

Negative Warne

AFP, Brisbane

Australia's spin-king Shane Warne said he didn't expect to be punished after an exchange with Pakistan umpire Aleem Dar during the first Test against New Zealand here on Friday.

The leading Test wicket-taker was called for two wides which Dar interpreted as 'negative bowling' as he attempted to stifle Kiwi century-maker Jacob Oram's scoring with deliveries down the leg-side.

The Kiwi all-rounder top-scored with a blistering unbeaten 126 in his team's first innings of 353 to put the Aussies under pressure on the second day.

"I was trying to bowl a slow top-spinner wide of leg-stump so he (Oram) could top-edge a sweep, because he likes to sweep and the umpire said it was negative bowling so he 'widened' me," Warne said.

"I thought the first one was a little bit wide but the second one I didn't think it was a wide so I asked him 'is that negative, is it?' and he said 'you look after your job and I'll worry about mine', so I said 'no problem'."

Warne said he was disappointed to be called for the wides and he didn't expect any official sanction to be taken against him for the exchange with Dar.

Warne praised Stephen Fleming for getting the best out of his New Zealand team.

Saqlain eyes Feb comeback

REUTERS, Karachi

Pakistan's seasoned off-spinner Saqlain Mushtaq is targeting a return to competitive cricket in late February after surgery.

"I have had key-hole surgeries on both my knees which had developed ulcers in them. I am now going through the rehabilitation process and by late February should be back to playing cricket," said Saqlain on Friday.

The 28-year-old has played just one test for Pakistan in a miserable year. He was dropped from the squad in April.

England get a rain break

BBC ONLINE, undated

Torrential rain in Windhoek relented to allow England a full workout for the first game of their winter tour.

They managed their first test session on Thursday ahead of Sunday's match against Namibia.

On Wednesday evening the players were caught in a storm as they ate outdoors at a restaurant.

"I've never seen rain like that before. There was a power cut and I got very wet and had to roll my jeans right up to my knees," said batsman Ian Bell.

"There were a couple of tables inside so we were able to nip in there, but we got served in the dark so I still don't know what I ate."

Bell is set to make his first appearance in limited overs international matches when England reach Zimbabwe, having played his first Test at the end of the summer.

Gough full of energy

REUTERS, Windhoek

Experienced England fast bowler Darren Gough has pledged to keep playing as long as he is physically able to do so.

Gough, 34, is with the England squad in Namibia to prepare for one-day tours of Zimbabwe and South Africa.

"I've hired a personal trainer for the first time, and I've seen the advantages of that and learned new things," Gough told reporters on Thursday.

"I'll do anything to play for England, and as long as I'm fit and I think I can do a job I'll still play."

"I'm enjoying my cricket more than ever," Gough said.

"I'm enjoying being in an England team that's together, not a collection of individuals."

Oram-some

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been earmarked as a possible successor to Stephen Fleming as New Zealand's next skipper.

New Zealand have a long history of producing talented all-rounders but could not have expected to find a replacement for Chris Cairns, who recently retired from Test cricket, so soon although Oram dislikes the comparison.

"He (Cairns) was good enough to do it from ball one and I'm not quite at that level yet," Oram said.

"I don't see myself as a natural hitter. Cairns's just an explosive player who can blow the game open from ball one... whereas it probably takes me, as you've seen, nearly three sessions to do that."

"I'm not quite at that level yet," he said.

"Cairns's just an explosive player who can blow the game open from ball one... whereas it probably takes me a bit of time."

ICC acts illogically!



AFP, New Delhi

The International Cricket Council (ICC) has often been criticised for its whimsical decisions, but the flip-flop over Sourav Ganguly's two-match ban has reduced it to a laughing stock.

The Indian captain was handed the unprecedented ban by ICC match referee Clive Lloyd following his team's slow over-rate during the six-wicket defeat by Pakistan in a one-day international at Eden Gardens, Calcutta, on November 14.

But when Ganguly appealed against the ban, it astonishingly paved the way for him to take part in the first of the two home Tests against South Africa starting in Kanpur on Saturday.

The ICC's code of conduct allows cricketers to continue playing while their case is heard and a statement issued by the governing body on Thursday said Ganguly was "free to take his place in the first Test against South Africa".

Clearly, it is an advantage to challenge the authority of the match referee.

