

'Not a good sign'

SPORTS REPORTER

Chief selector Faruque Ahmed yesterday said that it was not a good sign to see the home captain unhappy with training facilities ahead of a tough challenge.

The former national skipper commented this after Tigers captain Habibul Bashar had showed his frustration about poor practice pitches in Bogra.

"It is really a serious concern when the captain shows his disappointment. I have talked with coach Dav (Whatmore) about the matter and I can assure you that everything would be okay. I do not want to make any comments on the surface because I was not there," Faruque said.

The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) also took the matter seriously and said that the team's think-tank actually did not express its desire about the character of practice pitches.

"It is really unfortunate what our captain has told about the facilities. Still, the team management has not expressed what kind of wicket they needed. Everybody

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Barisal batsman Towhid Hossain cuts one square for four during his 61-run knock against Chittagong in the National Cricket League at the Dhanmondi Cricket Stadium on Wednesday.

PHOTO: STAR

U-19s win playoff

SPORTS REPORTER

The top-order put on yet another disappointing performance, but Bangladesh still recovered from their heartbreaking quarterfinal exit to hand a four-wicket defeat on West Indies in the playoff of the ICC Under-19 World Cup at the Sinhalese Sports Club ground in Colombo yesterday.

Mushfiqur Rahim's boys will now fight for the fifth place on Saturday either with Sri Lanka or Zimbabwe who clash in the other playoff today.

One paceman finally showed some mettle in a left-arm spin-heavy Bangladesh attack as Dollar Mahmud captured three wickets to tear the West Indies top order apart.

The Caribbeans were eventually bundled out for 161 in 37.2 overs.

Nabil Samad was the other successful bowler with 3-24 while Sakib Al Hasan took two for 32.

Chasing the small target, the junior Tigers' batting line-up was once again found wanting as they

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India can win it here

Inzy encourages his injury-hit side

Cricket

AGENCIES, Multan

After the morale-boosting victory in Lahore, a buoyant India would look to wrap up the five-match one-day series against Pakistan when the teams clash in the fourth tie which promises to be another high-scoring tussle here on Thursday.

But Pakistan captain Inzamamul Haq is backing his injury-hit side to have enough firepower to level the series in a day-nighter today.

India won the last two matches to lead 2-1 so Pakistan need a win in Inzamam's home town to stay in the series.

The hosts are without front-line bowlers Shoaib Akhtar and Shahid Afridi for the rest of the series.

"Our main players are injured, but it won't affect the team because we have good replacements," said Inzamam.

Paceman Umar Gul is also a doubt with a back injury and Pakistan have drafted Mohammad Sami and Rao Iftikhar into the squad.

Meanwhile, Inzamam's opposite number Rahul Dravid has injury problems of his own ahead of the clash at the Multan Stadium.

Opening batsman Virender Sehwag and off-spinner Harbhajan Singh have gone home and spinning all-rounder Ramesh Powar was brought in last week.

"We know Pakistan are a good team despite the fact they are without Akhtar and Afridi," said Dravid.

"But we are also without Sehwag and Harbhajan, who are our critical players in one-day cricket."

Dravid said his team would have to play disciplined cricket to win the series.

"We are very keen to win the series in Multan but it is not going to be easy," he told a news conference.

"We know we have to play well. We have to play one day of good cricket out of the remaining two to win the series. We are confident of doing it."

Dravid told his teammates to concentrate on playing their natural game and not get conscious of the fact that they were just one win away from clinching the series.

Dravid said his team was adept in both chasing and setting targets and needed to play just one good game to record a series win for the second consecutive time on Pakistani soil.

But he said if the team played according to a plan without thinking too much about the outcome, a positive result would come automatically.

"We will not be concentrating so much on result as on planning and strategy and if we do it well it's very good," said the Bangalore stalwart

for whom the one-day triumph would come as some sort of solace after the loss in the preceding Test series.

"We are playing good cricket and have won 11 games when we have chased. We are confident of doing both. We have specific plans when we bat first or chase. I do not think we prefer doing one over another," Dravid said.

The final one-day international will be held in Karachi on Sunday.

TEAMS

PAKISTAN (from): Inzamamul Haq (captain), Younis Khan, Mohammad Yousuf, Abdul Razzaq, Kamran Akmal, Shoaib Malik, Arshad Khan, Salman Butt, Navedul Hasan, Imran Farhat, Faisal Iqbal, Umar Gul, Mohammad Asif, Yasir Arafat, Rao Iftikhar, Mohammad Sami.

