

Benkenstein Durham's

AFP, London

South Africa international Dale Benkenstein has signed a three-year contract to play for Durham, the English club announced on Wednesday.

Alongside Mike Hussey and Ashley Noffke the Zimbabwe-born 30-year-old is the third overseas player to have joined Durham for the 2005 season.

Benkenstein has represented South Africa in 23 one-day internationals, making his debut against England in 1998, and has scored more than 6,000 first class runs at an average of 41.77.

Durham head coach Martyn Moxon said: "Dale's signing adds some valuable experience to the squad."

"He is a quality performer who will play an important role for us both on and off the field."

Munna stays

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The hospital staff were finding it very difficult to keep away the rush of family members, fans, current and ex-footballers and his close associates who flocked the hospital corridors throughout the day as news spread of his condition.

Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina visited the ailing footballer in the morning and assured his family of every financial help necessary for his treatment.

Saber Hossain Chowdhury, organising secretary of Awami League and a director of Abahani, said that they will make all possible arrangements to move Munna to Bangalore if the local doctors give the permission.

Dhaka City Mayor Sadek Hossain Khoka, BFF president SA Sultan and other officials also visited him.

National cricket captain Habibul Bashar rushed to the hospital on arrival in Dhaka from Chittagong yesterday morning. Test batsman Javed Omar also paid a visit.

The officials of East Bengal Club in Kolkata, where Munna was idolised after his gallant displays while playing for the Indian giants, were also in constant touch to know about his condition.

Munna made his national debut in 1986 during the Seoul Asian Games and captained Bangladesh when they won their first international trophy in the 4-nation tournament in Myanmar in 1995.



BFF president SA Sultan (C) addressing a press briefing in connection with the launch of Vision Bangladesh at the BFF conference room yesterday.

Thorpe calms Ashes fever

BBC ONLINE, undated

England batsman Graham Thorpe has urged supporters not to go overboard about the team's chances in the Ashes series after their win in South Africa.

"The media will drum up expectations but we have to be realistic," Thorpe told BBC Radio Five Live.

"Australia have been a long way ahead for a long time now, but I think we've shown we can have competitive matches against them."

"Our game has to go to another level if we're going to overturn Australia."

Thorpe is England's senior batsman, at the age of 36, but is eager to continue his Test career this summer.

Younger players like Ian Bell and Kevin Pietersen are queuing up for his place, and the Surrey left-hander said: "I know my career won't go on for ever."

But he continued: "I have a

contract with England until the end of September which takes in the next two Test series and I'm looking forward to playing."

"This team is certainly bringing out the best in me. It's been very much an up and down series (in South Africa), but one I've thoroughly enjoyed."

"It's been very tough and I'm glad to have got through five Test matches in six weeks."

Thorpe said he had no complaints about playing Tests back to back, but called for a four-day break between games.

"That gives you a bit of recovery time, and time to prepare for the next Test match. We had three Test matches back to back and sometimes only two days in between."

"We didn't have enough preparation time, but we didn't grumble, we managed to turn it into a positive for ourselves."

"We didn't look for excuses when we played badly and I think that's one of the strengths of the team."

Mahendra takes over after 4 months

AFP, Kolkata

Ranbir Singh Mahendra finally took over as president of the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) on Thursday, four months after he won a contentious election to the country's richest sports body.

The 57-year-old lawyer from the northern state of Haryana had defeated political heavyweight Sharad Pawar 16-15 in the BCCI election on September 29, thanks to outgoing president Jagmohan Dalmiya's casting vote.

The election was challenged by Pawar's supporters in India's Supreme Court, which ruled in favour of Mahendra earlier this month and ordered the BCCI to call a general body meeting to ratify his appointment.

Dalmiya, one of India's best-known sports administrators who once headed the International Cricket Council (ICC), had led the BCCI in the interim till Thursday's meeting.

However, an earlier decision to make Dalmiya the BCCI's first patron-in-chief and also India's representative on the ICC, which had also been challenged in a lower court in Madras, was put on hold pending the court's verdict.

"I don't know who will represent the board at ICC meetings, it all depends on what the court says," Dalmiya told reporters.

Mahendra, son of former Haryana chief minister Bansi Lal and a self-confessed protégé of Dalmiya, had earlier served as BCCI secretary in the 1980s and one of its five vice-presidents till last year.