Imagine a captain being hauled up for misdemeanour in a World Cup quarterfinal and slapped with a

suspension for the next two matches -- the semifinal and the final.

No worries. All he has to do is to appeal against the ban and find himself playing both games.

India will be happy to have their captain back for at least the Kanpur Test, but arch-rivals Pakistan are not.

Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) chairman Shaharyar Khan was on Friday quoted by the 'Mid-Day' newspaper as saying the ICC's decision to allow Ganguly to play was an "insult" to match referee Lloyd.

"It is an insult to the former West Indies captain," Khan told the Bombay-based tabloid.

"Look, rules are rules. What is the point of making laws and placing referees when the ICC overrules them as and when it wishes?"

ICC rules prescribe that appeals by the offending player have to be disposed of in a week's time by a commissioner appointed by it.

But the seven-day deadline is easier said than followed.

Tim Castle, a lawyer in distant New Zealand who was appointed commissioner to adjudicate on Ganguly's appeal, had -- by the ICC's own admission -- not received the video footage of the November 14 match till Thursday evening.

So Castle decided to hold a

teleconference with Ganguly on November 25 -- a day after the scheduled finish of the first Test -- before making a decision.

Match referee Lloyd handed Ganguly the unprecedented suspension for India's slow over-rate which saw the day-night international finish an hour behind schedule.

Lloyd gave an allowance of 22 minutes for stoppages owing to on-field injuries and frequent drying of the ball because of the heavy dew on the ground, but ruled that India still fell five overs short.

Ganguly, who had been earlier fined for a similar offence, contended he had not deliberately slowed down the game.

But PCB boss Khan was unimpressed.

"Of course, there was a lot of dew on the outfield," Khan told 'Mid-Day'.

"Besides some players needed assistance after suffering from cramps."

"Lloyd is one of the most lenient referees in the game. He must have considered all the circumstances before taking the decision."

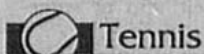
Lloyd himself has not spoken after Ganguly challenged his decision.



PHOTO: AFP

Roger Federer of Switzerland plays a backhand against Spaniard Carlos Moya at the Tennis Masters Cup in Houston on November 18.

Federer, Roddick in last four



AFP, Houston

World number one Roger Federer struggled past Spain's Carlos Moya for his 21st victory in a row over a top-10 foe while second-ranked Andy Roddick clinched an ATP Masters Cup semifinal berth.

Defending champion Federer, already assured a Saturday semifinal spot, rescued eight of nine break points, including four in the final set, for a 6-3, 3-6, 6-3, round-robin triumph here Thursday to dim Moya's hopes of advancing.

"It was tough mentally, knowing I'm qualified and knowing his situation," Federer said. "Both could feel it. He needed it so much and I didn't."

Wimbledon runner-up Roddick fired 16 aces, the last on match point, to beat Australian Open runner-up Marat Safin 7-6, 7-6, the American's third triumph in a row over the fourth-rated Russian.

"I stepped up on the big points and forced the issue on him," Roddick said after his tour-best 73rd victory of the year. "I tried to move it around a little bit, give him as little chance as possible to play in his comfort zone."

Australia's Lleyton Hewitt will join Federer and Roddick in the semi-finals by beating Argentina's

Gaston Gaudio on Friday. A loss sends Moya instead.

Britain's Tim Henman and Safin meet Friday with the winner claiming the other semifinal spot. Henman kept alive hopes for his first title of the year by beating Argentina's Guillermo Coria 6-2, 6-2.

"It's nice to have a performance like this," Henman said. "I've given myself an opportunity. I felt like it'd be a big match. I'm looking forward to it. He is the form player right now but I'm pretty happy with how I've been playing."

Safin is the hottest player on tour, having won titles at Beijing, Madrid and Paris in the past two months. But he could not conquer Roddick despite firing 16 aces against only one double fault.

"It sucks. But I'm not sad," Safin said. "I have a chance against Henman. He has a difficult serve and volley game. I have to stay focused and sometimes go for it. You have to play your game and not be scared of missing."

Federer began just 16 hours after going to bed from a rain-interrupted win over Hewitt, zipping through the first set in 27 minutes.

