

Malik ready to open

REUTERS, Karachi

Pakistan's young all-rounder Shoaib Malik is confident he can resolve his team's chronic problem in finding reliable openers and take on England's fearsome pace attack in next month's test cricket series.

Malik, 23, who has played nine tests and 102 one-day internationals, told Reuters he had the attitude and temperament to open against Steve Harmison, Matthew Hoggard and Andrew Flintoff.

Coach Bob Woolmer has hinted that Malik will retain his job of opening the innings as he did in Pakistan's last test against West Indies in Kingston in May, when he scored 64 in one innings.

"I am ready for the England pace attack. If my team needs me to open I have no problems with that," Malik said ahead of the England squad's arrival in Pakistan on Wednesday to play three tests and five one-day internationals.

"I can adjust myself accordingly to the situation," said Malik who has four one-day hundreds to his credit.

The first test will be played in the central Punjab city of Multan from November 12.

Pakistan have not found reliable openers since the pair of Aamer Sohail and Saeed Anwar split up in early 2000 with Sohail's retirement.

The problem appeared to have been resolved in the home series against South Africa in 2003 when Taufiq Umar and Imran Farhat put on three successive century opening stands.

They failed subsequently, however, and since Woolmer took over in June last year, Taufiq, Farhat, Salman Butt, Yasir Hameed, Shahid Aride, Mohammad Hafeez, Kamran Akmal and Malik have been juggled around as openers.

Malik said he was already practising against the new ball and was under no illusions that it would be an easy task against the English bowlers.

"The pressure is there on you always as a player and it will be no different against them. But as a professional you are expected to deliver for your country," he said.

He said he was ready to face the reverse swing art mastered by the English bowlers but felt they would struggle with the Kookaburra ball on Pakistani pitches. "They used the Reader cricket balls in the Ashes series, which encourage reverse swing. In the end it all boils down to how hard you try in the middle. I have no doubt it is going to be tough as they will be going flat out," he added.

Malik said he was also keen to contribute with his off-spin bowling as he was comfortable with his corrected action since being cleared by the International Cricket Council (ICC) this year.

Malik's bowling action was reported by ICC match officials during a triangular one-day final against Sri Lanka in Oct 2004.

He has taken eight test and 86 one-day wickets.

Lanka start off on wrong foot

AFP, Mumbai

Sri Lanka suffered a setback ahead of a one-day cricket series in India when they lost a practice match by three wickets here on Saturday.

The tourists scored 267-9 off their allotted 50 overs before a Mumbai Cricket Association (MCA) President's team posted 268-7 to win the match with one ball to spare.

Sri Lanka will play seven one-dayers against India, the first starting at Nagpur on Tuesday.



Did U Know?

The word 'checkmate' in chess comes from the Persian phrase 'Shah mat,' which means 'the king is dead.'



Jose Mourinho

(Chelsea manager) "I knew I had to win or I would be under fire because Chelsea is Chelsea and everybody would be thinking about them failing again." Revealing his feelings after joining the club.



PHOTO: AFP

Barcelona's Samuel Eto'o (R) trying to outwit Osasuna's Punal at the Nou Camp-on Saturday.

PREMIERSHIP

Costly draw for MU

Football

AFP, London

Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson refused to blame his side's crippling injury list for the loss of two more valuable points following a 1-1 draw against Tottenham at Old Trafford.

The result left champions Chelsea eight points clear ahead of Sunday's match against bottom-of-the-table Everton.

In Saturday's late match Charlton moved into second place after coming from behind to beat faltering Portsmouth 2-1 at Fratton Park.

Elsewhere Wigan's dream start to Premiership life continued with a 2-0 win over Aston Villa at Villa Park to lift them to third.

Fulham paid tribute to their most capped player Johnny Haynes, who died in midweek, with a 2-0 win over European champions Liverpool.

And Arsenal continued their 100 percent home record with a 1-0 win over Manchester City at Highbury thanks to a Robert Pires penalty.

In Saturday's early kick-off match Blackburn ensured Birmingham stayed in the bottom three with a 2-0 win at Ewood Park.

At Old Trafford, United got off to a dream start with Mikael Silvestre producing a smart save from his former Leeds United team-mate with a left foot volley before Robinson also denied John O'Shea.

United were rampant in the early part of the game and Alan Smith brought a smart save from his former Leeds United team-mate with a left foot volley before Robinson also denied John O'Shea.

