

Gaibandha cricket

OUR CORRESPONDENT

Ghagot Krira Chakra crushed Nabarun Krira Chakra by 121 runs in First Division Cricket League at Gaibandha Stadium yesterday.

Wining the toss, Ghagot made 195-8 in 45 overs and then they bundled out Nabarun for 74 in 25.3 overs.

Van Basten drops Davids

AFP, Zeist

Holland coach Marco Van Basten has overlooked Inter Milan midfielder Edgar Davids for next Wednesday's friendly international against England at Villa Park.

He has brought in Heerenveen striker Ugur Yildirim, who has Turkish and Dutch nationality, and AZ Alkmaar goalkeeper Henk Timmer for their first caps.

Rud Van Nistelrooy, Philipp Cocu, Arjen Robben, Pierre van Hooijdonk are injured.

SQUAD

Goalkeepers: Edwin Van der Sar (Fulham/ENG), Henk Timmer (AZ Alkmaar)

Defenders: Wilfred Bouma/PSV Eindhoven), Khalid Boulahrouz (Hamburg/GER), Giovanni van Bronckhorst (Barcelona/SPA), Nigel De Jong (Ajax), Jan Kromkamp (AZ Alkmaar), Mario Melchiot (Birmingham City/ENG), Joris Mathijsen (AZ Alkmaar)

Midfielders: Mark Van Bommel (PSV Eindhoven), Denny Landzaat (AZ Alkmaar), John Heitinga (Ajax), Wesley Sneijder (Ajax), Rafael van der Vaart (Ajax)

Strikers: Ugur Yildirim (SC Heerenveen), Romeo Castelen (Feyenoord), Dick Kuijt (Feyenoord), Roy Makaay (Bayern Munich/GER)

Moody denies S Africa approach

CRICINFO, undated

Tom Moody, Worcestershire's director of cricket, has dismissed rumours linking him with South Africa's coaching position.

Ray Jennings, the current coach, is only under contract until May and there is speculation that his idiosyncratic methods might have alienated some members of the board. Moody has been linked by sources within South Africa as a potential successor, with some people claiming that he has already been interviewed for the role.

But Moody denied the claims. "It's one of those things," he said. "There has been some rumours but I have had no approach from South Africa. I am committed to Worcestershire."

Becks wants

FROM PAGE 13

the team is working much harder and I've still got a lot more to give."

A spectacular long-range Beckham free-kick maintained Madrid's perfect league record in 2005 with a 2-1 win at bottom club Numancia on Sunday.

But despite five league wins in a row, Real remain seven points behind Barcelona.

Beckham said his private life -- invaded by newspaper allegations of sex flings last year -- was on firmer ground since his wife Victoria joined him in Madrid.

"Things have calmed down a lot," he said. "I've still got a few problems from the paparazzi but apart from that there are no problems."

"I've got a house and my sons are happy at school. My wife is here every day and that helps. We're going to have our third child in Madrid, so he can play for Spain or England."

Twenty20

FROM PAGE 13

youngsters to watch the game but not to copy the players' techniques?" he continued.

"There is nothing good about Twenty20 cricket. People who disagree don't know what they are talking about."

Dyson

FROM PAGE 13

warm-up game from March 26. The national cricket selectors named a pool of 24 players for training from which the final squad will be selected. These players will be involved in SLC's provincial tournament which gets underway tomorrow and ends with the final at Dambulla on March 6.

Gilchrist backs

FROM PAGE 13

"Maybe those teams watched us and have their own plans against him now," Harbhajan continued.

"Now maybe everyone knows where to bowl to him. But at the end of the day, he is a great player and I hope he comes out of this stronger. I would like to watch him score over 350 again in a Test -- just not against us."



Lt Gen Hasan Mashhud Chowdhury (4th from R), Chief of Army Staff and president of Kurmitola Golf Club, poses with other dignitaries after inaugurating the Square Golf Tournament on Thursday.

Lara unhappy over non-selection role

Cricket

CRICINFO, undated

Brian Lara has said that he was upset about not being part of the selection panel that picked the 14-member squad for the VB Series. Lara hinted that the new coach, Bennett King, had a lot of say in selection matters and the team was suffering because of his lack of experience with the West Indies setup.

This was under a new policy where his position as captain was not confirmed until the squad had been selected. The team returned home after being forced out of the VB Series, where they won only one game, but Lara insisted that there were several gains on the tour.

"You would think that someone who is in charge of the team and had won the ICC Champions Trophy would have had something to do with the selection," Lara told the Caribbean Media Corporation, the West Indian news agency, on arrival at the Grantley Adams Airport in Barbados on Friday.

