

## Nel fractures foot, Ntini may return

AFP, Brisbane

South African strike bowler Makhaya Ntini could make a surprise return for the triangular one-day series here after Andre Nel was found to have a severe stress fracture in his left foot Friday.

Nel, South Africa's leading wicket-taker in the 2-0 Test series loss to Australia, will fly home early on Saturday, missing the upcoming series which also includes Sri Lanka.

The firebrand seamer had failed to finish the third Test in Sydney and blamed the injury on a heavy workload and Australia's hard pitches.

Ntini went home 10 days ago after suffering a hamstring injury but the South Africans will not decide on Nel's replacement until Monday.

Ntini's hamstring tendon damage was assessed this week in Cape Town but officials here said a cortisone injection was likely to help him prove his fitness on Monday.

The severity of Nel's injury, first thought to be just bruising, became clearer after a bone scan taken on Thursday night.

Nel is considered a certainty to return in time for Australia's eight-week tour of South Africa starting in late February, needing three to four weeks' rest.

The Proteas warmed up for their opening tri-series clash against Australia here on Sunday with a 46-run victory over the Queensland Academy of Sport here on Friday.

All-rounder Jacques Kallis starred with 80 off 106 balls for the tourists, including a massive six, helping his team to recover from a bad start to make 234-7 in the match at Brisbane's Allan Border field.

Skipper Graeme Smith's disappointing form with the bat continued when he fell for 24 at 59-3 in the 17th over but Kallis and Ashwell Prince, who hit 50 off 72 balls, turned the game around with a vital century stand.

All-rounder Chris Simpson backed up his impressive off-spin spell of 3-40 to scare the tourists with 55 off 48 balls before the Academy side wilted to be all out for 188.

## Aussies did

FROM PAGE 12

Australian crowds have been in the spotlight recently after South Africa complained of racist taunts during their Test matches here and at Perth and Sydney.

Sri Lanka are scheduled to tour Australia in the 2007-08 southern hemisphere summer, although it is unclear if Muralitharan, who would then be 35, will still be playing.

"I will play until 2007, then keep and open mind about whether to play or not," he told Melbourne's Herald-Sun newspaper on Friday.

Muralitharan may leave the sport at the same time as his nemesis Warne makes a comeback to international one-day cricket.

Warne has indicated he may return for the 2007 World Cup in the West Indies, although his captain Ricky Ponting believes any comeback by the brilliant leg-spinner would have to begin quickly.

"Even Shane would agree he can't just put his hand up and say: 'I want to play in the World Cup', and just turn up at the World Cup for the first game and play there," Ponting said.

"If he is eventually going to declare himself available again, I think we'll all like to see it sooner rather than later."

Sri Lanka's next tri-series match in Australia is against South Africa, in Brisbane next Tuesday.

## Champions Trophy

FROM PAGE 12

be made available free to state broadcaster Doordarshan.

"It has been very helpful to draw together all of our members and many of the major TV rights holders in international cricket to discuss this important issue," Mani said in the statement.

"We now have a much better understanding of the potential implications of the recent government directive regarding sports television rights in India.

"It was very important to open a wide-reaching dialogue on this issue and we will continue to monitor the issue along with all of these important stakeholders."

Among the TV channels invited for the meeting were CSI Octagon, Doordarshan, ESPN-Star Sports, Sony, TEN Sports, Trans World International (TWI) and Zee network.

Pakistan seam bowler Shabbir Ahmed, who was banned for 12 months for an illegal action last month, will appear before an ICC review committee in Dubai on January 21, ICC media officer Jon Long said.

## PREMIERSHIP

# United set for City clash



AFP, London

Manchester United will cap a busy week with a trip to Eastlands for the Manchester derby on Saturday as the Red Devils try to cut Chelsea's 13-point lead at the top of the English Premiership.

In the other top games, the leaders travel to The Stadium of Light to take on rock bottom Sunderland on Sunday while Liverpool and Tottenham will do battle at Anfield on Saturday with the winners claiming third place.

Arsenal will hope to bounce back from their League Cup semi-final first leg reverse at Wigan on Tuesday with a victory against struggling Middlesbrough at Highbury on Saturday.

United can cut Chelsea's lead to 10 points if they win but the leaders will have the chance to re-open the 13-point gap just 24 hours later.

City boss Stuart Pearce will not be able to call on Matt Jansen for the derby despite offering the former Blackburn forward the chance to train with his squad.