INDIA (from): Rahul Dravid (captain), Sachin Tendulkar, Yuvraj Singh, Mohammad Kaif, Gautam Gambhir, Suresh Raina, Mahendra Dhoni, Irfan Pathan, Sri Sreesanth, Murli Kartik, Zaheer Khan, Ajit Agarkar, Rudra Pratap Singh, Ramesh Powar.

Umpires: Steve Bucknor and Asad Rauf.

Rajshahi take solo lead

ISPAHANI MIRZAPORE TEA 7th National Cricket League

SPORTS REPORTER

Dhaka finally fell from grace as Rajshahi took solo lead in the one-day table of the Ispahani Seventh National Cricket League with a five-wicket win in the battle of the table-toppers yesterday.

Rajshahi led the table with maximum ten points while Dhaka, whose maiden league defeat came in their first away match of the competition, slipped to second position with eight after five rounds.

Chittagong handed a thumping 66-run defeat on Barisal while Khulna snatched a three-wicket win over Sylhet with one over remaining as all three home sides finished on the winning side.

Khulna and Chittagong climbed to the third place with their second wins while the losers stuck to the bottom of the six-team table.

DHAKA-RAJSHAHI

Rajshahi definitely had the advantage in the battle for the lead as they were playing their fifth successive match on home soil. And a moderate total of 188 by the visitors at the Rajshahi Divisional Stadium did not threaten the local side at all.

With opener Jahurul Islam

hammering 71 off 93 balls Rajshahi coasted to victory with more than seven overs to spare. There was a hiccup close toward the target when they lost four wickets in the space of 31 runs but it was not enough for Dhaka to avoid the inevitable.

Jahurul, who shared two significant partnerships, 41 for the opening stand and 97 for the second wicket, smashed 14 boundaries before being dismissed by pacer Ashraful Haque.

Earlier, inserted Dhaka opener Uttam Sarkar (57 off 79 balls) added exactly 100 runs with Mahmudullah Riyad (49 off 84 balls) after they were reduced to 33-2 by the tenth over. But the much-vaunted Dhaka batting collapsed like a pack of cards against a tight line by gentle medium-pacer Farhad Hossain, who clinched the man-of-the-match award with 4-22 from 9.1 overs.

Dhaka would also be under the threat of losing solo lead in the first-class competition when their four-day match starts today. Rajshahi are six points behind and have a chance to catch the leaders with an outright victory.

CHITTAGONG-BARISAL

Barisal had no answer for Chittagong's massive collection of 300-6 and were all out for 234 at the Dhanmondi Cricket Stadium. With Chittagong's home ground being prepared for the Bangladesh-Sri Lanka Tests series, the two sides had to settle for the venue in the capital.

After electing to bat, the middle-order repaired an early damage with Nazimuddin leading Chittagong with a magnificent 93. Man-of-the-match Nazimuddin hit six fours and one six in a 98-ball innings that set the launching pad for quickfire knocks from skipper Ehsanul Haque (67 off 52 balls) and southpaw Faisal Hossain (66 not out off 59 balls).

Towhid Hossain was the only Barisal batsman to sow some authority after Chittagong pacer Gazi Alamgir had made early inroads and Yasin Arafat destroyed the middle. Towhid, who came to bat at number five, made a 72-ball 61 with five hits to the ropes.

SYLHET-KHULNA

In a seesaw battle at the Khulna Divisional Stadium, a five-wicket haul by paceman Ziaur Rahman and

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AFC Challenge Cup final on April 7?

Football

SPORTS REPORTER

The Asian Football Confederation (AFC) will consider revising the date of the final of the AFC Challenge Cup if Bangladesh hosts the whole tournament.

The 16-team tournament with all national sides participating is due to be co-hosted by Bangladesh and Nepal from March 25-April 9 but the present political condition of the Himalayan Kingdom suggests that Bangladesh will get the chance to host the tournament alone.

In that case, the final will be held on April 7 to avoid a clash with world champions Australia's cricket series in Bangladesh. According to the present schedule, the first Test between Bangladesh and Australia is due to start on April 9 in Dhaka and the football governing body of Asia would naturally want to avoid the clash with cricket.

Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) general secretary Anwarul Hoque Helal admitted that he has

discussed the issue with the AFC officials now in Dhaka and confirmed that the final will be held on April 7 if Bangladesh gets the nod as lone hosts.

"The final decision will be taken in the AFC executive committee meeting on February 23," Helal informed.

The organising committees for the AFC Presidents Cup and Challenge Cup sit on February 21 to decide whether Nepal would be allowed to stage two of the four groups.

If Nepal gets half of the tournament, there would not be any chance to bring the final forward because the teams would need at least two day's time to travel to Dhaka for the final.

