut into the five Tests against West Indies, losing the momentum to the series just when England had won an epic Lord's Test to make it 1-1 with three matches to play.

There will be no such interruption to the five Ashes Tests, which start at Edgbaston, Birmingham, on July 5 and end at The Oval in late August.

With Shane Warne and Glenn McGrath ready to inflict further torment on England's batsmen in this country, Brett Lee vying with Pakistan's Shoaib Akhtar for the title of world's fastest bowler, and Mark Waugh due for a big Ashes series with the bat, the ingredients are there for a heady cricketing cocktail.

Pollock pleased

Cricket

REUTERS, St John's

South African captain Shaun Pollock was glad to see a vastly improved all-round performance from his side as they won the second one-day international against West Indies on Wednesday to level the series 1-1.

After defeat in both the Test and one-day game in Jamaica, South Africa returned to the scene of their series-winning victory in the fourth Test and won by eight wickets, with four overs and one ball to spare.

South Africa scored 221 for two after West Indies had made 220 for eight.

"Antigua's been good to us," Pollock said afterwards. "We've talked about a few things because obviously we weren't happy about the way we played in Jamaica. I thought we bowled well but on the batting side we had a bit of improvement to do."

"I thought the guys worked hard and reaped the rewards for it. The performance was good, although there's always room for improvement. I'd probably give the guys about eight out of 10 today."

Pollock surprised several local pundits with his decision to field first after winning the toss but said their predictions that the pitch would become increasingly difficult.

cult for batting were not a factor.

"It looked like a pretty good deck and it had a bit of a grass covering on it and didn't look as though it was going to do much," he said.

"When we played here in the Test series there was a little movement early on, so I thought we'd try and get the best of that."

"When we restricted them to 220 we were pretty confident. The

wicket was playing nicely and the guys were confident that we could get there."

The South African captain was also happy to see man-of-the-match Herschelle Gibbs capitalise on his fine form with his first century of the tour.

"It's about time he got another

wicket was playing nicely and the guys were confident that we could get there."

"You would expect one of the bowlers to have a bad day but too many guys didn't perform today."

"We've got to be more consistent. But it's only the second game — we've still got five to play and I'm optimistic we can still do well," Hooper said.

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