

Laxman aims at ODI comeback

PTI, New Delhi

Having been ignored from India's one-day cricket squad for the last two tournaments, stylish batsman VVS Laxman is determined to fight his way back into the team by working on his game and fitness.

"It is off season and two-and-a-half month time is good time to work on the fitness and my game. I will use it for that," Laxman, who has agreed to be the brand ambassador for the Association for Cricket for Blind in India, said here on Thursday.

Laxman, whose last ODI assignment was the BCCI Platinum Jubilee match against Pakistan at Kolkata in November where he made 43 off 44 balls, was left out of the ODI team for the series against Bangladesh in December and against Pakistan this month.

"It is disappointing, definitely. That is because I have won matches for India. It's difficult for me that I am not in the ODI team. Hopefully I'll come back," the Hyderabad batsman, who scored 107 against Pakistan in the fifth and last ODI in Lahore last year, said.

Laxman was speaking on the sidelines of the first one-day international match between blind players of India and Pakistan at the Jamia Millia grounds.

When asked why was he being kept out of the shorter version of the game, Laxman said "I always go with the mindset to win the match for the country. You should ask the selectors about it".



India batsman VVS Laxman (L) speaks to blind Pakistani players after a one-day match against Indian blind cricketers in New Delhi on Thursday. The visually impaired cricketers from the two countries will play five one-dayers.

Shabbir flops on return



CRICINFO, undated

Pakistan fast bowler Shabbir Ahmed made an unimpressive Twenty20 Cup debut on Wednesday as the Multan Tigers were thrashed by Sialkot Stallions on the third day of the tournament at the Gaddafi Stadium in Lahore.

Shabbir was returning after recovering from a knee injury, which he sustained last year, but the early signs weren't too promising. He was carted for 48 runs in his four overs and the Stallions easily overcame a target of 110 with seven overs to spare.

Shabbir's knee injury had been detected before the Champions Trophy last year and a cartilage tear had ruled him out of action. After missing the Australian tour, Shabbir was in line to make it for the one-day series in India. Pakistan's second-string bowling attack performed impressively in India and with both Shoaib Akhtar and Umar Gul set for comebacks, Shabbir will need some incisive spells to return to the international fold.

Henin in qtrs

AFP, Warsaw

Justine Henin-Hardenne was tested by Venezuelan Maria Vento-Kabchi before earning a 6-3, 7-5 victory and a place in the quarterfinals of women's WTA tournament here on Thursday.

Playing in dull and uncomfortably cool conditions, the Belgian found it difficult to establish her superiority over an experienced and competent opponent, who often hit the ball deep and struck some fine cross-court angles to keep Henin-Hardenne from settling into a rhythm.

Although Henin-Hardenne took a 4-1 lead in the first set, she rarely looked comfortable and struggled to find any consistency on the heavy clay surface.

The Belgian had the opportunity to consolidate winning the first set when she held a point to lead 3-1 in the second, but Vento-Kabchi continued to trouble her with an aggressive baseline game.

The unseeded Belgian had to wait until the 11th game and a break for 6-5 on her third break point to gain the upper hand, but Vento-Kabchi still held three break points to take the set to a tiebreak before an ace and a service winner clinched victory.

Third seed Vera Zvonareva continued her recent slide when she was beaten 6-2, 6-4 by 17-year old Serb Ana Ivanovic. Although still ranked 10, the Russian has slumped against lowly ranked opposition such as Fabiola Zuluaga, Evgenia Linetskaya, Nuria Llagostera Vives and Iveta Benesova in recent weeks.

5-ball Flintoff

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From in the gym and training for the last 10 weeks so I was probably a bit nervous and eager."

Flintoff's rehabilitation programme after a bone spur was removed from his ankle has included regular running alongside former England physio Dave Roberts, but he still has some way to go before he can set a date for his return to bowling at full throttle for Lancashire and England.

"I can't know when I'll be back bowling again -- it's very much day to day at the moment," admitted Flintoff.

"I started walking through my bowling a couple of weeks ago and I've been bowling for 20 minutes at a time in the nets at around 50-60 per cent, but I couldn't say for definite when I'm going to be bowling again.

"I'm just pushing it more and more and seeing how I'm reacting to what I'm doing.

"I've been doing quite a lot of impact work with Dave. I've been doing a lot of hopping, jumping off steps and all sorts landing on my left foot just to get it used to me banging down on it again.

"Everything I've done so far I've responded well to, so it seems encouraging. I've only had one setback during this period when I had a slight problem with my calf on my right side, probably because it was compensating for my left leg, so I got a bit of a twinge in there, but it's not been anything serious."

Blatter coming

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Would begin in August. It has been decided that the Sher-e-Bangla Cup National Football Championship and the Suhrawardy Cup Youth Football Championship will be held in alternate years from now on.

"This year, we will hold the youth tournament," the BFF secretary said adding that the JFA Cup U-16 meet will take place in September.

Stalemate makes 'em happy



AFP, London

Battling Liverpool struck a mighty psychological blow by holding Chelsea to a goalless draw in the all-English Champions League semi-final first leg at Stamford Bridge here on Wednesday.

