

National soccer from July 15

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) has decided to start the National Football Championship from July 15 across the country.

Interested District Sports Associations (DSAs), services and universities have been asked to confirm their participation by May 31.

Besides, the districts who want to host the zonal round and final round have been requested to submit their letter of interest.

WI forget to win: Greg

CRICINFO, undated

Greg Chappell, the Indian coach, says West Indies have forgotten how to win, but he refuses to write them off for the remainder of the one-day series. Speaking after India won the first one-day International in thrilling fashion with one ball remaining at Sabina Park on Thursday, Chappell said West Indies boasted quality players who could be competitive.

"In a two-horse race, it's a 50-50 bet. All the rankings tell you is what you've done in recent times. It doesn't tell you about the class and the quality of the team, and the West Indian side has got some class," he said.

"There are some very talented players in that team. They have just forgotten how to win at the moment and that takes a bit of practice and they have not had as much practice as we have had."

West Indies coasted to an easy 5-0 series success over Zimbabwe, they had won only three of their previous 23 ODIs.

"We don't underrate them at all. There are a lot of class players in that side, and through history, they have been hard to beat in the West Indies so we don't underrate them at all," Chappell said. "We see them as a side that could very quickly turn it around. They've got a lot of good athletes, they bowl well, they have got some real talent in their batting line-up."

Kaif told not to change

CRICINFO, undated

A couple of days before the first one-day international, as the Indian team went through their paces at different parts of Kingston's Chedwin Park, Mohammad Kaif and Ian Frazer were involved in an animated session on the concrete pitch at a remote corner of the ground.

With the help of balls of different colours, shapes and material, team trainer Frazer delivered some fast short-pitched stuff on the jagged surface. Kaif decided to battle the pace and uneven bounce with a slightly open, two-eyed stance.

Frazer would have none of it: "Go back to your original stance," he hollered.

And everytime Kaif veered even slightly to open out, Frazer kept urging him to change it. "Focus on the ball, don't panic," Frazer continued.

"When you wait for the ball to come to you, you have more time than you think. Watch the ball carefully, but don't glare at it."

Frazer later understood why Kaif was changing his stance. "It's just one of those things batsmen try to do from time to time," Frazer told Cricinfo.

"I told him that it wasn't the stance that was preventing him from scoring runs. It was the same original stance that helped him score so many runs, there is no reason why he shouldn't be scoring again without resorting to a new stance." In the first one-dayer at Kingston, the new-found confidence, for the first half of the innings at least, was there for all to see.

Nowotny the key

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unpaid loyalty bonus due to him when he signed a contract extension in 2002. The case was finally settled 'amicably' in 2005.

The defender has had his knee operated on four times during his career.

Germany are due to go on Sunday to a training camp in Switzerland and stay there till the end of May.

Aside from Costa Rica Germany's other group rivals are Poland and Ecuador.

Bitterness drives

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Inter team-mates Javier Zanetti, Walter Samuel and Cristian Gonzalez feel after they failed to make Pekerman's final cut and he insists he will try to console them.

"I haven't spoken with Zanetti," he said. "I will talk with him and my other team-mates."

"It is hard for a player not to be included in the World Cup list."



PHOTO: AFP

Switzerland's Martina Hingis plays a backhand return during the 4th round of the Rome Masters WTA event against Flavia Pennetta of Italy on Friday.

Venus up against Martina

Tennis

AFP, Rome

Former champions Venus Williams and Martina Hingis set up a grudge battle at the Rome Masters Friday as both advanced into semifinal spots.

Williams rallied to win nine of the last ten games in overcoming Jelena Jankovic 5-7, 6-4, 6-1.

Hingis won the 500th match of her career as she trounced Italy's last hope, Flavia Pennetta, 6-3, 6-1.

Hingis beat Williams in the Swiss player's teenaged debut here in 1998, with the American returning the favour in the semis a year later.

Williams will aim for her first final since last July in California when she plays Hingis for the 21st time.

