

Leave Sehwag alone: Dravid

AFP, Montego Bay

India captain Rahul Dravid launched a passionate defence of under-fire teammate Virender Sehwag on Sunday following the opening batsman's struggle to find World Cup form.

Sehwag's place in the side has been placed in doubt as he endures a lean period with the bat which culminated in a third-ball duck in the last warm-up match on Friday against West Indies.

It has not help Sehwag's confidence either that India's chairman of selectors Dilip Vengsarkar disclosed the opener only got his place in the World Cup squad because of Dravid.

"In terms of supporting Sehwag, it's not that I am supporting Joe Bloggs' or any old player," Dravid said.

"This is a kid who has got some pedigree in international cricket. I get these questions all the time about if I am supporting Sehwag, and I wonder is it Joe Bloggs', some old Joe that I am supporting.

"The guy has done well in international cricket and people just need to hang back a little bit and let him play some cricket."

Dravid emphasised that to win the World Cup, India would need all of their players performing.

"That includes Viru' because we want whoever gets a chance to go out there to perform," he said.

"Whenever any player is not in form, it is an issue to deal with. It could be Sehwag, it could be any of us, but that's what a squad is all about. We have 15 players, and you hope that someone else steps up to the plate, and does the job for you.

"This is why we have spoken so much about believing that any 11 we put on the park should be able to win a match for India. This is what I truly believe, and I believe we have 15 players in the West Indies -- whatever their names -- that we can pick an 11 for India that can win against any team.

"I think this is the whole goal of what we are trying to do."

India have been drawn with Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Bermuda in Group B of the World Cup to be contested in Trinidad.

WI look

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bowed out for 80 in a nine-wicket defeat to Sri Lanka in the ICC Champions Trophy in October but then four days later produced a superb victory over World Cup favourites Australia.

In their final warm-up game against India on Friday, Lara's side were rolled over for 85 as they lost by nine wickets and left their captain talking of a "chronic" tendency to batting collapses.

Inconsistency runs throughout the side and while there is no doubt about the potential of the young players available to Lara there are a number of question marks over his squad.

On the batting front, among the questions are: Will Ramnaresh Sarwan recover from his injury problems and hit form in time? Can Dwayne Smith, who has a ODI average of just 15.58, finally produce regular big knocks? Will Devon Smith at last get a one-day fifty and kick-start his international career? Are inexperienced youngsters Kieron Pollard and Lendl Simmons really ready for the challenge of World Cup cricket?

While the West Indies look to have a solid and reliable roster of medium and medium-quick bowlers, the biggest concern is whether their quickies have the ability to rattle through the upper order of top sides.

There is much excitement surrounding Taylor and this tournament could determine whether, having put his serious back injury behind him, he really is the answer to the region's long and, so far, fruitless search for a world class pace bowler.

Finally and importantly, can wicketkeeper Denesh Ramdin rediscover his form behind and in front of the stumps? With a passionate, but frustrated, home support behind them and wickets that, in theory at least, should be familiar, there is much going West Indies' way but it remains to be seen if enough of Lara's team can give positive answers to the questions that still dog them.

Classic El Clasico

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Real's fighting performance will probably be enough for Capello to keep his job, at least for the moment.

After Real's exit from Europe, the Spanish media had been speculating that only a win would save his neck but a draw under these circumstances will probably suffice despite them staying in fourth place.

"For you I can never do anything right," added Capello, sarcastically mocking those journalists who have been predicting that this could be his last match in charge of Real.

The result temporarily returns Barca to the top of the Spanish first division but they will slip back to second if Sevilla get a point or more at Gimnastic on Sunday.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian artist and Guinness Book of World Record holder Jaspal Singh displays a miniature handmade wooden pitch featuring a model of the World Cup 2007 trophy alongside a bad and ball and flags of various countries in Amritsar on Sunday to mark the start of cricket's showpiece event.

Right time for Pakistan

REUTERS, St Augustine



A few weeks ago in South Africa, Pakistan looked as if they would struggle to beat a team of performing-seals.

But after two handsome wins in their warm-up matches, the glint of World Cup glory shines once more in the eyes of the team that went all the way in 1992.

Pakistan were soundly thumped in both the Test and one-day series in South Africa but the clearest evidence of their resurrection came when they cruised to a seven-wicket win over those same South Africans in a warm-up match here on Friday.

The pitch -- which South African captain Graeme Smith deemed "unfit" -- was surely a factor in Pakistan's seven-wicket victory after they won the toss and were able to field first.

