



ALL-STAR CONFERENCE: Real Madrid superstars (R-L) Ronaldo, Michael Owen and David Beckham appreciate something during a press conference at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on Thursday. The Spanish giants are on a four-day visit to China where they will play local team Beijing Hyundai at the Workers' Stadium on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

Ronaldo & Figo coming to India

THE TELEGRAPH, Kolkata

From the Bernabeu to India Gate -- Real Madrid mates Ronaldo and Luis Figo are sure to kick up a storm-- but not kick a football -- when they come to India in 10 days, to launch the latest rage in global car racing, A1 Grand Prix.

Come July 30 and the soccer superstars will be present in Delhi for the unveiling of the India A1 car and team by Sheikh Maktoum, the member of the ruling royal family of Dubai who has devised the sport.

"Both Ronaldo and Figo are promoters of A1 in their own countries, Brazil and Portugal, and have confirmed they would be part of the delegation coming to India for the launch," Andre Timmins, director of Wizcraft International Entertainment, which is organising a series of events to introduce and promote the sport in India, told The Telegraph.

Billed as the "World Cup of Motorsport" and hoping to be the substitute for the more illustrious F1, the A1 Grand Prix will see 25 countries locked in contest. In F1, teams (Ferrari, McLaren, Honda, etc.), not countries, take part.

The A1 cars, with 3400 cc engines, will weigh around 600 kg and will be fitted with six-speed transverse sequential gear selection through the paddle-shift system.

Just like F1, A1 races will be held on weekends -- the qualifying race on Saturdays and the main races (first a 25-minute sprint and then a 60-minute race) on Sundays. Thewinning drivers and the champion teams will be awarded points, to be added up through the full season.

Of the 12 races to take place in the inaugural season, from September 2005 to March 2006, three will be hosted in Asian countries -- China, Indonesia and Malaysia. On offer is a prize money of 1 million dollars for the top 10 finishers in every race.

Two-match WC ban on Hanke

AFP, Berlin

Germany international striker Mike Hanke, sent off during the third-place play-off in the Confederations Cup last month, has been suspended for the first two matches of the 2006 World Cup finals, the German team said on Thursday.

Germany assistant coach Joachim Low told Kicker magazine that the German football federation (DFB) would make a formal complaint to world football's governing body FIFA.

FIFA have also dismissed the idea of the 21-year-old VfL Wolfsburg striker serving his suspension for the under-21 side.

Germany have qualified as hosts for the finals on home soil and will play the opening match on June 9 in Munich against a yet-to-be-named opponent.

Hanke was sent off in the 54th minute of their match against Mexico after charging defender Carlos Salcido. It was Hanke's first appearance in the starting 11 though he has five international caps in all.



Did U Know?

At the first Olympic Games, which was held in Athens in 1896, silver medals were awarded to the winners and bronze to the second place getters.

Fergie the tourist



Football

AFP, Beijing

Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson can't wait to get to China where the Red Devils play local team Beijing Hyundai next week, not so much for the match but the sightseeing.

"I have never been to Beijing. China is a fast-developing country, so is the Chinese football team," Fergie told the Beijing Weekend newspaper on Thursday.

"I am sorry that it failed to qualify for the World Cup next year but their improvement is remarkable.

"As for the visit, I think I must go to the Forbidden City, because it is very worthwhile from an historical angle.

"The Great Wall and Tiananmen Square are also worth visiting. I think Beijing has a lot of places worth visiting but time is the key."

United arrive in Beijing on Sunday for their game at the

Workers' Stadium Tuesday with a host of star names in tow, including their Chinese signing Dong Fangzhuo who is expected to play.

"For me there is certainly pressure. But the key is to exert my ability well," said Dong. "Of course I hope to score. I will just try my best."

Dong was signed by United last year but is currently on loan to Belgium's Antwerp.



SIR ALEX FERGUSON

Very few of the Premiership team's players have been to China before and like Fergie are looking forward to the experience.

"I am looking forward to meeting you (Chinese fans)," said Rio Ferdinand, who is stalling on signing a new deal at Old Trafford and was jeered by fans during a 5-1 pre-season win over Clyde in Scotland on Saturday.