Helal also said that leading corporate houses like Transcom, Beximco, Parlex and Banglalink have already showed interests to sponsor the biggest event to be played in the country after the 28th Asian Youth Football finals in 1978 when 32 teams took part.

"The AFC marketing officials

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SL ODIs could be deferred

SPORTS REPORTER

Sri Lanka cricket team will arrive in Dhaka on Friday but it was uncertain till last night whether the first two one-day internationals will take place on schedule.

The first two day-night matches are due to be played at the Shaheed Chandu Stadium in Bogra on February 19 and 20 under floodlights but the Sri Lankan authority has expressed their desire to defer the matches.

"Sri Lanka has requested us to revise the schedule due to the team's tiredness after a long tour of Australia. But we have yet to decide about the fate of the matches because we are still discussing with the ESPNStar Sports about the matter. You will get the final decision on tomorrow," said Reazuddin Al Mamun, chairman of media committee and joint-secretary of Bangladesh Cricket Board.

He, however, suggested that there was no chance to revise the whole fixture.

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Cairns wants to leave winning

SPORTINGLIFE, undated

Chris Cairns will play his final game for New Zealand on Thursday as the Black Caps go retro in their Twenty20 contest against the West Indies.

As they did against Australia last year, the Black Caps will don the beige strips made famous by the New Zealand team of the 1980s -- including Cairns' father Lance.

However, unlike against Australia, the Black Caps are determined to come away with a win this time, especially Cairns.

"I suppose it's all about your own personal standards. For me, playing the game is all about winning," he told the Black Caps website.

"Eden Park's a wonderful place and it's a great opportunity to say goodbye in NZ," he said. "It'll be an emotional occasion, that's for sure." Cairns announced his retirement last month and played his final match for his Canterbury province in their State Shield one-day final victory last week where he took four wickets and hit a six to win the game.

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Pietersen won't change

Cricket

AFP, Mumbai

England batsman Kevin Pietersen on Wednesday backed his swash-buckling style to succeed against the tough challenge of India's high-class spin attack.

Pietersen, 25, recuperating from a rib injury and enjoying his longest break in five years with his family in South Africa, said he was raring to get back into action in the three-Test series in India.

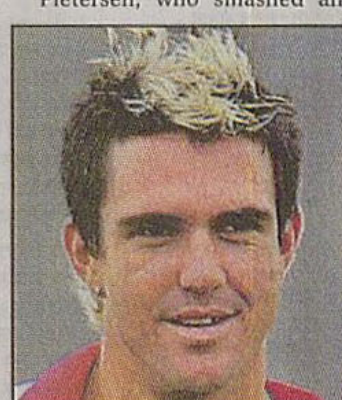
He defended his aggressive technique saying it did not matter if he was called a "slogger, hacker or a monkey" as long as he kept scoring runs.

Pietersen said his style -- that won him huge popularity in England during last year's Ashes victory against Australia -- did not even come close to some of the Indians in the ongoing one-dayers in Pakistan.

Citing players such as

wicketkeeper-batsman Mahendra Dhoni, Pietersen said: "They play more shots in 10 balls than I play in 150."

Pietersen, who smashed an



KEVIN PIETERSEN

Ashes-record of seven sixes in his knock of 158 in the final Test that helped secure the Ashes victory, said he was looking forward to challenges posed by Indian spin-

ners Harbhajan Singh and Anil Kumble.

"They are world-class spinners, it's going to be a challenge facing them. I'm looking forward to the challenge but I don't think I'm going to change my technique."

"I think it's great for the game and hopefully the purists do accept it," he added.

Pietersen, who had to miss a one-day series in Pakistan last year because of the rib injury, said he was "very, very happy" with his recovery.

"It gave me my first two months off in I don't know how many, five or six years," he told reporters at the England team hotel in Mumbai.

"I'm not concerned at all because there's no pain."

England will play three Tests and seven one-dayers in cricket-mad India, where they have not won a Test series since David Gower's tourists triumphed 2-1 in 1985.

India have lost just three of the last 25 Test series played at home

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Aussie eyes on WC

Cricket

AFP, Sydney

Australia's cricketers celebrated their crushing win in the one-day series against Sri Lanka and South Africa Wednesday, as national selectors continued to experiment with the team line-up ahead of next year's World Cup.

The world champions had faced criticism recently over the decision to rest key players from some games during the triangular series and for some patchy performances with the bat and in the field.

"I think people questioned whether we were even interested in trying to win this, you know, maybe focusing too much on the World Cup," vice-captain Adam Gilchrist said of the series at a post-match press conference.

"Well, we've won it, so those people can rest easy."