Champions Chelsea are well on their way to setting a string of new records in the Premiership this season and look certain to dismiss Sunderland who themselves look set to set new marks for all the wrong reasons.

Chelsea have 58 points from 21 games and if they continue that ratio through to May they will be the first top flight side ever to pass the 100-point barrier for a season.

Sunderland, for their part, are on course to win fewer points than the previous record, which they set the last time they were in the top flight, in 2002-03 when they won just 19 points.

Liverpool and Tottenham have both been busy in the transfer market this month, although in different ways.

While the Merseysiders have brought in defenders Jan Kromkamp and Daniel Agger, Spurs have been shipping players out with three squad members joining Portsmouth.

Middlesbrough travel to Arsenal without centre-back Ugo Ehiogu who they have allowed to leave for West Brom, despite an injury to captain Gareth Southgate that

should only keep him out for two weeks.

Arsenal will welcome back big guns such as captain Thierry Henry, Robert Pires, Sol Campbell and Jens Lehmann for the visit of the north east strugglers.

In the weekend's other games, under-fire Newcastle boss Graeme Souness takes his charges to Craven Cottage to play Fulham who may give a debut to new goal-keeper Antti Niemi.

Aston Villa host West Ham, Birmingham, boosted by new striker Chris Sutton, travel to Charlton and Ehiogu could make his debut for West Brom at Wigan on Sunday.

## FIXTURES

(1500 GMT kick-off unless stated)  
**Saturday**  
Arsenal v Middlesbrough, Aston Villa v West Ham, Blackburn v Bolton (1715), Charlton v Birmingham, Fulham v Newcastle, Liverpool v Tottenham, Man City v Man Utd (1245), Portsmouth v Everton  
**Sunday**  
Sunderland v Chelsea (1600), Wigan v West Brom (1330)

## WC opening gala put off

REUTERS, Berlin

The World Cup opening gala in Berlin has been cancelled, FIFA said on Friday, claiming the staging of the event could damage the playing surface needed at the Olympic Stadium five days later.

However a German newspaper said it was called off because of rising costs and sluggish ticket sales.

The gala, rather than an opening ceremony, was to be held for the first time ahead of the World Cup tournament on June 7 in Berlin's Olympic stadium, two days before the finals start.

"Personally, I still think the idea of holding such a high-profile opening event is a good one," said FIFA president Sepp Blatter in a statement.

"FIFA has not taken the decision to cancel the event at such a late stage lightly, but as world football's governing body, we must put sporting considerations first."

Performers were to include American soprano Jessye Norman, U.S. band Black Eyed Peas, Algerian singer Cheb Khaled and around 5,000 volunteers.

Previous World Cups have held opening ceremonies. They typically lasted about an hour immediately before the first match.

## Atletico axe Bianchi

REUTERS, Madrid

Atletico Madrid sacked coach Carlos Bianchi on Thursday after a poor run of results left the Primera Liga club four points above the relegation zone and on the verge of elimination from the King's Cup.

"We have arrived at an agreement with Bianchi to terminate his contract with immediate effect," club president Enrique Cerezo told a news conference.

The former Boca Juniors coach signed a three-year contract in June when he arrived with an impressive track record.

The 56-year-old Argentine led Boca out from mid-table obscurity to become the dominant force in South American football, steering them to success in three Libertadores Cups and two World Club Cups.

But just five months into his new job, Atletico are 12th in the league and without a win in their last nine league outings.

On Wednesday, they suffered a 1-0 home defeat to Real Zaragoza in the first leg of their last-16 tie in the King's Cup.

## Younis powers

FROM PAGE 12

the day when Yuvraj Singh ran out Salman Butt with a direct hit at the non-striker's end.

Butt ran down the wicket from the bowler's end when Malik played a shot to mid-wicket and failed to return to the crease after being refused a single.

Malik, who was promoted to open the innings against England, showed he had settled into the role by making 59, his fourth Test half-century.

Malik hit seven boundaries and a six before he drove Irfan Pathan to Harbhajan Singh at covers midway through the post-lunch session.

Earlier, the tourists ended the suspense over their team composition by playing Ganguly in place of two regular openers, Gautam Gambhir and Wasim Jaffer.

Pakistan went in with a three-pronged pace attack of Akhtar, Mohammad Sami and Navedul Hasan and one specialist spinner in Danish Kaneria.

The third series between the neighbours in two years includes two more Tests in Faisalabad from January 21-25 and Karachi from January 29-February 2.