Pro league

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Hoque Helal, also a member of the delegation, informed that the BFF will start recruiting officials from April.

"We are going to take about 25 men including an executive secretary who will run the show for the committees. They will be trained by the AFC before becoming ready for work from September."

"We also have to prepare a budget for the whole programme. We know that we don't have the financial resources to implement such a vast programme. We have to know where the funds will come from. Once we prepare the budget, we will ask for help from the government and the AFC."

"Although we will launch the pro-league next year, I think it will take at least three years for it to take a good shape. The clubs interested in joining the league will have to fulfil the criteria set by the AFC. But we will move step by step," said Helal.

The BFF president announced that they will open the newly built BFF House (BFF Bhaban) on April 10 instead of the earlier proposed date in February.

"According to tradition, either the FIFA president or the regional chief has to inaugurate the building. But none of them are available in February. Mr. Hamman has agreed to arrive in Dhaka on April 9 to open the building the next day. We will try to make it a grand occasion with the presence of the Prime Minister," Sultan said.

Safin stops

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The Russian saved a match-point in the fourth set tie-break and then put his fans through the shredder when he squandered six match-points amid unbearable tension in a marathon fifth set.

But Safin finally clinched a sensational win on his seventh match-point, when an exhausted Federer stumbled out wide leaving the Russian to send an easy forehand into an open court to win.

The Russian's victory ended Federer's 26-match winning streak, a run stretching back to his defeat in last August's Athens Olympics.

Warne calls for venue change

BBC ONLINE, undated

Shane Warne believes New Zealand authorities should move Australia's one-day international from Hamilton in March because of a poor pitch.

Warne on Wednesday saw his World XI bowled out for 81 in 20.5 overs and New Zealand lose six wickets in 15 overs to complete a 2-1 series win.

"I think the authorities should have a look to see if the game should be moved," Warne said.

"It's standard -- you couldn't play a one-day international here."

Australia are due to play the fourth one-day international of a five-match series at Westpac Park on 2 March.

Wednesday's charity match last barely three hours and to appease the 11,500-capacity crowd the teams agreed to play an extra 10-overs-a-side game.

The World XI refused to play a competitive Twenty-20 match saying the pitch was too dangerous.

Australian opener Matthew Elliott, who scored 10, took three blows on his hand and both Kumar Sangakkara and Andy Bichel were nursing sore shoulders.

The same pitch last season saw a crater develop during the first Test against South Africa.

A year earlier, New Zealand and India created Test history when they were both dismissed on a green top for under 100 in their first innings.

New Zealand Cricket chief executive Martin Snedden admitted the wicket was "not ideal".

But he told the Waikato Times: "I don't think players were in danger."

"There just needs to be a bit of discussion and quiet reflection on what's happened and we'll see what happens from there."

Rafique blows

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comfortably in Chittagong but still there are areas we need to improve on," said the 32-year-old adding that it was not only the middle-order that was not getting the runs but also the bowling at times was giving away too many runs.

Asked what was going wrong with Mohammad Ashraful, who has been a flop in the series so far, Bashar blamed the nature of the wicket.

"Ashraful is a stroke-maker who loves to play his shots. But the wickets we have played on in Chittagong, and Dhaka were not ideal for stroke play," said Bashar.

The Bangladesh captain admitted that the toss was vital on this kind of slow surface but expressed his desire to complete a successful run chase after two futile attempts.

"We want to successfully chase in at least one game just to prove that we are a better side than Zimbabwe."

But when asked whether he would field first if he won the toss tomorrow, Bashar replied in the negative.

The dashing right-hander however admitted that he would have dearly loved an off-spinner in the side but he was ready to play with the available resources.

Serena wins

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was still hopeful, but it wasn't looking good," she said.

Like Sharapova, Dechy believed that her opponent's experience had been the key.

"Maybe she handled the tight moments a bit better than me," said the 25-year-old, who had been playing in her first grand slam semi-final.

Davenport, who delayed retirement at the end of last season after convincing herself that she could still challenge for honours at the highest level, is now contemplating her first grand slam final for five years.

Maynard backs 17-man squad

REUTERS, Kimberley

England assistant coach Matthew Maynard on Wednesday defended the large number of players in the squad for the seven one-day internationals against South Africa.

