

Ricky on captain's trail

Cricket

INTERNET/AFP, Sydney

Ricky Ponting took his first step on a path he hopes will lead him to the Australian Test captain's job when he was named Tasmania captain on Wednesday.

Previous captain Jamie Cox said he had stepped down to give the 26-year-old Ponting the chance to prove himself for the day Steve Waugh retires.

"The experience of captaining his home state will hopefully greatly improve his chances of becoming Tasmania's first Australian captain," Cox said from England where he has been captaining Somerset.

"What Jamie has done for me is great and I can't thank him enough," said Ponting who with Western Australian wicketkeeper Adam Gilchrist is the frontrunner to succeed Waugh.

Gilchrist was Waugh's deputy in India and on the Ashes tour and Ponting captained the team for one county game in England.

Ponting said he had not had many opportunities to captain since his junior days but he had always thought of himself as a leader on the field.

"When I'm out on the field I try to think as if I'm captain and I've always had a few suggestions, whether to Jamie or Steve Waugh," he said.

"My philosophy will be fairly aggressive and attacking."

Tasmanian Cricket Association chairman Denis Rogers said they wanted to give Ponting greater experience as a captain and the chance to demonstrate his leadership qualities.

"We want to be able to assist Ricky in every way possible if he is ready."



RICKY PONTING

does get an opportunity later on to be called for higher honours and responsibilities," added Rogers who is also Australian Cricket Board chairman.

Ponting's career stalled briefly following his involvement in two off-field incidents -- the first at a nightclub in Calcutta in 1998 and the other at a bar in Sydney in early 1999.

But Cox said he had matured over the last couple of years.

He was also sidelined after crashing into a boundary hoarding at the Sydney Cricket Ground in February 1999, seriously injuring his ankle.

Ponting, who recently became engaged, said he had grown up as a cricketer and a person.

If he plays in all Australia's international seasons, Ponting will only lead Tasmania four times. Cox, who becomes vice-captain, will then take over.

Ponting had a brilliant underage career and was always seen as a gifted player, with an aggressive and supremely confident approach.

He made his Tasmanian debut at just 17 -- making 56 against South Australia in Adelaide -- and his first Test appearance when he was only 20, compiling 96 against Sri Lanka in Perth in 1995-96.

On both occasions he showcased two qualities which have remained with him ever since: an ability to play virtually every shot in the book and a hatred of being tied down in his appearances at the crease.

His speed and outstanding fielding skills have made him an even more valuable player, particularly in the one-day international arena.

For most of his Test career, Ponting has battled in the number six position but there have long been suggestions that he should be moved higher in the order, which he did on the recently-completed Ashes tour, albeit with limited success.



Swiss Michel Kratochvil in action against compatriot George Bastl at the Heineken Open in Shanghai yesterday.

Michel ousts George

Tennis

AFF, Shanghai

Third seed Michel Kratochvil almost felt the need to send out for refreshments Wednesday as he took nearly two and a half hours to overcome Swiss compatriot George Bastl 4-6, 6-2, 6-2 for a quarterfinal place at the 400,000-dollar Heineken Open.

"It was a popcorn match," Kratochvil said, using a player term for a mini-marathon. "But I felt pretty good throughout, I'm top-fit."

The 22-year-old son of a pair of tennis club-owning parents is among only three seeds still alive in a tournament decimated by the first-round ouster of draw-card Andre Agassi on Tuesday.

The American was beaten by Georgian Irakli Labadza, a 20-year-old with a huge serve who next faces American Justin Gimelstob.

New Jersey's Gimelstob took an opening victory over popular Thai Paradorn Srichaphan, winning 7-6, 3-6, 6-4. In another first-round result, Brazil's Andre Sa stopped South African Robbie Koenig 6-3, 3-6, 6-2.

Japan's Takahiro Terachi won a second-round battle of outsiders, defeating Australian qualifier Michael Tebbutt 6-7, 6-4, 6-1.

Hingis retains top WTA rankings

INTERNET, London

Martina Hingis retains her position at the top of the WTA rankings, despite the success of Venus and Serena Williams at the US Open.

