



MARVELLOUS MAHELA: Sri Lanka captain Mahela Jayawardene thrashes the ball through the covers on his way to a majestic unbeaten century against New Zealand in their World Cup semifinal at the Sabina Park in Kingston on Tuesday.

A vital push

AFP, Kingston



Sri Lanka captain Mahela Jayawardene thanked coach Tom Moody for pushing him and the team to their limits after his century steered them into the World Cup final.

Jayawardene's superbly-paced 115 not out was the cornerstone of Sri Lanka's imposing score of 289 for five against New Zealand in the first semifinal at Sabina Park.

In reply, after a fine opening spell from Lasith Malinga, who took one wicket for five runs in four overs, the spinners sparked a middle-order collapse.

New Zealand lost five wickets for 11 runs in 23 deliveries, with off-spin star Muttiah Muralidaran taking three on his way to four for 31.

Jayawardene said a combination of the captaincy and the influence of Moody, a member of Australia's World Cup winning squads in 1987 and 1999, had been key factors in his growing toughness.

"I have become mentally much stronger than the last two years," Jayawardene said after scoring a maiden World Cup hundred in his 23rd tournament appearance.

"The captaincy probably would have helped but Tom definitely has pushed me to the limits.

"He's not happy when I'm cruising. He's not happy with anyone cruising. He has pushed me and I have found out I can push myself as well."

Jayawardene took 48 balls to score his first boundary but accelerated to such an extent he scored three sixes and 10 fours in a 109-ball innings.

"I thought 240 would be a competitive score and anything beyond that was to our advantage," he said after becoming this World Cup's second leading run-scorer behind Matthew Hayden with 529 to the Australian's 580.

"Tillakaratne Dilshan came in and got some quick runs and it released some pressure from me. I knew I could hit a few boundaries and everything fell into place."

Off-spinner Dilshan turned up trumps with the ball too, taking just five deliveries to strike when dismissing key New Zealand batsman Scott Styris for 37.

"I never expected Dilshan to pick up a wicket that early. That was a bonus. Once we got that, Murali also came up and asked can he have a go at the batsmen for a couple of overs and see if he can pick up a couple of wickets because that was a good time to put pressure on New Zealand."

"He picked up two wickets in that extra over, so it worked pretty well."

Jayawardene also paid tribute to Malinga, returning to the side after a three-match injury absence, who has made a major impact upon world cricket with his unique round-arm action.

"The guy has been putting in a lot of effort and he was very upset when he's not been part of the team. I wasn't surprised because he's got a big heart."

Sri Lanka's win was all the more impressive as dynamic opening batsman Sanath Jayasuriya, one of three survivors from the side that won the 1996 World Cup along with Murali and left-arm quick Chaminda Vaas, made just one.

But 22-year-old opener Upul Tharanga, under pressure for his place, responded with a tournament best 73.

"Sanath's been a great cricketer with the way he goes about his game and if he carries on obviously we are at an advantage. But we have taken a lot of pressure off Sanath in the last 12 months," said Jayawardene.

Sri Lanka will now face either double-defending champions Australia or South Africa in Saturday's final in Barbados.

"If you're to win the World Cup, you've got to beat the best. Whoever comes through, we'll be happy to play them."

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Arnold to go after Cup

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's left-handed batsman Russel Arnold will retire from international cricket after the World Cup final, Sri Lanka Cricket (SLC) said on Wednesday.

"Russel has informed his decision to team manager Michael Tissera in Jamaica and it has now been officially conveyed to the cricket board," SLC spokesman Samantha Algama told AFP.

Arnold will, however, continue to play domestic cricket, Algama added.

Sri Lanka, who defeated New Zealand in Tuesday's semifinal, will meet the winner between Australia and South Africa in Saturday's final in Barbados.

Arnold, 33, made his Test debut in Colombo against Pakistan in 1997 and enjoyed a permanent position in the Sri Lankan side between 1999 and 2003.

Temporary loss of form forced him to the sidelines over the past two years before the selectors brought him back for the World Cup.

Arnold played 44 Tests, scoring 1,821 runs with three centuries.

The World Cup final will be his 180th one-dayer. He has made 3,949 one-day runs with one hundred.

