

Tactics irk SL fans

AFP, Colombo



Sri Lankan cricket fans Tuesday expressed frustration and disappointment over their team's tactics in resting top players for the World Cup clash against Australia.

Sri Lanka, already assured of a place in the semifinals, kept out star bowlers Chaminda Vaas and Muttiah Muralidaran for the Super Eights match in Grenada on Monday, which Australia won by seven wickets.

Buoyed by the team's excellent showing in the tournament so far, fans had eagerly awaited victory over Australia, the favourites to win their third consecutive World Cup title.

Mumtaz Begum, a female fan, said: "I can't believe they rested Vaas and Murali against a tough team like Australia. The loss will hit the morale of our team."

"They should go on a holiday if they needed rest. World Cup comes only once in four years," said another disappointed fan Saman Priyantha.

Stanley Weerasinghe, a veteran watcher of Sri Lankan cricket, said, "whatever the tactics, the end result is that we have lost badly."

"Australia are the top team in the world. You have to respect your opponents and play your best team in a tournament like the World Cup."

Taxi driver Ranjith Priyantha complained that "Vaas and Murali did not tour India in February saying they needed rest because of the World Cup. Now they go to the World Cup and still want rest."

The pundits, however, were willing to give the Sri Lankan team management the benefit of the doubt.

Popular commentator Roshan Abeysinghe said the decision could be justified because Sri Lanka had already assured its place in the semifinal and there was no need to go full throttle.

But Sanjeeva Ranatunga, a

former player, said the loss had exposed Sri Lanka's batting frailties.

"Upul Tharanga failed once again and Russel Arnold and Tillakaratne Dilshan showed weakness against the bouncing ball," he said. "The team must seriously consider its batting failures."

Bandula Warnapura, who captained Sri Lanka in their inaugural Test match in 1981, said it was not wise to look ahead towards the final when the semifinals had yet to be played.

Sri Lankan captain Mahela Jayawardene has defended the decision to rest Vaas and Muralidaran which immediately weakened an attack already without injured seamer Lasith Malinga.

"We have to do what's best for the team and that's why we took the decision," Jayawardene said after the match.

"We use our personnel on and off and we have to make sure we have the guys ready for the semifinals."

Malik likely to be named Pak captain

CRICINFO, undated

Shoaib Malik has emerged as the leading candidate for the Pakistan captaincy after discussions between Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) officials over the weekend.

An official announcement on the decision is expected in the next two to three days.

The appointment, if Malik agrees, is likely to be till September, when the situation will be reviewed again ahead of a hectic international season that includes a full series in India and a home series against Australia.

The discussions centred on Malik and Salman Butt but it was narrowed down to the former as Butt currently does not hold down a place in either the Test or ODI sides.

"In principle, a decision has been taken to offer it to Malik. There isn't really another suitable candidate around," one official told Cricinfo.

"We have a few assignments in the pipeline over the summer. There may be a series against Sri Lanka in Abu Dhabi and a match in England so we are talking about Malik for that. We will review the situation in September, ahead of the home season," he added.

PCB chairman Nasim Ashraf refused to confirm or deny that Malik would be offered the captaincy but

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Star absences puzzle Aussies

AFP, St George's



Australia's Andrew Symonds admitted he was stunned to see Sri Lanka rest frontline bowlers

Chaminda Vaas and Muttiah Muralidaran from their World Cup Super Eights clash on Monday.

Symonds smashed an unbeaten 63 as the world champions wrapped up a comfortable seven-wicket win at the Grenada National Stadium.

Both sides had already made sure of their places in the semifinals but Monday's result made it almost certain that Sri Lanka will avoid the defending champions in the last four and will probably face New Zealand in Jamaica.

Australia, as probable Super Eights winners, look destined to play their semifinal in St Lucia against either South Africa or England although West Indies still have an outside chance of getting through.