The Wimbledon champion won their last meeting a fortnight ago in the Warsaw third round to level the series at 10 wins apiece.

She has also won five of their last six and seven of their last nine meetings, although the Swiss Miss won the only time they clashed in a Grand Slam final, at the US Open in 1997.

Williams dropped the first set to her 21-year-old Serbia and Montenegro opponent who also had three chances to take a 5-3 lead in the second but after breaking for 4-all, Williams went on the rampage.

Eng selectors in Harmison dilemma

AFP, London

Whether or not to bring back fast bowler Stephen Harmison will be the central issue confronting England's selectors ahead of Sunday's squad announcement for the second Test against Sri Lanka at Edgbaston starting on May 25.

So far this season the selectors have been bold, handing a debut at Lord's to the raw but quick Sajid Mahmood in preference to the steady, and still uncapped, Jon Lewis.

But in Harmison's case the selection trio of chairman David Graveney, coach Duncan Fletcher and former England off-spinner Geoff Miller face an issue of fitness not just tactics.

The situation is complicated further by the fact that the two concluding matches of the Sri Lanka series, at Edgbaston and Trent Bridge, are back-to-back.

And, although they won't say so publicly for fear of being branded disrespectful to their current opponents, one of England's major goals this season is to ensure all their key players are fully fit ahead of the defence of the Ashes in Australia starting in November and next year's World Cup in the West Indies.

"There is a lot of cricket ahead of us and if we rush him (Harmison) and there is a problem, we're only going to have to rest him again later on -- we have to make sure everyone is fully fit when they come back and play for us," Fletcher said earlier this week.

POSSIBLE SQUAD

Marcus Trescothick, Andrew Strauss, Alastair Cook, Kevin Pieteresen, Paul Collingwood, Andrew Flintoff (captain), Geraint Jones, Liam Plunkett, Sajid Mahmood, Matthew Hoggard, Monty Panesar, Ian Bell, Stephen Harmison.

Narail toy with

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Madrasa beat Baliadanga High School of Chapainawabganj.

Chandpai Mesersha Secondary School of Bagerhat defeated Dumuria NGC and NCK Secondary School of Khulna 3-1 at the Narail Stadium.

"It was tough to play last night (three sets) and then again in the afternoon," said the American, 1999 Rome champion. "I didn't have much time to recover."

"It was tough, but I'm happy to go through. I had difficulties in the first set, too many errors."

"But in the third, I drew encouragement from my father (and coach). He kept telling me to go for it."

Former US Open champion Svetlana Kuznetsova broke the spell of a spirited qualifier with nothing to lose to set up an all-Russian semi-final against Dinara Safina, who extended her dream clay run 6-1, 6-1 over off-the-boil compatriot Elena Dementieva.

The seventh-seeded Kuznetsova needed two hours, 41 minutes to stop Swiss-born Italian Romina Oprandi 6-4, 5-7, 7-6 (7/4) in a battle of 20-year-olds.

Oprandi, playing in only her second WTA-level tournament, forced the vastly more experienced Kuznetsova to save a match point in the ninth game of the final set.

"Her game looked like magic," admitted a worried 2004 Grand Slam champion. "The ball bounced where I never expected it."

"I focussed as hard as I could, I'd never played her and she has a good game."

Oprandi, who sports the only known double lip-piercing in the women's game, only obtained her Italian passport recently thanks to

her father's heritage.

The former youth soccer player and junior Orange Bowl champion is set for a rise from her world ranking of 133.

The comprehensive defeat in 67 minutes left two-time Grand Slam finalist Dementieva gasping after a match where she committed 27 unforced errors, double-faulted seven times and was broken six times.

For Safina, the possibility of taking the title is looking extremely good after not having dropped a set all week. Her previous best in Rome was the second round.

The 19-year-old sister of Marat Safin, winner of four career titles and world ranked 19th, hopes her form holds up for two more matches this weekend.