"Unfortunately, this was not the case. If you have a new selection policy and there is a coach who has a lot of say in the process and does not have the experience of knowing West Indies cricket, then there will be areas in which you will fall down.



BRIAN LARA

"I'm sure that the selectors are astute enough to know what's happening in West Indies cricket," Lara continued.

"The right players that are needed, and we will hopefully see some improvement the next time we

take the field."

Lara, though, touched upon the silver linings from the tournament. "We looked more like a unit," he told The Barbados Nation.

"We looked more aggressive and more like we knew what we were doing in the middle but it happened pretty late. We didn't get out of the blocks until midway through the tournament and left ourselves with virtual finals every time we went out to the middle after that."

West Indies, who appeared rusty for a major part of the tournament, were away from international cricket for more than three months after their Champions Trophy triumph, where they recorded an incredible victory in the finals in September.

Lara also emphasised the need for significant contributions from senior players and singled out Chris Gayle for his batting slump.

"It's a team game and everyone has to contribute," he said.

"Unfortunately, one of our best batters, Chris Gayle, was unable to fire but these things happen. Hopefully, in the next series, he'll get things going."

Kenyan accounts frozen

Cricket

AFP, Nairobi

The Kenyan government on Friday froze bank accounts of trouble-ridden Kenya Cricket Association (KCA), effectively grounding all its activities amid a row over the management of the sport, officials said.

All activities will remain grounded until a case instituted by the KCA against the government is heard next week, according to a KCA official who insisted on anonymity.

The sports ministry mid January dissolved the KCA and set up an

interim committee to run the sport, pending fresh elections in April, but the sacked office bearers rushed to court challenging the decision.

Both sides, who are still in log-gerheads over money and a national constitution, are expected to appear in a Nairobi court on February 10.

"Until the case is decided we cannot guarantee payments to any of our employees," the KCA official added in Nairobi.

The cash freeze has effectively grounded the training sessions of the national team, which is preparing 1for the ICC Intercontinental Cup qualifying tournament against Namibia and Uganda at the end of this month.

Others affected are about 30 KCA staff members, including 17 coaches in the national development programme that relies heavily on funding from the International Cricket Council.

But doubts have been raised over the KCA spending, amid a long-standing row with national team players over salary payments and other outstanding allowances.

One of the coaches on the development team is reported to have gone without his salary for the last three months and faced eviction from his house for non-payment of his rent which is on arrears.

Premiership's best

Football

AFP, London

Manchester United boss Alex Ferguson claimed their 4-2 victory at Arsenal earlier this week was one of the best ever matches in the history of the Premiership.

The Red Devils' 4-2 win ended any hopes of the Gunners' retaining their title and left United as the only realistic challengers to runaway leaders Chelsea.

Ferguson has spent the last three days bringing his team back down to earth in time for Saturday's must-win Old Trafford clash with Birmingham.

But while he insisted United were fully primed to face Steve Bruce's men, Ferguson could not help reflecting on a powderkeg encounter that will go down as one of the all-time greats.

"Tuesday's game produced a level of football that you will not see matched many times," he said. "To get that kind of drama, inten-

sity and pure excitement in a single game is amazing.

"It is a tribute to every player involved in the game. They raised the bar and in doing so produced what might have been the best game the Premiership has ever seen. It was the kind of match you just didn't want to end.

"At times like that, Sky must realise how lucky they are. They have done a fantastic job in taking English football on but to get something like that to show viewers all round the world, it must have left their producers purring like cats."

Unfortunately for Ferguson and his team, the momentum generated by the startling win was halted almost immediately by the unstoppable Chelsea bandwagon, which rolled Blackburn over at Ewood Park on Wednesday night.

Despite losing just once since the opening day of the season and picking up 35 points from a possible 39 in their last 13 matches, United still find themselves 11 points adrift of Jose Mourinho's men.

Ferguson knows it would take a

combination of an unexpected Chelsea collapse and the Red Devils maintaining their own impressive form for his team to stand any chance of lifting their ninth Premiership title.

However he insists his team have the potential to take advantage of any Chelsea slip and is not expecting to follow up the Arsenal victory with a miserable defeat, as occurred at Portsmouth immediately after the Gunners' 49-game unbeaten run came to a shuddering halt at Old Trafford in October.

"That was a different time," he observed. "If you create 18 chances in a match and don't take any of them like we did at Portsmouth, you don't deserve to win. But the form of the team now is far different."