"I hope you will have fun at our match. I think it is good preparation for us in the new season to play in a different climate."

Paul Scholes echoed similar sentiments.

"We are looking forward to coming to China. The Asia Tour will prepare us for the rest of the season."

The club, who are estimated to have 40 million fans in Asia, are on a four-nation Asian tour that also takes in Hong Kong, Beijing and Japan.

Asia, and in particular China, is seen as a key market for the world's richest sports club, which over the past three years has opened at least 10 of its "Mega Stores" across the continent.

Robinho's medical done



Football

REUTERS, Madrid

Brazilian forward Robinho has undergone a medical at a clinic in Sao Paulo before signing for Real Madrid, Spanish media reported on Thursday.

Sports daily Marca said the 21-year-old international, who has been the subject of a tug-of-war between his club Santos and the Spanish giants, was checked over by Real Madrid chief medical officer Alfonso del Corral.

"I can't tell you whether or not Real Madrid are going to sign him or not but I can say that Robinho is in perfect physical state," said Brazilian doctor Joaquim Grava, who was present at the medical.

"If I was asked to give him a mark out of 10, I would give him

20."

One of Brazil's most exciting young talents, Robinho has refused to train with Santos since returning from international duty at the start of the month because he has been angry at their refusal



ROBINHO

to accept an offer of 25 million dollars offer from Real.

Santos president Marcelo Teixeira has accused Real of making an illicit approach for Robinho. He said any club wanting to sign him before his contract ended in 2008 would have to pay the full 50 million dollars stipulated in his buy-out clause.

Spanish media report that Santos are now prepared to accept an offer of 30 million euros (36.22 million dollars).

One of Robinho's agents, Vagner Ribeiro, said he believed the long-running transfer saga was finally nearing its end.

"We are going to sort everything out before the weekend," he said. "It can't go on like this."

Real are in China on the second leg of a pre-season tour of the United States and Asia.

Waugh's key Englishmen



Cricket

AFP, New Delhi

Fast bowler Stephen Harmison, all-rounder Andrew Flintoff and skipper Michael Vaughan are the key players who could help England win the Ashes, says former Australian captain Steve Waugh.

"To my mind, England have three match-winners in Flintoff, the 'White West Indian' Harmison and Vaughan," Waugh wrote in his column in The Hindu newspaper on Thursday.

"England will take great comfort from knowing that they have a bowler capable of both intimidation and strike power in Harmison, who can produce decisive spells," said Waugh, 40.

"But he needs to take 30 wickets if he wants to help England regain the Ashes from a squad of Australian players yet to taste Ashes defeat."

England, who last won the Ashes in 1986-87, hope to return to winning ways when they clash with Australia in the opening Test at Lord's on Thursday.

"Flintoff's performance will bear a direct correlation to his team's fortunes and as such he will be targeted by Australia with aggressive body lan-

guage and positive play," said the former Australian captain.

Waugh, the second-highest scorer in Test cricket with 10,927 runs in 168 matches, said Vaughan's performance both as batsman and captain would be crucial.

"The class batsman in the English line-up is their captain," he said.

"He will need to score 500-plus runs to lead the younger, inexperienced players and allow himself the luxury of making clear decisions with a confident frame of mind in the delicate moments of a game."

Waugh said "individual brilliance" could play a significant role in deciding the outcome of the Ashes since both England and Australia look formidable and "difficult to break down".

He said England must wrest the early initiative if they hope to end the drought against world champions Australia who had "at least half-a-dozen" match-winners.

Waugh said that Australian wicketkeeper-batsman Adam Gilchrist was the man to watch out for.

"The standout is Gilchrist, who has single-handedly influenced more matches in the modern era than any other player," he said.

Hiddink Soccerroos'

AFP, Sydney

The Football Federation Australia (FFA) has called a press conference here Friday with Dutchman Guus Hiddink expected to be announced as the next Australian coach.

Hiddink confirmed in South Korea on Wednesday that he had reached agreement with the FFA about the national job, expected to be on a part-time basis with his other coaching position with Dutch club PSV Eindhoven.

FFA chief executive John O'Neill has this week all but confirmed that the highly-credentialled Hiddink will be the next Soccerroos' coach and late Thursday the FFA said a press conference would be convened here late Friday to announce their new coach.