Gilchrist was backed up by

captain Ricky Ponting who said the team had come together to win the second and third finals against Sri Lanka after losing the opening final in Adelaide by 22 runs.

"We've been heading in the right direction for a while now with our one-day cricket and Adelaide was a bit of a shock to everybody I think," he said.

"But the way we've bounced back after that has been of the highest class and the highest calibre. The cricket's been unbelievably good really."

"It's satisfying sitting here now after being tested being 1-0 down to come and play the cricket we have when it's really counted."

Gilchrist showed stellar form in the final, smashing 122 off 91 balls for the fastest one-day hundred by an Australian to help his team cruise to the 267 target set by Sri Lanka at the Gabba in Brisbane.

Opener Simon Katich hauled in 107 for the nine-wicket win, ensuring his place on the team to tour

South Africa later this month.

Debate over the national one-day side has raged for weeks with some calling for the recall of experienced bowlers Jason Gillespie and Michael Kasprowicz and others arguing hotly for the inclusion of young batsman Phil Jaques.

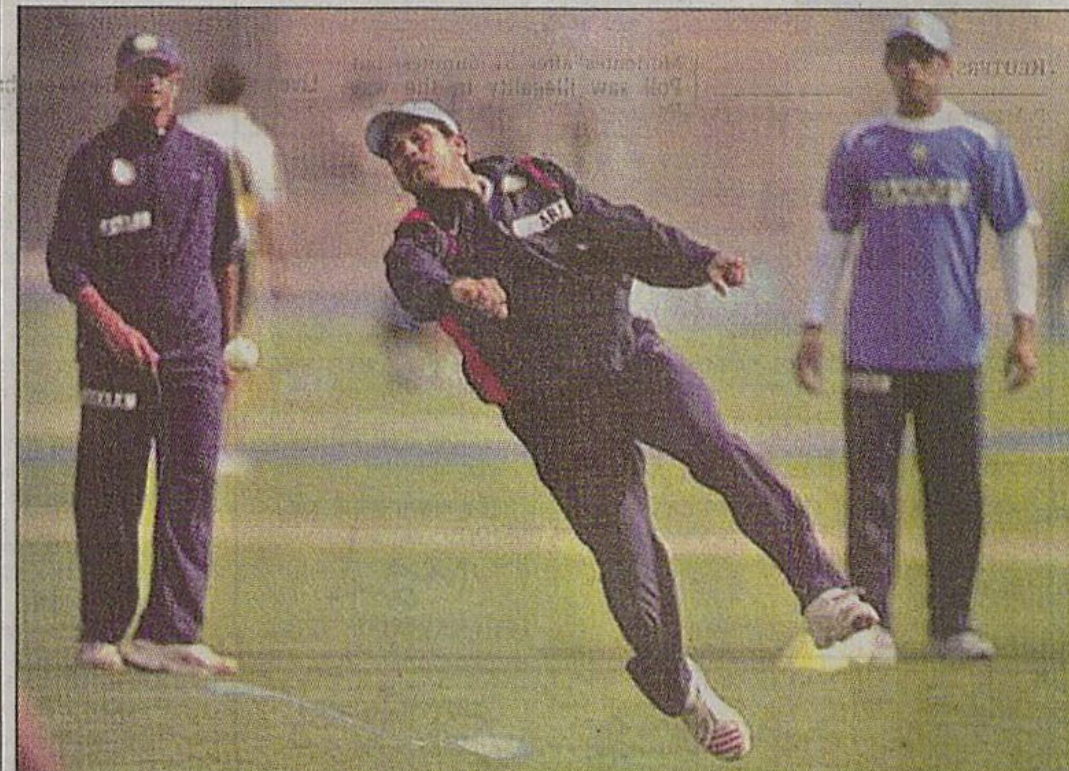
In a column in Wednesday's Sydney Morning Herald, commentator Peter Roebuck said despite Australia's superb core players, the team suffered several "soft spots."

"No team containing Ponting, Michael Clarke, Andrew Symonds, Michael Hussey and Brett Lee need fear any opponent," he said.

But, he adds: "Australia have several vulnerable areas that demand attention or else the World Cup will be lost."

The main area of concern is the bowling line-up, which could potentially be without paceman Glenn McGrath for some time as he remains in Australia while his wife battles cancer.

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India's Sachin Tendulkar throws the ball as captain Rahul Dravid (L) and another teammate look on during a practice session at the Multan Cricket Stadium on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AP



Steve Waugh

(Australian cricket legend)

"He's exciting to watch, he's a match-winner. There's a lot of debate over his action, but I don't have a problem with it. I think it's fine."

About Muttiah Muralitharan.



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