The Reds will be happy to go into the second leg on May 3 unscathed but Chelsea will be undaunted by the task of winning 1-0 at Anfield for a second time this season.

England midfielder Frank Lampard wasted Chelsea's best chance in the 22nd minute, firing over the bar from short range with goalkeeper Jerzy Dudek motionless.

Milan Baros forced a superb save out of his Czech Republic teammate Petr Cech shortly before half-time, the Blues stopper deflecting the striker's powerful header round the post to keep matters even.

Chelsea boss Jose Mourinho, never short on confidence, insisted his team will be victorious in the return leg.

"Ninety-nine percent of Liverpool

fans think they have one foot in the final, but they are not there yet," said Mourinho who guided Porto to the European title last season.

"In the Champions League 0-0 is a good result. We have scored goals at Anfield and I am very confident. They have to score at home, it is a dangerous situation for them."

Chelsea, one win short of securing the Premiership title, started the clear favourites against Liverpool, who will be fortunate to finish better than their current fifth place, not high enough to secure a Champions League spot for next season.

The Blues notched up two 1-0 Premiership wins over Liverpool this season then came from behind to win February's League Cup final in Cardiff 3-2 to rub salt in the wounds.

A hamstring injury ruled out Chelsea's Republic of Ireland winger Damien Duff but Arjen Robben, not fit enough to replace him, started on the bench.

Baros recovered from a knee injury in time to feature, much to Liverpool boss Rafa Benitez's relief as substitutes Djibril Cisse and Harry Kewell were not fit enough to last 90 minutes.

Chelsea had the better of the opening exchanges in a keenly-fought match.

Joe Cole jinked into the Liverpool penalty box 11 minutes in but his shot was straight at Dudek.

The England midfielder was finding space down the right flank against Djimi Traore, and his cross two minutes later almost resulted in an opener.

Didier Droghba jumped for the header and the ball dropped kindly for a cross shot. His effort was heading wide but Eidor Gudjohnsen, sliding in at the far post, just failed to connect and score.

Liverpool's Norway winger John Arne Riise cut into the penalty box on 19 minutes but shot straight at Cech who produced an instinctive block.

Lampard wasted a chance to score three minutes later when given a simple chance from close range.

William Gallas' cross from the left was nodded down by Cole but Lampard's shot cleared the crossbar with the goal at his mercy.

Liverpool gave the Blues a scare before the interval.

Baros forced an excellent save out of Cech on 39 minutes when his

international teammate tipped a powerful header round the post following a curling Steven Gerrard pass.

Cole gave Traore further trouble five minutes after the interval, but after cutting inside the left-back, Sami Hyypia slid in to nudge the ball from his feet as he shaped to shoot.

Liverpool's Igor Biscan and Chelsea's Cole were cautioned as tempers flared before Netherlands winger Robben replaced Tiago with 31 minutes left.

Benitez responded by replacing Baros with Cisse in the lone striker role. The France forward blasted a fierce shot just wide on 68 minutes, leaving Luis Garcia bemoaning the spurned chance to cross.

Liverpool's Xavi Alonso was cautioned in the last few minutes to rule himself out of the return leg.

Cech had to charge off the goal-line in injury time to deny a Cisse effort, securing a stalemate for the trip to Merseyside next Tuesday.

Argentina would welcome Brazil

REUTERS, Buenos Aires



Argentina coach Jose Pekerman says Brazil will get a warm welcome in June for a World Cup qualifier and the game will not be influenced by the racism row involving an Argentine player in Sao Paulo two weeks ago.

Argentina and Brazil's soccer rivalry took a new twist two weeks ago when Leandro Desabato, defender for Buenos Aires club Quilmes -- as unpleasant but said there was no climate of revenge.

"I'm confident that they (Brazil) will have the best possible attention, that they will be well-received and that it will be a good game on the field," Argentina coach Jose Pekerman told Reuters in an interview.

"The other (off-field) conditions depend on the government, the security services and each one will try to make sure that things are the way they should be... and there are no problems."

Paes ready to roll in Davis Cup

AFP, Jaipur

Leander Paes, India's most successful Davis Cup player, will return to singles play in the Asia-Oceania second round tie against Uzbekistan starting at the Jai Club grass courts here on Friday.

Paes, the team captain with a 72-30 win record in the tournament, had opted out of the singles in the first round tie against China in March to give youngsters Prakash Amritraj and Harsh Mankad an opportunity to gain experience.

The duo won all four singles in India's 5-0 romp, but Paes decided to replace Mankad against Uzbekistan which takes the winner into the world group play-offs in July.

The 31-year-old, who mainly plays doubles on the ATP circuit, will take the court on all three days in stifling hot weather.

Paes said he was ready for the challenge.

"I have carried the Davis Cup responsibility on my shoulders for years now," he said.

"I may not have played singles in a while but it is more a matter of being mentally prepared. I am ready for it."

Paes meets Farrukh Dustov in Friday's opening singles while Amritraj clashes with Denis Istomin in the second match, according to the draw made Thursday.

