



I AM THAT CONFIDENT! Indian master-bat Sachin Tendulkar plays with a stump during practice at Centurion yesterday.

Mother of all matches

AFP, Centurion

If cricket alone mattered, Saturday's high-profile World Cup showdown between arch-rivals India and Pakistan would be a connoisseur's delight. One-day cricket's leading batsman Sachin Tendulkar facing record-breaking bowler Wasim Akram is only one of the mouth-watering contests on offer at SuperSport Park. There is also the world's fastest bowler Shoaib Akhtar sending down thunderbolts at the star-studded Indian batting line-up of captain Saurav Ganguly, Rahul Dravid and Virender Sehwag.

Or Indian off-spinner Harbhajan Singh playing his trade against two of the best players of slow bowling, Yousuf Youhana and Inzamamul Haq.

Alas, the hype surrounding the first encounter between the arch-rivals in two and a half years has relegated the cricket to the background.

The intense political rivalry on either side of the border has spilled over to cricket with India refusing to sanction bilateral matches against Pakistan in protest at Islamabad's alleged support of militancy in the disputed region of Kashmir.

The winner on Saturday will be feted when the team returns home, the loser faces heaps of humiliation irrespective of how far the rivals

progress in the World Cup.

Coming at it does towards the end of the preliminary league, the match assumes greater significance in the race for the Super Sixes.

India, with 16 points from five games, will qualify if they win. Even a defeat will see them through unless England upset the form book and defeat reigning champions Australia on Sunday.

Pakistan, who are lagging behind with just eight points from four matches, must beat both India

and Zimbabwe to seal a place in the next round.

"We want to win, not only because it is Pakistan, but we want to take as many points as we can into the Super Six," Indian captain Saurav Ganguly.

For his Pakistani counterpart, Waqar Younis, losing is not an option.

"We don't want to leave it to other teams to decide our fate," he said. "We have to win both our remaining matches."

The match promises an exhilarating contest as 502-wicket Wasim pits his skills against 11,917-run Tendulkar and Shoaib attempts to rattle the likes of Ganguly, Dravid and Sehwag.

"I will target everyone," said Shoaib who was timed at a record-breaking 161.3 kmh (100.23 mph) against England last Saturday.

"Naturally I want to get Tendulkar, because this is a big, big wicket, but not many realise removing Dravid is equally important.

"He rotates the strike and in no time he is on 50."

Tendulkar is the tournament's top run-getter with 371 while Wasim is the joint leader with Sri Lanka's Chaminda Vaas on 12 wickets apiece.

Pakistan's wayward bowling and inept batting has so far been a concern for Waqar.

Inzamam, the side's premier batsman, has scored just 10 runs in four innings, while hard-hitting opener Shahid Afridi has made only seven runs and taken two wickets with his leg-breaks.

The rest of the batting has been so ineffective that number 11 Shoaib tops the team's averages at 72 following his spectacular 43 against England.

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Wasim Akram

PHOTO: STAR FILE

Bat does his talking

REUTERS, Centurion

Before the World Cup, Sachin Tendulkar decided to keep his thoughts to himself.

"I don't want to give interviews until after the tournament," he said.

His statements with the bat, however, have been loud and clear. The world's best batsman has topped in four of India's five matches in making 371 runs. As in the 1996 World Cup, Tendulkar is on course to top the run-making charts.

Indian fans will look to him again during Saturday's Pool A clash against Pakistan at Centurion.

The 29-year-old, nearing 12,000 one-day runs and already boasting a record 34 centuries, looked subdued before the tournament,

missing 11 out of India's last 14 one-day games with niggling injuries.

But he has quickly regained his touch after being restored to the top of the batting order in South Africa.

Tendulkar scored a run-a-ball 152 against Namibia. He has made at least 50 in every innings apart from his 36 out of a team total of 125 against Australia.

Captain Saurav Ganguly put Tendulkar's success at the top of the order in perspective.

"In these (pace-friendly) pitches, we can't expect to score 300 plus every time, 250-260 are winning totals. Once the ball gets older, runs come easier."

India had a good one-day run in 2002, winning a tri-series in England and then sharing the

Champions Trophy in September. Tendulkar, against his wishes, had been dropped down the order to add steel to the middle order and avoid panic if he was dismissed early and the tactic seemed to work.

Tendulkar duly cut down on high-risk attacking shots and accepted his role as innings anchor.

When the team's form began to dip, however, Tendulkar was brought back as opener and that tactic, too, has paid off.

