

All roads lead to Mohali

Revenge not on Inzy's mind; Sourav nervous to be favourites

AFP/REUTERS, Mohali

Pakistan captain Inzamam-ul-Haq said Monday India would plan to capitalise on the absence of his key paceman Shoaib Akhtar by preparing a fast track for the opening Test here.

"I think Akhtar's absence has prompted India to leave grass on the pitch," Inzamam said on the eve of the first Test of a three-match series.

But he felt Akhtar's absence would not be a big handicap, saying he had support bowlers to deliver in the pressure series, Pakistan's first in India in six years.

"I think the pitch will help seamers more than spinners on the first couple of days. If it (grass) remains on the track, it will give equal chances to both the teams as we have adequate back-up," he said.

Akhtar had pulled out of the tour due to a hamstring injury.

Inzamam, leading an inexperienced side, said it was up to senior players to show the way to youngsters against a full-strength Indian side.

"Pressure is always there in the

India-Pakistan series," he said. "It's necessary for experienced batsmen to show more responsibility. I know I have to perform both as captain and batsman to set an example. We may not be favourites, but are capable of winning the series."

Inzamam said his team had come not to avenge last year's defeats, but to play competitive cricket.

"Revenge is not on our minds," said Inzamam, whose team lost both the Test and one-day series against India at home last year.

"We know India have an edge as they have experienced players. We may be inexperienced, but not weak and I'm confident we can win," he said.

Inzamam felt leg-spinner Danish Kaneria could play a key role as the pitch was also expected to help spin.

"He (Kaneria) has been our key spinner for the past couple of years. He can be dangerous and win matches single-handedly," said Inzamam.

Only three players in the Pakistan squad, Shahid Afridi, Younis Khan and Inzamam, have played Tests in India, when

they drew 1-1 in 1999 and won an Asian Test Championship game.

"With India and Pakistan there will be tension, whether you are travelling for the first time or fourth time," Inzamam said.

On the other hand, India are under pressure as favourites to win the much-awaited home Test series, according to their captain Sourav Ganguly.

"Every cricket player is a bit nervous before the start of the first Test," Ganguly told reporters on Monday. "Things change as you get into the series."

TEAMS

INDIA (from): Sourav Ganguly (captain), Virender Sehwag, Gautam Gambhir, Rahul Dravid, Sachin Tendulkar, Venkatesh Laxman, Dinesh Karthik, Irfan Pathan, Zaheer Khan, Anil Kumble, Harbhajan Singh, Laxmipathy Balaji.

PAKISTAN (from): Inzamam-ul-Haq (captain), Salman Butt, Taufeeq Umar, Younis Khan, Yousof Youhana, Asim Kamal, Abdul Razzaq, Kamran Akmal, Danish Kaneria, Mohammad Sami, Navedul Hasan, Yasir Hameed, Shahid Afridi, Mohammad Khalil, Arshad Khan, Shoaib Malik.

Umpires: Rudi Koertzen (South Africa) and Darrell Hair (Australia).

"We're a very balanced side and most of us are on the peak of our game."

"But we have to play to potential to be in a position to win and that is going to be the case for the next 50 days."

Ganguly had at his disposal a full-strength bowling attack as seamers Laxmipathy Balaji and Ashish Nehra had returned after being out of Test cricket for nearly a year due to injuries.

"It's good to pick the best eleven after a long time. We'll choose the side that suits the conditions," said Ganguly, who is likely to go into the match with three fast bowlers.

India included three pacemen - Irfan Pathan, Zaheer Khan and Balaji - and two spinners - Anil Kumble and Harbhajan Singh - in the twelve announced for the match.

Ganguly did not believe his team would find it easy just because they more experienced than their rivals.

"True, we are a balanced side but cricket is not played on paper. What matters is how you perform on the field. Pakistan are a young team and we'll have to play really well to win the series," he said.



IT'S MINE, NO IT'S MINE: India captain Sourav Ganguly (L) and his Pakistan opposite number Inzamam-ul-Haq hold the TVS Test Series Cup during a press conference at Mohali yesterday.



Did U Know?

Lori McNeal shocked the tennis world by defeating defending champion Steffi Graf in the first round of Wimbledon 1994.

What to WATCH

- SET Max**
India vs Pakistan
First Test, Day One
Live at 10:30 am
- ESPN**
Football Focus
Live at 6:30 pm
Sportscentre
Live at 8:30 pm
- English Premier Football League
Newcastle United vs Liverpool
Taped Version at 9:00 pm
UEFA Champions League
Chelsea vs Barcelona
Live at 1:30 am (Wednesday)
- STAR Sports**
Sportsline
Live at 9:30 pm
UEFA Champions League
AC Milan vs Man United
Live at 1:30 am (Wednesday)

Zia increases his lead

SPORTS REPORTER

Grand Master Ziaur Rahman widened the gap at the top of the table when the champion defeated Fide Master Khondokar Aminul Islam in the Mercantile Bank 31st National Chess Championship at the NSC conference room yesterday.

