



England batsman Ian Bell sweeps one down to fine leg during their NatWest Trophy ODI Series clash against Pakistan at Sophia Gardens in Cardiff on Wednesday.

Dhoni doesn't mind a bit of tinkering

PTI, Chennai

Wicketkeeper-batsman Mahendra Singh Dhoni is fully in line with the team management's move to experiment with players' positions in order to have the best team fielded at the World Cup in the Caribbean next year.

"Experiments are in tune to get a final composition of players for the World Cup. In fact, we are also planning to prepare slower wickets, which will be close to those in the West Indies and Sri Lanka, for the Champions Trophy," he said.

Dhoni said it was better to undertake various experiments now.

"We can't wait for the World Cup and then start experimenting," Dhoni said "in the West Indies, the wickets were slow and the ball was not coming on to the bat. It was not easy to play big shots. I hope it will hold us in good stead during the World Cup," he said.

Dhoni said the main focus at the ongoing training camp in Bangalore was on improving individual skills of the players.

"It's a one-to-one camp for specific training. Everyone (support staff) is there for the individual."

CA defends cancelling tickets

AFP, Sydney

Australian cricket organisers on Thursday defended a decision to cancel Ashes tickets sold for inflated prices over the Internet, saying they were trying to protect fans from scalpers.

Cricket Australia (CA) said it had invalidated 1,300 tickets to the upcoming series against England after hiring private investigators to identify tickets sold on Internet auction sites.

CA chief executive James Sutherland warned that his organisation would take a hardline against scalpers and fans should avoid buying from them.

Dhaka stun

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planning and as a result gained more possession. But Noakhali, with six national players, had a few chances to score as well. Skipper Alfaz had two in as many minutes when, in the 59th and 60th minutes, he failed to beat the Dhaka 'keeper.

The final twist came in the 79th minute when Dhaka's Polo converted a penalty after Maruf was seen to have been fouled by Noakhali defender Lincoln.

After the match, Dhaka captain Anif Chowdhury said, "We tried to play a very complete game and were confident to win this crucial match although we have no star players like them (Noakhali)."

"Our coach (Kamal Babu) had a big influence with his tactical decisions, especially when he fielded Belal after we went down 1-0."

But it was a different story with Noakhali manager Abdul Wadud Pintu who complained that the referee Azad Rahman "tried his best to send Dhaka into the final".

He, however, said that his team's poor performance was behind their defeat. The second semifinal will also be telecast live on Bangladesh Television (BTV).

TEAMS
NOAKHALI: Aminul, Jewel, Monu, Emily, Masud, Ashraf, Mofazzel, Arman, Titoo, Jalal, Alfaz, Shohag, Didar.

DHAKA: Al-Amin, Ramjan, Sony, Afzal, Murad, Polo, Anif, Moloy, Arafat, Shahadat and Ridon.

Bell tolls at right time

Cricket

AFP, Cardiff

England may have been saved by rain from an eighth straight one-day defeat against Pakistan but at least they had the consolation of seeing Ian Bell come good against an impressive attack in the opening match of this five-game series here at Sophia Gardens in Cardiff.

Bell's career-best 88 was the only significant score in England's total of 202 all out after they were made to bat first in overcast, pace bowler friendly, conditions in this day/night clash in the Welsh capital.

Jamie Dalrymple's 27 was England's next best score and, after rain between innings, Pakistan were well on their way to chasing down a revised target of 159 in 32 overs.

But, with the tourists 46 for one off seven overs, a second shower meant the game was abandoned as a no-result in what was the first senior England international against Test opposition ever staged in Cardiff.

Nadal goes to Ground Zero

Tennis

AP, New York

For Rafael Nadal, playing at the U.S. Open also presents an opportunity to make an annual visit to ground zero.

The second-seeded Nadal had been in New York on vacation with his parents and visited the World Trade Center five months before Sept. 11, 2001. That memory draws the 20-year-old stand-out to the former World Trade Center site each year.