But there was no mistaking the talent and skill that the potentially devastating Pakistanis were able to

muster to deal ruthlessly with the top-ranked team in world cricket.

Pakistan were similarly dismissive of Canada's challenge in their first warm-up game in St Augustine on Tuesday, which they won by 77 runs.

However, coach Bob Woolmer was not about to accept that his team had suddenly become favourites to win the tournament.

"If we are, we've gone from being non-favourites to favourites very quickly," Woolmer said after his team beat South Africa.

Asked how his players had managed to bounce back so quickly after their travails in South Africa, Woolmer said, "This is the World Cup, this is the big time, this is where everyone has to put in the big performances."

Captain Inzamamul Haq was his usual calm, confident self despite the upward curve his team seemed to be scaling.

"The team is well prepared for the tournament," he told a news conference after the match against South Africa.

"This is a fine opportunity for the

players to perform, and we're looking forward to taking on that opportunity."

"People do have high expectations of the Pakistan team but I am confident that there will not be undue pressure and that they will deliver in the tournament."

Inzamam dismissed the notion that the pitch had handed Pakistan an unfair advantage against the South Africans.

"It is a question of the quality of cricket that a team plays that should be assessed when we look at their performance, not the state of the pitch," he said.

Pakistan's attack might have been disrupted by the late withdrawal of injured fast bowlers Shoaib Akhtar and Mohammad Asif through injury, but replacements Mohammad Sami and Yasir Arafat have slotted seamlessly into the squad.

Against South Africa, Sami bowled with pace and took two wickets, while Arafat conceded just 27 runs in seven tidy overs.

Pakistan face West Indies (March 13), Zimbabwe (March 19) and Ireland (March 23) in Group D.

Easy wins worry Rahul

AFP, Montego Bay



Skipper Rahul Dravid hopes that India's two comfortable wins over the Netherlands and the West Indies will not

backfire on them when the serious business of the World Cup gets underway.

Dravid said there were some advantages and disadvantages to his side's easy victories in both matches, particularly against West Indies, whom they crushed by nine wickets.

"With a performance like this, it meant that some of our batsmen did not get a chance to bat, and our spin bowlers did not get a chance to bowl," said the captain.

"I think the advantages sometimes outweigh the disadvantages when you beat a top team like West Indies so convincingly. I think what it does to the

spirit of the team can be very important as well.

"No one should discount the plus points you gain from momentum, the plus points you gain from the confidence that it gives in winning over a team like West Indies who had the upper hand over us a lot over the last year."

India, who are already being talked of potential champions, open their campaign against Bangladesh in Trinidad on Saturday and Dravid is keen that his team keep their feet on the ground.

"They [the warm-up games] would give you a pointer as to where you are with your preparations and your readiness," Dravid told reporters at a news conference at the Ritz Carlton Hotel here.

"The games were 13 players against 13 players, and teams were trying different things. I think the big event is the big event. We have won both our games, but we will keep our

feet firmly planted on the ground knowing full well that the real tournament starts for us on March 17.

"We can take some confidence from the matches, and we can learn some lessons from them, but the real cricket for us starts on March 17."

Dravid was questioned about any concerns he had about the pitches that are likely to be rolled out for the competition.

There were concerns about the quality of the pitches used for the warm-up matches in Trinidad, where India will contest the group stage with Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Bermuda, and the unknown nature of many of the surfaces which have been relaid ahead of the World Cup.

"We just want to forget about the pitches right now," he said.

"We do not talk about them too much in our team meetings because what we are focussing on is the performance of our team."

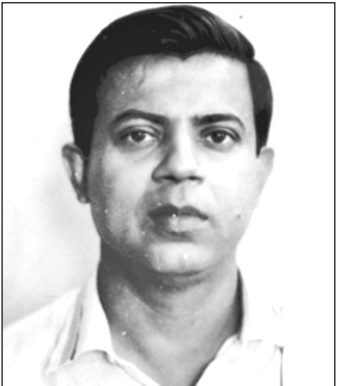
was not only a great loss for the BSAJA but also for the sports arena," Syed Manun said adding that Rumi's contribution in the War of Liberation would always be remembered with pride and gratitude by the generations to come.

Rumi, also a former president of the BSAJA, died on March 11 in 2003 following a heart attack at the age of 55.

He joined Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha (BSS) as a senior sports reporters in 1997 and continued there till his death.

Earlier, he worked with the now-defunct Dainik Bangla for 20 years from 1977.