## SCOREBOARD

Scoreboard at stumps on the first day of the first Test between Pakistan and India at the Gaddafi Stadium in Lahore on Friday:

<b>PAKISTAN:</b> First innings					
Malik c Harbhajan b Pathan	59				
Butt run out	6				
Younis not out	147				
Yousuf not out	95				
Extras: (lb-10, nb-8, w-1)	19				
Total: (For 2 wkts in 85 overs)	326				
Fall of wickets: 1-12, 2-136					
To bat: Inzamam, Afridi, Akmal, Akhtar, Sami, Naved, Kaneria					
<b>Bowler</b>	<b>O</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>W</b>	
Pathan	21	3	76	1	
Agarkar	15	3	59	0	
Ganguly	6	1	14	0	
Harbhajan	16	4	64	0	
Kumble	23	1	92	0	
Sehwag	4	0	11	0	

**INDIA:** Dravid, Sehwag, Ganguly, Tendulkar, Laxman, Yuvraj, Dhoni, Pathan, Agarkar, Kumble, Harbhajan.

**Toss:** Pakistan.

**Umpires:** Rudi Koertzen and Darrell Hair.

## PRIMERA LIGA

# Valencia's sights on Barca



REUTERS, Madrid

In-form Valencia tackle second-placed Osasuna at home in the Primera Liga on Saturday, confident that they can mount a title challenge to leaders Barcelona.

Quique Sanchez Flores's side have crept up to third in the league on the back of a seven match unbeaten run, though they remain six points short of Osasuna and 10 adrift of Barca.

"It is reckless to say Barcelona are already champions," Flores told a news conference.

"They are about to lose one of their most decisive players (Samuel Eto'o) to the African Nations Cup for up to a month while playing in three competitions, with a high profile match against Chelsea in the Champions League to boot.

"I don't think Barca will be able to maintain their pace and they still have to play us at home, so we shouldn't lose faith."

Valencia eliminated Villarreal in the King's Cup on Wednesday and

have not conceded a goal for five consecutive matches in all competitions.

Osasuna have struggled since the winter break and were knocked out of the King's Cup by Deportivo Coruna on Wednesday, and lost their 100 percent home record in the league drawing 1-1 with Racing Santander last weekend.

Their two leadings scorers, Savo Milosevic and Pierre Webó, are missing due to injury and African Nations Cup commitments respectively.

Champions Barcelona can make it 17 consecutive wins in all competitions on Sunday when they entertain second-bottom Athletic Bilbao in the Nou Camp.

It will be 18-goal Eto'o's last game before leaving to join up with Cameroon.

Fourth-placed Deportivo host bottom club Alaves while fifth-placed Villarreal visit Racing.

Real Madrid, who are sixth, face another tough match at home against seventh-placed Sevilla, as they look to reignite their league campaign.

Juan Ramon Lopez Caro is

without injured strikers Ronaldo and Raul, while new signing Antonio Cassano remains a doubt as he struggles to regain his fitness.

Real have only won once in their last four league outings.

Atletico Madrid caretaker coach Pepe Murcia takes charge of his first game away at third-from-bottom Real Betis, following the sacking of Carlos Bianchi on Thursday.

The Madrid club have not won in nine league starts and fell 1-0 in the first leg of their last-16 King's Cup tie against Real Zaragoza on Wednesday.

## FIXTURES

(1600 GMT kick-off unless stated)  
**Saturday**  
Real Betis v Atletico Madrid (1900)  
Valencia v Osasuna (2100)  
**Sunday**  
Deportivo La Coruna v Alaves, Getafe v Celta Vigo, Malaga v Cadiz, Racing Santander v Villarreal, Real Sociedad v Espanyol, Real Zaragoza v Real Mallorca, Barcelona v Athletic Bilbao (1800), Real Madrid v Sevilla (2000)

## SERIE A

# Milan face Roma test



REUTERS, Rome

The Serie A season reaches its midway point on Sunday with Juventus firmly in control, while second-placed AC Milan must travel to the Italian capital to face a rapidly-improving AS Roma.

Juventus sit atop Serie A on 49 points, nine ahead of Milan. The gap between them is due to Milan's poor away form.

Ancelotti's side has a 100 percent winning record at the San Siro stadium, but have already lost four times on their travels this season and Ancelotti will be hoping strikers Andriy Shevchenko and Alberto Gilardino can prevent them slipping up against Roma.

After an uncertain start, the pair have hit their stride, hitting the target eight times in the past three matches to make Milan's attack the most prolific in the division.

