

Younis exudes confidence

PTI, New Delhi

Pakistan vice-captain Younis Khan is confident his team will fare better on their South African tour than India, who lost the Test series 2-1.

The team gave a good account of themselves in the practice match against Rest of South Africa and Younis, who scored 76, said the team was in a positive frame of mind going into the three-Test series against the Proteas starting in Centurion on January 11.

"It is just as well we started on the front foot because we have only a few days before the first Test. I am confident we can do better than India, who narrowly lost the series here," he wrote in a website.

"We have a strong and well balanced squad and the bowlers in particular are looking good," he said.

India lost the recent series against Graeme Smith's men after winning the first Test in Johannesburg before going down in Durban and Cape Town.

Younis, one of the mainstays of Pakistan batting, has returned to cricket after the death of his brother Farman Ali Khan in a car accident in Germany last month.

The Pakistan vice-captain had also lost his father and another brother not too long ago.

"It has been a very sad time for me and my family after my brother passed away but I am hoping cricket will help me to get through this difficult time in my life," Younis wrote.

Younis said he was trying to keep his mind off the personal bereavement by focussing on the South African tour.

BCB

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Although Faruque denied that there had been any significant discussions in the selection meeting on the squad for the four-match series against Zimbabwe, it was learnt that Mashud's recent comments came to talk besides Sharif and some other players.

"We have had no significant discussion on the squad for Zimbabwe. We will finalise the squad on January 25 but we will meet again before the final sitting," he informed.

Smith to take

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also covered any suggestion that Smith would go part-time with Scotland whilst taking charge of Rangers.

The Glasgow giants have been in contact with the SFA over Smith taking over from Le Guen who left Ibrox by mutual consent late last month.

"First and foremost there has been some contact and we need to sit down with Walter and discuss his reaction," SFA chief executive David Taylor said Monday before the statement was released.

Asked if he expected Smith to resign, Taylor said: "No, but we have to discuss with him the contact and whether that has to be taken any further."

"He is under contract and that is where it rests at the moment. There are some significant issues. We are having a discussion today about the situation."

Smith, the 58-year-old former coach at Rangers, had been tipped to return to the club along with former Ibrox striker McCoist.

Smith, who led Rangers to seven league titles in a row in the 1990s, took over as Scotland boss in December 2004 after the ill-fated reign of former Germany boss Bert Vogts.

Serious cricket

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The Super League will take place after the national cricketers return home from the World Cup.

The clubs will miss the services of country's top cricketers in the most part of this season's league because of the coming Zimbabwe tour as the Tigers are scheduled to fly for Harare on January 31. According to the fixture released by the CCDM, the 11-round first leg will end on February 13, which that means the national cricketers will only able to play six matches, provided the political situation allows.

Two archrivals Mohammadian and Abahani, who came alive after mediocre seasons in the recent past, will be real sufferers in the absence of the national stars.

The Motijheel outfit have already made a bright start to the season when they clinched the first-ever Twenty20 League title but no doubt the absence of players like Habibul Bashar, Aftab Ahmed and Sakib Al Hasan will make it difficult for them.

On the other hand, their Dhanmondi foes will miss national stars like Khaled Mashud and Mashrafee-bin-Mortaza.

It has been time and again told about bringing quality foreign recruits but so far, it seems that old faces would return to Dhaka this season as most of the teams have yet to confirm big names.

A club can register three foreign players with only one permitted to play.

