



Tatiana Golovin of France stretches to return the ball against Peng Shuai of China at the Sydney International tournament on Monday. Golovin won the match 6-4, 7-5

Rakib, Zia win on

SPORTS REPORTER

International Master (IM) Abdullah Al Rakib head the points table of the Bengal Peerless DIFE Rating Chess competition after his sixth round win against Nasir in Kolkata yesterday.

Rakib now has 5.5 points in his six rounds while in other matches, Grand Master Ziaur Rahman and IM Enamul Hossain Rajib won their respective matches.

Zia is now on 5 points while Rajib and FIDE Master Sheikh Nasir Ahmed earned 4.5 points after six rounds of matches.

Akhtar flies out to SA

AFP, Islamabad

Paceman Shoaib Akhtar has been included in the Pakistan team against South Africa after fast bowler Umar Gul was injured ahead of the first test, officials said Monday.

Akhtar, 31, was originally left out of the 17-man party after selectors felt he lagged match fitness.

But he bowled 21 overs in a first-class match and took five wickets to reclaim his space in the team.

"Akhtar will fly out on the first available flight to South Africa as a back-up for fast bowler Gul, who was injured during a tour game," Pakistan Cricket Board spokesman Aamir Bilal told AFP.

The first of three tests between Pakistan and South Africa starts on Thursday.

Akhtar has not played for Pakistan since a one-day match against England four months ago. He was banned for two years, and fellow paceman Mohammad Asif for one year, in November after both tested positive for the banned steroid nandrolone in October.

However, a Pakistan Cricket Board appellate committee overturned the bans last month on the grounds that neither player took the banned substances knowingly.

The World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) has challenged the decision and the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) said last week that it will likely rule on the appeal against the lifting of bans within four months.

Yousuf may miss two Tests

AFP, Lahore

Pakistan's record-breaking batsman Mohammad Yousuf is likely to miss the first two Tests against South Africa this month due to surgery scheduled for his pregnant wife, an official said Monday.

"Yousuf's wife has undergone some complications in her pregnancy and is due to undergo surgery on January 12," Pakistan Cricket Board director of communications, Ahsan Malik, told AFP.

Doctors have said the operation may be delayed until January 19.

"If the operation is held on January 12, he would fly to South Africa on the 14th, but if it happens on January 19 he will miss the second Test as well," Malik added.

Pakistan start the first Test against South Africa at Centurion from January 11, and Yousuf's absence will be a blow to a team already hit by injuries to fast bowler Umar Gul and all-rounder Shoaib Malik -- both suffering from ankle problems.

The second Test is scheduled for Port Elizabeth from January 19. The third Test starts in Cape Town from January 26.

Bowling coach Waqar Younis also refused to go on tour and resigned in protest over his appointment, which was only for the Tests and not for the five-match, one-day series which follows.

Yousuf, who created a world record for the most runs in a calendar year with 1,778 in 2006, was due to leave for South Africa before the first Test.

The 32-year-old, whose father died last month, has been the mainstay of Pakistan batting, having scored 6,402 runs in 73 Tests and 7,608 in 228 one-day internationals.

Is he serious?

Cricket

INTERNET, undated

Shane Warne has not ruled out remarrying ex-wife Simone, revealing the two are deciding whether they have a future together.

Pouring out his heart in an interview with British TV legend Michael Parkinson, Warne said their divorce in 2005 was inevitable but a reunion was possible.

"We had to (get divorced), because we had to realise: Did we both want each other? Did we want to get back with each other? What did we actually want?" he said.

"I have not ruled out getting back together but we both have to work out if that's what we want."

Warne said he and Simone have not decided whether they could commit to each other again.

"She might like somebody else, I might like somebody else... I might not be able to commit 100 per cent," he said. "I don't think we want to get back together for the wrong reasons. Only time can tell and we'll see."

Asked if he and Simone would remarry, Warne replied: "Not sure."

As speculation mounts that cricket's glamour couple will reconcile, Warne freely admitted the breakdown of their marriage had been his fault.

