

Singh puts pressure on Pathan

PTI, Potchfstroem

Batting may have been a perennial source of concern on this tour for India, but on the bowling front it has been a problem of plenty.

With Punjab's young VRV Singh impressing as back-up bowler in the warm up game against the Rest of South Africa, coach Greg Chappell was wearing a happy look at the options at his disposal.

"VRV Singh has been bowling close to 145mph and with good control too," muttered Chappell after he sat through with team's video analyst Ramakrishnan in the press box on the third afternoon of the four-day game here on Saturday.

VRV Singh has lost little time in adapting to the high altitude and the kind of line and length to bowl on the wickets in South Africa. He has come in for high praise from some of the team's seniors, including maestro Sachin Tendulkar.



PHOTO COURTESY

Players of the American International School of Dhaka pose with the South Asian Inter-Scholastic Association basketball championship trophy after they defeated American Embassy of Delhi in the final of the competition in Kathmandu last Sunday.

Batting remains the worry

by having seven men there.

And he wasn't playing some kids either. Morne Morkel will take the new ball for South Africa, sooner rather than later, and Alfonso Thomas is part of that dying breed, a medium-fast swing bowler who's tremendously accurate. Nantie Hayward had his moments too, while Friedel de Wet gave nothing away. "Sourav played very well," said Chappell later. "His feet were moving well, and he showed the discipline that is required to make runs. His example inspired Irfan."

Pathan carried on the good work in the second innings as well, even as the rest folded for next to nothing, but his first-innings century was relegated to the shadows by Ganguly's return. Right from the first handshake with Chappell at the nets after Ganguly's arrival in Potchfstroem, the TV crews and others have tried to magnify every single gesture made by both men, often arriving at ludicrous conclusions.

On the morning after his 83, Ganguly arrived at the nets wanting to practise the cut shot. Chappell sent down about 20 balls, and the little episode was caught on camera by the ESPN crew, there to interview the coach in the build-up to the Test series. The others went into a tizzy when they realised that ESPN had such footage, and it was hard to believe that so much was made of something as innocuous as a coach giving throw-downs to one of his players. Both men are professionals, with nearly 200 Test matches between them, and neither has anything to gain by sabotaging the other in these desperately lean times for Indian cricket.

If there was a negative, it was the manner of Ganguly's dismissal in the second innings. Having ducked under one bouncer, he got himself into a real tangle against another short-pitched ball, looping up the simplest of catches off the right glove. The South African bowlers, who will no doubt have watched it, will certainly have made a mental note to bowl fast and straight, with the ball pitched short of a length. Such a scenario will force Ganguly to play either the hook or the pull to make runs, or wait for the odd ball pitched on a driving length.

In that regard, Pathan's batting had only complicated selection matters. He's clearly not intimidated by short-pitched fast bowling, and the assurance with which he got into line will tempt the team management to explore the idea of fitting him somewhere in the batting line-up. For the moment, he can't hold down a place on the strength of his bowling, but with the likes of Wasim Jaffer and Virender Sehwag so short on runs and confidence, it'll be interesting to see what decision they make.

Even with Munaf Patel looking increasingly unlikely to play in Johannesburg, there are few such worries about the bowling. Seesanth bowled good outswing at lively pace, while Zaheer Khan was simply outstanding. The delivery that nipped back sharply to castle Jean Paul Duminy in the second inning was perhaps the best of the match, but to an extent, even he was eclipsed by VRV Singh, the wild-card pick who had divided opinion when he was called up for the Tests.

For as long as most of us can

remember, Indians have been at the receiving end when it comes to raw pace. Now, they have someone who can dish it out. Chappell, who had been anxious to have him in the touring party, came into the press box on Saturday afternoon and spoke of how excited some of the seniors had been. "Sachin said at lunch time [on Friday] that he had really enjoyed watching from slip, and that he felt VRV had touched around the 145mph mark," said Chappell. "They were standing so far back at slip."