"It's not the way we would have done it but they're a different team," said Symonds on the decision to rest Vaas and Muralidaran.

"They are key players. It can affect confidence when you do

that."

Sri Lanka captain Mahela Jayawardene defended the decision to rest the duo which immediately weakened an attack already without injured seamer Lasith Malinga.

"We have to do what's best for the team and that's why we took the decision," said Jayawardene.

"We use our personnel on and off and we have to make sure we have the guys ready for the semifinals."

He subsequently told a news conference that Murali had been nursing a groin problem and Vaas needed a break as the side couldn't afford another injury to one of their bowlers with Malinga already sidelined.

Australia captain Ricky Ponting, who top-scored with 66 and shared an unbroken century stand with Symonds for the third wicket, said it was important that the same players stayed on course for the final.

"Right at this moment it's all about momentum. We've played some good cricket and we're looking to carry that momentum into the semifinals," said Ponting.

Monday's win was Australia's 20th successive World Cup win, and made it almost certain that they would top the Super Eights table with a perfect record.

"It's coming together nicely."

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PHOTO: AFP

Australia captain Ricky Ponting hits a boundary on the on-side during their World Cup Super Eights match against Sri Lanka at the Grenada National Stadium in Saint George's on Monday.

80 heads will roll in PCB

AFP, Islamabad

The Pakistan Cricket Board said Tuesday it will sack 80 employees, including some senior management officials, in the wake of the national team's World Cup fiasco.

Pakistan were ousted from the tournament after a humiliating defeat by minnows Ireland on March 17. Coach Bob Woolmer was found murdered in his hotel room the next day.

A Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) press release said 80 employees would be "relieved from their positions with severance pay" after a review of its management structure by external consultants.

"The decision to terminate their services was taken on corporate lines," PCB marketing director Ahsan Malik told this news agency. PCB chief operating officer Shafqat Nagmi was quoted by state media as saying that the aim was to restructure the board "ensuring good governance and (the) right man for the right job."

"Some of the previous employees were not even known to their job description and they were not performing their duties to a level of satisfaction. Besides, they were not suitable in the new structure," he said.

Officials said those shown the door included two general managers plus others from lower tiers of the organisation.

The review of the PCB's staffing levels included a comparison with other cricket boards, including those in Australia and South Africa, Nagmi said.

Poison theory given impetus

CRICINFO, undated

Speculation over the possibility that Bob Woolmer, the late Pakistan coach, was poisoned has increased following a report in a Jamaican paper, apparently quoting the toxicology report, to that effect.

The Jamaica Gleaner on Tuesday says samples taken from Woolmer's blood, stomach and urine have shown the presence of a foreign substance and has quoted an unnamed government official as saying that the substance could have been poison.

This seems to tie in with the theory that Woolmer may have been poisoned before being strangled.

The Gleaner also says that Scotland Yard has been called on to analyse the results of the report.

Mark Shields, the Jamaican deputy commissioner of Police, has decided not to comment on the report till all investigations are over.

"We have some results from toxicology now, but they will require further investigation and analysis, and therefore it would be totally inappropriate for me to elaborate any further on that," Shields was quoted as saying in the newspaper.

Woolmer was found unconscious in his hotel room in Jamaica

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AFP, St George's



Australia captain Ricky Ponting scored an unbeaten 66 as the champions stretched their unbeaten run at the World Cup to 26 games and 20 consecutive wins with a seven-wicket Super Eights victory against an under-strength Sri Lanka here Monday.

Australia had a minor wobble when occasional off-spinner Russel Arnold took two wickets in five balls to leave them 79 for two.

But Ponting and Andrew Symonds (63 not out) saw Australia, chasing 227 to win, to 232 for three with an unbroken stand of 106 in a win achieved with 44 balls to spare when the captain hit leg-spinner Malinga Bandara for six.

However, Sri Lanka's attack was missing fast bowler Lasith Malinga (ankle ligaments) and the rested duo of left-arm quick Chaminda Vaas and off-spinner Muttiah Muralidaran.