"There's the odd niggle (injury) and it was a very tough Test series, so we wanted as many players as possible," Maynard said of the 17-man squad.

"You can never have enough bowlers and one-day cricket is all about who bowls best, so they will all come in handy."

Test bowlers Matthew Hoggard and Simon Jones have both been added to the one-day squad and will compete with fellow seamers Alex Wharf, James Anderson, Steve Harmison, Kabir Ali and Darren Gough for places in the side.

"Matthew Hoggard was the bowler who the South Africans altered their batting line-up to protect their captain (Graeme Smith) from, so we thought it would be a good idea to add him," Maynard told reporters.



PHOTO: AFP

... BITTER PILL TO SWALLOW: Russian Maria Sharapova reacts during her titanic semifinal defeat against Serena Williams at the Australian Open yesterday.

Experience undid her

Australian Open

AFP, Melbourne

Maria Sharapova said Serena Williams' experience of saving lost causes had been the difference after she saw victory snatched from her grasp in the Australian Open semi-finals Thursday.

The Russian teenager said Williams' proven ability of escaping from tight corners had been crucial as the tigerish former world number one saved three match points to win 2-6, 7-5, 8-6.

"She's one of the best competitors out there," said the 17-year-old.

"I mean, she's been in those situations when she was down in the third set, and out of nowhere she knows how to turn it around."

"That comes from experience, that comes from her fighting spirit."

"The match could have gone either way, and she took her chances and she played well when she needed to. And that's the difference."

ence."

Williams' win came two years after she fought back from 15-40, 2-5 down to defeat Belgium's Kim Clijsters in the semifinals at Melbourne Park.

The six-time Grand Slam champion revealed she took taken comfort from the memory of her Houdini act against Clijsters two years ago as she fought off three match points.

"I thought, 'Okay, Serena, you're down matchpoint but that's okay, you've been down matchpoint before.' So I thought, 'Okay, I could do this.'"

Williams said the victory ranked among her most satisfying.

"Those are always the best wins, when you're down matchpoint because it's like you realise that you can't give up," she said.

Williams said she had kept her composure despite a high unforced error count -- 53 throughout -- which allowed Sharapova a free ride throughout the early part of the match.

"I was battling Maria and

myself," Williams said.

"I was playing two opponents because I was making a tremendous amount of errors."

"I wasn't doing what I had practised. But I just tried to stay positive."

Sharapova had been the only player on the tour to enjoy a winning record against Williams prior to Thursday's match, with her two victories coming in the Wimbledon and WTA Championship finals last season.

Williams' victory on Thursday squared her head-to-head record at two wins but the American said she was looking forward to an extended rivalry with the Russian youngster, who she believed had once viewed her as a role model.

"I definitely think she's looked at me as a reference maybe growing up, which is exciting," Williams said.

"I never thought I'd play someone that probably looked up to me."

"I think she has a fighting spirit and I think that's gotten her to where she is today. I'm still a fighter, too. Top fighter out there."

Red-hot Roddick v weary Hewitt

Australian Open

AFP, Melbourne

Andy Roddick has freshness on his side as he attempts to redress a big-match imbalance against Lleyton Hewitt in Friday's semifinal showdown between the world number two and three at the Australian Open. The American second seed has had almost half the on-court workload than the never-say-die Australian in the five matches to the semi-final, but even that might not be enough to fend off Hewitt before his home fans.

Roddick has spent a total of 7hr 42min on court in coasting through to the last four, dropping only one set along the way.

By comparison, Hewitt, bidding to become the first home winner of the national open in almost three decades, has been drawn into five-set dogfights in his last two matches for a total of 14hrs 38min court time, raising doubts about what he has left in the tank.

Throw in a persistent hip injury and his ability to recover from two draining matches against Spanish prodigy Rafael Nadal and Argentine ninth seed David Nalbandian and yet again Hewitt is up against it to fight off Roddick.

Hewitt's battling performances

tennis has been one of the highlights of this year's Open.

The feisty 23-year-old has fought back from the brink to wear down Nadal and Nalbandian in the fifth set, roared on Davis Cup-style by his home crowd.

Then there is Hewitt's 4-1 record over 22-year-old Roddick, featuring victories at the French Open, US Open and last year's Masters Cup.

Roddick finds Hewitt a difficult opponent to beat and even allowing for the fatigue factor the Australian battler will scrap for every point as he continues with his dream of becoming the first home winner of his national open since Mark Edmondson in 1976.