Zia stretched his collection to nine points after ten rounds, 1.5 points ahead of joint-second GM Niaz Mursheed, International Master Enamul Hossain Rajib and IM Reefat Bin Sattar and IM Abdullah Al Rakib.

Young IM Rajib shocked GM Niaz in the tenth round while Reefat defeated Mainuddin Ahmed.

Rumi Smriti TT

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh Biman and Wari Club became respective group champions in the Rumi Smriti Open Table Tennis Tournament yesterday.

Biman blanked K All Memorial 3-0 while Wari beat Swamibagh Boys 3-1 in the group finals at the NSC Woodenfloor Gymnasium.

Narail and Dhaka TT Club emerged group champions in the boys' competition defeating Barna TT Club and Dinajpur respectively.

Earlier, Dhaka TT Club upset Biman 3-2 in the semis.

In the women's team final, Abahani were pitted against Bangladesh Biman Reds. Abahani eliminated Gaibandha while Biman Reds beat Jessore by identical 3-0 margins.



BATTLING LIKE NO. 1: Khulna's number 10 batsman Dollar Mahmud sweeps one over mid-wicket on way to scoring 63 in the second innings at Chittagong yesterday.

Emphatic win for Ctg



SPORTS REPORTER

Despite struggling in the one-day table, limited-overs champions Chittagong kept up their quest for the first-class title when they romped to a nine-wicket win over Khulna in the fourth round of the Ispahani Sixth National Cricket League yesterday.

Chittagong joined Dhaka on top of the longer-version table with their second outright win in the competition. Both sides are now level on 18 points after Dhaka's four-wicket defeat of Rajshahi on Sunday.

In the other match, centuries by numbers seven and eight helped Sylhet pull off a draw against hosts Barisal who collected four points by virtue of their first-innings lead.

Sylhet, however, crashed to the bottom of the table with six points. Rajshahi are second on 12 points, followed by Khulna and Barisal on

327 when left-arm spinner Ilias Sunny dismissed Ziaur Rahman for a two-ball duck, leaving Manjurul stranded just one short of the fifty-run landmark.

Ilias finished with 4-73 while Habib Moballik, who captured 3-72, ended the match with seven wickets.

However, the man-of-the-match award went to stand-in skipper Ehsanul Haque, who took a match haul of five wickets apart from scoring a century in the Chittagong first-innings.

The hosts, who were set a meagre 48-run target, stormed to 52-1 in just seven overs. Nazimuddin spearheaded the chase with a blistering 24-ball 39 stuffed with half a dozen fours and one six.

BARISAL-SYLHET
Iltiaz Hossain and Ezaz Ahmed scored contrasting hundreds to salvage Sylhet from a certain defeat against Barisal on the final day at the Barisal Stadium.

Khulna eventually finished on

Lara crosses his fingers

CRICINFO/BBC, undated

The immediate future of the seven West Indian players, including Brian Lara and Ramnaresh Sarwan, who have been dropped over a sponsorship dispute, depends on a high-level meeting later Monday.

The meeting will be chaired by Keith Mitchell, the Prime Minister of Grenada, who is also the head of the sub-committee appointed to resolve the crisis.

The meeting, to be held in St. George's, the capital of Grenada, will be attended by the members of West Indies Cricket Board (WICB), the West Indian Players Association (WIPA), and representatives of the two rival mobile phone companies, Digicel, the team sponsor, and Cable & Wireless.

Meanwhile Lara, the main man in question along with Sarwan, Chris Gayle, Dwayne Bravo, Fidel Edwards, Dwayne Smith and Ravi Rampaul, has called for "give and take" ahead of talks in Grenada.

At the heart of dispute is the alleged ambush marketing by Cable & Wireless which has personal endorsement deals with the players.

"Positive action is needed now. Time is not on our side," said Lara.

He has expressed hope that a compromise can be reached.

"I have great faith in the proceedings scheduled for Grenada on Monday, but there must be some give and take."

Independence Day soccer deferred

SPORTS REPORTER

The Independence Day Gold Cup Football Tournament has been deferred by a week as the Bangabandhu National Stadium (BNS) was not ready to hold local matches.

"We deferred the tournament as it is impossible to prepare the ground within a week. Besides top clubs of the country are scheduled to play international matches (AFC Cup) over the next week," said Anwarul Haque Helal, the Bangladesh Football Federation general secretary.

The eight-team competition will now kick off on March 18 at the BNS with Mohammedan taking on Arambagh and Muktiyoddha Sangsad facing Sheikh Russel Krira Chakra in the opening day's fixtures.

Murali might miss NZ tour

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's star spinner Muttiah Muralitharan is set to miss the upcoming Test series in New Zealand due to slow recovery of his injured shoulder, team physiotherapist CJ Clarke said on Monday.