He appears to have played more freely at the World Cup, hitting a fine run-a-ball 50 in India's 83-run victory over England on Wednesday as fellow opener Virender Sehwag curbed his natural flair to support

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Help me Viv

AFP, Centurion

Out-of-form Pakistani batsman Inzamamul Haq on Friday revealed he was going to speak to West Indian legend Vivian Richards in a bid to get back among the runs at the World Cup.

"I have never faced such a situation before. I want to call my idol Vivian Richards to sort out the problem," Inzamam told this news agency.

Richards is currently in South Africa as head of the West Indies selectors, but Inzamam was unaware whether he will come to watch Saturday's high-profile clash between India and Pakistan at SuperSport Park.

"I have no clue where my form has gone but the confidence is

there," the 32-year-old said.

"My father phoned me from Pakistan and advised me not to lose faith and has prayed for my success against India. I have always followed my father's advice and have succeeded."

Inzamam, who shed 23 pounds to get fit for the World Cup, appears to have lost his appetite for runs as well, struggling to make 10 runs in four matches.

But his teammates were backing him to come good soon.

"I called my old friend Mushtaq Ahmed (former Pakistan spinner) and spoke to Waqar Younis and Wasim Akram," he said.

"All of them told me that there was nothing wrong and runs would come in the next game."

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'Sonic' Akhtar breathes fire

REUTERS/INTERNET, Centurion

Pakistan World Cup strike bowler Shoaib Akhtar has promised India's batsmen a torrid time in their Pool A match on Saturday, adding he did not rate their batting line-up as highly as the Australians.

Shoaib, with 10 wickets at 18 runs apiece and fresh from sending down a plus 100mph delivery against England earlier in the tournament, said: "I know I can bowl quicker than this (100 mph), something in the vicinity of above 165 kph. But I want to get five wickets and win the match for my team instead of bowling at 100 mph," he said, adding that after he went for so many runs against England "I was so unhappy with myself, I couldn't sleep that night."

But against India, he says he would love to bowl with a lot of fire.

"I'm again bowling quick with the old ball. That has come back to me, and that adds to my lethality. Against India, I'm going to go after

the bigger names, I'm not going to make it easy for them.

"Sachin Tendulkar is one of the greatest batsmen in the world. It will be a big challenge bowling to him."

"I have found it much easier bowling to them rather than Australia, although my best figures and performances have come against Australia."

The 27-year-old Shoaib said the Centurion wicket should help with its extra bounce, although he said it was not a vital ingredient "As I am fast through the air." He added, though, that he was hoping for swinging conditions.

Rahul Dravid would be another key player for India. "I rate him very highly. He is the one to watch out for because he holds their innings together with singles and doubles," Shoaib said.

Tendulkar and Dravid already

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Betting frenzy

REUTERS, Bombay

They're swift. They're stealthy. They work round-the-clock out of cars, posh apartments and even five-star hotels as India's excitement over cricket reaches fever pitch in a land where the game is almost a religion.

Mobile phones tucked between head and shoulder and fingers flying over computer keyboards, bookies in Bombay track the flood of bets as the national team battles it out in the World Cup a continent away in South Africa.

Although illegal in India, betting has reached unprecedented levels since the World Cup began two weeks ago, the police said.

"The whole atmosphere is so charged," said Shridhar S Vagal, joint commissioner of Bombay police.

Betting is also rampant across the country. But in Bombay, India's money capital, the stakes are much higher at least 10 billion rupees (210 million dollars) are bet on every match, said Vagal.

"It's difficult to contain as bookies have become highly mobile."

Betting is also rampant across

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BATTLE WITHIN BATTLE

AFP, Centurion

Key duels to look for during the World Cup clash between Pakistan and India at SuperSport Park here on Saturday:

SACHIN TENDULKAR V WASIM AKRAM

Sparks are bound to fly when the world's best one-day bowler faces the best batsman at the start of the innings.

Wasim may not have anything left to prove in the game but wants to bid goodbye to cricket after the World Cup by helping his team defeat India for the first time at the World Cup.

Tendulkar, the tournament's highest scorer with 371 runs, hopes to continue in the same vein and give India a flying start.

The first 15 overs will considerably influence the course of the game, for Wasim is the master of shrewd variations capable of rattling the Indian top order in his first spell.

India will depend largely on Tendulkar to neutralise Akram's efficacy, for he is now looking more comfortable after regaining his opening slot.