"I want to continue this dream, why stop now," she said after winning her sixth career match at the tournament.

"I played a good match, it was solid, Maybe I was a little nervous in the last game, but I went for it anyway."

Safina, with 18 winners, claimed victory on her second match point, breaking Dementieva.

Russians are creating their own revolution on the WTA Tour so far this season, claiming titles at all five of the elite Tier I events in 2006, with two trophies from Nadia Petrova and one each from Dementieva, Maria Sharapova and Kuznetsova.

Pigs out, Brazil in!

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and sponsors.

The high level of global interest in the Brazilians has nevertheless assured the organisers of a healthy profit with sponsorship deals, ticket sales and the distribution of television rights more than matching the hefty outlay.

The 55,000 tickets for the team's 14 training sessions, going for \$16 apiece, were all snapped up within two days, with many reportedly being resold on the black market for up to six times the original price. More than 100 countries have meanwhile bought the rights to broadcast the training sessions with Brazilian television even arranging for several live transmissions.

Eight hundred media workers have been accredited for the training camp with more than half coming from Brazil.

In a further indication of the glamour surrounding the team, the hotel where they are staying is auctioning off the chance to sleep in the players' bedrooms, sadly only after they have vacated them.

The small road leading up to the stadium is meanwhile being transformed into a 'party mile' of drinks

The Messi-ah?

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Despite his tender years and the expectation on his young shoulders, his first 10 appearances in La Liga reaped nine goals and his display at Mallorca showed what a precocious talent he is.

Arriving into the action with just a quarter of the contest remaining, he found the net twice but also spooned over an open goal in between to remind onlookers of his fallibility.

He has been part of the Barca set-up since 2000, after his family relocated to Spain the previous year.

And he has learned the club philosophy, graduating from the youth ranks to form an almost telepathic link with Ronaldinho in a side which makes the Harlem Globetrotters appear reserved.

"Messi continues to show just what a special talent he is," said coach Frank Rijkaard.

"He is still very young but is already crucial to the team."

Being the junior partner is a familiar position for the boy known as Leo to his team-mates, averaging more than a goal a game for the

stands, food stalls and the almost obligatory Brazilian beach bar, complete with wood-chip 'sand'.

With much of the financial aspect being handled by private investors and firms, the local authorities have had to put up "just a few tens of thousands of francs", according to mayor Josep Odeumatt.

"We have had many dignitaries staying here over the years, from Queen Victoria to Mark Twain," adds Odeumatt. "But this is definitely the biggest event in our history."

"Our tourism industry will of course benefit from the publicity. In addition we now have a football pitch that meets FIFA international standards -- allowing us to welcome other top clubs in future."

Olympique Lyon are already pencilled in for a visit at the end of July, although the French champions may need stronger stomachs than the reigning world champions - the pigs of Weggis are set to move back in shortly after the Brazilians move out.

reserves as a 16-year-old and subsequently making his first-team debut in October 2004 at local rivals Espanyol, to become the third-youngest player to represent the club.

The Argentinian teenage prodigy has recently extended his contract with Barcelona for the second time in three months so that it will now run until 2014 rather than 2010.

If time allows his talent to bloom as it might, he will be playing in his third World Cup that very year - and he will still not have reached what ought to be his prime.

He appears a must for Argentina's squad for Germany this summer, a more than capable deputy for playmaker Juan Roman Riquelme and a general wild card selection.

Messi would certainly add fresh ideas to Pekerman's plans and how much he achieves between now and June with Barcelona, and indeed how heavy his legs are as a consequence, will perhaps dictate what imprint he leaves on the biggest stage.

SL amass the runs

AFP, Hove

Sri Lanka's Chamara Kapugedera and Thilan Samaraweera both scored unbeaten centuries as the tourists piled on the runs on Friday in their final match before next week's second Test against England at Edgbaston.

Teenager Kapugedera finished on 134 not out and Samaraweera was unbeaten on exactly 100 as Sri Lanka made 521 for five declared on the second day of four against Sussex.