Sri Lanka skipper Mahela Jayawardene said subsequently Murali was nursing a groin problem and Vaas needed a break.

Between them the Sri Lankan trio had taken 41 wickets at this tournament, Vaas and Murali bagging three apiece in the six-wicket win against New Zealand last time out which Malinga also missed through injury.

Both sides had already qualified

for the semifinals and Sri Lanka's decision to omit 1996 World Cup winners Vaas and Murali denied Australia's batsmen fresh experience against the pair ahead of a possible final clash -- the teams are set to avoid one another in the last four.

Ponting's fifty came off 67 balls

with three boundaries while Symonds, in typical hard-hitting form, reached the landmark in 56 balls with two sixes and three fours.

However, it needed a key double strike from left-arm wrist spinner Brad Hogg to spark a collapse as Sri Lanka were bowled out for 226.

Sri Lanka, after slumping to 27

for three, saw Jayawardene (72) and Chamara Silva (64) put on 120 for the fourth wicket before both batsmen fell in quick succession to Hogg, who took two wickets for 35 runs from his 10 overs.

Left-arm quick Nathan Bracken did a superb job at both ends of the innings in a miserly return of four for 19 from 9.4 overs.

Sri Lanka, from 167 for three, lost their last seven wickets for 59 runs.

Their attack then needed every chance to go to hand.

But Arnold, fielding close in at short cover, put down a tough head-high catch when Adam Gilchrist was on 10, off Dilhara Fernando.

Matthew Hayden, characteristically aggressive, drove Farveez Maharoof for six. But a partnership worth 76 in 12 overs was broken when Hayden, on 41, dragged Arnold's fifth ball to Tillakaratne Dilshan at mid-wicket.

And 76 for one became 79 for two when left-hander Gilchrist missed Arnold's quicker ball and was lbw for 30.

Even when Michael Clarke (23) fell to Bandara, Australia were in charge at 126 for three in the 24th over.

Sri Lanka had to face Australia's first-choice attack and, after Jayawardene won the toss, they lost three wickets lost for one run in 14 balls.

Veteran opener Sanath Jayasuriya was lbw for 12 to Bracken.

Then Glenn McGrath needed just three balls to strike when

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TRALIA V SRI LANKA SCOREBOARD

Scoreboard of the World Cup Super Eights match between Australia and Sri Lanka at the National Stadium in Grenada on Monday:

| | R | M | B | 4s | 6s |
|--|----------|----------|----------|----------|-------------|
| SRI LANKA | | | | | |
| Tharanga c Hayden b Bracken | 6 | 33 | 22 | 0 | 0 |
| Jayasuriya lbw b Bracken | 12 | 21 | 12 | 2 | 0 |
| Sangakkara lbw b McGrath | 0 | 6 | 4 | 0 | 0 |
| Jayawardene c Gilchrist b Hogg | 72 | 133 | 88 | 5 | 1 |
| Silva c Clarke b Hogg | 64 | 119 | 107 | 6 | 0 |
| Dilshan c Hodge b Tait | 7 | 13 | 12 | 0 | 0 |
| Arnold b Tait | 3 | 15 | 10 | 0 | 0 |
| Maharoof c Symonds b Bracken | 25 | 40 | 22 | 4 | 0 |
| Kulasekara c Hayden b Bracken | 1 | 5 | 5 | 0 | 0 |
| Bandara c Hogg b McGrath | 17 | 23 | 19 | 0 | 2 |
| Fernando not out | 0 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Extras: (lb-5, w-11, nb-3) | 19 | | | | |
| Total: (All out in 49.4 overs) | 226 | | | | |
| Fall of wickets: 1-26, 2-27, 3-27, 4-167, 5-174, 6-178, 7-183, 8-184, 9-218, 10-226. | | | | | |
| Bowler | O | M | R | W | NB/W |
| Bracken | 9.4 | 3 | 19 | 4 | w-1 |
| Tait | 10 | 0 | 68 | 2 | nb-1, w-6 |
| McGrath | 9 | 1 | 48 | 2 | nb-1 |
| Hogg | 10 | 0 | 35 | 2 | - |

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PHOTO: AFP

An Aussie fan wearing a Spiderman suit cheers his team during the World Cup match against Sri Lanka at the Grenada National Stadium in Saint George's on Monday.