A brilliant student, Rumi was born in Naogaon on January 1, 1948 and passed the Matriculation Examination in 1964 with distinction as being one of the first batch examinees of the Government Laboratory High School, Dhaka.



MASUD AHMED RUMI

beginners in this field," he observed with paying deep respect to the memory of Rumi.

"Rumi Bhai's untimely demise

Lara denies late night partying

AFP, Montego Bay

West Indies' troubled World Cup build-up suffered another blow on Sunday when skipper Brian Lara faced rumours that members of his team had been partying until the early hours on the eve of their nine-wicket thrashing at the hands of India.

"I don't know anything about it," said Lara, when quizzed about the allegations.

"I doubt that with the sort of importance of this tournament that that would have been the case.

"I'm sure that if the management, Clive Lloyd or (coach) Bennett King, knows about it they would definitely filter it down to myself.

"I am not going to go there, but something such as that is not what we want to portray. The guys know and they are very professional in understanding what is necessary to perform the next day," he was quoted as saying by the Jamaica Gleaner newspaper.

On Friday, West Indies slumped to 85 all out in just 25.5 overs of their warm-up match against India.

After the game, reports emerged that some players were seen at a Montego Bay nightclub until three o'clock in the morning.

Lara, who will retire from one-day cricket after the World Cup, said he was confident that his side will recover from their India mauling.

"We will be working to get the guys to understand their particular roles and to understand their strengths," Lara said.

"A lot of guys tend not to play the way they are accustomed to play because of the situation. What they need to do is to understand their role and be as professional as possible.

"You are talking about a team that has beaten everyone else (over the past two years). We got to the final in Malaysia, won the ICC Champions Trophy two years ago, made the final again last year, so you can't get on the team too hard," he said.

"We have played very good cricket for the sort of situations that we have been in.

"I am quite confident that the team is going to bounce back, especially in the competitive stage when the tournament starts on Tuesday," Lara said ahead of the match against Pakistan.

"You are going to see a performance that as a West Indian you would be proud of."

Jose reveals

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continued. "It is a big project.

"I have said that any coach would like to be at Chelsea and some people might have been interested in me leaving, but my decision to stay on is total."

Mourinho also revealed that his main objective this season is to deliver the UEFA Champions League trophy, but remains determined to push Manchester United all the way in the Premiership.

"The Champions League is our dream and I hope to win it this season, but the Premier League is also special for me," he concluded.

Fergie intends

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Yet it would be a major disappointment if United were not to at least add one more to the list, having moved nine points clear at the Barclays Premiership summit as well as booking a Champions League quarter-final meeting with AS Roma.

Given Chelsea's vast resources, a title triumph this term would undoubtedly rank as one of Ferguson's finest achievements.

Yet the 65-year-old is unwilling to class it as such, insisting it would be of no lesser or greater significance than any of his previous eight.

"Winning the league any year is an achievement," he said. "They have all been fantastic and this one would be no different from the rest.

"Excluding the League Cup, there are three major trophies on offer. All the top English clubs are chasing them, so not everyone can win them.

"We are fortunate in that we still have a chance, so hopefully we can do it."

BD A win

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"We have won both the four-day and the one-day series against a talented side. From that aspect it has been fantastic."

SCORES IN BRIEF

ENGLAND A: 194 all out in 49.4 overs (Davies 5, Jefferson 45, Compton 1, Prior 51, Gidman 13, Yardy 9, Rashid 19, Bresnan 20, Smith 5, Onions 8 n.o., Kirtley 4, extras 14, Dollar 1-27, Manzarul 3-38, Enamul 1-28, Mehrab 1-38, Riyad 3-27).

BANGLADESH A: 198-5 in 45 overs (Jahirul 41, Mehrab 10, Nazimuddin 42, Tushar 34, Manzarul 38 n.o., Farhad 21, Riyad 2 n.o., extras 10, Bresnan 2-28, Yardy 1-36, Smith 1-17, Kirtley 1-30).

Result: Bangladesh A won by five wickets.

SPORTS REPORTER

Narinda Government School will take on BAF Shaheen School in the boys' final of the 16th Bata School Handball Tournament today.

Narinda ousted BIS 20-14 in yesterday's first semifinal while Shaheen School knocked out Bhashantek High School 8-2 in the other semi at the Dhanmondi Women's Sports Complex.

Old rivals Viqarunnissa Noon School and Scholastica will be pitted against each other in today's girls' final. Scholastica dumped Ahmed Bawani Academy 12-1 while Viqarunnissa defeated Sunnydale 12-7 in the two semis.