"There is a confidence and a determination about the place and it didn't need the result we achieved at Highbury on Tuesday to emphasise that. It means we have now done the double over Arsenal and Liverpool in the same season, which I don't think we have done before."

Sharapova races into semis

Tennis

REUTERS, Tokyo

Wimbledon champion Maria Sharapova and world number one Lindsay Davenport have both powered into the Pan Pacific Open semifinals in resounding fashion.

Sharapova swept aside fellow Russian Elena Likhovtseva 6-3, 6-3 on Friday while Davenport trounced Czech Iveta Benesova 6-1 6-2 to move closer to a record fifth title at

the 1.3 million dollar tournament.

But there was disappointment for Elena Dementieva as the Russian was upset by Japan's Shinobu Asagoe 6-3, 6-4 after suffering a freak hand injury.

Second seed Sharapova, beaten by Serena Williams in the Australian Open semifinals last week, was never seriously tested in a one-sided match on Tokyo's indoor carpet.

The 17-year-old repeatedly punished Likhovtseva's weak serve and closed out the match with a ferocious backhand pass after 64

minutes.

"I felt I could break her any time. I know people are hungry to beat me after I won Wimbledon but I love beating them too."

Pan Pacific title holder Davenport is also trying to get the Australian Open out of her system after losing to Williams in the final last weekend.

Square Golf held

SPORTS REPORTER

The Sixth Square Golf Tournament, one of country's leading tournaments, concluded at the lush green course of the Kurmitola Golf Club yesterday.

Around 400 golfers took part in the two-day event. Chief of Army Staff and President of Kurmitola Golf Club, Lt. General Hasan Mashhud Chowdhury inaugurated the Square Golf Tournament and also gave away the prizes to the winners.

Tapan Chowdhury, managing director, Square Pharmaceuticals Limited and Anjan Chowdhury, managing director, Square Toiletries Limited also spoke on this occasion.

Blues fancy Cole

AFP, London

Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho has fuelled speculation about a summer bid for Arsenal's Ashley Cole days after newspaper reports the Premier League leaders had made an illegal approach for the left-back.

Mourinho has promised to make two major signings in the summer - a left-back as well as one of the world's greatest players - but he has ruled out David Beckham.

"We'll buy two - one left-sided defender, because I only have one, and another player," he told the Daily Mail.

"Ashley Cole is the best English defender."

Liverpool's Steven Gerrard looks to be the man he has singled out as one of the world's greatest players.

"We are already scouting half-a-dozen players, who are the best in the world, because only they have the ability to join a super, balanced squad like ours," he said.

"That player isn't Beckham, not that I don't like him as a player or as a person."

"It's simply that because of the position that he plays, and the way that our team play, he doesn't seem ideal to us."

Newspaper reports last weekend claimed Cole had met Mourinho and Chelsea chief executive Peter Kenyon in a London hotel but the Premier League has said it would only launch an investigation if Arsenal lodged an official complaint.

A Chelsea statement released on Friday read: "The club has an established policy on stories linking it with players, whatever the circumstances. We have not commented in the past, do not intend to comment now, and will not do so in the future."

Arsenal are currently in talks with Cole to extend his current deal which runs out in 2007.

Advantage Australia

FROM PAGE 13

SCOREBOARD Scoreboard in the Australia v Pakistan first tri-series one-day international final at the Melbourne Cricket Ground yesterday.

Table with columns: AUSTRALIA, Gilchrist c Razaq, Clarke lbw b Navedul, Ponting b Anjum, Martyn st Akmal b Afridi, Symonds c Inzamam b Razaq, Lehmann c Akmal b Afridi, Katich c sub (Yasir) b Razaq, Watson c Hafeez b Razaq, Lee b Navedul, Gillespie not out, McGrath run out, Extras: (b 1, lb 8, w 7, nb 3), Total (in 49.1 overs), Fall of wickets: 1-29, 2-51, 3-53, 4-190, 5-190, 6-213, 7-213, 8-220, 9-235, 10-237

Table with columns: BOWLER, O, M, R, W, Navedul 9 0 50 2, Anjum 8 1 27 1, Khallil 4 0 30 1, Afridi 10 0 50 2, Razaq 10 0 33 3, Hafeez 8 0 38 0

Table with columns: PAKISTAN, Butt lbw b Lee 0, Akmal c Gillespie b McGrath 4, Hafeez c Watson b McGrath 13, Youhana b Lee 2, Inzamam c McGrath b Lee 51, Malik c Lehmann b Gillespie 66, Razaq run out 3, Afridi c Katich b Gillespie 26, Navedul c Lehmann b McGrath 29, Anjum not out 19, Khallil not out 0, Extras: (b 3, w 2, nb 1) 6, Total: (for 9 wkts) 219, Fall of wickets: 1-1, 2-7, 3-9, 4-27, 5-118, 6-123, 7-153, 8-171, 9-216