Their hundreds, allied to that of inexperienced opener Upul Tharanga (140), helped vindicate Sri Lanka coach Tom Moody's decision to omit recently-arrived veteran left-handed batsman Sanath Jayasuriya from this match after the former captain announced he was ending his Test retirement.

Before stumps Sri Lanka also had the added bonus of taking a wicket with fast bowler Lasith Malinga, who could add firepower to what was a largely innocuous first Test attack after being omitted from the drawn series-opener at Lord's, having Richard Montgomerie caught behind down the leg-side for 27.

Sussex, as is now the common trait among English counties facing touring teams, were fielding an under-strength side and Sri Lanka, who batted for 14 hours to save the first Test of three, gorged themselves on runs.

Kapugedera and Samaraweera then established a record partnership for any wicket in matches between the sides by adding an unbroken 238 in 63 overs for the sixth wicket.

Kapugedera, playing in only his eighth first-class game, stroked 11 fours on the way to a maiden century while Samaraweera's patient hundred was his second of the tour.

Kapugedera reached his hundred in untroubled fashion, courtesy of a pull to the mid-wicket fence off Kirtley, in just under three hours. He faced 204 balls with 15 fours.

Pakistan puts priority on fielding

CRICINFO, undated

In a sign of how much of an issue fielding has become in Pakistan cricket -- and it's not as if the malaise is a new one -- Wasim Bari, chairman of selectors, has said that cricketers intending to break into the national set-up will be considered only if their fielding is up to the mark.

Speaking to the Karachi-based The News Bari said, "In modern day cricket, a player's fielding ability has become a very important aspect and that is going to show in our selection process in the future."

"Gone are the days when players could force their way into the national team entirely through batting and bowling performances."

After dispiriting performances in the field against India in the ODI series earlier this year, the seriousness of the issue has finally been acknowledged by the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) and Bari's comments are the latest recognition of how embedded the problem is.

Jonty Rhodes, widely regarded as one of the best fielders of all time, is due to arrive in Pakistan in June for a two-week stint to work with the national team as well as coaches in the National Cricket Academy.

Owen backs

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defender. "You can see goals coming from plenty of different directions."

Owen is also looking on the bright side of his injury layoff. He has played only one competitive game for Newcastle since breaking a bone in his foot on December 31.

"I think I've played 20 games this year between club and country. That's probably 20 fewer than being perfect if you're talking about preparing for the World Cup," he conceded.

"But in saying that I prefer to have played 20 fewer than 20 too many. I'm raring to go, I'm fit, and I feel sharp in training. I'm looking at it now as a positive thing."

Pele: The greatest

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Cup win they got to keep the trophy in 1970, as for Pele he had scored 12 goals from his 14 World Cup ties, a record which speaks for itself.

Pele finally left Santos in 1974 in a five million dollar deal to join New York Cosmos in the United States, where for his farewell match in 1977, he played one half for Santos, and the other for Cosmos in an event watched by over 700 million television viewers.

Typically, he marked the occasion with his 1285th and final official goal.

He was named as FIFA's player of the century and remains a prominent figure in the world of sport.

Tendulkar a spent force?



Sachin Tendulkar may never again be the dominant player he once was, according to former Test batsman Arun Lal.

"The writing is on the wall. He's been performing to expectation for the last 16 years and it's taken its toll, physically and mentally," said Lal.

He thinks Tendulkar may only have a couple of years left in international cricket but for the time being remains a key member of the Indian side.

"He represents a generation of cricketers who have done phenomenally well for India. With (Sourav) Ganguly not in the side, you really need Sachin there to provide stability."

"I believe for the next year, year and a half, he is essential to the

Indian cause," Lal told BBC World Service Sport.

Tendulkar is hoping to be named in the squad for the forthcoming Test series in the West Indies.

But that may depend on the outcome of a check-up in London, where he underwent shoulder surgery two months ago.