"Some of the things that I've done and the mistakes I've made I'm not proud of, but it shows I am human," he said.

"I have made mistakes and I will probably make some more in the future."

Warne spoke candidly about the pain that his womanising caused Simone.

"If I had stopped and thought, 'hang on a minute', I wouldn't have done it," he said.

"But unfortunately I gave in to temptation."

"I have apologised to my wife, who is the only person I have to apologise to."

Warne revealed that the lowest moment in his life came during the Ashes tour of England in 2005, when he officially split from Simone.

He threw himself into his cricket but felt isolated and alone after the finish of play and fell back on teammate Michael Clarke for support.

"There were times when I sat there by myself and cried. It's never easy

going through a divorce. It's bloody tough."

"I think a lot of people were looking for me to fall to pieces," he said.

While the priority was time with children Brooke, Jackson and Summer, Warne was keen to see whether he and Simone have a future.

"We have to work out whether we can forgive and forget, whether we do want to move on together," he said.

"At the moment we wake up and our three beautiful children are still there and we are very lucky that we have got three beautiful children."

Parkinson, who was in Melbourne and Sydney for some of the Ashes series, interviewed Warne at Fox studios in Sydney after Warne had appeared at a charity cricket match on Saturday.

Warne was at a Twenty20 match organised by the South Sydney Rugby League club and turned out for a team led by New Zealand Test ex-captain Martin Crowe.

"G'day mate, your hair looks great," said Warne to the Kiwi, who, like him, has undergone hair restoration therapy and been paid to advertise it.

Warne bowled the first over of the match.

NZ-SL 5TH ODI TODAY NZ consider top-order shuffle

BBC ONLINE, undated

New Zealand captain Stephen Fleming feels his team can avenge their record one-day defeat in Tuesday's deciding match of the series against Sri Lanka.

Having won two games in succession, the Kiwis were routed for 73 -- their second lowest total ever -- in Auckland.

The 189-run margin of defeat was the highest in their one-day history as Sri Lanka squared the series 2-2.

Fleming said: "It was an awful performance but we have got to get it right in the final match."

New Zealand have been struggling in the batting department since winning the first match and Fleming, who only returned for the last game, could fair no better, as he was out for a duck.

He said New Zealand were considering re-jigging the line-up so he may drop down from the top of the order with Nathan Astle, who returns after missing the last match, opening the batting.

"We've been searching for some time to get the batting right and put a complete performance together," said Fleming.

"You've got to respect the fundamentals of batting. I think a little bit of anxiety and pressure is creating technical problems at the top."

"We've got to make sure mentally we are right, and then allow the opportunity to be skillful enough to get the runs on the board."

Spinner Daniel Vettori (virus) and James Franklin (knee) were able to train on Monday and could return for the crucial game after missing the last match.

Batsman Hamish Marshall believes New Zealand have the chance to quickly make amends after their horror show in Auckland.

Blatter issues

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for the FIFA president not to award the Italians the World Cup, and it was indeed an error on my part."

Blatter then said he had apologised to the Italians straight after the match.

"I said sorry to the Italian authorities straight after the final," he added. Italy claimed the World Cup for a fourth time by beating France 5-3 on penalties after the July final had ended in a 1-1 draw.

United leave

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his hands as Kiraly's outstretched leg prevented his effort from finding the net.

But the industrious marksman was not to be denied. A neat 55th move involving Carrick, Ronaldo and Rooney resulted in Larsson rifling home from 16-yards to send Old Trafford wild.

United went close to making it 2-0 from Ryan Giggs' free-kick but the Welshman was denied by the woodwork.

Czech Republic ace Baros equalised after Gary Cahill's effort was blocked but just as Villa were settling for a replay, Solskjaer netted the winner from the edge of the box.

Gunners seek

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anything but world class in Saturday's 6-1 FA Cup win over fourth-division Macclesfield.

