



Did U Know?

The United States' Major League Soccer made its debut in 1996, shortly after the wildly successful 1994 World Cup was hosted by the United States.

What to WATCH

ESPN

FA Cup
Bolton Wanderers vs Arsenal
Live at 11:35 pm
STAR Sports
Australian Open
Women's Singles Final & Men's Doubles
Final
Live at 8:00 am
FA Cup
Everton vs Chelsea
Live at 8:35 pm



Maria Sharapova

(Russian tennis star)

"I'm really excited. I think my shoulder seems to be getting better. That's a big positive. Like I said, without playing a lot of matches to be able to play the quality of tennis that I played today, I think it's a big plus."

After losing to Justine Henin-Hardenne at the Australian Open semifinal.

Clubs say 'no' to BFF

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh Football Federation's bid to hold a single-leg Premier Football League this year got a blow when the top clubs opposed the idea.

The BFF high-ups sat with the Premier and First Division clubs on Thursday night to discuss the issue but the representatives of 17 clubs present were negative about the idea.

Also, they refused to play the league at the Kamalapur Stadium as well as taking part in two players' transfers for the Premiership and the Professional League in the same season.

The BFF will have to hand over the Bangabandhu National Stadium for renovation of the ground, which will take at least six months. If it wants to launch the Professional League in September, the governing body of football has no other alternative but to stage the Premier League at another venue.

The BFF is expected to take a decision in its executive committee meeting on February 1.

Sino duo lifts doubles crown

AFP, Melbourne

China's Yan Zi and Zheng Jie won the country's first-ever Grand Slam title Friday, grinding down top seeds Lisa Raymond and Samantha Stosur to take the Australian Open women's doubles title. It was a sterling come-from-behind victory by the 12th seeds and the perfect Chinese New Year present for a country considered by many to be the future of tennis.

They had looked out for the count after losing confidence to see the first set slip away in 41 minutes, but regrouped and regained composure to take the second set on a tiebreak, saving two championship points.

The Sichuan natives doggedly held on to win the third set for a memorable 2-6, 7-6 (9/7), 6-3 victory in 2hr 15mins.

Switzerland's Roger Federer acknowledges the crowd after defeating Germany's Nicolas Kiefer in the Australian Open semifinal in Melbourne on Friday.

Australian Open

AFP, Melbourne

Roger Federer reached his third consecutive Grand Slam final Friday with an easy win over Nicolas Kiefer at the Australian Open, to set up an intriguing clash with new star Marcos Baghdatis. The Swiss world number one, watched by his idol Rod Laver in the arena named after him, was too consistent for the self-destructing 21st seeded German, winning 6-3, 5-7, 6-0, 6-2 in 2hr 40min.

Federer stepped up his game after error-riddled wins over Tommy Haas and Nikolay Davydenko in previous rounds,



PHOTO: AFP

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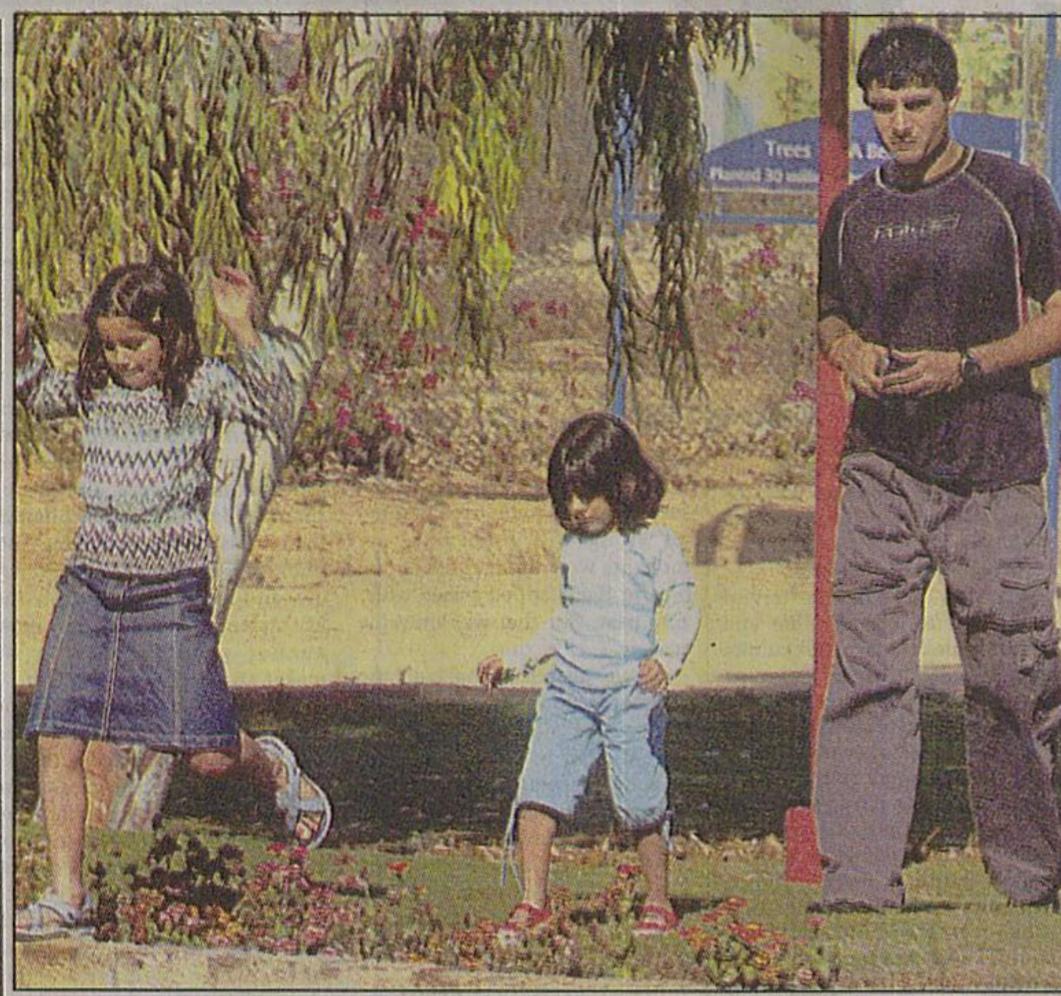