Moya, out for two months with a shoulder injury, broke Federer in the fourth game of the second set and held out, taking his first set since 1999 off the reigning Wimbledon, US Open and Australian Open champion.

"I put a lot of pressure on him with my serve and forehand," Moya said. "He makes you play under pressure more than any other guy. You expect to take more chances. He missed a few more than he usually does but he's still number one."

Federer answered the challenge, saving two break points in the first game of the third set, breaking Moya in the second to seize the lead and denying Moya on two more break chances in the fifth game.

"I'm disappointed," Moya said. "I had my chances. I lost 8-of-9 break points. When you do that against Federer you lose. If I had won one of those points, it could have been different."

Federer held twice more to win in one hour and 46 minutes, stretching a streak of top-10 victims that began with a Cup title last year.

Safin squandered three break points on Roddick in the 12th game of the second set, then hit a forehand long, slammed his racket to the ground, grabbed it and broke it over his knee.

"That was one moment I was really (ticked) off at myself. I can break a racket but I have to try to be more calm," Safin said.

Roddick fired four aces in the final tie-breaker, the fifth set in a row and seventh of the past nine between them to be settled only after a tie-breaker.

Honours evenly shared

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half-century he pulled Martin next ball to a leaping Nathan Aspinall at square-leg for 51 leaving the home side 109 for three.

Darren Lehmann didn't enhance his chances of holding on to his Test place with an 11-ball knock of eight before he was caught behind by Brendon McCullum, giving Vettori his second wicket.

Martyn, fresh from his series-high 444 runs in India at 55.50, was Australia's great hope of reducing New Zealand's lead.

His fluent half-century, his 20th in Tests, came up off 89 balls with five fours and a six off Martin.

Clarke, who spectacularly launched his Test career with 400 runs in the four-Test series in India last month at 57.14, provided staunch support for Martyn and the pair were threatening to turn the tide during Saturday's third day's

play.

SCOREBOARD

Scoreboard on the second day of the first cricket Test between Australia and New Zealand at the Gabba on Friday:

NEW ZEALAND: First innings (over-night 250 for 7)
Richardson c Ponting b Kaspruwicz 19

Sinclair c Ponting b Gillespie 69
Fleming c Warner b Kaspruwicz 0

Styris c Gilchrist b Kaspruwicz 27
Astle run out (Clarke) 19

McCullum c Gilchrist b Warner 23
Oram not out 126

McCullum c Gilchrist b Warner 10
Vettori c Warner b Kaspruwicz 21

Mills c Hayden b Warner 29
Martin c Ponting b Warner 0
Extras: (lb-1, lb-2, w-3, nb-4) 10
Total: (All out in 117.3 overs) 353
Fall of wickets: 1-26, 2-26, 3-77, 4-138, 5-138, 6-180, 7-206, 8-264, 9-317, 10-353.

Bowler O M R W

McGrath 27 4 67 0
Gillespie 29 7 84 1

Kaspruwicz 28 5 90 4
Warne 29.3 3 97 4

Lehmann 4 0 12 0
AUSTRALIA: First innings
Langer lbw b Vettori 34

Hayden lbw b Mills 8
Ponting c Aspinall b Martin 51

Martyn not out 59
Lehmann c McCullum b Vettori 8

Styris 31
Extras: (lb-1, nb-5) 6
Total: (For 4 wickets in 57 overs) 197
Fall of wickets: 1-16, 2-85, 3-109, 4-128.

Bowler O M R W
Martin 13 5 44 1

Mills 12 6 33 1
Oram 10 1 43 0
Styris 5 1 27 0
Vettori 17 4 49 2
Bad light ended play with 3 overs left.
Toss: New Zealand

Preview: Primera Liga

Night that never ends



AP, Madrid

Forwards Ronaldinho and Ronaldo face each other for the first time in Saturday's eagerly anticipated league clash of Spanish giants FC Barcelona and Real Madrid, just three days after they were teammates in Brazil's shock World Cup qualifying defeat.

With interest in the match at the Camp Nou especially high as Barcelona leads the standings, four points clear of second-place Madrid, the two South Americans have the perfect showcase to display their best form.

The star pair, who played together in their national team's 1-0 defeat against Ecuador in a World Cup qualifier on Wednesday, have struggled at times this season.