Cyril Mitchley, the former umpire who was match referee for the game, also spoke of how impressed he had been with the bowling from both sides. "There wasn't much wrong with the pitch at all," he told Cricinfo. "But the overhead conditions helped swing, and most batsmen are no longer used to playing high-quality swing bowling at pace."

With Anil Kumble certain to slot in for the Test, India certainly appear to have the bowling resources to stretch a South African line-up that were horribly exposed by the likes of Stuart Clark not so long ago. Whether they have bat to put runs on the board is another matter. Rahul Dravid's return will undoubtedly help, as will an innings of substance from Sachin Tendulkar. Chappell and others feel that Tendulkar's problems are more in the mind than anything else, and if he can get his headspace right, who knows what's possible. As Lara, McGrath and Warne have shown recently, writing off the old-timers is an exercise fraught with danger.

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Down 2-0 in their Ashes defence, it was a morale-boosting match for the English.

Strauss (88) and Cook (106 retired) enjoyed the chance for some extended time in the middle, putting on 183 for the first wicket.

Neither Cook or Strauss made a significant score in the first two Tests, but they looked in good touch from the outset and were rarely troubled by the WA bowlers.

Earlier, Anderson swung the ball appreciably and finished with 3-53 in a highly impressive performance that revived his chances of retaining his spot for the third Test, while fellow paceman Mahmood also pressed his Test claims with 2-67.

Harmison bowled much better than his figures of 1-99 indicated, while Panesar pressed his claims for selection for the Perth Test by gaining plenty of turn and bounce in taking 1-69.

Former England captain Michael Vaughan was playing for England and although he fielded all day on Saturday, he elected not to bat on Sunday, when the practice match ended in a draw.

AIS lift 2nd b'ball title

SPORTS REPORTER

American International School (AIS) of Dhaka lifted the South Asia Inter-Scholastic Association (SAISA) basketball championship for the second time in a row in Kathmandu on December 3.

In a close match, the Dhaka-based school fended off American Embassy School of Delhi 48-44 in the final. They beat Lincoln School of Kathmandu in the semifinal.

SAISA is a conference of international schools in the subcontinent that compete in various sports and other activities.

Ryan Luby was awarded most valuable player for the school side by coaches David Feren and Cody Taggart.

Sania, Li move into qtrs

AFP, Doha

Chinese top seed Li Na and Indian favourite Sania Mirza cruised into the Asian Games quarterfinals of the women's singles on Sunday and declared themselves fighting fit.

Li took just 56 minutes to dispose of Indonesia's Sandy Gumulya 6-1 6-3 despite her left ankle needing heavy strapping during the match.

Li, who made history at Wimbledon this year when she became the first Chinese woman to reach the quarterfinals of a Grand Slam, said she strained it during an earlier match, but it would not hurt her performance here.

"It's not bothering me," she said.

The world number 21 meets Uzbekistan's Iroda Tulyaganova in the quarters, but said her major threat to winning gold came from teammate Zheng Jie.

"I'm taking one game at a time rather than thinking about the final but China is my main competition," she said.

Zheng, a doubles Grand Slam winner, also moved into the final eight after India's number two Shikha Uberoi retired hurt.

Now A teams

FROM PAGE 17

Shahjada are the only players not to have played for the national team.

BANGLADESH SQUAD: Gazi Salauddin, Javed Omar Balim, Tushar Imran (Captain), Rajin Saleh, Alok Kopali, Manzur Islam Rana, Moshfiqur Rahim, Mahmudullah Riyad, Tapash Baisya, Nazmul Hossain, Mohammad Sharif, Enamul Haque and Mohammed Shahjada.

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Mohammedan Sporting Club signed in Hasibul Hossain, Rasheedul Haq, Faisal Hossain, Sahagir Hossain, Nadimuddin Mintu, Arafat Sunny, Junaid Siddiqui, Tapash Baisya and Imtiaz Hossain. The giants kept the services of national captain Habibul Bashar and Aftab Ahmed.