Hingis has failed to win a Grand Slam in her last 10 attempts and her only Slam final of the season was at the Australian Open where she lost to Jennifer Capriati.

Nevertheless, the Swiss star has retained her place at the top because she has won a number of lesser-ranking events which have boosted her points total.

Venus Williams who has successfully defended both the US Open and Wimbledon title this year remains fourth in the overall rankings.

Sandrine Testud of France is the biggest climber on the rankings. She won the inaugural Big Island Championships in Hawaii after Justine Henin retired hurt.

Leading WTA tour tennis (previous rankings in brackets):

- 1. (1) Martina Hingis 5,256 pts. 2. (2) Jennifer Capriati 5,123 3. (3) Lindsay Davenport 4,345 4. (4) Venus Williams 4,333 5. (5) Kim Clijsters 3,176 6. (6) Amelie Mauresmo 2,842 7. (7) Serena Williams 2,753 8. (8) Justine Henin 2,742 9. (9) Monica Seles 2,414 10. (10) Nathalie Tauziat 2,083 11. (12) Jelena Dokic 1,808 12. (11) Shalhanessy 1,756 13. (13) Amanda Coetzer 1,603 14. (17) Sandrine Testud 1,580 15. (16) Silvia Farina-Elia 1,535 16. (14) Magdalena Maleeva 1,522 17. (15) Dementieva 1,515 18. (18) Barbara Schett 1,389 19. (19) Sanchez-Vicario 1,286 20. (20) Kournikova (Russia) 1,258

Sport returns to DC

AFF, Washington DC

With patriotic banners and chants of "U-S-A, U-S-A", pro sports returned to the United States capital late Tuesday for the first time since terrorist attacks here and in New York a week ago.

The Philadelphia Flyers' 6-1 trouncing of the Washington Capitals in a pre-season ice hockey exhibition that was less meaningful than the act of returning life to normal for players and fans after the devastating attacks.

Only about 5,000 spectators were on hand at MCI Arena, few in the most expensive seats, for a game that players had openly admitted they felt might be a target should terrorists wish to commit another atrocity.

"Everybody in the building was nervous the first 15 minutes. Then I think everybody sort of settled down," Capitals defenceman Brendan Witt said.

After a moment of silence during which players from both teams lined up along centre ice to show unity, a colour guard presented the American flag and a spectator yelled "Yay, America" to arouse a cheer from the crowd.

After the US anthem was sung, the fans began a chant of "U-S-A, U-S-A" heard most notably in a hockey rink during the 1980 US Olympic gold medal team's stunning upset of the Soviet Union, the "Miracle on Ice".

Spectators were given cardboard American flag replicas as they entered through toughened security and bag checks. Fans waved the

banners during a first-period stoppage during a standing ovation for police, firefighters and rescue crews.

Banners on display included "God Bless America," "Proud to be an American," and "I Will Not Fear."

Another memorialised Garnet "Ace" Bailey, a member of the original Capitals' squad and an 11-year National Hockey League veteran who was aboard one of the airplanes which crashed into the World Trade Centre.

On the ice, four-time defending NHL scoring champion Jaromir Jagr scored his first goal for Washington since being obtained in a deal from Pittsburgh.

But the Flyers got two goals and an assist from Pavel Brendl and a goal and two assists from Jeremy Roenick in the romp. Roenick was in his first game for Philadelphia after leaving Phoenix. Brendl arrived from New York in a deal that sent Eric Lindros to the Rangers.

Spectators filed out of the building after a game without incident to the sounds of more patriotic songs, including "Proud to be an American" and Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the USA".

Some of American football's Washington Redskins spent Tuesday visiting those injured at the Pentagon. Quarterback Jeff George was touched by fans who exhorted the team to win Sunday at Green Bay from their hospital beds.

"They are laying there and saying, 'Good luck on Sunday,'" George said. "After what they have been through, they are thinking about us. That there is touching."

Abahani put icing

FROM PAGE 13 Abahani won a staggering 14 out of 15 League matches. Their only defeat in the League was against Mukti Juddha.