"I was (there) two days ago," Nadal said Wednesday, after he won his first-round match 6-4, 6-4, 6-4 over Mark Philippoussis, the 1998 Open runner-up. "The big hole is still there."

"I always remember when I was in the last floor of the tower. (I) remember the benches in front of the window. I was sitting for half an hour."

Aside from paying his respects by going to ground zero, being in New York for Nadal is all about improving his luck at the U.S. Open.

Top two off the mark

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when he finally got on to the Arthur Ashe stadium after a 24-hour rain delay to take on Philippoussis whose injury woes meant he needed a wildcard just to get into the main draw.

The big Melbourne player did what he could with his blistering first serve, sending down 19 aces, but Nadal had too many weapons and was imperial on his own serve.

Nadal, whose best showing was three previous US Opens was a third round loss to James Blake last year, said that despite an upset stomach he had been delighted with his opening salvo.

"Today I played my best match in the last three weeks," he said.

"I am trying to play a little more aggressive. I was playing like that at Wimbledon (where he reached the final). I need to get more aggressive."

Federer, gunning to become just the third man in the Open era after John McEnroe and Ivan Lendl to win a hat-trick of titles in New York, was never troubled by an out-gunned Wang.

"I thought I was always in control because I always got to break

However, Bell -- who earlier this season scored three Test centuries against Pakistan -- had at least taken his chance to shine in the No 3 role having been drafted in as an opener during England's five-wicket Twenty20 defeat by Inzamam-ul-Haq's men at Bristol on Monday.

"That was probably the best I've played in one-day cricket for England," Bell told reporters after stumps here Wednesday, having faced 117 balls with 12 fours in an innings that bolstered his chances of appearing in next year's World Cup in the Caribbean.

"I tried to carry on my form from the Test matches and wanted to be positive -- it went pretty well today, I thought," Bell said.

"It was the kind of wicket if you were 50-50 forward or back there was plenty happening for the bowlers."

Bell dropped on nine at slip by Younis Khan and off a caught and bowled by leg-spinner Shahid Afridi on 68, rode his luck but was one of the few England batsmen who looked like he had a method for facing fast bowlers Mohammad

Asif (three for 28) and Shoaib Akhtar (three for 45).

He may have batted in seven different positions for England since his debut two years and 19 matches ago but the 24-year-old Bell was in doubt that No 3 was his favoured position.

"That is the one I've done the most for Warwickshire. It's where I normally bat and where I'm happiest in one-day cricket," he said.

It gives you the opportunity to get yourself in a bit more -- and the type of player I am, that is a help to me. Then I can gradually score quicker and quicker," Bell said ahead of Saturday's second match of the series at Lord's.

Wednesday's outcome meant England, who during their current home season England had lost a Twenty20 and five full one-day internationals against Sri Lanka before Monday's Twenty20 defeat had avoided an eighth straight reverse.

"It's not the way we wanted to stop the run of defeats," Bell said.

"We believe we can compete with Pakistan in this series and we're excited about Lord's."

for the French Open and Wimbledon title in the same year.

Since the Open Era of tennis began in 1968, there's never been a time when three Grand Slams in the same calendar year featured the same two finalists.

Federer said it's way too early to anticipate another Grand Slam championship encounter between the two.

"I'm more concerned about my path, trying to make it there," said Federer, who won a third consecutive Wimbledon title in July, and is in the hunt for a ninth career Grand Slam title here.

"I think the draws for both of us are pretty good. I don't think of playing him right now, not at all, because it's just too long of a road."

Brazil set

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Parreira -- under whom he captained Brazil to the World Cup trophy in 1994 -- on July 20 as the veteran coach paid the price for Brazil going out to France in the World Cup quarterfinals.

for my best game," he lamented. "Nobody is scared of me any more."

Hewitt trounced Albert Montanes of Spain 7-5, 6-4, 6-3 but admitted that he was still bothered by a troublesome knee injury that has seen him drop out of the world top 10.

"It's definitely not 100 percent," he said. "It was important just to get through today's match and hopefully no more damage was done. We'll see how it pulls up again tomorrow."