AFP, London



Frank Lampard expects Chelsea to shrug off the strains of their gruelling schedule and come out with all guns blazing as they try to keep the pressure on Premiership leaders Manchester United.

Jose Mourinho's side are still on course for an unprecedented quadruple after their Herculean efforts against Valencia and Blackburn last week.

But there is no let-up in Chelsea's hectic fixture list and by the time they kick off at West Ham on Wednesday they could be six points behind United, who play Sheffield United 24 hours earlier.

The reigning English champions managed to haul their weary bodies through extra-time to see off Blackburn in Sunday's FA Cup semifinal just five days after snatching a dramatic Champions League win in Valencia.

Mourinho insists he has few options to rest his key players, so the likes of Lampard, Didier Drogba, John Terry and Michael Essien will

have to find a way to battle through the pain barrier over the final month of the campaign.

With so much at stake, England midfielder Lampard has no doubts his teammates will rise to the challenge of going head to head with United, who they also face in the FA Cup final.

"The quadruple is still on but there are a lot of tough games between now and the end of the season," Lampard told Sky Sports. "We will need character and quality if we are going to get anywhere near winning them all."

"It is obvious there is a shoot-out in the league and the FA Cup now, we know that. The Champions League is different, we both have tough semi-finals and are not thinking we will be in the final of that competition yet."

"Everything is an incentive this year because we are fighting on so many fronts. It would be nice to get the FA Cup in the bag considering what we have done with the League Cup and the Premiership."

"Although we have been very strong over the last couple of seasons, the FA Cup stands out as the one we haven't got."

The trip to struggling West Ham is guaranteed to be a ferocious affair

as the two London rivals desperately need the points for differing reasons.

While Chelsea chase United, West Ham are embroiled in a fight for survival at the other end of the table.

Upton Park will be no place for the faint-hearted and Lampard, a former West Ham player, has warned his colleagues what to expect.

"It will be a hot atmosphere but we cannot afford to lose points in the title race," he said. "Both teams are desperate to win and I think it is going to be a bit of a war to be honest."

"It is very important after all the hard work we've done recently we don't let it go in one game. It will be a very tough match for us, make no mistake about that."

That Chelsea are still in contention on all fronts is a tribute to the way Mourinho has handled a traumatic season scarred by injuries to key players and his frosty relationship with Blues owner Roman Abramovich.

FIXTURES

(1900 GMT kick-off)
Wednesday
Blackburn Rovers v Watford, Liverpool v Middlesbrough, West Ham United v Chelsea

The sudden detente between the pair after Sunday's match, when they exchanged a brief hug in their first meeting since January, seemed to hint at an amicable resolution to the feud.

However, John Terry's revelation that talks over the Chelsea captain's contract extension have broken down will hardly have eased the tension behind the scenes at Stamford Bridge.

West Ham are five points from safety with just five games to play, but Australia defender Lucas Neill -- who may be regretting his decision to quit Blackburn earlier in the season and snub Liverpool for the Hammers -- insists a win against Chelsea could spark a great escape.

"We still need three wins and we've got five games in which to do it," Neill said. "Three of the matches are at home and are all winnable in my opinion."

"I hope the atmosphere will be bubbling against Chelsea. Naturally you raise your game against teams like that, and I expect there will be lots of passion and commitment."

"As long as we control our aggression, we can get something from the game. We have beaten Arsenal away. Who says we can't beat Chelsea at home?"