SCHOOL CRICKET

Gaibandha correspondent: Kacharipara High School crushed Gaibandha Government High School

by 77 runs at the Gaibandha Stadium to set a final clash against Mohimaganj High School in the Standard Chartered Young Tigers National School Cricket Tournament.

In reply to Kacharipara's 173 in the second semifinal, Gaibandha boys skittled out for just 96. Feroz topscored with 39 for the winners. The final is slated for tomorrow at the same venue.

Manikganj correspondent: Kusherchar Ismail Hossain High School moved into schools cricket final with a thrilling two-wicket win over Oxford Academy at the Manikganj Government High School ground. In a low scoring semifinal, Oxford were all out for exactly 100 with Sabbir taking three wickets. Kusherchar also struggled but reached 101-8 in 26.2 overs.

WC HANDBOOK

The NCC Bank Limited unveiled

the cover of its handbook on the Cricket World Cup 2007 at the National Sports Council. The handbook contains information on teams, venues and careers of players in addition of World Cup records.

NEW DG OF BKSP

Brig Gen M Shawkat Hossain of Bangladesh Army is going to be appointed the Director General of BKSP on deputation.

According to a PID handout, the service of Brig Gen M Shawkat Hossain has been placed with the Ministry of Youth and Sports for the new appointment.

The handout said the government has also placed the service of Brig Gen M Najib Hasan, who is the DG of BKSP on deputation, with the Armed Forces Division for his return to the Army.

Minnows eye a day in the sun

AFP, Port of Spain



When Dwayne Leverock bowls to Sachin Tendulkar in the World Cup, it will be more than just a contest between a spinner carrying extra flab and a batsman having extra strokes.

It will be moment to relish for the Bermudian left-arm spinner if he dismisses the Indian batting superstar, the world's leading scorer with 14,763 runs and a record 41 centuries.

No prize for guessing which cricketer stands to gain more from the Group B game here on March 19 -- Leverock, who is playing his first World Cup, or Tendulkar, who will be making his 382nd one-day appearance.

Six non-Test-playing nations -- Canada, Bermuda, the Netherlands, Ireland, Scotland and Kenya -- will be in fray in group matches starting on Tuesday, with the sole aim of enjoying just one day in the sun.

The lesser-known players have hitched their wagons to the stars at the big stage, like Canadian John Davison who was least expected to hammer the fastest Cup century when Brian Lara, Tendulkar and Ricky Ponting were around.

"John who?"

The question became irrelevant after Davison smashed a 67-ball hundred in a group match against the West Indies at Centurion in the

2003 edition in South Africa.

That was the day when even batting masters were pushed into the background and forced to acknowledge a masterpiece from a minnow.

He batted without fear of failure, treating the West Indies attack with sheer disdain in an engrossing display of stroke-making.

Davison was to catch the attention again with his power-hitting. It came against New Zealand in a group game at Benoni when he raced to his half-century off just 25 balls, the third fastest in the tournament history.

The World Cup has provided opportunities to minnows to grab the headlines simply because they go into the mega event with "nothing to lose and everything to gain" attitude.

Zimbabwe were one of the qualifiers in the 1987 edition in the sub-continent when they nearly pulled off an upset in their opening group match against New Zealand, thanks to Dave Houghton.

Houghton had played just six one-dayers before hammering a 137-ball 142 with six sixes and 13 fours at Hyderabad to give a big scare to New Zealand, who eventually won by three runs.

Zimbabwe had always been impressive qualifiers, often testing big teams. They made a memorable Cup debut in 1983 when they surprised Australia in their opening game at Trent Bridge.

Their star was Duncan Fletcher, the current England coach. He hit an unbeaten 69 as a lower-order batsman and then grabbed four

wickets to help his team pull off a stunning 13-run victory.

It was the turn of Zimbabwean chicken farmer Eddo Brandes to earn fame in 1992 as the paceman grabbed four crucial wickets to bowl his side to victory over England at Albury.

The impressive one-day performances eventually led to Zimbabwe's first Test in late 1992.

Sri Lanka were also tough customers as a non-Test-playing nation, impressing the cricket authorities with their gutsy performances. They gave a brave display against eventual 1975 runners-up Australia at the Oval.

Batsmen Sunil Wettimuny and Duleep Mendis were taken to hospital for X-rays after being struck by paceman Jeff Thomson, but not before playing parts in their team's chase.