"Undoubtedly the stress level has increased over time. Most cricketers are now suffering from severe strain."

"The stakes are higher, there's a lot more to be earned, so in every aspect the pressure has gone up many, many fold from when I played, so there's bound to be burn-out of certain players," Lal commented.

"Who's going to decide? Is it going to be decided by the fitness of a Sachin Tendulkar or the stresses on a Ricky Ponting? I don't think there's anybody qualified to decide," he added.

Stepanek finds his feet on clay



Radek Stepanek, the world number 16 from the Czech Republic, reached only the second Masters Series final of his career when he beat Jose Acasuso of the Argentine 6-4, 7-6 (7/5) in an absorbing encounter here on Saturday.

It was also Stepanek's first Masters Series final on clay, an achievement which caused him to perform a spectacular swallow dive in the dirt, enjoying every moment of soling his kit.

The victory ensures that Stepanek will reach the world's top ten for the first time.

"I am very pleased indeed - it has been one of my ambitions," said the 27-year-old.

"I made a very good start. I set out to be aggressive because I saw from Acasuso's other matches that he would start incredibly fast and get a good lead. I broke at once and held right through which gave me confidence."

"In the later stage of tournaments it's a question of conditioning which is important. I have won all my matches in straight sets which helps concentration and makes you stronger both mentally and physically."

The straight sets victory was his fourth of the tournament, which was possibly crucial, for Stepanek looked significantly the fresher of the two players.

me get nearer the top ten," Stepanek said.

Acasuso's performance looked laboured compared with his sterling efforts in a long semi-final against Fernando Verdasco, and he dropped his serve in the opening game.

This proved much more important than it appeared, for Stepanek produced a great deal of variety behind his delivery and never looked like losing his service games in the first set.

He was particularly dangerous when changing direction with his backhand drive and projecting it down the line, but also appeared at the net at unexpected moments.

Stepanek brandished a fist when he held serve to reach 5-3 but, not for the first time, he found it difficult to serve out for the set, requiring three deuces to do it.

Acasuso looked as though he was on the way out when he went break point down in the fifth game of the second set, but he held on and might have changed the course of the match three games later.

He held an advantage point on Stepanek's serve, with a chance of making a forehand pass from well inside the baseline, but unaccountably netted it.

After missing that chance the pressure mounted upon him as the possibility of defeat came closer. When Stepanek produced some superbly mobile defence to make a mini-break in the tie-break it looked all over.

But once again the Czech's uncertainty when trying to close things out manifested itself, and briefly Acasuso had a chance to escape.

BITS AND BOBS

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had requested some time off in order to rest a persistent foot injury but, although he will still have to link up with his Swedish team-mates, Valentin has assured the 29-year-old he will not be overworked.

"He will show up (to the training camp), but since he has had a tough schedule, we will probably take it easy with him," Valentin told Swedish newspaper Aftonbladet.

"There is no reason to rush anything."

Valentine believes Ljungberg's performance in Wednesday night's Champions League final defeat to Barcelona showed he is ready for the World Cup.

"He fought well against Barcelona, so there should not be any worries," he added.

Whistle-stop tour for Japan fans

AFP, Tokyo

Japan will carry on their tradition of organising a "bullet" tour for supporters to attend a World Cup football match without an overnight stopover.

The Japan Football Association said on its website that it will allow 600 tickets for the Japan-Brazil Group F match on June 22 in Dortmund to the 35-hour lightning package tour.

The tour's price will be 248,000 (2,250 dollars) for an economy class seat and 348,000 yen (3,160 dollars) for a business-class seat.

The match will be the final group game for the Asian champions and the five-time world champions who must earlier play Croatia and Australia.

According to a tentative itinerary, the tour group will leave Tokyo and Osaka aboard two chartered planes for Cologne on the morning of June 22.

TV refund if England triumph!

AFP, London

A confident Scottish shop owner has offered buyers refunds on new televisions should they end up watching bitter rivals England win the World Cup. The Daily Telegraph newspaper reported Saturday.