However, Ronaldo burst out of the doldrums to give an awesome display in the second half of Madrid's 6-1 thrashing of Albacete last Sunday. Ronaldinho's best moment came when he netted a spectacular late winning goal earlier in the month to earn Barcelona a 2-1 Champions League win over AC Milan.

Ronaldo says a Madrid victory on Saturday would set the seal on the team's recovery after a poor start.

"It's an important match which we want to win to confirm that we're in good form," said Ronaldo, who netted 34 goals in his only season with Barcelona in 1996-97.

Ronaldinho will be making his second appearance against Madrid. In the first, last April, he created

Barcelona's winning goal at the Santiago Bernabeu Stadium with a cheeky chip for Xavi Hernandez to score.

"I can't hide the fact that it's a very special game for me. It will be the first time I've played against Madrid at home and I'm really keen to do well," Ronaldinho said.

Madrid goes into the match with



RONALDO RONALDINHO

confidence after chalking up four straight wins, while Barcelona suffered a setback with its first defeat against Real Betis.

"When they see us second, four points behind, they're going to be a bit scared of us. We have achieved fantastic triumphs in the league and the Champions League. Now we're going there with greater confidence," Madrid left back Roberto Carlos told the club's Web site.

Madrid, which last season gained its first league win over Barcelona at the Camp Nou in 20 years, hasn't lost on its last four visits in all competitions to the 98,000 capacity stadium.

Madrid coach Mariano Garcia Remon says he's expecting another victory.

Spanish FA says sorry

AFP, London

The racist abuse targeting England's black players has brought about an official apology from the Spanish football federation, its English counterpart the FA said on Friday.

The FA said it had received a formal apology following the chants during the friendly international between the countries in Madrid on Wednesday.

The FA reported the abuse following the match, during which Ashley Cole, Shaun Wright-Phillips and Ashley Cole were taunted with 'monkey' chants, to European governing body UEFA and world body FIFA.

England's black under-21 players were subjected to similar abuse during their fixture the night before.

Ganguly allowed

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Ganguly are class players. You should remember these guys have done good things for us in the past."

On the eve of the first Test at the Green Park Stadium, the South Africans received a boost with all-rounder Jacques Kallis recovering from a side strain, but is unlikely to bowl.

Kallis, who was injured in a drawn tour game last week, batted at the nets and Smith said he would be available for the first match of the two-Test series.

Smith urged his team, short on experience and struggling to shake off a prolonged slump, to rise to the challenge of beating India at home.

"We come here as a young side, highly motivated," he said on Friday. "Touring India is always a tough proposition. But we've got a team that is looking forward to the occasion, hoping to prove the people wrong and coming out with a few smiles."

Smith said his team would miss opening batsman Herschelle Gibbs and left-arm spinner Nicky Boje, both part of the side which registered a 2-0 sweep over their last tour in 2000.

Gibbs and Boje, who remain under investigation by Delhi's police over their cricket match-fixing inquiry launched after the tour, opted out because they feared detention.

"With guys like Herschelle not being here, you lose a lot of experience," Smith said.

"But a young guy gets the opportunity of taking his place and making his own."

The side, which lost 1-0 in Sri Lanka in August, has prepared hard in a conditioning camp to face the challenge of spinners Anil Kumble and Harbhajan Singh.

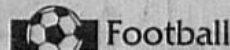
The second and final Test of the series begins in Ganguly's home city of Kolkata on November 28.

TEAMS
INDIA (from): Sourav Ganguly (capt), Rahul Dravid, Virender Sehwag, Gautam Gambhir, Sachin Tendulkar, Venkatesh Laxman, Dinesh Karthik, Mohammad Kaif, Anil Kumble, Harbhajan Singh, Murali Kartik, Irfan Pathan, Zaheer Khan, Ashish Nehra.

SOUTH AFRICA (from): Graeme Smith (capt), Hashim Amla, Zander de Bruyn, Boeta Dippenaar, Andrew Hall, Jacques Kallis, Makhaya Ntini, Justin Ontong, Robin Peterson, Shaun Pollock, Jacques Rudolph, Thami Tsolekile, Alfonso Thomas, Martin van Jaarsveld.

Preview: Premiership

Robben follows the 'master'



AFP, London

Arjen Robben may be on the verge of claiming his crown as London's favourite Dutch Master but the threat of being usurped by a younger rival will not prevent Dennis Bergkamp from hanging around Highbury for another season.