"We have to work out some details which I proposed to them," Hiddink told reporters after PSV Eindhoven drew 1-1 with Lyon of France to drop out of a pre-season tournament in South Korea Wednesday.

"In case that we do so, then it's both jobs until November.

"And afterwards we have to see if they qualify for the World Cup."

The 58-year-old Dutchman, who captivated the football world when he took co-hosts South Korea to the 2002 World Cup semi-finals, would replace Frank Farina, whose contract with the Soccerroos was terminated early after Australia conceded 10 goals at the Confederations Cup in Germany late last month.

Australia is counting on Hiddink to break its World Cup drought, with the Soccerroos having failed to reach the finals since their only appearance in Germany in 1974.

The team is due to resume its World Cup quest by taking on the Solomon Islands in the Oceania play-offs in September before an anticipated two-leg meeting against a yet-to-be determined South American team in November.

Police hunt for kidnapped coach

AFP, Mexico

Mexican police are hunting for the Argentine coach of one of the country's biggest football clubs.

Ruben Omar Romano, who coaches Cruz Azul, was dragged from his car and bundled into another vehicle by five men.

Police said they had few clues about who seized the 47-year-old but Mexico City has one of the worst records in the world for kidnappings -- usually for ransom.

Armed men in two 4x4 cars cut off his vehicle, fired an assault rifle and dragged him off, local media reports.

"Whoever's behind this kidnapping is a well-organised group," said police chief Joel Ortega.

He said no ransom demands had been received but local radio stations report the gang may have left a ransom note in a church asking for 5 million pesos (470,000 dollars).

Romano has been involved in Mexican club football for years having coached four other sides.

Mexico has one of the highest number of kidnappings in the world, with some 3,000 reported cases in 2003.

School chess

SPORTS REPORTER

A total of 22 players shared the lead with maximum two points in the boys' senior group (Class VI-X) after the second round of the Standard Chartered Bank School chess tournament ended at the BCF auditorium yesterday.

In the junior group (KG-Class V), 12 players were jointly on top with two points each.

In the girls' competition of the 9-round Swiss League, Annie, Sathi, Moni, Mohona, Mithila and Reshma were the seven players to win in both rounds.

Shoaib rocks Northants

AFP, London

Pakistan fast bowler Shoaib Akhtar grabbed six wickets while England reject Graham Thorpe handed the England selectors a timely reminder of his Ashes credentials on Wednesday.

Shoaib enjoyed figures of 6-47, with five of his victims bowled, to put Worcestershire in charge of their English County Championship match against Northamptonshire.

The home side were dismissed for 299 at the County Ground before in their reply at the end of the first day at the County Ground.

Thorpe fell just of a first century of the season for Surrey against Kent at Guildford.

The 35-year-old, overlooked for the Ashes series after England opted for young South African-born talent Kevin Petersen, hit 95 with his runs coming on the eve of the opening Lord's Test.

His innings helped Surrey reach 394 for five while Ali Brown finished 101 not out.

Second Test starts today

Fit-again SL look to wrap up series against WI



Cricket

AFP, Kandy

Sri Lanka go into the second cricket Test against the West Indies here Friday boosted by the quick recovery of star bowlers Chaminda Vaas and Muttiah Muralitharan from a flu virus.

The veteran duo, who struck a rich haul in the six-wicket romp for the hosts in the first Test in Colombo last week, were the latest victims of the virus that gripped the Sri Lankan team.

"Almost half the side had been down with the virus in the past few weeks," captain Marvan Atapattu revealed after the team's nets at the Asgiriya Stadium here.

"It started with the manager (Michael Tissera) and I too had it before the first Test before some of the others got it.

"Vaas and Muralitharan were the worst affected, but they have recovered well and will be fit to take the field on Friday," the captain said.

Vaas top scored with 49 and claimed seven wickets to win the man-of-the-match award in the first Test at the Sinhalese Sports Club in Colombo.

Muralitharan marked his return to international cricket after 11

months due to a shoulder injury by bagging six for 36 in the West Indian second innings.

It was the prolific off-spinner's 45th haul of five or more wickets in an innings and took his career tally to 539 wickets, second only to Australian Shane Warne's world record mark of 583.

