

## 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 helped 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 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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bowled 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 bat 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 skin 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 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.

"This is a fine opportunity for the

## 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 as 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 credit for us starts on March 17."

Dravid was questioned about any concerns he had about his 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 relayed 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."

## Rumi fondly recalled

BSS, Dhaka

The memory of Masud Ahmed Rumi, a valiant Freedom Fighter and a renowned sports journalist, was fondly recalled by his fellow colleagues and friends at a function here today.

The function featured by discussion and a milad mahfil was organised by the Bangladesh Sports Journalists Association (BSJA) at its office to mark the fourth death anniversary of Rumi, a symbol of the most sincere and honest professional in sports journalism.

BSJA president Manzurul Haque and general secretary Syed Mohammed Mamun along with BSJA members, well-wishers and friends attended the milad mahfil and prayed for the eternal peace of the departed soul of Rumi.

Earlier taking part in the discussion on the life and activities of the late journalist, Manzurul Haque said Rumi Bhai was not only a renowned sports reporter but also a very

loveable soul.

"He took sports reporting to a new height by his excellent writing skill, thus setting a trend for the

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

"Rumi Bhai's untimely demise

was not only a great loss for the BSJA but also for the sports arena," Syed Mamun 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 BSJA, died on March 11 in 2003 following a heart attack at the age of 55.

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

Earlier, he worked with the now-defunct Dainik Bangla for 20 years from 1974-94.

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.

**Result: Bangladesh A won by five wickets.**

MASUD AHMED RUMI

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"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."

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.

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## LOCAL SNIPPETS

### 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 Vigarunnissa Noon School and Scholastica will be pitted against each other in today's girls' final. Scholastica dumped Ahmed Bawani Academy 12-1 while Vigarunnissa 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 Mohimagan 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