

England climb ICC table

REUTERS, London

England's cricketers have closed the gap on Australia at the top of the Test rankings after their Ashes triumph but the world champions look unlikely to be toppled in the near future.

Australia's rating fell from 133 to 127 while England's rose from 114 to 119 after their 2-1 series win.

It would take a 3-0 England win in Pakistan, however, coupled with an Australian home defeat against eighth-ranked West Indies for Michael Vaughan's side to go atop.

An ICC press release said that if England and Australia both continued performing against the other Test countries, the next series between the sides in 2006-07 could decide not only the Ashes but also which side leads the Test Championship.

England now has the highest rating of any side other than Australia since a new system of calculation for the table was introduced in June 2003.

RANKINGS

Australia 127, England 119, India 111, South Africa 100, New Zealand 100, Sri Lanka 98, Pakistan 95, West Indies 74, Zimbabwe 28, Bangladesh 6.

Ashes winners to be stamped

AFP, London

After their first class victory over Australia, England's victorious Ashes cricket team are to be honoured with a set of stamps, the Royal Mail said Wednesday.

Images of England's new sporting heroes will feature on the special commemorative set, but it is not yet known which players.

All-rounder Andrew "Freddie" Flintoff was named man of the series.

Of particular interest will be the 68 pence stamp (one euro, 1.24 dollars) - needed to send a letter to Australia.

Royal Mail spokeswoman Julietta Edgar said: "England's victory in the Ashes series certainly counts as a momentous occasion, making it an ideal topic for a set of Royal Mail special stamps."

Ricky wants to stay put

AFP, Sydney

Ricky Ponting arrived home Wednesday, declaring that he still wants to be Australia's cricket captain and that his team have a burning desire to retrieve the Ashes off England late next year.

England regained the Ashes after 16 years with a 2-1 series triumph over the Australians following the drawn fifth and final Test at The Oval on Monday.

Australian team members returned home Wednesday amid calls for heads to roll after the world champions had gone to England in June with expectations of a comfortable series victory.

Ponting has taken much of the blame for the failure with fast bowling great Dennis Lillee calling for Shane Warne to replace him as captain.

Ponting confronted a large media pack shortly after his arrival at Sydney Airport and said he wasn't aware of Lillee's comments.

"I'm not concerned about those things. As long as I am doing the right thing by everyone in my dressing room as the team and the coaching staff, well then that's all I can do," Ponting told a press conference.

"I know I'm not going to keep everybody happy along the way, I am sure I've done things even before this series that other people haven't been that happy with."

"But as long as I am looking after the guys in my dressing room, then I'll be happy."

Meanwhile AFP adds from Perth that Australian cricket team members on Wednesday rallied behind Ponting after Lillee demanded a new skipper.

Wicketkeeper Adam Gilchrist said it was "probably a bold statement" for Lillee to say Ponting should make way for Shane Warne as Test captain in the wake of the upset loss to England.

Opener Justin Langer described Ponting as "a mini Steve Waugh" for his leadership qualities and said his skipper would be better for the tough experience of the Ashes series.

"Everyone is going to have an opinion and Dennis is a long way far removed from the team," Gilchrist said on arrival here Wednesday.

Murali the mighty

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Captain Marvan Atapattu was also humble in his comments. "True it's a two and a half day game, but we don't want to insult the opposition and deprive them of competing with the big boys. Along the years we have suffered similar defeats in Sri Lanka's early years," he said.

"We honestly didn't think that it'll come this easy after the way they batted and got to 155 for two just after lunch and then one bad shot changed everything for them allowing us to come back."

Out of this world Kaka

REUTERS, Milan



AC Milan's Brazilian midfielder Kaka was basking in eulogies and comparisons with the greats of the game after his wonderful solo goal helped secure a 3-1 Champions League victory over Turkey's Fenerbahce.

Milan were being held 1-1 until three minutes from the end of the game when the 23-year-old midfielder scored a magnificent goal. Bursting free in midfield, Kaka spun out to the right before weaving past two defenders and firing home.

The goal was greeted first with cheers and then an extended standing ovation from the San Siro crowd. "It was like a goal from another era," said Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti, "It reminded me of the goal Maradona scored against England in the World Cup in Mexico."