Roma, however, have recently shaken off their erratic early-season form to rise to seventh in the division on 27 points.

The constant and heavily-publicised wrangling over Antonio Cassano's contract, which hung over the squad up until Christmas, has been resolved by the striker's

departure to Real Madrid.

Cassano's departure and injuries to Shabani Nonda and Vincenzo Montella leave Roma with a shortage of strikers.

Francesco Totti is expected to start alone up front, with Mancini, Simone Perrotta and Damiano Tommasi in support -- a formation that served Roma well in their last two games against Chievo Verona and Treviso, both of which they won.

Roma's biggest concern surrounds influential playmaker Rodrigo Taddei, who picked up an ankle injury in training on Thursday and risks missing Sunday's match.

Fiorentina's fans, meanwhile, could be forgiven for looking anxiously over their shoulders.

The twice Italian champions occupy fourth place -- the final Champions League berth -- but have made a slow start to 2006, drawing 1-1 with Reggina and losing 4-1 to Juventus midweek to tumble out of the Italian Cup.

On Sunday they face a tricky game against high-flying Chievo, who lie sixth and are on course to repeat their glorious 2001-02 season, when they finished fifth in their first year in the top-flight.

Fiorentina striker Luca Toni is still Serie A's leading scorer thanks

# Amoroso joins Milan



INTERNET, undated

AC Milan have completed the signing of striker Marcio Amoroso from Brazilian side Sa Paulo after the departure of Christian Vieri.

Vieri left the San Siro for French side Monaco earlier this week and Milan boss Carlo Ancelotti has moved quickly to fill the void left by the experienced hit-man.

Brazilian international Amoroso has penned an 18-month deal in Milan that will keep him at the club until the summer of 2007.

The 31-year-old is no stranger to Italian football having played for Udinese between 1996 and 1999 and then Parma between 1999 and 2001.

The much-travelled striker has also played in the Bundesliga with Borussia Dortmund and La Liga with Malaga, and he now joins a Milan side looking to close the nine-point gap on league leaders



MARCIO AMOROSO

Juventus.

Andriy Shevchenko and Alberto Gilardino are likely to continue as the first-choice pairing up front for Milan and Ancelotti sees Amoroso as the ideal substitute who will come on late in games to provide a fresh pair of legs in attack.

# Vaughan sure of Barmy Army

FROM PAGE 12

outs even before we arrive," said Vaughan.

"England fans are very clever and have special ways of getting tickets and I'm sure we'll be well supported in Australia."

"The fans played a big part in us regaining the Ashes last summer. They really got behind us and gave us a lift when we went out onto the pitch and throughout every day's play.

"I played in Australia last time and I'm sure there'll be plenty of England support there to give us a big lift."

Cricket Australia are yet to confirm plans to limit the number of tickets available to English fans but if they do, as expected, some feel this will simply create a black market with tickets sold at exorbitant prices.

The Boxing Day Test in Melbourne is expected to break all attendance records and surpass the previous high of 90,800.

But with memories of their Ashes defeat still fresh, the Australian players, including

Shane Warne, are keen for the majority of those tickets to be taken up by their fellow countrymen.

"You can't start making excuses and talking about the crowd for your performances in the middle," said Vaughan.

"We played a good series and deserved to win and the crowd played a big part. In Australia you expect to be sledged by the crowd, but we always have good support out there.

"There are a lot of ex-pats living out there and I'm sure you'll see large numbers of England supporters in every ground."

"It's great for the game of cricket that 10 months before the Ashes start everybody is talking about every ground being sold out and that there's going to be a ticket crisis."

While Australia are focusing on their next Ashes series, Vaughan has more imminent concerns but is optimistic he will be fit enough to join England's tour of India next month following surgery on his right knee.

Vaughan flew home early from

the pre-Christmas tour to Pakistan to have the operation having been troubled by the injury throughout the trip.

"I've taken a positive step in the last two weeks," he said.

"I've been able to get on the machines and work very hard for two to three hours a day, so I don't think there will be any problem for me getting on the plane with the rest of the lads next time."

"Going out there (India) to play is as tough as going anywhere in the world at the moment."

"It's going to be extremely difficult to go out there and win but this team has shown that it reacts when it is thrown a challenge."

"Heat is going to be a factor and they have some wonderful players like Sachin Tendulkar and Rahul Dravid not to mention spinners like Anil Kumble and Harbhajan Singh -- they've got a very strong team."

"We need to learn from our mistakes in Pakistan and we'll have to be at our very best to beat them (India)."