PHOTO: AFP

HAVING A PICNIC! Sourav Ganguly, in an out of the Indian team, his daughter Sana (C) and son (L), daughter of Sachin Tendulkar, strolling at the Arabian Sea Country Club in Karachi on Friday.

Karachi promises a lot

Cricket

AFP, Karachi

The focus has shifted from the players to the pitch as India and Pakistan attempt to salvage their Test series after two high-scoring draws that drew widespread criticism.

The rivals get a chance to break the deadlock in the third and final Test starting at the National Stadium here from Sunday on a hard, greenish wicket that experts say should produce a result.

The bowlers' graveyards in Lahore and Faisalabad made a mockery of the first two Tests which produced 2,791 runs and 12 centuries and saw only 36 of the possible 80 wickets fall.

The stinging criticism of the flat, lifeless wickets from players and fans alike prompted the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) to release a statement blaming the cold weather in both cities for the dull

draws. "Regrettably, due to weather conditions -- rain, frost and absence of sunshine -- the pitches turned out low and slow, tilting the balance totally in favour of batsmen, producing dull cricket and disappointing results," the PCB released said.

"It is hoped that Karachi, which has abundant sunshine, will produce a pitch that will be result-oriented and will strike a fair balance between bat and ball."

Pakistan coach Bob Woolmer said his first look at the National Stadium wicket made him optimistic that a result was possible.

"I am pleased to see the best square of the series two days before the Test starts," said Woolmer, and the former England batsman.

"It is a typical Karachi wicket which should have good bounce in the beginning and help spinners later in the game."

The high-profile Test series, touted as bigger than the Ashes contests between England and Australia, needs a fitting finale to

lift the morale of fans on both sides of the border.

When India played in Pakistan in 2004, all three Tests produced results with India winning 2-1. Pakistan's tour of India last year ended 1-1 with one match drawn.

Indian captain Rahul Dravid hoped the dull draws in the current series would not diminish interest in India-Pakistan contests.

"Our cricket is important to many people in the world and it's important that people get to see good cricket -- not only for India and Pakistan but for world cricket," said Dravid.

"We've had some very good series before this one. When we came here in 2004 we had some of the best wickets I've seen and played in my career."

"The last couple of Test matches haven't lived up to the expectations of an India-Pakistan contest and I hope Karachi will do that."

India and Pakistan are confident of fielding full-strength teams for the decider despite injury and

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draws.

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Federer said he was looking forward to playing tournament surprise packet Baghdatis in Sunday's final.

"We're all surprised he has got so far because there's other very talented youngsters who I thought would make the break before him. But he has proved us all wrong," he said.

"He has beaten quality players and he totally deserves to be in the final."

"The thought that I've played him three times and beaten him

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Federer makes it thrice Sets up Baghatis final

Australian Open

AFP, Melbourne

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Federer stepped up his game after error-riddled wins over Tommy Haas and Nikolay Davydenko in previous rounds,

and broke Kiefer's serve five times in the last two sets for a convincing win.

The top seed, the first player since Andre Agassi in 1999 to reach three consecutive Grand Slam finals, is looking for his second Australian Open, after beating Russian Marat Safin here in 2004, and his seventh Grand Slam crown.

"I had sort of a strange feeling going into this match. Not a negative one, but just like a big excitement because I knew, I'm so close for another Grand Slam," Federer said.

"We've had many close and tough matches over the years, he's beaten me a few times and happily I've beaten him more times than he's beaten me," he said of Kiefer, the bad boy of the tournament who

has rung up a stack of fines.