Mauresmo had looked as out of sorts as the weather on Tuesday as she went 2-5 down to German wildcard Kristina Barrois in the second set after winning the first 6-1.

But she was all business on the resumption and with Barrois helping her with a rash of mistakes she quickly put away the five games she needed to go through.

There were wins also for rising Serb Ana Ivanovic who survived a mid-match wobble to oust Vera Dushvina of Russia 6-3, 5-7, 6-4 and for Victoria Azarenka of Belarus who defeated Russian 11th seed Anastasia Myskina 6-4, 6-2.

England stick to same side

BBC ONLINE, undated

England may not replace injured Steve Harmison for the remainder of the one-day series with Pakistan.

Fast bowler Harmison was ruled out of all five limited-overs matches because of a nagging back problem.

It was expected a replacement would be named from the 30-man provisional squad selected for the Champions Trophy.

But team spokesman James Avery said: "Unless there are more injuries they will probably stick with the same squad, certainly for the next game."

Test specialist Matthew Hoggard and uncapped Durham seamer Graham Onions would have been candidates had Duncan Fletcher and the selectors decided to bolster their options.

But England already have Stuart Broad, Darren Gough and Sajid Mahmood in the seam department, plus Jon Lewis, who did not feature in the opening game at Sophia Gardens.

Harmison had a scan after the Test series earlier this month having experienced pain while bowling.

An ECB statement before the series said: "He's been ruled out as a precautionary measure after not responding to treatment following soreness in his lower back."

Shabbir case not forgotten

REUTERS, Karachi

Pakistan have not given up hope of pace bowler Shabbir Ahmed playing international cricket again despite a 12-month ban for having an illegal bowling action, an official said on Thursday.

"We will be sending Shabbir to Australia soon so that he can undergo lab tests on his bowling action. The reports of which would be forwarded to the International Cricket Council (ICC)," Saleem Altaf, director of cricket operations, told Reuters.

The 30-year-old Shabbir, who has taken 51 Test wickets, was banned last December by the ICC for an illegal bowling action after being reported twice in Test matches in 2005.

The Pakistan board appealed to the ICC earlier this year to have the ban reviewed but it was rejected by an independent group of bowling experts.

"Shabbir is at present playing league cricket in England and we are in touch with him. We have already worked on his action which has shown improvement," Altaf said.

It's only

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a stretch. But, you know, I think she's great. I can't say enough nice things about her," he said.

Sharapova, who beat Michaela Krajicek of the Netherlands 6-3, 6-0 on Wednesday, was also quizzed by reporters about Roddick.

"You know what, I really don't talk about my personal life," she said. "When two tennis players know each other and are friends, and are known around the world, there's people are gonna talk. That's exactly what's happening."

Hammers pull

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With the addition of Tevez, a prolific striker who's capable of being both subtle and barnstorming, Upton Park is now home to one of the most fearsome strikeforces in England. The Argentinian will surely be an automatic first choice, leaving Pardew the luxury of choosing between Dean Ashton - when he returns to fitness - Bobby Zamora, Marlon Harewood, Carlton Cole and Teddy Sheringham.

Their midfield will also be formidable, with Mascherano, who Sir Alex Ferguson reportedly rated as the world's most worthy recipient of the "new Roy Keane" tag, likely to slot in alongside Reo-Coker, Benayoun and Matthew Etherington.

All of a sudden West Ham look an excellent bet to win this season's UEFA Cup - and have been transformed into genuine contenders for a Champions League spot.

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AP, New York

Count Roger Federer among those against the idea of on-court coaching.

The women's tour is experimenting with the rule change, using it at a US Open tuneup this month in Montreal, where coaches wore microphones so TV viewers could hear the consultations.

Federer was asked about allowing coaches to help players during matches, a no-no in tournament tennis, after he opened his bid for a third consecutive US Open championship by beating Wang Yeu-tzuo of Taiwan 6-4, 6-1, 6-0 Wednesday.