"It is frustrating for a striker to be in a team that wins 6-1 and he is not on the scoresheet," coach Jose Mourinho said.

"He fought hard. Maybe in his matches he couldn't say this ... but, against Macclesfield, he chased the luck and fought hard," he added of the former scourge of Italian and European defences.

Benitez's Riise

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With a Premiership blockbuster against Manchester United fast approaching on January 20, Wenger is likely to rest several key players for his side's second trip to Merseyside in quick succession.

This tie should have been played last month but was called off due to fog.

Henry, delighted to have scored his second goal in two games since returning from injury, is in no mood to rest. He is eager to make up for lost time and wants another stab at Liverpool having moved a step closer to achieving his dream of playing in his first FA Cup final at Wembley.

"Our goal is to win the FA Cup," said Henry. "I've been at Arsenal a very long time and never played in an FA Cup Final at Wembley. We've played in a lot of finals over the years, but never there."

"It would be pretty special to be the first captain to lift the cup at the new-looking Wembley, but there are a lot of skippers out there who want to do that. We'll have to keep our feet on the ground."

"The only other goal I have scored at Anfield was a penalty, a long time ago when we won the double. I've played a lot here over the years and to score a goal like that on Saturday was special."

Monty dreams of Warney

Cricket

AFP, Sydney

Monty Panesar has said it would be beyond his "wildest dreams" to work with Australia great Shane Warne.

Left-arm spinner Panesar, one of the few England players to emerge with some credit following the side's recent 5-0 Ashes series whitewash, spoke to Warne during last week's fifth Test in Sydney and would relish the chance to be coached by the leg-spin legend.

"There have been rumours going round about England wanting to offer Shane Warne a coaching job and as a young spinner, I have to say that it would be beyond my wildest dreams to work with him," Panesar told Monday's Daily Mail.

"He could be an incredible inspiration to me because he has so much knowledge and experience," the 24-year-old Northamptonshire bowler added.

"I had a long chat with Warney at the end of the last Test, on Friday. It was overwhelming for me -- just a

young spinner -- to be able to listen to him talking about the game," Panesar, controversially left out of England's team for the first two Ashes Tests, explained.

"He was very nice to me about it - talking a lot about technical things like the pace to bowl at, angles, stuff like that."

"He told me that he thought I was a good bowler, but that I had to keep improving my game," said Panesar, who in his three Tests against Australia took 10 wickets at a shade under 38.

Warne, who will continue to play cricket for English county Hampshire after retiring from Tests at Sydney, said Monday he would not be averse to helping England recover from their Ashes thrashing, after coach Duncan Fletcher said he would like to enlist his skills.

But Warne, who admitted it was "strange" to refer to himself as "Shane Warne, the former Test cricketer", said he had received no specific request from Fletcher or the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB).

Warne, who bowed out having

taken a world record 708 Test wickets -- 195 of them against England -- said he retained a great affection for England, having helped a number of bowlers informally during his time with Hampshire.

In a reference to his conversation with Panesar, Warne added: "Of course, there is a big difference between an informal chat, where you wouldn't dream of asking for a cent, and actually being employed," he wrote.

"I am not sure what Duncan has in mind, whether it is for me to go around the counties or for bowlers to come to see me at Hampshire."

"As a general comment, if I could help the cause of spin bowling, if I have the time and if it fits in with my family, then I would give it a lot of thought... Whatever I do, I want to do it properly."

Fletcher, who is under fire in the aftermath of England's Ashes performance, raised the prospect of Warne crossing cricket's great divide on Friday.

"I'd be happy with him to speak to anyone, there's no doubt about it," he told reporters in Sydney.

Haq, Gul troubled

AFP, Kimberley

Pakistan fast bowler Umar Gul bowled just three overs Sunday on the second day of the touring team's three-day match against the Rest of South Africa.

Coach Bob Woolmer said Gul had been troubled by a "left ankle niggle" and he had been given a limited workload as a precautionary measure.

Pakistan start the first of three Tests against South Africa at Centurion Thursday.