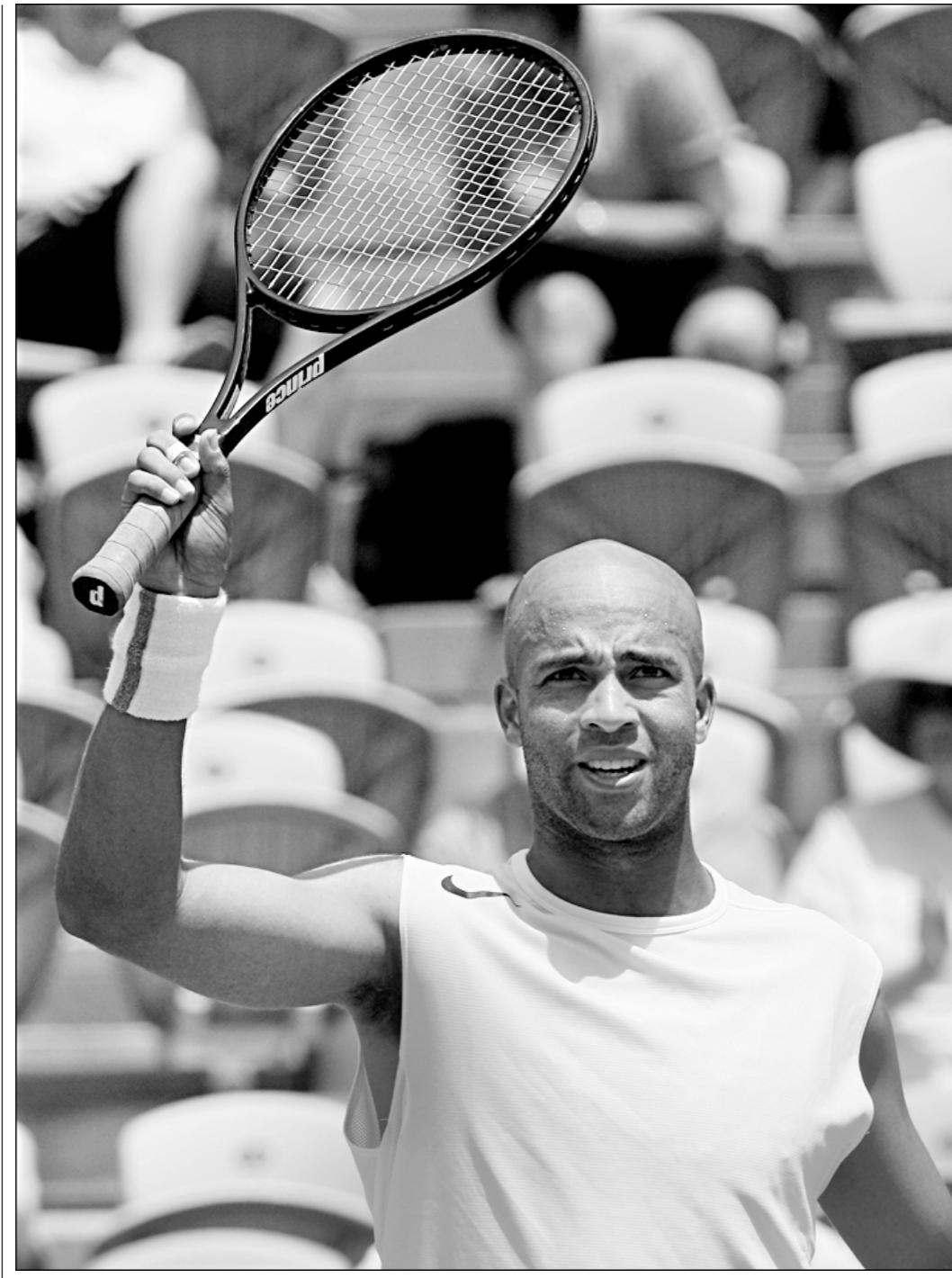


PHOTO: AFP

American tennis player James Blake waves to spectators after beating compatriot Kevin Kim at the Sydney International tournament on Tuesday. He won in straight sets 6-3, 6-4.

Nadal exit boosts Blake

Tennis

AFP, Sydney

James Blake strengthened his title claims with an opening victory amid the demise of top seed Rafael Nadal on a day of withdrawals at the Sydney International here Tuesday.

American third seed Blake accounted for compatriot Kevin Kim, 6-3, 6-4 in the opening match on Centre Court.