Abahani fielded a all-local team on Wednesday night as their four foreign recruits including Nigerian Colly Burns, the leading scorer for the team with nine goals, left home after the championship was confirmed in the previous match.

Mukti Juddha's striker Emeka with ten goals was the top marksman in the League.

Apart from Abahani's heroics and Mohammedan's dismal run, the league will also be remembered for a stunning reversal of fortune for Mukti Juddha Sangsad.

Mukti Juddha, who won the League last year and also lifted this season's curtain raiser, the Federation Cup, were eliminated from the first phase.

TEAMS Abahani KC: Apel, Titu, Nazrul, Sujon, Hasan, Aminul (Partho), Iqbal (Ashrafu), Arman, Bidyut, Ritu (Asad) and Kanchan. Mohammedan SC: Bijon, Jewel, Faisal, Masud Rana, Papel, Idris Abdullah (Nakib), Tushar, Joy, Faisal Mahmud (Monwar/Tipu), Alfaz and Sunday. Referee: AM Monsur Azad. Yellow cards: Idris and Joy (Mohammedan).

POINTS TABLE table with columns: Team, M, W, W/T, L/T, L, GF, GA, Pts

FIFA rankings France under pressure

Football

AFF, Paris

World champions France remain top of world soccer governing body FIFA's global rankings released Wednesday, but are facing a stiff challenge from fast-closing rivals.

The biggest movers were England, who shot up six places moving into the top ten for the first time in over two years, while Portugal lifted four spots, and are now fifth having overtaken Iberian rivals Spain.

France are 11 points clear of second-placed Brazil, who failed to capitalise on France's defeat in Chile, by losing 2-1 to Argentina in their 2002 World Cup qualifier on September 5.

Argentina are closing fast on their arch-rivals and are four points behind Brazil on 794 in third position.

Portugal are on 732 points having overtaken Spain, who also moved up one place into sixth, while the

Netherlands moved up two places to eighth and England are now in ninth spot after lifting six spots. England's historic 5-1 win in Munich against Germany assured them a place in the top ten for the first time since April 1999.

Position Team Points table with columns: Position, Team, Points

Arantxa starts in style

Tennis

AFF, Tokyo

Arantxa Sanchez-Vicario made a strong first step forward to winning back the singles title she won in 1994 at the Princess Cup tennis tournament on Wednesday.

The fifth-seeded Spaniard, using an array of effective drop shots, needed just 50 minutes to beat Evie Dominkovic of Australia 6-1, 6-3, becoming the last player on the field to advance to the second round.

South African qualifier Liezel Huber pulled off a stunning blow to upset 1999 Wimbledon junior champion Iroda Tulyaganova, sixth seed from Uzbekistan, for a 6-4, 6-1 victory in her first win in a main draw this season.

Another qualifier, Siljvia Taraja of Croatia, joined Huber into the second round when she caused another upset by beating Japan's Shinobu Asagoe 4-6, 7-6, 6-3.

Huber, known more as a doubles player under her maiden name of Horn, has reached a main draw only twice out of seven events this year and lost both of them in the first round.

Huber defeated Choi Young-Ja of South Korea, fourth seed Annabel Ellwood of Australia, and fifth seed Erika Delone of the United States on her way to securing a berth in the 565,000-dollar tournament here.

In the second round, Huber will challenge American Meilen Tu, the winner over Rachel McQuillan of Australia 6-2, 6-2.

Taraja, ranked 128th against Asagoe's 88th, will next play Sanchez-Vicario Thursday.

In other first-round action, Gala Leon Garcia of Spain outclassed Janet Lee of Taiwan 6-4, 2-6, 6-2, while Saori Obata brushed aside Shihō Hisamatsu 6-1, 6-4 in an all-Japanese match.

Nicole Pratt of Australia was an easy 6-1, 6-0 winner over Marlene Weingartner of Germany.



Spaniard Arantxa Sanchez-Vicario makes a forehand return against Evie Dominkovic of Australia during their Princess Cup first round engagement in Tokyo yesterday.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

Crossword puzzle grid with clues and solution time: 21 mins.

CRYPTOQUIP puzzle grid and instructions.

CRYPTOQUIP solution and explanation.