Last year's second placed side Sonargaon Cricketers kept pool players Mohammad Ashraful and Mohammad Rafiq while also roping in Arshaful's partner in the national partnership record earlier this month Marshall Ayub, Mohammad Sharif and Dhaman Ghosh.

But all-rounder Neeyam Rashid left his club of seven years Abahani and signed for newcomers Partex along with Ahsanullah Hasan. Among the major names, Partex roped in Syhetil Captain Rajin Saleh.

Brothers Union have lost most of their players as Ehsanul Haque, Nafis Iqbal, Nazmul Hossain, Enamul Haque, Arafat Salahuddin, Ziaur Rahman, Rasheedul Haq and Arafat Sunny all exited the club this season. But Brothers are expected to confirm the services of Debobroto Paul, Imran Ahmed, Hannan Sarkar, Almagir Kabir, Abul Bashar and Saju Datta.

The transfers go on today and end tomorrow evening.

No Vaughan in Ashes

Cricket

AFP, Perth

Michael Vaughan has conceded he has no chance of making an unlikely Ashes comeback down under.

Talk of the 2005 Ashes hero, who is on the comeback trail after knee surgery earlier in the year, returning late in the current Ashes series gathered momentum when he played in two one-day matches for the England Academy here over the last week.

In a close match, the Dhaka-based school fended off American Embassy School of Delhi 48-44 in the final. They beat Lincoln School of Kathmandu in the semifinal.

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PCB boss under scrutiny

Cricket

CRICINFO, undated

The role of Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) chairman Nasim Ashraf in the inquiry into the doping scandal that rocked Pakistan cricket has come under scrutiny with the publication of a letter written by him to the first anti-doping commission, which banned Shoaib Akhtar and Mohammad Asif, and allegations from the head of the commission that attempts were made to influence their decision.

Ashraf has termed the allegation as "absolute hogwash."

The letter, addressed to Shahid Hamid, the head of the commission, was obtained by The Nation, a leading English language daily based in Lahore. In the letter, sent three days before the final verdict was given, Ashraf asks the commission to consider a set of points before reaching a final verdict.

As well as asking the commission to make sure players have the opportunity for full legal representation and that independent experts are appointed to evaluate analytical material, the chairman suggests that "the concentration of Nandrolone found in the two samples is quite consistent with the use of contaminated food supplements."

Ashraf insisted that both processes had been fair and transparent. "Both tribunals were completely independent and a due

chances of an Ashes recall were gone when he elected not to bat in the tour match on Sunday, instead allowing other Test hopefuls to gain valuable batting practice.

Acting England captain Andrew Strauss said Vaughan as saying he simply wouldn't be ready for a Test recall in the next three weeks.

"If I could have fitted in a three-day game next week there would be more of a chance, but that's not possible," Vaughan told Atherton.

"Realistically, I've no chance of playing in the Test series."

"The problem is that there is nothing you can do to replicate something like a day in the field with its sudden twists and turns."

"I need to be sure I will last out."

"The one-day series is more realistic."

Vaughan, who led the English side to victory in the historic 2005 Ashes series, didn't fire in his fielding series.

He was dismissed for a seven-ball duck in his first outing, before making just nine in his next innings.

Graveney confident of England fightback

Cricket

AFP, London

England's chairman of selectors David Graveney insisted Sunday he was confident his side have enough fighting spirit to turn the Ashes Test series around.

England are under pressure going into next week's third Test in Perth with hosts Australia holding a 2-0 lead in the five Test series after a surprising victory in Adelaide last week.

But Graveney nevertheless remained confident.

"We know where we have been under par. The Australians are quite rightly talking a big game and we know we are playing a really tough team. But we have had some success and have great resolve. Everyone has to pull together -- we can turn this around," he told Radio Five Live's Sportsweek programme.

Whether Monty Panesar will be called up is