Sri Lanka were eventually restricted to 276-4 in reply to their opponents' 328-5. They did better in the next edition when they shocked India. Their Cup performances also helped them gain Test status in early 1980s.

But the best by a non-Test-playing nation came from Kenya, who qualified for the semi-finals in 2003.

The minnows need not lose heart as they have something to draw inspiration from when they begin their World Cup campaign.

Bowling NZ's concern

REUTERS, Bridgetown



After a week divided between highs and lows during the World Cup warm-ups, New Zealand captain Stephen

Fleming can be forgiven for wondering what lies in store when the event proper starts.

Already he has had to contend with bowler Mark Gillespie, arriving in the Caribbean with a "paralysed" bowling arm and all-rounder Jacob Oram turning up with a broken finger.

The New Zealand physio's workload got a tad heavier on Friday when batsman Peter Fulton broke a left-hand little finger -- his "pinkie" -- in catching Kumar Sangakkara during the Kiwis' 18-run win over Sri Lanka.

Oram and Fulton should be fit to play New Zealand's key Group C opener in St Lucia on March 16 but Gillespie's chances of turning out against England in that match look remote.

He contracted a virus shortly before flying to the Caribbean last week and its effect has effectively numbed his right bowling arm, forcing him out of the shock warm-up defeat by Bangladesh on Tuesday as

well as Friday's redeeming victory.

"Mark has paralysis of his right arm which is not a great thing when you're a right-arm bowler," Fleming told reporters with customary dry humour.

"He's improving but at what rate I'm not so sure.

"It will be hard for him to get up and play [against England], he's had no cricket. We can't rule him but I would say it's certainly unlikely."

Gillespie's absence does not help a bowling attack which looks to be a potential area of concern although it would be harsh to judge them too stringently on performances on a 3W's Oval which must be as benign as any in the Caribbean.

Nevertheless, his chief strike weapon, fast bowler Shane Bond, was wayward against both Bangladesh and Sri Lanka and should England's top order get a foothold in St Lucia, he could be dispatched for plenty despite his considerable pace.

Otherwise, the Kiwi attack looks workmanlike rather than lethal although spinner Daniel Vettori, at 28 a very seasoned performer now at the highest level, continues to pose a considerable threat to any batsman.

His understudy, Jeetan Patel, lacks Vettori's control and certainly

Sri Lanka dealt with him without much difficulty in Barbados before finishing only 18 runs shy of New Zealand's 285 total.

On a brighter note, the Black Caps' batting, despite a below par total of 226 all out against a modest Bangladesh attack, looks shipshape and in Oram, Fulton and Brendon McCullum they have a middle order which could easily embarrass England.

Both New Zealand and England should progress comfortably to the Super Eights from Group C which also includes Canada and Kenya albeit that the latter incredibly made it through to the last four in the previous edition in South Africa in 2003.

Fleming, however, wants revenge for England's recent tri-series success over them in Australia and a win on Friday would build on the momentum they gained by beating world champions Australia 3-0 last month.

"We're pretty sure about the style of play we want against England," he said. "England are playing well and they've got Kevin Pietersen back so it looks like it's going to be a tough game for both sides. I'm looking forward to it."

Dav sees bright

(71.42).

"This time we are a team in a real sense. We have a reliable batting side and a good bowling side as well," captain Habibul Bashar told Reuters.

"The morale of the team is very high. Everybody is in a positive frame of mind and keen to perform.

"And we hope to fight effectively to move forward for the second round."

Whatmore also believes the inroads made by the current crop of Bangladesh players will go a long way towards creating a world beating team in the near future.

"They've got potential to do that. They've got 150 million people in the country and all the kids there want to play cricket for Bangladesh," said Whatmore.

"Just like India and Sri Lanka we've got the base there from which to draw from... the future is bright."

Memorable

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Kalou was at the centre of the action as he saw an effort blocked after 66 minutes.

A period of sustained pressure was rewarded in the 71st minute as a goalmouth scramble ensued following a Robben corner and Lampard took advantage to place a low shot past Cerny from close range.

Didier Zokora forced Cech into a fine save as Tottenham dared to commit a few more bodies forward, before Essien fired wide at the other end.

Chelsea drew level at 3-3 four minutes from time as Drogha headed on to Kalou and he swivelled delightfully to volley into the left-hand corner.

The drama was still not over though and Defoe almost grabbed a winner for Spurs as he jinked past three Chelsea players on the edge of the area and crashed a ferocious effort against the crossbar.