Martin Jol made some changes after

the break and the north Londoners came out firing on all cylinders.

Jermaine Jenas levelled matters on 72 minutes, scoring from a free-kick that left van der Sar rooted to the spot.

Despite slipping further behind Chelsea, Ferguson brushed aside concerns over his side's crippling injury crisis.

"It's frustrating but you have to get on with it," he said. "It is no problem for us, we have young players thriving on the opportunity to play."

Liverpool manager Rafa Benitez was despondent after watching his side fail to score for fourth time in eight league games this season.

"They created two chances and scored two goals, we created lots of chances but didn't score," said Benitez.

Collins John opened the scoring and Luis Boa Morte sealed the win deep into stoppage time.

Tony Warner produced a series of sensational saves to keep the Fulham goal intact and leave the European champions still languishing in the bottom half of the table.

Arsenal captain Thierry Henry was presented with a silver cannon by legend Ian Wright before kick-off to commemorate his record scoring feat of 187 goals - one more than Wright managed for the Gunners.

The French talisman won the penalty that Pires converted to give Arsenal their fifth home win of the season but was also involved in a bizarre incident that will hog the headlines.

Pires turned from hero to clown when trying to tee up Henry with a second penalty after David Sommeil brought down Dennis Bergkamp.

The Frenchman fluffed his pass - which would have been illegal anyway -

leaving manager Arsene Wenger bemused.

"We got away with it. I don't think Robert's intention was a lack of respect it was just a bad decision," said the French manager on the day of his 56th birthday.

"If it had finished 1-1 it would have been a big mistake."

At Villa Park Aaron Hughes put the ball into his own net from a Henri Camara cross in the first half and Alan Mahon rifled home a second after the break.

Blackburn moved up to ninth in the table after a scrappy encounter.

Paul Dickov's penalty shortly after half time and a Craig Bellamy second on his return from injury saw Rovers to victory.

On the south coast Portsmouth looked to be heading towards their first home win of the season when Dario Silva put them 1-0 up in the 14th minute. But second-half goals from Darren Ambrose and Dennis Rommedahl saw Charlton secure all three points.

Sunday's other matches see a north-east derby when Newcastle play Sunderland while in-form West Brom travel to Bolton and West Ham are at home to Middlesbrough.

TOP SIX												
English Premiership table after Saturday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):												
Chelsea	9	9	0	0	23	3	27					
Charlton	9	6	1	2	15	9	19					
Tottenham	10	5	4	1	12	6	19					
Wigan	9	6	1	2	10	5	19					
Man Utd	9	5	3	1	14	7	18					
Man City	10	5	2	3	11	8	17					

'Akhtar at crossroads'

Cricket

AFP, Lahore

Pakistan's tarnished bowling star Shoaib Akhtar faces a "make-or-break" test of his fitness and commitment this week ahead of an all-important home series against resurgent England.

The 30-year-old known as the Rawalpindi Express returned to Pakistan from Australia on Sunday amid a chorus of questions about his poor fitness record and attitude.

"With his age he is at the crossroads," said former Pakistan captain Imran Khan, a supporter of Akhtar.

"I think the England series is a make-or-break for Akhtar. He is 30 so he has four years left in him but it is Akhtar who gives Pakistan the hope to win against England," said Khan, a renowned fast bowler in the 1970s and 80s.

Pakistan hopes Akhtar, who has 144 wickets in 36 Tests, proves his fitness in a practice camp this week and later in a trial match, to warrant a

selection against England in the first Test at Multan from November 12.

Despite bowling some of the fastest deliveries ever recorded in the game, Akhtar does not have an automatic place and faces tough competition from fit-again pace partners Mohammad Sami, Umer Gul and Shabbir Ahmed.

His regular mid-series breakdowns since 2000 have also damaged his chances. A hamstring pull ended his tour of Australia earlier this year and forced him out of away series in India and the West Indies.

It took his tally to 35 Tests missed out of Pakistan's 71 since his debut in 1997.

Off the field he has been fined for late night outings, while Worcestershire chairman John Elliott described him as difficult to handle during a stint at the county this year.

But Pakistan coach Bob Woolmer, who tried unsuccessfully to shorten Akhtar's bowling run-up last year, still figures him in his plans to outdo England.