"Ricky is the only player capable of doing something like that in the modern game," he added. "While there was some exaggeration in Ancelotti's comparison with Diego Maradona's famous solo goal in 1986 -- scored after he had run through the entire English midfield and defense -- few would argue that Kaka's strike was among the very best scored in the Champions League."

"It was certainly one of the most beautiful goals of my career," said Kaka. "It is flattering to be compared with greats of the past but I have my own characteristics and I want to write my own story," he added.

His earlier goal, which opened the scoring in the 18th minute of the Group E game, is destined to be forgotten but that too showed the quality of a player who will play a major role in Brazil's World Cup bid next year.

Picking the ball up from Andrea Pirlo on the edge of the area, the ex-Sao Paulo player turned and then drilled the ball into the bottom corner with the kind of calm precision normally reserved for 10 meter

passes. Kaka even had time to create Milan's third, converted by Andriy Shevchenko after a shot from Sergio, who had been fed by a sweeping cross-field pass from his fellow Brazilian.

Milan captain Paolo Maldini felt that comparisons were needless but had no doubt about the importance of the Brazilian to the Italians' bid to win their seventh European Cup.

"Who can compare to Kaka?"



IT CAME FROM UP ABOVE: AC Milan's star playmaker Kaka points towards the heavens after scoring his 'wonder goal' against Fenerbahce at the San Siro stadium in Milan on Tuesday.

Beckham=Jesus s!

AFP, London

England fans may pray for him to lead the country to victory in next year's World Cup, but not even his most ardent admirers have ever compared David Beckham to Jesus. Until now, that is.

An academic conference was to hear Wednesday that while Beckham has yet to perform any miracles -- at least off the football pitch -- he is perhaps the closest thing modern British society has to a Messiah figure.

"Beckham the brand is all about salvation, redemption, even resurrection," said Carlton Brick, on the politics and sociology faculty of the University of Paisley in Scotland.

"It is not me that is saying Beckham is a pseudo Christ-like figure, but it is how he is often portrayed, and it is how he portrays himself," he told The Guardian newspaper.

Brick was to argue later Wednesday at a three-day conference on celebrity at Paisley University that Beckham's footballing story has been presented by the media, and even his advisors, as an almost Christ-like parable, the paper said.

This process started at the 1998 World Cup, when a petulant kick against an Argentinian opponent saw Beckham sent off, something many newspapers blamed for England's defeat in the match.

But in subsequent years the midfielder became increasingly famous and adored, eventually being made England captain.

"The redemption came in 1998 after he was sent off in the French World Cup. He was even pictured in a magazine in a white shirt looking Christ-like under the word 'redemption,'" Brick said.

"Then he was expected to be the saviour of English football. The Sun (newspaper) even ran a picture of his broken foot and asked us to place our hands on it to heal him."

Other more obvious religious allusions are Beckham's crucifix tattoo, his Christ-like poses in magazines and his decision to call his son Cruz, Spanish for cross, Brick noted.

The footballer and his wife, ex-pop star Victoria, were even portrayed last Christmas as Jesus and Mary in a controversial nativity display at Madame Tussauds, the London waxwork museum.

But that was where the similarities ended. "Beckham may be a god of the global consumer culture -- transcending barriers of sexuality and race -- but when it comes down to it he's just a footballer," he said.

"This guy can't bring peace and harmony to the world and there's something fundamentally wrong in using pseudo-Christian iconography which implies that he can."

We are way

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In I feel they took the defeat for certain. Psychologically, most of us gave up against Muralitharan and the other big names even before the match was over. We are guilty of this predetermined thought which creates lack of confidence. It's time to get mentally tough otherwise similar things will be repeated.

"The opposition proved their mental strength by lasting out on a difficult wicket. Also we lack wicket-taking bowlers like them that's why we could not put enough pressure."

"But the two young pacers (Syed Raseel and Shahadat Hossain), who had nothing in the wicket for them, have impressed. We could set a field for them. The last series in England, we conceded too many runs with new balls but they handled it nicely. Their tidy and controlled line put the brake on the Lankan scoring, which makes me happy."

Bashar admitted that his charges had completely misread Muralitharan's doosras. "It's difficult to read from his action. You need time at crease to guess correctly."

Bashar reiterated that the Tigers' real ability never surfaced in this Test.