Second seed Russian Nikolay Davydenko reached the last eight with a 3-6, 6-3, 6-4 win over American Vincent Spadea in the ninth match.

Defending champion Blake, who beat Russians Davydenko and Igor Andreev on the way to winning here last year, said he was looking for back-to-back Sydney wins to carry into next week's Australian Open.

"I came into last year with no real expectations. It's a very difficult draw, a lot of the top players, everyone looking to peak around this time and get ready for Australia,"

Blake said.

"It's not going to be easy, but I would love to have as much success as I had here last year and then maybe take it to Melbourne with even more confidence and hopefully go a little further."

Blake will take on Australian Nathan Healey in the quarterfinals after Healey downed Austrian Stefan Koubek 6-3, 7-5.

World No.2 Nadal withdrew with a right thigh injury in the first set of his opening match, throwing his Australian Open challenge into doubt.

The two-time French Open champion had treatment just above the knee when trailing Australian Chris Guccione 4-3 and called it quits 5-6 behind on serve.

Nadal had lengthy treatment from a trainer before resuming, but decided not to complete the match due to concern over the injury ahead of the season's first Grand Slam, which starts on Monday in Melbourne.

The 20-year-old Spaniard missed last year's Australian Open with a left foot injury but said he hoped to be fit within two days.

Mathieu will play Davydenko next on Wednesday, while Gasquet takes on German Benjamin Becker.

She's played in her whole life.

"But Venus didn't give me any good pointers, actually."

"She told me some false information, so I'll be calling her back about that."

The seven-times Grand Slam winner's comeback from knee and ankle problems is gathering momentum.

"I was really happy to win because I wasn't ready to go home yet," Williams said.

"I wanted to have at least one more match here before the Australian Open, so I was happy to win."

Williams' game was strong in the opening set, but fell apart in the second when Safarova's passing shots hit their target and the Czech forced Williams to move around the court.

"I spoke to Venus before the match, she's played her before and she said that she was a tough opponent," Williams said.

The third set could have tipped in favour of either player.

Serena reaches last eight

Tennis

AFP, Hobart

Serena Williams chided her sister Venus over some misleading information before scraping into the quarterfinals of the Hobart International here Tuesday.

Williams had never played Czech Lucie Safarova before so she called on Venus' experience with the athletic left-hander.

Williams won in a third-set tie-breaker, 6-3, 3-6, 7-6, but she quipped it was no thanks to her elder sister.

"I spoke to Venus before the match, she's played her before and she said that she was a tough opponent," Williams said.

"So I knew from the start she was probably going to play better than

In the end, Williams made fewer mistakes than she did in the second set to claim a victory.

"It just boiled down to me not making any mistakes," she said.

"I knew I was going to win. I didn't think I was going to lose at all."

"Maybe it was intuition, but I felt right and knew I was going to pull it out."

Safarova said she was nervous about playing the high-profile American.

"I was pleased to see that I could play with her the same as I can play against the other girls," she said.

Williams will Wednesday play Austrian Sybille Bammer, who ousted Spanish second seed Anabel Medina Garrigues 6-4, 6-3.

India's Sania Mirza finished over the top of Italian Romina Oprandi 6-7, 6-3, 6-0.

Sreesanth just did it

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with another Pakistan fast bowler Waqar Younis in Kochi."

Sreesanth said he wants to use his performance in South Africa as a stepping stone for achieving greater success in the forthcoming series. "I cannot sit back on laurels. I have to work with the same intensity and even more. I am still learning," Sreesanth said. While expressing satisfaction over his performance in South Africa, during which he scripted India's first Test win in the country by claiming eight wickets in Johannesburg, Sreesanth revealed that he had set a bigger target for himself. "My dream was to capture 25 wickets in the series. I thank God that I could get 18 wickets and equal Anil Kumble and Srinath's record (in South Africa). They are the legends in Indian cricket

and to hold the record along with them is a great feeling."