Table with columns: BOWLER, O, M, R, W, Lee 10 0 23 3, McGrath 10 3 34 3, Gillespie 10 0 47 2, Watson 9 1 38 0, Lehmann 4 0 29 0, Symonds 7 0 45 0

Result: Australia win by 18 runs Man of the Match: Andrew Symonds (AUS) Toss: Australia 2nd final: Sunday D/N

PREVIEW: PRIMERA LIGA

Atletico in Lion's den

Football

AFP, Madrid

Spain's runaway league leaders Barcelona have not been beaten in their Nou Camp stadium for more than a year and even Sunday's rivals Atletico Madrid admit they would be happy to settle for a point there.

"Barcelona could be on their way to being champions. If they carry on playing like this, no one is going to catch them," said Atletico's Spanish international striker Fernando Torres.

"Everyone thought they were wobbling but they shut a lot of mouths with their 4-0 win at Sevilla last week." The big worry for Barca coach Frank Rijkaard is that his inspirational Brazilian midfielder Ronaldinho has missed training all week.

The World Player of the Year picked up a leg injury in last weekend's match.

French international Ludovic Guily is another who will have a late fitness test after suffering again from his chronic back problems, working out for several days alongside Ronaldinho in the Barca club gym.

Atletico have their own injury

problems though, with both Jose Antonio Garcia Calvo and Jesper Gronkjaer both doubtful.

Barcelona have 51 points from their 21 games and a seven point advantage over bitter rivals Real Madrid, who play host to fourth-placed Espanyol on Saturday.

Pundits have been quick to point out this week that the visit of the Barcelona-based club means the season has turned full circle for Real.

It was Espanyol's 1-0 defeat of the Spanish giants in September that precipitated the resignation of former Spain boss Jose Antonio Camacho.

Mariano Garcia Remon then took over as the Real coach only, in turn, to be superseded by Wanderley Luxemburgo during the winter break.

However, Luxemburgo has cured Real's woes as the team has rattled off five consecutive league wins since his arrival.

The encounter will see two old friends come face-to-face as foes.

Espanyol playmaker Ivan De La Pena and Real's Ronaldo played together at Barcelona during the 1996-97 season and are still regularly in close contact.

"I used to have great fun playing alongside Ronaldo," said De La Pena. "He was a bit thinner then, but he's still a phenomenon on the

pitch." The main worry for Luxemburgo is whether Zinedine Zidane will recover from his midweek bout of gastro-enteritis.

If Zidane is unfit, Spanish international Jose Maria Gutierrez will start alongside recent signing Thomas Gravesen.

Reigning champions Valencia are now a distant third behind the top two, having only managed two points from their last three games to fall seven points behind Real Madrid.

The sorry streak prompted an astonishing outburst from Valencia coach Claudio Ranieri during training on Wednesday.

"Why do you only react when you are up to your necks in trouble?" demanded Ranieri ahead of Sunday's match with Real Sociedad.

FIXTURES

Saturday (kick off times in GMT): Real Sociedad v Valencia (1900), Real Madrid v Espanyol (2100) Sunday: Albacete v Real Zaragoza (1600), Real Betis v Osasuna (1600), Getafe v Numancia (1600), Levante v Sevilla (1600), Malaga v Real Mallorca (1600), Villarreal v Racing Santander (1600), Deportivo v Athletic Bilbao (1800), Barcelona v Atletico Madrid (2000)

PREVIEW: PREMIERSHIP

United can only hope

Football

AFP, London

It is indicative of how radically Chelsea have transformed the English football landscape this season that Manchester United have been reduced to relying on a favour from Manchester City.

Sir Alex Ferguson and his squad continue to insist that all is not lost in their bid to chip away at Chelsea's commanding lead at the top of the Premiership.

But even the most red-eyed of optimists would accept that what little hope remains will disappear if Jose Mourinho's men are not tripped up soon.

Which is where City, visitors to Stamford Bridge on Sunday, come into the picture.

Kevin Keegan's side have the distinction of being the only English side to have beaten Chelsea since Mourinho took charge in the summer.

But results since that 1-0 win at Maine Road back in November have done little to suggest that City are capable of pulling off a similar upset at Stamford Bridge on Sunday.