"What do you think I think? I think it's a joke," Federer said with a smile. "It's been like this forever, so why change it?"

Of course, this comes from a man who managed to win three Grand Slam titles in 2004 while he was between coaches. And from someone who complained that rival Rafael Nadal was getting improper coaching help during their five-set final in Rome this year.

"We don't need it," Federer said. "We will be the only sport who doesn't have it, and I think that's good about it. You don't need to be like the other sports."

WHO'S HE?

Ryan Sweeting played a game of fill-in-the-blanks after reaching the second round of the US Open when his opponent, 2004 French Open runner-up Guillermo Coria, quit with a right thigh injury.

The ATP Tour Web site doesn't have Sweeting's photo or much of any information about him, so he gladly provided plenty, from his date of birth (July 14, 1987) to his

OPEN SECRETS

height (6-foot-4). He was born in the Bahamas and moved to Florida when he was 12. So while he's already played in the Davis Cup for the Bahamas, he says he's now keen on joining the US team, because he's a citizen.

Sweeting is ranked 495th and got into the Open with a wild card from the U.S. Tennis Association. Depending on how things go in New York, he'll decide whether to turn pro or return to the University of Florida for his sophomore year.

Coria was hurt in the third game of the match, and quit after five games.

"I wish we could have played the whole match out and seen what would have happened," Sweeting said.

NOT HIM AGAIN

Tim Henman's victory over fellow Briton Greg Rusedski earned him another Grand Slam meeting with Roger Federer.

Henman lost to Federer in the second round at Wimbledon, and they'll square off at the same stage at the US Open.

"It's as tough a test as you can have. But it depends which way you want to look at it. Do you want to look at it as a tough draw or a great opportunity?" Henman said after his 7-6 (4), 6-2, 6-3 win over past Davis Cup teammate Rusedski, the 1997 Open runner-up.

"I was watching golf the other day," Henman added. "One of the golfers said, 'Tiger Woods is the best in the world, but he's beatable. I think that's the same with Roger. ... You hope he has a bit of an off day.'"

BEING BETHANIE

Known for her kooky outfits, Bethanie Mattek looked more suited for the Roman Open than

the US Open.

Fined for wearing an argyle cowboy hat at last year's Open, she showed up this time in beige, a loosely draped top that resembled a toga.

Mattek also brought back her knee-high socks -- these were also beige; she wore pink at a tournament two weeks ago.

Mattek won't get a chance to reprise her outfits this week. She lost to Daniela Hantuchova 7-5, 6-3 Wednesday.

Born in Minnesota, Mattek moved toward more outlandish fashions when she lived in Miami. She once wore a leopard-print dress at the US Open, and sported a tube top over a halter-top this year at Wimbledon.

BLAKE ON BOOK

James Blake isn't so sure he likes the idea that Vince Spadea, a former top-20 player, wrote a book about life on the tennis tour.

Spadea makes mention of Blake in the book, and the fifth-seeded Blake was asked about it after beating Juan Monaco of Argentina in straight sets at the US Open on Wednesday.

"I would never bring other guys into it without either their approval or just letting them know that something from the tour is going to be put in a book," Blake said. "I feel like in writing that book, he may have made a mistake and may have kind of rubbed a few people the wrong way and not made so many friends in the locker room."

Spadea, currently ranked 84th, also won Wednesday, eliminating Gilles Muller 6-2, 6-4, 6-3. A year ago, Muller upset 2003 US Open champion Andy Roddick in the first round.

NBA stars look to perk up

Basketball

AFP, Saitama

US stars know they must improve to beat Greece on Friday and qualify for Sunday's World Basketball Championship final, where either 2004 Olympic champion Argentina or title-hungry Spain will await.

All four undefeated teams have set the stage for a dramatic curtain call to the 24-nation showdown, with perennial powers set to be tested by a US squad of National Basketball Association stars that has appeared vulnerable at times.

"You can't help but notice that Greece, Spain and Argentina have been playing some great games as well," US forward Elton Brand said.