Looking back at the tour where India lost both the one-day and the Test series, he said, "It is not always easy to perform well outside the country and especially in South African conditions. We tried our best. It was a team effort. May be in some points we were not good enough." He also said the presence of Sourav Ganguly in the team helped the players. "He performed exceptionally well especially in tough situations. He is a mature player and performed well. He played a big role."

On reports of players damaging the dressing room during celebrations after the Wanderers Test win, Sreesanth said: "I do not know. That day we had a good party. I do not want to comment on that."

Rain decides

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"Traditionally, away from home a lot of sub-continent teams struggle in places like New Zealand and England but this team is starting to turn the corner with regards to touring, a lot of it is down to self belief."

New Zealand seamer James Franklin has been troubled by an injury to his left knee and admitted that surgery may be required.

"At some stage it's probably going to be needed but I saw the specialist and we're confident I should be able to get through the summer," he said.

"It's not a bad result, both sides are pretty even, there was a lot of up and down cricket from both teams and a draw in all three series is fair."

Little practice for WI, India

AFP, London

West Indies will play just a solitary three-day match before their Test series in England starts with back-to-back clashes in May, the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) announced Monday when they confirmed the tourist match schedules for the 2007 season.

During their recent 5-0 Ashes campaign drubbing in Australia, England were severely criticised for playing just seven days' cricket before the Test series got underway.

But with the international programme increasingly congested, all of the world's leading sides are having to cope with playing far fewer matches on tour outside of the major fixtures than in years gone by.

Since 2000, England have routinely played seven Tests in a home season, having previously made do with a usual maximum of six.

The West Indies' situation for this tour of England is complicated by the fact that there are only two weeks between the end of the Cricket World Cup in the Caribbean and their tour opener, against Somerset, on May 12.

The first match of a four Test series is due to start on May 17 at Lord's with the second encounter of the series at Headingly following fast on May 25 at Headingly.

After those games, the West Indies do have a three-day match against an as yet unnamed opponent.

India, who will be touring later in the English season, will have more practice before their three-Test series starts at Lord's on July 17.

They have two first-class matches, against Sussex and England A while, after the first two Tests, they play Sri Lanka A in a three-day game in Leicester.

WINDIES SCHEDULE

May 12-14: v Somerset, Taunton

May 17-21: v England, 1st Test, Lord's

May 25-29: v England, 2nd Test, Headingly

Jun 01-03: v TBC

Jun 07-11: v England, 3rd Test, Old Trafford

Jun 15-19: v England, 4th Test, Riverside

Jun 21: v England A, New Road

Jun 24: v Derbyshire, Twenty20, Derby

Jun 26: v PCA Masters, Twenty20, Arundel

Jun 28: v England, 1st Twenty20, The Oval

Jun 29: v England, 2nd Twenty20, The Oval

Jul 01: v England, 1st ODI, Lord's

Jul 04: v England, 2nd ODI, Edgbaston

Aug 24: v England, 2nd ODI, Bristol (D/N)

Aug 27: v England, 3rd ODI, Edgbaston

Aug 30: v England, 4th ODI, Old Trafford (D/N)

Sep 02: v England, 5th ODI, Headingly

Sep 05: v England, 6th ODI, The Oval

Sep 08: v England, 7th ODI, Lord's

INNINGS SCHEDULE

Jul 07-10: v Sussex, Hove

Jul 13-15: v England, Chelmsford

Jul 19-23: v England, 1st Test, Lord's

Jul 27-31: v England, 2nd Test, Trent Bridge

Aug 03-05: v Sri Lanka A, Leicester

Aug 09-13: v England, 3rd Test, The Oval

Aug 16: v Scotland A, Glasgow

Aug 18: v England A, Northampton

Aug 21: v England, 1st ODI, Rose Bowl (D/N)

Aug 24: v England, 2nd ODI, Bristol (D/N)

Aug 27: v England