"Our results might suggest that this is our real face but we have proved that we can do better. Just as our coach says, we have to fight back from troubled times. The easier option is to admit failure. May be we are often choosing the easier option. We have to change that," he said adding that they will have to be more positive against Muralitharan who has taken 29 wickets against Bangladesh in three Tests.

Coach Dav Whatmore was understandably upset. "I was upset with the level of resistance. Sri Lanka were going to win the match and there's no question with that. That was always the result. But I was interested with how much of a fight these players were prepared to show. I am disappointed that we didn't fight harder to prevent inevitable," the Bangladesh coach said.

Tendulkar, who has spent half his life playing for India -- he made his Test debut in 1989 aged 16 -- has 10,134 Test runs from 123 matches and needs just one more century to break compatriot Sunil Gavaskar's world record of 34 Test hundreds.

Tendulkar is already the most successful one-day batsman in history with 13,642 runs from 348 matches with 38 centuries.

India are hoping Tendulkar will be fully fit for the gruelling season ahead which includes 16 Tests and a minimum of 38 one-dayers from late October to June.

Lyon hiding for Real

AFP, Paris



Gerard Houllier's rehabilitation as a manager gained ground on Tuesday as French champions Lyon thrashed nine-time European champions Real Madrid 3-0 in their opening Champions League group match.

Houllier's former team and reigning titleholders Liverpool also won for good measure beating another Spanish side Real Betis 2-1 in Seville.

It was a good night for British clubs as the side Liverpool controversially beat in the semi-finals last term Chelsea edged Belgian league leaders Anderlecht 1-0 while Rangers were twice pegged back but eventually emerged 3-2 victors over 2004 Champions League winners Porto.

Both the Milan clubs won their opening matches with AC Milan - sensationally beaten on penalties in last season's final after leading 3-0 - scoring two late goals to beat Turkish side Fenerbahce 3-1 and Inter scraping a 1-0 victory away at surprise group qualifiers Armedia Bratislava.

Norwegian side Rosenborg pulled off an excellent result in the fiery cauldron of Greek outfit Olympiakos' stadium with a 3-1 victory but the victors will find Lyon a tough nut to crack in a fortnight's time.

Lyon's goals came in a 10-minute period of the first-half through Norwegian international John Carew, Brazilian midfielder Juninho and Sylvain Wiltord.

The hosts threatened to totally embarrass the Spanish giants when a penalty was awarded in the 40th minute but Real goalkeeper Iker Casillas saved Juninho's strike.

Houllier - who guided Liverpool to UEFA Cup glory - was ecstatic at his team's outstanding display.

"The first half was like a dream," said the former France national coach. "It was a very good match of football. I thought Gregory (Coupet the goalkeeper) had an outstanding game. We deserved this victory."

"It's a good start and it's a great night for the supporters and the club," added Houllier, who succeeded Paul Le Guen in the past after he resigned at the end of last season after landing the title.

Real handler Wanderlei Luxemburgo said it was a case of Lyon taking their chances and his side not doing so.

"I don't believe that the team played any worse than they did in the defeat by Celta Vigo at the weekend."

"We controlled the match but didn't take our matches. I am not concerned about two successive defeats, I am just sad for the players that they haven't got their due rewards," said the former Brazil national coach, who may yet rue the decision to spend millions on his compatriots Robinho and Baptista and sell England striker Michael Owen.

Liverpool grabbed two early goals through Florent Sinamangong and Luis Garcia but were perhaps a bit fortunate to come away with the three points as Betis fought back hard but only had Arzu Garcia's goal as reward.

Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez said that his inside knowledge of the team from his time as coach of Valencia had served them well.

"It was against a team that we would be expecting to fight for qualification," said Benitez. "They are a very good team at home, with their fans behind them."

"But I had an advantage in that I knew the team and knew the atmosphere here."

Chelsea were far from impressive but had England international Frank Lampard to thank for their narrow

win over Anderlecht, although Blues manager Jose Mourinho said he was satisfied. "I think we played very well in the first half and deserved more," said the Portuguese national.

"In the second half we expected them to come at us but they didn't and seemed to want us to come out so they could get in behind us but they were rarely dangerous."

His Anderlecht counterpart Frank Vercauteren said he was proud of the way his side had battled, though, he too admitted he had expected the players to take on Chelsea more often up front.