The Americans overcame poor shooting in the first half to defeat Germany in a quarterfinal test but such a slow start against the European champion Greeks could doom the Americans' goal of reclaiming the global basketball throne.

"We know the stakes are getting higher and that we are going to have to play a lot better," US guard Kirk Hinrich said. "To beat Greece were going to have to have our best performance."

The US team relies upon pressure defense to set a tempo and force turnovers, giving them the confidence that their own performance is a deciding factor.

"We control our destiny," US scoring leader Carmelo Anthony said. "If we go out there and play good, the sky is the limit. If we go out there and play bad, anything can happen."

The latter is what Greece's Theodoros Papaloukas is counting upon. Papaloukas was Most Valuable Player of last year's European final and of the European league's finals with champion CSKA Moscow. Now

he wants to complete a championship treble and bring the Greeks their first medal in a global event.

"Our desire for a medal is very big. We won the European championship last year and my club won the Eurobasket title and now I want to have this success," he said.

"This is why you live. Money and success is great, but this, this is something special."

It's special for the Americans, too, after their sixth-place finish in the 2002 worlds and only a bronze medal at Athens, where US superstar LeBron James was on the bench for most of the US 2004 Greek tragedy.

"It's going to be a tough game, so we have to come out with our A-plus game," James said. "They have been together for a long time. We must maintain our focus. Go out and win and take care of business."

That means improving upon the 38 percent accuracy rate against Germany.

"Well shoot all right on Friday and hopefully on Sunday," said US coach Mike Krzyzewski. "I have every confidence in the world about that."

Expect the Argentina-Spain game to bring drama as well. The Spaniards have not managed a global podium finish since the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics but they have won 16 games in a row and beat Argentina twice in tournament tuneup games.

"We have a great opportunity and we're going to take advantage. We're going to try and make history," Spain guard Juan Carlos Navarro said.

"No one is invincible."

Argentina will make a history bid as well. The South American have not won the world title since taking the inaugural 1950 event with a home-court edge.

"We have to play a perfect game," said Argentina scoring leader Emanuel Ginobili of the

NBA San Antonio Spurs. We have to play excellent defense and be aggressive on offense."

Argentina's average win margin has been 24 points and with several NBA players they will be tough for any team to stop.

"It's not as easy as we made it look," Ginobili said. "It's great pride for us after the winning the Olympics to do so well. Everyone is confident. We're playing well but it doesn't mean we're better than Spain, Greece or America."

Spain coach Pepu Hernandez is confident as well.

"The one who wants to beat us will have to play a real good game," he said. "Maybe they can beat us. But it's going to be difficult."

India will

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Hair further enraged the Sri Lankans, and many cricket fans within the Indian sub-continent, by branding Muralidaran's action "diabolical" in his autobiography "The Decision Maker".

India's cricket chiefs have said they will wait for Madugalle's ruling on Hair before deciding if they should support demands from Pakistan and Sri Lanka to remove the Australian from the elite panel.

Privately officials admit they will vote in Pakistan's favour if the ICC called a meeting to decide on Hair's future.

Hair, meanwhile, received support from former Australian bowling great Dennis Lillee who said players must respect the umpire's decision.

"Whether you like it or not, you have to abide by the umpire's ruling," Lillee told reporters at his academy for fast bowlers in the southern city of Chennai.

"I was always taught to accept the umpire's verdict. The authorities should back the umpires."

Rain saves England

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the second over when Stuart Broad, on his one-day international debut, had Shoaib Malik lbw for five with his fourth legitimate ball at this level to leave the visitors for one.

At the other end Darren Gough, England's most successful one-day international bowler with 235 wickets and playing his match at this level in over a year, saw Hafeez top-edge a hook over the slips for four and next ball force him to the backward point boundary.

Bell's was the only individual England score above James Dalrymple's 27.

Dropped on nine and 68, Bell shared stands of 57 with Paul Collingwood (14) and 68 with Dalrymple.

But it needed a last-wicket stand of 29 between Gough and Broad to take England past 200.

Asif ripped through England's top