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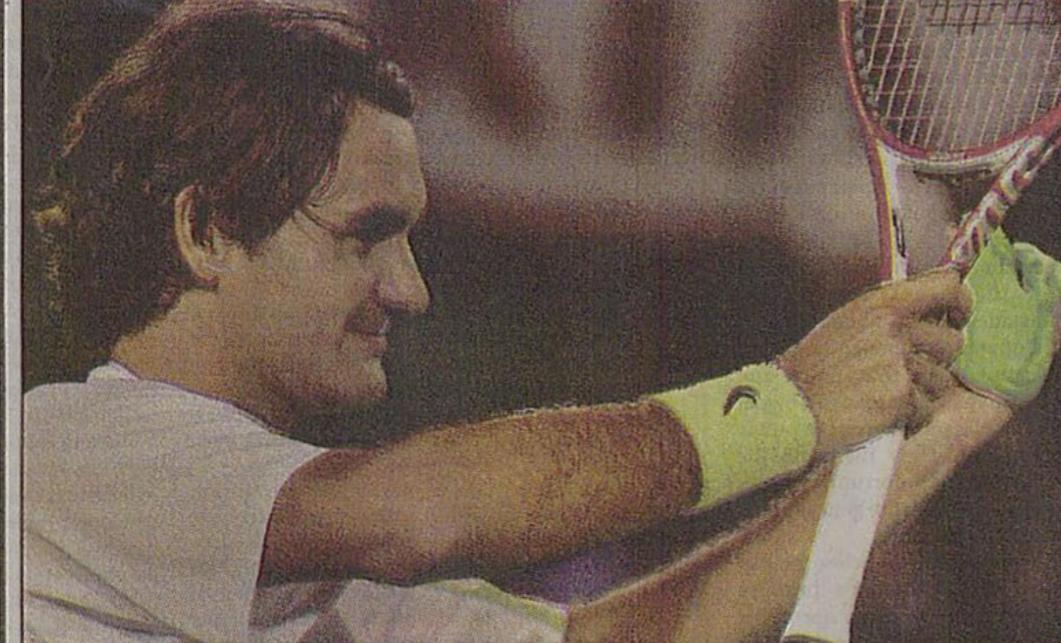


PHOTO: AFP

Switzerland's Roger Federer acknowledges the crowd after defeating Germany's Nicolas Kiefer in the Australian Open semifinal in Melbourne on Friday.

BD A complete UAE whitewash

Cricket

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh A completed the whitewash of United Arab Emirates cricket team with a five-wicket victory in the back-to-back limited-overs game at the Khulna Divisional Stadium yesterday.

Captain Rajin Saleh, fresh from his side's massive 114-run win on Thursday at the same venue, won the toss for the second successive occasion but preferred to field first in the second match.

The visiting UAE, who had lost the first two games against Bangladesh Under-19 team in Bogra, however, failed to set a challenging total for the start-studded second string Bangladesh squad as they bundled out for 160 in 49 overs.

Left-arm spinners Abdur Razzaq and Mosharrif Hossain picked up two wickets each while four batsmen were run out victims.

Ace paceman Mashrafee Bin Mortaza, who made a return to competitive cricket in Thursday's match after a five-month lay-off.

Monty Panesar was called up

Friday to fill the vacant spin berth for England's forthcoming three-Test tour of India.

The uncapped left-arm saw off competition from the likes of Ian Blackwell and Alex Loudon and with Ashley Giles still struggling with the hip injury that forced him to return early from Pakistan, Panesar will have hope to make his Test debut on the spin-friendly Indian pitches.

However, the selectors also announced that Blackwell had been placed on standby in the event that Giles failed to regain fitness.

Left-arm Blackwell has also been named in the England A squad to tour the West Indies as has off-spinner Loudon.

When the selectors named a 15-man squad earlier this month, including left-arm Giles -- England's senior spinner -- and Hampshire off-break veteran Shaun Udal, both of whom were involved in the recent 2-0 series defeat of Pakistan, they kept a place open for a third slow bowler.

Panesar, a 23-year-old England-born Sikh had already put himself in contention by taking 46 wickets for Northamptonshire at a cost of just 21.54 apiece in last season's County Championship.

"Monty has done very well for

due to back pain, was not included for the second game.

The home team saw a middle-order collapse after a 68-run opening partnership between Rajin (42 off 55 balls) and Shahriar Nafees (35 off 42 balls) but Alok Kapali and Farhad Reza associated in an undefeated 64-run stand for the sixth wicket as Bangladesh A coasted to 163-5 in 36.3 overs.

Out-of-favour Kapali was not out with 28 off 33 balls while Farhad made unbeaten 35 off 41 balls.

SCORES IN BRIEF

UAE: 160 all out in 49 overs (Arshad 47, Sagib Ali 24, Asad 41 not out, extras 9; Shafiq 1-10, Farhad 1-31, Razzak 2-47, Mosharrif 2-14).

BANGLADESH A: 163-5 in 36 overs (Rajin 42, Nafees 35, Tushar 0, Mahmudullah 1, Nadir 11, Kapali 28 not out, Farhad 35 not out, extras 13; Ali Asad 3-35, Shoeb 2-54).

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