The Indian batting star may not be as aggressive as he was a few years ago, but is innovative enough to take advantage of the fielding restrictions in the opening 15 overs.

Wasim is Pakistan's leading wicket-taker against India with 60 victims in 47 matches. Tendulkar remains, not surprisingly, India's highest run-getter against Pakistan with 1,335 from 43 games.

SAURAV GANGULY V SHOAIB AKHTAR

If spared by Wasim, India could still be stung by Shoaib Akhtar, the world's fastest bowler after breaking the 100-mph barrier earlier in the tournament.

Shoaib forms a fearsome twosome with Wasim which gives batsmen

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Shoaib Akhtar

PHOTO: STAR FILE

It's only a sport

AFP, Centurion

Pakistan team manager Shaharyar Khan has warned spectators to keep their emotions under control during Saturday's highly-charged World Cup clash between his side and India.

The match, the first between the two rivals since June 2000, is being played against a background of mounting political tension over the disputed territory of Kashmir.

But Khan, a former diplomat, insisted on Friday that fans of both sides should leave the politics at the turnstiles and remember that they are watching a sporting event.

"It's not war," said Khan.

"It's just a vintage cricket match between two top teams and one team has to win so I advise people on both sides to treat it as sport and not as a political issue."

"It is a sporting event and not a

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Passions run wild

REUTERS, New Delhi

For India's cricket-crazy fans, there is perhaps only one thing bigger than their team winning the World Cup - a resounding victory over Pakistan.

When the two hostile neighbours cross swords on Saturday in World Cup Pool A, passions back home are bound to run high.

"The intensity in an India-Pakistan match is always tremendous," former India captain Ajit Wadekar told Reuters on Thursday. "They're always seen as our deadliest foes and the two teams play close, hard matches that go down to the wire."

"Unlike other countries, when Indian play Pakistan fear plays a vital role. Players are unsure how fans back home will react if they lose. Sometimes that is a load on the mind which becomes unbearable."

Just two weeks ago, fans across India protested angrily about their

team's poor start to the tournament in South Africa.

Captain Ganguly was given a mock funeral and his effigy was burnt. Posters of Sachin Tendulkar, Virender Sehwag and Rahul Dravid were set alight. Batsman Mohammad Kaif's house was attacked with black paint and oil.

Pakistani cricket players have been known to react in a similar manner.

"Our fans get too agitated and often over-react if we lose to India," former Pakistan Test captain Rameez Raja, now a television commentator, said last week.

With tempers already frayed, experts say there is no telling how volatile fans on both sides of the border will react to defeat.

"If India lose to Pakistan, people won't allow the team to come out of

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Red alert!

INTERNET, Potchefstroom

The Ashes, the Frank Worrell trophy, Dennis Lillee v Viv Richards... all great rivalries but none is close to matching the contest scheduled for Centurion's SuperSport Park on Saturday, when Saurav Ganguly's Indian squad meet the Waqar Younis-led Pakistanis.

Through wars, territorial disputes and decades of political strain, the relationship between Pakistanis and Indians has been, at best, testy, at worst, bloodthirsty.

So when the two nations meet for their World Cup pool clash the first time they've met at Test or one-day level in more than two years security will be significantly boosted to quell unrest between fans, whose fanaticism has turned violent in the past.

"There are games when we boost our security personnel numbers and our strategies might be changed to accommodate various situations," World Cup security chief Patrick Ronan said. "You could say that that game (India-Pakistan) is one of those games."

"We have watched the fans of both sides throughout the tourna

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Sehwag has a score to settle



VIRENDER SEHWAG

AFP, Centurion

India's Virender Sehwag is determined to make up for his lack of runs in the World Cup by firing on all cylinders during Saturday's key game against Pakistan.

The 24-year-old, whose batting

"I have never worked so hard as I did before the World Cup and it is quite strange I am not being able to deliver."

Inzamam's tally of 8,949 runs in 288 one-day matches is the fourth highest behind Indians Sachin Tendulkar and Mohammad Azharuddin and Sri Lanka's Aravinda de Silva.

Inzamam burst on the scene with a swashbuckling 60 off just 37 balls in the 1992 World Cup semi-final against New Zealand and then made an unbeaten 42 as Pakistan defeated England in the final.

He has never scored a World Cup century, his highest being 81 against Australia four years ago, and

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INDIA WARNS! Tiny Indians echo their country's sentiment at Kolkata on February 27.

PHOTO: AFP