A bruising 1-0 win at Blackburn in midweek left Chelsea just nine wins and one draw away from securing their first title in 50 years, as well as extending their run of clean-sheet victories in the league to eight matches.

The Londoners' run-in includes potentially tricky trips to Everton and Bolton as well as a trip to Old Trafford that is currently scheduled for April 16.

But it remains difficult to envisage them cracking at this late stage, or to understand why Mourinho insists all his players have to just concentrate on continuing to do what they have been doing with quiet efficiency all season.

Manchester United are second

now, a few days ago it was Arsenal but it's not our problem because at the moment they have a big fight for second place," the Portuguese manager said.

"They have to fight each other to see who can be more comfortable there. We need to win nine matches and draw one to be sure of winning the league and I don't care about Manchester United, I don't care about Arsenal, I just care about us.

"We are just concentrating on what we have to do."

Ferguson admitted this week that United could win every match from now to the rest of the season and still be trailing by several lengths as Chelsea cross the finishing line.

But in the wake of Tuesday's 4-2 comeback win over Arsenal, there is no doubting the confidence among United's players about their ability to put together a winning run between now and the end of the season.

"Winning at Highbury for us was like when a club in Spain wins at Real Madrid or Barcelona -- we proved we are still in the race," said Gabriel Heinze, United's Argentinian defender.

On paper, Birmingham, the visitors to Old Trafford on Saturday afternoon, should not overly trouble United in their current form. But Ferguson will know from his vast Champions League experience to be wary of Birmingham's latest acquisition, Walter Pandiani.

The Uruguayan striker, signed on loan from Deportivo La Coruna minutes before the transfer deadline on Monday night, marked his debut with a goal in the 2-1 defeat of Southampton on Wednesday night.

And the striker nicknamed 'The Rifle' knows there will be no better way to leave a lasting impression on English football than by shooting a hole in United's title hopes in the Theatre of Dreams.

Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger

conceded the title to Chelsea in the wake of Wednesday's defeat by Manchester United, but that does not mean the Gunners have nothing left to play for.

With the burden of financing their new stadium to consider, Arsenal can ill afford to miss out on automatic qualification for next season's Champions League, a privilege granted only to the top two in the league.

Wenger also has this season's tournament to consider as he seeks to restore his side's confidence in the run-up to the second round clash with Bayern Munich later this month.

The Frenchman is under pressure to restore goalkeeper Jens Lehmann to his starting line-up this weekend at the expense of the hapless Manuel Almunia, who was at fault on at least one of United's goals in midweek.

But there is little he can do about his painfully stretched defensive resources. Sol Campbell, Philippe Senderos (both injured) and Kolo Toure (suspended) are all unavailable for the trip to Villa meaning Pascal Cygan is likely to be accompanied by the inexperienced full-back Justin Hoyte in the middle of defence.

The pick of the weekend's other games comes at Norwich on Saturday, where West Brom are the visitors for an encounter made for the cliched old billing of 'relegation six pointer.'

FIXTURES

Saturday: Aston Villa v Arsenal (1715 GMT), Crystal Palace v Bolton (1245 GMT), Liverpool v Fulham, Manchester Utd v Birmingham, Middlesbrough v Blackburn, Newcastle v Charlton, Norwich v West Brom, Tottenham v Portsmouth Sunday: Chelsea v Man City (1605 GMT), Southampton v Everton (1400 GMT)

PREVIEW: SERIE A

Milan's Lazio test

Football

AFP, Rome

Second-placed AC Milan host Lazio on Sunday looking to make further ground on leaders Juventus and keep alive their dream of retaining the Serie A title.

On Wednesday Milan bounced back from two consecutive 1-0 defeats -- against Livorno and Bologna -- with an impressive 4-1 demolition of Messina. A resounding victory in Sicily coupled with Juve's surprise 1-0 defeat at home to Sampdoria took the reigning champions to within five points of Fabio Capello's pacesetters with 16 games left to play.

And with Juve facing a potentially testing time away to Palermo on Saturday, Milan could really crank up the pressure on their championship rivals if results go their way this weekend.

Milan captain Paolo Maldini insisted his team were still very much in contention for the coveted Scudetto.

"We knew we didn't play well against Bologna last Sunday, but

we also knew that our challenge for the championship wasn't over," said the 36-year-old defender, who last month celebrated 20 years with his hometown club.

"When you have a dip in form you will lose ground, but against Messina we showed our winning mentality. We are relaxed as there are 50 points to play for."

Milan's Brazilian midfielder Marcos Cafu echoed his skipper's sentiments.