"He is in our scheme of things because he is a genuine fast bowler but

the question mark is whether he can last five days of a Test and 15 of the series," said Woolmer.

Rameez Raja, a former captain and ex-chief executive of the Pakistan Cricket Board, said Akhtar had a lot to prove.

"It's up to Akhtar to prove everyone wrong, he should understand the importance of playing for Pakistan. If you play for your country you get all the accolades, all the endorsements and all the county contracts," he said.

"If you are not playing for your country your stature as a player goes down.

"There are always lots of expectations of Akhtar and he has got to prove a point to everyone against England and then against India," said Raja, who conducted an inquiry after Akhtar allegedly feigned injury last year.

"It was the last Test against India and there were complaints that Akhtar feigned injury so we had to conduct an inquiry," said Raja. The probe cleared Akhtar of the allegations.

"Akhtar has to get over all his problems, he has to, and I wish him all the best for England."

Zurich Open Davenport's

Tennis

AFP, Zurich

Lindsay Davenport overcame Patty Schnyder 7-6, 6-3 to win the 1.3-million-dollar Zurich Open on Sunday, earning her sixth title of the season.

The 29-year-old American has now won 51 career titles, just two short of the 53 held by Monica Seles who is ranked eighth on the all-time winners list.

It was also her fourth victory in Zurich, where she has reached the final all six times she has played.

"You never get sick of winning," said Davenport, who dined with Roger Federer on the eve of the final. "It's a great tournament to win. I always do well here and it's always nice to come back to a tournament like that.

"But I didn't make it easy on myself, flying back home from Germany and coming back late, and it almost backfired in the first round."

Schnyder challenged well in front of her home town supporters, but she was ultimately overpowered by top seeded Davenport, who forced her into numerous errors, especially on her backhand.

Primera Liga

Eto'o shapes Barca romp

Football

AFP, Madrid

Samuel Eto'o couldn't get the goals to help Cameroon to the World Cup finals two weeks ago but he hasn't stopped scoring since and he got a brace in Barcelona's 3-0 win over Osasuna on Saturday.

The African Player of the Year produced Barca's opener less than two minutes after the break, heading home a corner by Ronaldinho.

His second came barely five minutes later when he finished off a cross from Sylvinho, after a magnificent run by the Brazilian wing back down the left flank.

Osasuna keeper Ricardo Lopez got a hand to Eto'o's shot but the former Manchester United player couldn't keep the ball out of the net and Eto'o now has eight goals to his name in as many league games this season.

Frenchman Ludovic Giuly, who came on for Eto'o nine minutes from the whistle, completed the second half scoring spree for the Catalan club three

Eusebio forgiven!

AFP, Bratislava

Portuguese football legend Eusebio has been officially pardoned by Slovakia - for ending the then unified Czechoslovakia's dream of playing in the 1966 World Cup.

A superb goal by the Mozambique-born Eusebio - known as the "black panther" - against Czechoslovakia in a Bratislava qualifier ended the 15 million-strong country's hopes of participating in England.

On Saturday, top government official Eduard Kukan stood next to Eusebio as he told reporters it was time to forgive and forget.

"No one could possibly forget the goal which destroyed the dreams of 15 million people, but despite that goal I've decided, as minister for foreign affairs, to officially forgive Eusebio," said Kukan.

Former Benfica striker Eusebio, who scored 1137 goals in his career, was invited to the Slovakian capital on semi-official business by the ministry for foreign affairs.

However his visit is being seen as highly symbolic. Slovakia are currently close to qualifying for the 2006 World Cup finals in Germany and are set to play off against Spain.

FC Bratislava in the Slovakian league are also involved in the Champions League.

Matthaeus to make WC group draw

AFP, Berlin

West Germany's 1990 World Cup winning captain Lothar Matthaeus has been handpicked by FIFA to make the group draw for the 2006 World Cup finals in Leipzig on December 9.

Germany host the World Cup, running from June 9 to July 9, and FIFA felt it was appropriate that an icon such as Matthaeus, who has won a record 150 caps for his country, was given the honour of making the draw.

"It is a great honour for me," Matthaeus told Bild daily.

Matthaeus, 44, is coach of the Hungarian national team but will be rooting for his homeland Germany after Hungary failed to qualify for the finals.

