



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

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

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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

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PHOTO: STAR FILE

Shoaib Akhtar

Betting frenzy

REUTERS, Bombay

They're swift. They're stealthy. They work round-the-clock out of clubs, 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. 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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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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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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Red alert!

INTERNET, Potchefstroom

The Ashes, the Frank Worrell trophy, Dennis Lillee v Viv Richards... all great rivalries but none is closer 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

style resembles that of his idol Sachin Tendulkar, has his own scores to settle with the arch-rivals.

He made his international debut against Pakistan at Mohali four years ago, was trapped leg-before by Shoaib Akhtar for one, gave away 35 runs in three overs of off-spin, and was promptly dropped.

He now returns to the SuperSport Park for only his second match against Pakistan and regarded as one of the most fearsome strikers of the ball in the game.

He re-emerged on the scene with a bang, making a 70-ball hundred in a must-win game against New Zealand during the tri-nations series in Sri Lanka in August 2001.

He filled the slot of an opener by the forced absence of Tendulkar due to injury and formed a match-winning combination with skipper Saurav Ganguly during the NatWest series in England last summer.

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Passions run wild

REUTERS, New Delhi

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

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

PHOTO: AFP