

Lara on the mend

PTI, Ahmedabad

Injured West Indies captain Brian Lara was fighting to get fit for Thursday's Champions Trophy encounter against India although the team management was expecting the batting superstar to recover in time for the crucial match.

Lara, who did not come on to field during his team's outing against Australia on Wednesday after sustaining a freak back injury, skipped the net session here during the day.

Instead, the legendary left-hander took some rounds of the Mota stadium with the team physio and also did some light exercises.

However, West Indies media manager Imran Khan said the champion batsman should be able to play in the match against the home side.

"He is receiving treatment from the physio. And we expect that he will be fit in time for our match against the hosts," Khan said.

While explaining Lara's absence during the three-hour net session, Khan claimed that it had been decided beforehand that only half of the team would do the net routine on Sunday.

Bell firm on bowlers

BBC ONLINE, undated

England batsman Ian Bell has played down concerns over strike bowlers Andrew Flintoff and Steve Harmison ahead of the Ashes.

Flintoff has yet to bowl competitively after ankle surgery, while Harmison was heavily punished in Saturday's ICC Champions Trophy defeat to Australia.

Bell told BBC Five Live: "We know Fred is getting himself back and he'll be ready, and the same with Harry."

"Those guys are big-match players and they will be firing and ready to go."

Harmison, who also struggled for rhythm in England's first Trophy match against India last Sunday, saw his 29 deliveries hit for 45 runs in the six-wicket loss to the Aussies in Jaipur.

The Durham bowler was not the only England player deserving of criticism after they were bowled out for 169, Australia getting home with 13 overs to spare.

But Bell defended the policy of using big-hitters Flintoff and Kevin Pietersen in the top four, with an eye on next year's World Cup in the West Indies.

"In one-day cricket if you don't bat through your 50 overs you're going to be in trouble," he told the Sportsweek programme.

"We've fallen short twice and that's a major problem, especially out here in India

"The batting hasn't really fired but in terms of the World Cup the wickets in the West Indies are going to be similar to here," he explained.

"We've got to get our big hitters in, our best players in."

Bell made 43 in an opening stand of 83 with Andrew Strauss on Saturday.

He hinted England had seen a chance to exploit veteran bowler Glenn McGrath as he takes time to return to form after time away from the Aussie side because of injury and family reasons.

"He's coming back from injury, game by game he's going to get better but Strauss put him under pressure from ball one," he added.

"I guess that's what we're going to have to do in Australia, try and carry on what we did on Saturday."

Gayle unhappy

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after West Indies stunned world champions Australia in a Champions Trophy match in Mumbai on Wednesday.

"I'm unable to speak about it any real detail as I might be fined again and go home with no money! But I would just say that I was disappointed by the fact I was fined 30 per cent of my match fee and that we should both have been in the meeting together but they were conducted separately," Gayle said in a column on a cricket website.

Gayle said it had all started off a joke which became a "bit more heated".

"Everything started off as a joke and then things became a bit more heated, but that's all part of the game between two competitive teams. I don't think I crossed the line that night as was suggested but I've had to accept my punishment and I will move on and try to forget it." Gayle also said the victory against Australia had given the team a big boost, but India, whom they play next, would prove to be "tougher" opponents.

"The India match we have next though will be even tougher as they are in their home conditions and will have a very passionate crowd supporting them. We've been here before and know how intimidating the pressure can be for an opposing team taking on India in India," he said.



PHOTO: AFP

Slovak star Daniela Hantuchova is ecstatic after defeating Russia's Svetlana Kuznetsova in the Zurich Open semi-final in Zurich on Saturday.

Maria reaches final

 Tennis

AFP, Zurich

US Open champion Maria Sharapova overcame a warning for coaching to beat Katarina Srebotnik 7-6, 6-2 to reach the final of the Zurich tournament on Saturday.

The Russian second seed will face Daniela Hantuchova in the final after the leggy Slovakian defeated Russian third seed Svetlana Kuznetsova 6-4, 6-2.

Sharapova received a warning for coaching after dropping serve in the second set, but she responded by taking control of the rallies and winning the final three games, breaking for 4-2 and the match by forcing backhand errors.

Hantuchova took advantage of an under-powered Kuznetsova, the Russian third seed, 6-4, 6-2 to reach the final.

Kuznetsova received treatment to the big toe of her right foot when down 4-2 in the second set, but failed to divert the unseeded Slovak from her quest to reach her first final since Los Angeles in August 2005.

Hantuchova always held the upper hand, and her consistency was in stark contrast to Kuznetsova, who struggled to find any rhythm or way to unsettle the Slovak.

Hantuchova broke to lead 2-1,

love with a netted forehand. But Sharapova failed to capitalise, dropping her own serve to love with a succession of errors, and she then had to fight off a set point at 6-5 with an ace.

Sharapova always looked the more comfortable player in the tiebreak, securing it with her sixth ace, and she then took a 2-0 lead in the second set against a disappointed opponent.

But Srebotnik quickly recovered her composure, and a Sharapova double-fault followed by a backhand error earned her the break back at 3-1 before the Russian imposed her greater range on the semifinal.

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