Robben may only have just embarked on his Chelsea career but already he is a short odds favourite to finish the season as player of the year. But even if that particular scenario materialises, the prodigiously talented winger knows he will still have his work cut out to emulate the impact that his 35-year-old compatriot has had on English football over a trophy-rich decade with Arsenal.

At the end of this season, Bergkamp will have been at Highbury for 10 years but with Arsenal currently playing a style of football he adores, he confesses to finding it hard to let go of his links with North London.

"I will have been here 10 years at the end of the season and in that whole time there have only been one or two moments when I thought 'maybe it's time to move to do something else'," he said.

"But maybe I will play for one more season. The way we've been playing is one of the big reasons why I wanted to carry on last season and you'd be crazy to step away from this if you can still do it."

Bergkamp and his Arsenal teammates will have to wait to see if Saturday's Highbury meeting with West Brom will bring a reunion with former Gunners striker Kanu, who is battling a groin strain.

"It will be nice to go back there and see a lot of old friends, but I am struggling at the moment," the Nigerian forward said.

Robben's introduction into the Chelsea line-up has helped give Mourinho's side the look of genuine champions.

But although the Dutchman was signed by former Chelsea boss Claudio Ranieri, the club's Portuguese right-back Paulo Ferreira has no doubt that it is the Mourinho method that is behind Chelsea's rise to the top of the Premiership.

Ferreira, a leading figure in the E. Porto team Mourinho led to Champions League glory last season, said: "The Chelsea Mourinho is the same guy as the Porto Mourinho. You have to prove yourself in every training session, to demand more of yourself the whole time."

"You might still get in the team if you have an off day but you're always working hard to get picked."

Chelsea entertain Bolton at Stamford Bridge with a two-point cushion over Arsenal but they will be wary of visitors who have taken points off all the top teams they have faced this season.

Midfielder Gary Speed insisted: "We are not going to Stamford Bridge with trepidation."

"We're a very confident side and we will be going there to win. If you go there with any other attitude then you have got no chance."

Manchester United will certainly be hoping Bolton display plenty of attitude as they seek to close an 11-point gap on the Premiership leaders.

Their own lunchtime appointment with Charlton at Old Trafford on Saturday represents Sir Alex Ferguson's 999th game in charge and the United boss could have one without Ruud van Nistelrooy scoring a hip injury while playing in Holland in midweek, leaving him doubtful starter.

Charlton's former Liverpool midfielder Danny Murphy has

"We do win at the Camp Nou. The math has arrived at the best possible moment for Madrid," Garcia Remon said.

But history favors Barcelona in this situation.

On 16 of the 12 occasions Madrid has visited the Camp Nou when Barcelona was leader, the Catalan team have won.

And Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard's confident last weekend's defeat will inspire his team, which has won all five league games at home this season.

"No we'll have to react," Rijkaard said. "It will be a very interesting match because we'll be playing against a team which has returned to form."

Barcelona's Cameroon striker Samuel Eto'o goes into his first match between the powerhouses as the league's leading scorer with nine goals.

"If he plays as we know how, there isn't a team in the world that can beat him. But everyone knows what soccer is like. We could make a mistake and hand the game to our opponent," Eto'o told sports daily Marca.

Lu Figo, who is despised by many Barcelona supporters for leaving the club for Madrid in 2000, will make his third appearance at the Camp Nou since then. Two years ago, Barcelona fans hurled a variety of objects - including pig's head - as Figo prepared to take corner kicks during the second half.

The chaotic scenes brought a 13-minute suspension of the game. As a consequence, the Spanish soccer federation ordered

the stadium closed for two matches, although the punishment has never been served, irritating Barcelona's rivals, especially Madrid.

The Camp Nou should have been shut. If it had been the Santiago Bernabeu, that's what would have happened," Garcia Remon said this week.

Barcelona will have Brazilian right back Juliano Belletti available again, although inspirational defender Carles Puyol is struggling to be fit in time. Madrid's Ivan Helguera is also doubtful.

Many armchair fans in Spain are in danger of missing the game after financial negotiations between the state broadcaster and the association of regional companies broke down on Wednesday. Unless a late solution is reached, half of Spain will lack television coverage of the match.