"However, we still posed them problems in the second-half and we will be ready for them in the second match at our place," said the former Belgium international midfielder.

Sotirios Kyrgiakos scored the decisive goal in the five-goal thriller between Rangers and Porto.

Rangers manager Alex McLeish was delighted with the win but admitted Porto were unlucky not to have taken anything from the game.

"I can't praise the players highly enough and the spirit and fight they showed to take the lead three times was terrific."

"I'm not going to dispute the fact that Porto are a better footballing side than us and we are not going to kid ourselves on."

Kaka was AC Milan's star turn as he scored twice including one that earned him the highest of praise - comparisons with Argentinian legend Diego Maradona.

UEFA Cup gets rolling



AFP, Paris

UEFA Cup champions CSKA Moscow open the defence of their title against Danish club FC Midtjylland on Thursday while English clubs hopes of making the second round are mixed.

Bolton manager Sam Allardyce has promised to shake up his side when they embark on their first ever campaign in Europe's second-tier club competition against Lokomotiv Plovdiv of Bulgaria.

The Trotters then have to face Manchester City in the Premiership three days later.

"We won't make too many changes but we will make some," said the Bolton boss, who saw his side grind out a goalless draw against Blackburn at the weekend.

"We've got to try and win the home leg comfortably enough so that we make sure we get through," said Allardyce. "But we've got to keep enough back to try to cope with a Manchester City side that is in top form."

"We'll be going there to face a team that's in confident mood and it will be difficult, but we'll focus on that fully once we've got the European dream out of the way."

One bonus for Allardyce has been the form of Henrik Pedersen, who has played three games as emergency left-back in the absence of the injured Ricardo Gardner.

Allardyce was hoping to draft in Olivier Bernard during the transfer window but he opted for Rangers instead.

Pool competition

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Players' registration began on Wednesday at three leading pool clubs in the city and will continue till September 19.

Interested players can enroll their names at Pool Lovers (Banani), Wega Zone (Bailey Road) and Rack & Q (Dhanmondi) with a registration fee of Tk 500 each.

BBSF General Secretary Syed Mahboob, who is also the General Secretary of the Asian Confederation of Billiards Sports, spoke on the occasion.

Manjarul

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(AUS), Inzamamul Haq (PAK), Jacques Kallis (RSA), Younis Khan (PAK), Brian Lara (WIS), Damien Martyn (AUS), Anil Kumble (IND), Glenn McGrath (AUS), Ricky Ponting (AUS), Danish Kaneria (PAK), Kumar Sangakkara (SRI), Virender Sehwag (IND), Harbhajan Singh (IND) and Shane Warne (AUS).

One-day international player-of-the-year: Rahul Dravid (IND), Andrew Flintoff (ENG), Herschelle Gibbs (RSA), Adam Gilchrist (AUS), Inzamamul Haq (PAK), Brett Lee (AUS), Glenn McGrath (AUS), Justine Kemp (RSA), Shoaib Malik (PAK), Kevin Pietersen (ENG), Daniel Vettori (NZL), Ricky Ponting (AUS), Kumar Sangakkara (SRI), Graeme Smith (RSA), Andrew Symonds (AUS), Marcus Trescothick (ENG), Chaminda Vaas (SRI) and Yousuf Youhana (PAK).

Emerging player-of-the-year: Kevin Pietersen (ENG), Ian Bell (ENG), Gautam Gambhir (IND), Dinesh Karthik (IND), Manjarul Islam (BAN) and AB de Villiers (RSA).

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

Crossword puzzle grid with clues for Across and Down. Includes a solution time of 25 mins and a word search at the bottom.

Cryptoquip puzzle grid with a 10x10 grid of letters and numbers.

CRYPTOQUIP W Y Z J H A G J K K I L V AIMQWSILIVMLV SVGGJQ, V UJMLIG WY Z J H L I M L H S U W Q N V U V R O W I - Q V R O W I. Yesterday's Cryptoquip: WHY DO CAR MECHANICS ALWAYS SEEM TO DRINK COFFEE AT WORK? BECAUSE IT'S BREAK FLUID! Today's Cryptoquip Clue: G equals R! The Cryptoquip is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals Q, it will equal Q throughout the puzzle. Single letters, short words and words using an apostrophe give you clues to locating vowels. Solution is by trial and error.