Asian Champions League final shifted to Jordan

REUTERS, Kuala Lumpur

The Asian Football Confederation (AFC) on Sunday took the unusual step of moving the second leg of this month's Asian Champions League final from Saudi Arabia to neutral Jordan.

AFC officials said the October 31 game between Saudi holders Al Ittihad and UAE side Al Ain would go ahead in Amman instead of Jeddah because of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan.

The timing of the decision has raised eyebrows as both teams booked their places in the final almost two weeks ago.

Saudi officials had requested the second leg be postponed out of respect for Ramadan, AFC officials said.

The first leg will take place as scheduled in Al Ain on October 26. Al Ittihad thrashed South Korea's Pusan 1-Park 7-0 on aggregate while Emirates side Al Ain overpowered China's Shenzhen Jianlibao 6-0 over two legs in the semi-finals.

Al Ain won the inaugural Asian Champions League in 2003 with Al Ittihad victorious last year.

minutes from time.

The reigning Spanish champions could have taken the lead after 25 minutes when their teenage Argentine international Lionel Messi headed a Deco corner against the crossbar.

Another good chance fell to Eto'o later in the first period but Osasuna manage to ride their luck until half time.

Barca move up to fourth, ahead of the eight games being played on Sunday, while Osasuna stay in second place but will almost certainly have been overtaken by several teams by the end of the weekend.

One negative note for Barcelona, with three games looming up in the next 10 days, was that both Belletti and Deco were injured in the first half and limped off before half time.

UEFA Cup contenders Sevilla produced their best domestic performance of the season to beat struggling Alaves 2-0 on Saturday.

Goals from Adriano and Vincenzo Maresca, the latter a penalty, got Sevilla three vital points to put their spluttering start to the season further behind them.

Jesus Navas went close early for Sevilla but they took the lead after 26 minutes when their Brazilian striker Adriano found the net after a neat pass from Maresca.

Sevilla had further chances to add to their tally in the second half before Maresca got a controversial second goal from the penalty spot. Javier Saviola looked to have dived following a legitimate challenge by his Argentine compatriot Franco Constanzo.

League leaders Real Madrid face fifth-placed Valencia on Sunday.

TOP SIX												
Spanish football league table after Saturday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):												
Real	7	5	0	2	17	6	15					
Osasuna	8	5	0	3	9	8	15					
Getafe	7	4	2	1	11	7	14					
Barcelona	8	3	4	1	17	10	13					
Celta	7	4	1	2	10	8	13					
Valencia	7	3	3	1	12	10	12					

Proteas go 1-nil up

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through the covers and then chipped over the in-field for the winning single with three balls remaining.

SCOREBOARD

Final scoreboard of the first one-day international between South Africa and New Zealand at Springbok Park in Bloemfontein on Sunday:

NEW ZEALAND												
Fleming c Gibbs b Nel	45											
Astle c Boucher b Pollock	1											
Vincent c Boucher b Ntini	8											
H Marshall lbw b Kallis	16											
McMillan c Prince b Kallis	66											
Oram run out (Smith)	35											
McCollum c Dippenaar b Nel	28											
Vettori c Prince b Nel	1											
Adams not out	30											
Mills not out	1											
Extras: (b-1, lb-11, nb-2, w-4)	18											
Total: (For 8 wkts in 50 overs)	249											
Fall of wickets: 1-7, 2-18, 3-70, 4-97, 5-172, 6-200, 7-204, 8-241												
Did not bat: Bond.												
South Africa substitutions: Boje for Ntini.												

Bowler												
Pollock	10	2	43	1								
Ntini	4	0	19	1								
Langeveldt	10	1	48	0								
Nel	9	0	42	3								

Kallis	9	1	45	2
Boje	6	0	32	0
Kemp	2	0	8	0
SOUTH AFRICA				
Smith b Adams				19
Dippenaar lbw b Bond				10
Kallis b Mills				0
Gibbs c Marshall b Bond				25
Prince b Astle				31
Boucher b Vettori				33
Kemp c Vincent b Patel				73
Pollock c Adams b Patel				37
Boje not out				3
Langeveldt not out				3
Extras: (b-1, lb-4, nb-1, w-13)				19
Total: (For 8 wkts in 49.3 overs)				250
Fall of wickets: 1-29, 2-34, 3-41, 4-85, 5-117, 6-182, 7-247, 8-247				
New Zealand substitutions: Patel for				
Oram.				