Muralitharan, out of Test cricket since August last year, was expected to make a comeback during the tour which was postponed from January due to the Asian tsunami which ravaged Sri Lanka on December 26.

But the 32-year-old, who underwent corrective surgery last month, SEE PAGE 14 COL 1

The unresolved puzzle



AFP, Mohali

The great Indian rope trick may have belonged to the realm of imagination, but not the spin trick which still puzzles and bewilders visiting batsmen.

Pakistan were left nonplussed in the New Delhi Test in 1999 when India's incredible leg-spinner Anil Kumble became only the second bowler in the game's history after Englishman Jim Laker to claim 10 wickets in a Test innings.

India have four fast bowlers to choose from for the first Test against Pakistan starting here on Tuesday, but cannot ignore their spin-twins -- Kumble and Harbhajan Singh -- for gaining an early advantage.

The old Indian trick -- spinners bowling in tandem on friendly pitches with a cluster of close-in fielders -- is still good enough to trap visiting batsmen and produce the desired result.

India skipper Sourav Ganguly has the luxury of leading a full-strength bowling attack, but will be

forced to drop one or two of his pacemen to accommodate the spin duo on low, slow pitches.

Kumble is the fifth-highest wicket-taker in the world with 444 scalps in 92 matches and has already played match-winning roles against Pakistan. His 10-wicket haul is still the talking point of India-Pakistan contests.

Pakistani coach Bob Woolmer said his batsmen needed to apply themselves well against the Indian spin duo to sustain their chances of posting big scores.

"It will be a huge challenge to confront the likes of Kumble and Harbhajan," said Woolmer.

Kumble and Harbhajan may not allow Pakistani batsmen the luxury of playing long innings since both are capable of keeping unrelenting pressure with their subtle variations.

Kumble is a leg-spinner with a difference. He is not a big turner of the ball like Australian Shane Warne or Sri Lankan Muttiah Muralitharan, but has the skill to test batsmen with accuracy and disconcerting bounce.

And he is keen to maintain his vice-like grip on the Pakistani bats-

men. "I just want to go there, bowl, get wickets and hopefully win matches for my team," said Kumble, who bagged 15 wickets in three matches to help his team win their first Test series in Pakistan last year.

Harbhajan played only a supporting role when Kumble was removing one Pakistani batsman after another six years ago.

But the off-spinner has now developed into a match-winner in his own right. Harbhajan is the only Indian to grab a Test hat-trick and his 32-wicket haul was the key to India's stunning Test series win at home against Australia in 2001.

Nicknamed the "Turbanator" after his awesome performance against Steve Waugh's Australian side four years ago, the Sikh has been going from strength to strength and troubling batsmen with bounce, turn and variations.

Harbhajan has recently been cleared by the International Cricket Council after being reported for a suspect bowling action in the second and final Test in Bangladesh last year.

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Home away from home



AFP, Mohali

Fatima Bibi, 67, has come from Pakistan not to watch cricket in the high-profile series in India, but to cash in on the opportunity to revive old memories.

"My kids will watch the match, not me," she said ahead of the first Test between India and Pakistan starting here on Tuesday.

"I am here to see my family home in Patiala. I am lucky to get a visa (for the northern Indian city) and will go there after the Test and rekindle old memories," she said.

Bibi, who migrated to Pakistan after partition from India in 1947, is one of the 2,000 Pakistani fans to have arrived here from the Wagah border in nearly 30 buses.

Pakistan may be playing their first Test series in India in six years, but they will not be performing in front of a partisan crowd. Cricket authorities here are leaving no stone unturned to make Pakistani fans' stay comfortable.

"Cricket is a vehicle to improve relations between the two nations and we've opened our hearts just like Pakistan did last year when India toured there," said Inderjeet Singh Bindra, president of the host cricket association.

"The next five-six days will be a cricket carnival with a sell-out crowd of 35,000, including Pakistani fans," he said.

Indian fans still remember Pakistan's hospitality when the Sourav Ganguly-led squad toured Pakistan in 2004, their first visit in nearly 15 years.

"We want to reciprocate the love the Pakistanis gave us when we toured their country last year," said local businessman Rajinder Gupta, who has vacated half of his house for cricket guests.

Banners proclaiming "Welcome to Pakistan fans" greeted the

visitors when they arrived in hotels and "India-Pakistan food and cultural festivals" are being planned. The facilities include prayer mats in the rooms.

But cricket is not the top priority for many Pakistani fans, as most

have planned shopping and sight-seeing, and in some cases a return to their roots.

"I waited for this moment all my life as I would be able to see my family and my birthplace in the

SEE PAGE 14 COL 2



WELCOME BACK: Pakistani cricket fan Mohammed Tofeq (R) poses with his mother Farjana Bibi, who migrated to Lahore at the age of 13, after their bus arrived in Chandigarh on Sunday.