Paes will team up with erstwhile partner Mahesh Bhupathi in Saturday's doubles against Istomin and Murad Inoyatov. The formidable Indian pair has won four Grand Slam titles and reached the semi-finals at the Athens Olympics last year.

In Sunday's reverse singles, Amritraj faces Dustov while Paes meets Istomin.

"I am happy to start the first singles, hopefully I will give a 1-0 lead to Prakash," said Paes.

"I have to concentrate on my game and as a captain I have to take care of Prakash in the evening."

PCB sends tour

FROM PAGE 16 Peshawar in 2003. The Indian team last year also declined to play a Test in Karachi although it did play one-dayers there and in Peshawar.

England last toured Pakistan in 2000-1, winning their first ever Test series on Pakistan soil 1-0.

A PCB official said: "The reason for the long official of the tour is that the ECB had requested us to schedule at least two three-day games before the start of the Test series and also a one-day practice game before the five one-day internationals."

incident with rival forward Grafite and was at one stage handcuffed before being released on bail.

Pekerman described the incident -- hailed by Brazil as an example to the world in the fight against racism but denounced as a farce by Quilmes -- as unpleasant but said there was no climate of revenge.

"I'm confident that they (Brazil) will have the best possible attention, that they will be well-received and that it will be a good game on the field," Argentina coach Jose Pekerman told Reuters in an interview.

"The other (off-field) conditions depend on the government, the security services and each one will try to make sure that things are the way they should be... and there are no problems."

Chelsea's mega offer for Adriano?



MILAN

Chelsea were on Wednesday being associated with a world record £70m swoop for Inter Milan striker Adriano.

The Corriere dello Sport newspaper claims that the Brazilian is the London club's primary transfer objective and they are ready to make a summer bid.

Chelsea initially expressed an interest when the 23-year-old was still at Parma but the South American opted to join the Nerazzurri instead.

However, they are now ready to launch a new bid by offering a host of Roman Abramovich's millions for the star striker.

Adriano is undoubtedly a key figure at the San Siro but if the alleged £70m offer turns out to be real, then the Italian club may be tempted to sell and then re-invest that cash on the market.

That money could then be used to finance moves for various players, including a replacement for Adriano.

Inter are also set to reinforce

their defensive options over the summer and that cash injection would make proposed moves for Walter Samuel of Real Madrid and Roma's Cristian Chivu much simpler.

Meanwhile, Virgilio daily said Adriano has made the London giants aware that he isn't keen on a move to England.

Adriano's first option is to stay at Inter, particularly if majority shareholder Massimo Moratti stays in charge. And if he is to move, he would only leave Inter for Real Madrid.

Moratti is ready to reward Adriano for his loyalty with a 'super contract'.

Talks were held over the weekend with the striker's agent, Gilmar Rinaldi, in which a new, five-year contract was put on the table.

The new deal would run to 2010 and also include the option of another five years taking it through to 2015.

Those close to negotiations say Rinaldi and Adriano are excited by the proposal and an announcement could be made by May 10 when the Inter board meets to discuss new financial strategies. (Internet Source)

Beckham can't believe it

AFP, Madrid

England skipper David Beckham said he is "amazed" and finds it "incredible" that his family's former nanny sold a story making claims about his marriage to a Sunday tabloid newspaper.

The Real Madrid player and his wife, Victoria, have already admitted they plan to sue the former nanny Abbie Gibson for breach of confidence after the allegations were made in the News of the World at the weekend.

"When someone talks of selling a story to the newspapers, I find it incredible," Beckham told reporters here on Wednesday.

"I can't understand that can happen when you invite someone to your place to take care of your children, who are the most important thing for you. You need to trust them and I find it incredible that later they want to sell their story."

"But I can't say much about it because there's a legal case. I'm able to focus on football because my wife and I are normal people."

"Of course we argue, but I love her a lot and my parents taught me from when I was little how to treat women. If I didn't, my mum would come and have a terrible go at me. Really, we're very happy and we love each other a lot."

Sponsor for U-15s team

SPORTS REPORTER

The Rupchanda Soya Bean Oil will sponsor Bangladesh U-15 cricket team's tour of Sri Lanka, a Bangladesh Cricket Board media release said yesterday.

Bangladesh will meet hosts Sri Lanka and Malaysia in an U-15 tri-series to be held in Colombo from May 2-9.

Puskin's chehlum today

SPORTS REPORTER

The chehlum of Bangladesh Hockey Federation joint-secretary and Abahani hockey player and organiser Zahidur Rahman Puskin will be held at Abahani Club premises in Dhanmondi today.

A Qurankhwan will be held in the morning and food will be distributed to the poor and distressed after the Jumma prayers on this occasion.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

Crossword puzzle grid with clues for Across and Down words.

Cryptogram puzzle grid with letters and numbers.

CRYPTOQUIP

FE RSKVSVXV R GSPV B RBHRBCV, ISXIVMXVA JVSJPV ISHPA WVPJ PSSLESM GWV KFRFFXC PFXL Saturday's Cryptogram: TO DETERMINE IF A GOLF PLAYER IS REALLY GOOD, I SUPPOSE THE PROOF IS IN THE PUTTING. Today's Cryptogram Clue: R equals S