Alan Coupar has made the promise to at least 20 customers who bought liquid crystal display (LCD) television sets costing 1,000 pounds (1,880 dollars, 1,470 euros) at his shop in Blairgowrie, eastern Scotland.

However, one English local resident said he was disappointed that "the locals seem to think it's funny".

"As an Englishman living here, I find this not only insulting but damn near racist," the unnamed man was quoted as saying.

England topped their European qualifying group to reach the 2006 World Cup tournament which kicks off in Germany on June 9.

Scotland came a distant third in their qualifying group and won't be taking part in the tournament.

Sanath still confident

AFP, Hove

Sri Lanka stalwart Sanath Jayasuriya is remaining positive about his prospects of a Test recall even though his chances of appearing in next week's second Test against England seemed to suffer a blow this week.

The 36-year-old left-handed opening batsman was recently persuaded to end his Test retirement by new chairman of selectors Asantha de Mel and arrived in England ahead of schedule, as he is still a one-day regular, during the drawn first Test at Lord's.

Neither Sri Lanka coach Tom Moody nor captain Mahela Jayawardene were consulted about Jayasuriya's recall and the former skipper was omitted from the ongoing tour match against Sussex, the tourists' last before they go to Edgbaston for the second Test.

But an upbeat Jayasuriya said: "It doesn't rule me out because they are trying out a few players here."

Donald unsure of Pollock role

CRICINFO, undated

Allan Donald is excited about the new look South African pace attack but he isn't sure what role Shaun Pollock, once it's spearhead and his former new-ball partner, has to play in it.

In particular Donald is excited about the emergence of Dale Steyn in the recent series win against New Zealand as a partner to the indefatigable Makhaya Ntini.

Donald told the Supersport website, "Maybe it was a case of bringing him (Steyn) in too soon against England last season, but against New Zealand he has shown us what he can do. For the first time South Africa have two bowlers who can strike at 140 kmph-plus."

Together Ntini and Steyn took 36 wickets between them to lead South Africa to a comprehensive 2-0 series win against New Zealand.

Their success, however, prompted questions of the role of Pollock, who was no longer taking the new ball.

Donald pondered, "Shaun Pollock's role is the question. There are all sorts of rumours going around -- should he play Test cricket, should they keep him in the squad even though he isn't playing every match, should they take him to Sri Lanka, should they take him to the World Cup?"

Pollock missed one Test through injury and only picked up five wickets in the two that he played against New Zealand.

Donald admitted it is a difficult situation, though he hinted that all hope was not lost just yet.

"Those are tough questions. It is a serious issue, and it will become more serious as the months roll on. We've seen the selectors make a positive move with the new ball, and Shaun has fitted in beautifully."

More penalty for Read

AFP, London

Former England wicketkeeper Chris Read received a fresh punishment on Friday from English cricket chiefs after an extraordinary pitch-side bust-up with Pakistan leg-spinner Mushtaq Ahmed.

Read was handed a suspended one-match ban from the county championship, until the end of the 2007 season, and any further disciplinary penalty he receives between now and then will see that ban enforced.

He had already been given three penalty points under the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB)'s disciplinary code for breaching provisions relating to the use of obscene or insulting language towards another player.

The sanction followed an incident during a county championship earlier this month after Sussex spinner Mushtaq trapped Read lbw fifth ball for a duck.

After being given out, Read briefly returned to the pavilion before coming out to confront Mushtaq on the third-man boundary.

An angry exchange ensued in which Read, who had been irritated by Mushtaq's appeals on earlier deliveries, used the word "cheat," according to astonished spectators at the normally sleepy ground in Hove.

The penalty points remain on Read's record for a period of two years. The accumulation of nine or more penalty points in any two-year period triggers an automatic suspension.

Read is widely regarded as the best gloveman in English cricket but lost his place in the England line-up to Geraint Jones on account of his rival's superior batting.