"He's got an advantage, he's in bed already tonight. Yeah, he's got an advantage in that point. But come Friday I'll be ready to go," Hewitt vowed after his midnight finish Wednesday against Nalbandian.

"You're always going to prefer to have spent less energy out on the court leading into a semi-final when it gets down to the business end of the tournament."

"But when you start playing it's the top four players in the world playing the semi-finals now, so you're going to have to play your best tennis and you're going to have to have enough petrol in the tank as well."

It is a much different situation for

Roddick when he first made the semi-finals here only to run out of gas and go down to German Rainer Schuettler in the 2003 semi-final.

Roddick was backing up after his monumental five-hour quarter-final victory over Moroccan Younes El Aynaoui which was decided 21-19 in the fifth set in the early hours of the morning.

"Well, the only other time I got this far at the Australian Open, I felt like I was about to fall over walking out to my semi-final match," Roddick said.

"It's been pretty smooth sailing so far as much so as I've ever had being in this position in a grand slam."

"But at the same time that could end up being a good thing. I don't have many miles on me so far this tournament."

Hewitt has the memory of his 6-3, 6-2 spanking of Roddick in their last meeting in the semi-finals of the Masters Cup in Houston last November.

"Obviously, that's in the back of my mind. I'm sure it's going to be in the back of his mind as well that I played a pretty good match against him in the Masters Cup."

"So I'll be trying to emulate a very similar situation. But I'm sure he's going to learn a lot from that match and he's going to come out and want revenge."

Crucial Pak-WI

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Pakistan on Friday and again in Perth on Tuesday to make the finals. "We're looking forward to the two games, it's a do-or-die situation, we have to win both, I'm sure that the guys are going to be up to it," he said. The Windies' biggest concern is Lara's bruised wrist, which he has played with since being struck in the opening game of the series, against Australia in Melbourne.

Lara said the injury was preventing him from training, but he expected to play in the remaining matches.

TEAMS

PAKISTAN (from): Inzamamul Haq (captain), Salman Butt, Taufeeq Umar, Yasir Hameed, Mohammad Hafeez, Yousef Youhana, Younis Khan, Shahid Afridi, Abdul Razzaq, Azhar Mahmood, Kamran Akmal, Navedul Hasan, Mohammad Khalil, Rao Iftikhar.

WEST INDIES (from): Brian Lara (captain), Shivnarine Chanderpaul, Christopher Gayle, Wavell Hinds, Ramnaresh Sarwan, Marlon Samuels, Dwayne Bravo, Ryan Hinds, Courtney Browne, Ian Bradshaw, Pedro Collins, Mervyn Dillon, Reon King, Xavier Marshall.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistan captain Inzamam Haq bats in the nets at the Adelaide Oval the day before the VB Series one-day match against West Indies.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

CROSSWORD puzzle grid and clues. Across clues include: 1 Beyond control, 5 Round Table address, 8 Kohoutek feature, 12 Creche trio, 13 Farm implement, 14 In a bad way, 15 "do" word, 16 Piralite potable, 17 Prepare a casserole, 18 Put aside, 20 Related candy, 25 Street's boss, 29 Dryly humorous, 30 Lemieux millieu, 31 Unctuous words, 33 Rounded handle, 34 Altar affirmative.

Down clues include: 1 Writer Kingsley, 2 Report-card, 24 Green-span subj., 25 Ms. McEntire, 26 Drudge, 27 Verdi opera, 28 Laggard, 32 Performer, 33 Amateur songfest, 35 Sellout sign, 36 Chaps, 38 Garden shelter, 39 "The Trial" writer, 42 Unexciting, 43 Reverbate, 44 Horace or Herbie, 45 Big Bird's home, 46 Whopper, 48 Abby's sis.

CRYPTOQUIP puzzle grid and clues. Across clues include: 1 Beyond control, 5 Round Table address, 8 Kohoutek feature, 12 Creche trio, 13 Farm implement, 14 In a bad way, 15 "do" word, 16 Piralite potable, 17 Prepare a casserole, 18 Put aside, 20 Related candy, 25 Street's boss, 29 Dryly humorous, 30 Lemieux millieu, 31 Unctuous words, 33 Rounded handle, 34 Altar affirmative.

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