Both bowlers will once again play a key role as Sri Lanka attempt to sweep the short two-Test series against the second-string West Indians -- provided the weather holds.

Although Thursday dawned bright, allowing the two teams to finally gain some practice, the forecast is for light seasonal rain on all five days of the Test.

"There is little we can do about the weather, so why worry about it?" said Atapattu. "We just have to go out there and play our best."

The rivals will finalise their playing elevens on Friday morning after another look at the barren track which Atapattu described as "the usual Kandy wicket that will take turn as the game progresses."

Left-arm seamer Nuwan Zoysa and leg-spinner Upul Chandana are expected to come into the reckoning for Sri Lanka in place of young all-rounder Gayan Wijekoon and left-arm spinner Rangana Herath.

The West Indies, meanwhile, will

once again rely on captain Shivnarine Chanderpaul, the only experienced player in the weakened squad, to prevent a 2-0 scoreline for the hosts.

The left-hander, whose 87 Tests dwarf the rest of the squad's 55 matches put together, top scored in both innings of the Colombo Test with 69 and an unbeaten 48.

The tourists are badly hit by the absence of 10 leading players including master batsman Brian Lara due to a sponsorship dispute with their cricket board.

TEAMS

**SRI LANKA** (from): Marvan Atapattu (captain), Sanath Jayasuriya, Mahe-la Jayawardena, Kumar Sangakkara, Thilan Samaraweera, Tillakaratne Dilshan, Upul Chandana, Chaminda Vaas, Nuwan Zoysa, Muttiah Muralitharan, Lasith Malinga, Gayan Wijekoon, Russel Arnold, Rangana Herath.

**WEST INDIES** (from): Shivnarine Chanderpaul (captain), Denesh Ramdin, Darren Powell, Omari Banks, Kerry Jeremy, Deighton Butler, Sylvester Joseph, Narsingh Deonarine, Dwayne Smith, Tino Best, Jermaine Lawson, Xavier Marshall, Runako Morton, Ryan Ramdass.

**Umpires:** Simon Taufel (Australia) and Tony Hill (New Zealand).

Ganguly's absence will be felt, says Kirmani



Cricket

CRICINFO, undated

The morale of the Indian cricket team as it bids to win the upcoming tri-nation Indian Oil Cup in Sri Lanka would be low in the absence of Sourav Ganguly, according to Syed Kirmani, the former wicketkeeper and chief selector.

Unless he's granted a dramatic reprieve by the International Cricket Council (ICC), Ganguly will sit out the tournament, serving the last four games of a six-match suspension while Rahul Dravid leads the side.

"The six-match ban on Sourav (Ganguly) by the ICC is harsh," said Kirmani. "But a rule is a rule. His absence will affect the team's morale to a certain extent. After all, he has been the most successful

captain of India."

Speaking at a public function, Kirmani reckoned that Greg Chappell, the new coach, was one of the great players of the game, and someone who could inspire the team to perform well.

He added that Sachin Tendulkar's absence "would not have any adverse impact", while also pointing out that "the team had a bad series against Pakistan at home but the players would like to stabilise and do well."

Kirmani rejected any suggestion that Virender Sehwag, named vice-captain for Sri Lanka, would have to shoulder a greater batting burden.

"Every player is capable of scoring runs," said Kirmani. "A few players could run in to bad form or the entire team could have a bad patch. That is cricket. On the whole, we have an established batting line-up."

Asked whether India had no option but to pick a foreigner as coach, he replied in the negative.

"The players and the BCCI (Board of Control for Cricket in India) wanted it," said Kirmani, adding that John Wright, the former coach, had infused professionalism and improved the team's fielding considerably.

"Greg will provide great inspiration to the team, but the fact that the Indians had won the 1983 World Cup without any coach or a physio or a trainer will remain," said Kirmani, who was an integral part of that legendary team led by Kapil Dev.

Kirmani, a former Karnataka stalwart, also pooh-poohed the idea that captaincy would take the sheen off Dravid's batting. "Rahul has a mature mind and I am sure he will not be under any extra pressure as captain."



PHOTO: STAR

Scene from yesterday's second round matches of the Standard Chartered school chess tournament at the federation hall room.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

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