Pakistan captain Inzamamul Haq did not bat because of a chest infection as his team, 401 for three overnight, made 485 for nine declared.

Albie Morkel, a South African one-day international and brother of recent Test debutant Morne, took five for 113 as the Pakistanis slipped after a dominant first day batting performance in which openers Mohammad Hafeez and Imran Farhat made centuries before retiring.

The Rest slumped to 84 for four before an unbroken partnership of 136 between captain Morne van Wyk and the left-handed Arno Jacobs enabled them to reach 220 for four.

Seamer Shahid Nazir and off-spinner Hafeez took two wickets each.

BRIEF SCORES

PAKISTAN: 485 for 9 (Hafeez 108 ret'd, Farhat 106 ret'd, Hameed 79, Younis 76, Morkel 5-113)

REST OF SOUTH AFRICA: 220 for 4 (van Wyk 70*, Jacobs 69*)

Ponting hates Twenty20

CRICINFO, undated

Ricky Ponting doesn't like playing Twenty20 matches and believes Australia should contest only one game of the popular format each season. Ponting will captain Australia against England on Tuesday in a warm-up for the tri-series and the SCG is expected to be sold-out.

Ponting, who has 131 runs in four Twenty20 affairs, said his problem with the concept was treating a game between two countries as "just being fun". "I don't really like playing Twenty20 international cricket," he said in the Courier-Mail.

He said if the games were limited to one fixture a season and a four-yearly tournament it "might be all right". "Maybe with the odd international game and by having state teams playing a short competition in the way Twenty20 cricket is played in England, I think it has value," he said. "My problem is that I can't play a game in which I'm wearing my national team's colours, and my opponents are wearing theirs, and treat it as just being fun."

However, Andrew Hilditch, the chairman of selectors, said the format should be played seriously ahead of the inaugural Twenty20 World Cup in South Africa in September. "The reality is there's not going to be much difference from one-day cricket, and that Twenty20 is likely to grow and grow," he told AAP.

Warne hints

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using Warne in an advisory capacity. "That was very kind of him," Warne said, "especially after he said a few weeks ago that his batsmen were on top of my bowling. Perhaps he's changed his mind after Adelaide and Melbourne."

"The fact is that I haven't heard anything from the ECB, so I can't say yes or no. I have an affection for England and a house in Southampton," he said. "And I've helped out England bowlers in the past. I am a big believer in players learning from each other. That is what happens -- or should happen -- at the end of every match or series."

Tigers doing well

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out thinking of the other. I think we have to look at both. It's very close isn't it..." reminded Whatmore.

"You get just one week after returning from Zimbabwe and then you go to the World Cup," he said adding that he has some new faces for the 30-member probable World Cup squad. The selectors will meet today to decide on the probabilities as well as the team for Zimbabwe.

The Sri Lankan-born Australian was satisfied with the lead-up games, both in international and domestic circuits, ahead of cricket's mega show in the Caribbean.

"I don't know how many times people have said that in the past but whatever you have as a lead-

up, whether in the form of international cricket or domestic matches, you still have to do the best you can. Before we played the last series the boys were in domestic competition and we did okay and again we will be in domestic competition and then go and play internationally.

"So I have no complaints and we have a lot of cricket as lead-up," he explained expressing satisfaction over the players' fitness.

Questions were raised about Aftab Ahmed's bowling in the recently concluded Twenty20 League although he had been instructed not to do so. Interestingly, he was used by his national captain Bashar, also the Mohammedan skipper.

Paul Close said that he was looking into the matter.

"There had been some instructions for him not to bowl and to follow a rehabilitation programme. So that's something we are looking into. Without him we'll refrain from making comments. We'll wait till we see him face to face and get the facts from the horse's mouth," he said.

"I have heard from certain players that conditions at the Dhammondi Cricket Stadium were not ideal. You would always want better facilities for the players and there is always room for improvement," he added replying to a question whether the ground conditions at certain venues were risky for players.