ROONEY UPSTAGES KAKA

United clinch a thriller

AFP, Manchester

It was supposed to be Cristiano Ronaldo v Kaka, but it was Wayne Rooney who finished an exhilarating evening with his name echoing around Old Trafford and the praise of his manager Sir Alex Ferguson ringing in his ears.

Rooney's injury-time winner means Manchester United will travel to Italy next week with a 3-2 lead to defend in the second leg of their Champions League semifinal, and Ferguson is confident his side can emerge from the San Siro with a ticket to next month's final in Athens.

"We had some bad moments: we lost two terrible goals ourselves through bad defending," Ferguson admitted after watching his side survive the loss of three-quarters of his first-choice back four.

"But there were also some great moments of football which prove that we have the quality to win this tournament. It is not going to be easy in Milan and they know it is not going to be easy but we have an outstanding chance now."

"We were outclassed at key moments."

"I'm very proud of where we've got to but I'm disappointed that we are not going one step further."

His pride comes from knowing his team continues to punch above their weight -- there are only 150 professional players in a population of four million where rugby union is the dominant sport.

"There are a lot of other New Zealand teams that have felt the hollow feeling and we just have to get on with it."

"We've got to make sure semi-finals are a line in the sand. We've got to produce players of the calibre to take us to a World Cup semifinal and win it."

"We hoped we were going to have a couple of great days and get there this time. But we are just going to have to wait."

"We do damn well with what we've got. For a country like ours to keep producing semifinal sides is very good but we are not happy with that. It's not good enough."

After losing twice in this World Cup to Sri Lanka, and suffering a 215-run reverse against champions

Australia, who play South Africa in Wednesday's second semifinal, Fleming said his side had fallen short against the best.

"Australia and Sri Lanka may go on to contest the final and if that's the case there's no shame in being beaten by them in a World Cup."

"They are the only teams that beat us. But if you look at why they beat us, it's probably that skill factor."

"Sri Lanka, where their bowling attack is unusual but the best, against an Australia batting line-up which is the best in the tournament, if that's the final it will be a good contest to watch."

New Zealand were still in the game with Sri Lanka, who won the toss and were 129 for three off 30 overs.

But Jayawardene took the game away from them although he was dropped on 70 by Shane Bond.

In all 102 runs came off the last 10 overs.

"We bowled poorly in the last 10," said Fleming. "Their captain played extremely well and almost guarded himself until that last 10 overs to make sure they got a score."

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Crowe not surprised

AFP, Wellington

Former New Zealand captain Martin Crowe on Wednesday branded the national side under-performers after they crashed out of the World Cup at Kingston.

Crowe, one of New Zealand's most successful batsmen, said he agreed with Stephen Fleming's decision to step down as one-day skipper, and said coach John Bracewell should follow suit after the 81-run semifinal loss to Sri Lanka.

"You need to move on to fresh ideas because the game is moving on very quickly," Crowe told Radio New Zealand.

Even though New Zealand reached the play-offs -- as did the side Crowe led to the 1992 World Cup -- there was a vast difference between the performances of the two sides.

Crowe's side were knocked out by Pakistan in a game which went to the wire, while the class of 2007 were soundly beaten.

"I didn't feel there were a lot of players in form," Crowe said.

"Coming off that Australian debacle (a record 215-run loss last week), I felt we were going to have

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Ferguson hails Rooney

INTERNET, undated

Sir Alex Ferguson hailed the wonder of Wayne Rooney of Manchester United striker

fired home the last-gasp winner which makes the Red Devils slight favourites to reach the Champions League final.

After dragging United back on level terms against AC Milan with an instinctive second-half strike from Paul Scholes' inspired pass, Rooney then latched on to a Ryan Giggs through ball before lashing home a phenomenal first-time effort which sealed a 3-2 first-leg win.

Providing they avoid defeat in the San Siro next Wednesday, they will confirm an all-English meeting with either Chelsea or Liverpool in Athens on May 23. And Ferguson knows who he will have to thank.

"Wayne was a threat to Milan all night," said the United boss.

"We played him up front on his own because we wanted to stretch their defence.

"It meant he wasn't going to get the greatest involvement in the match but he still made some fantastic runs between the two central defenders and of course, the winning goal was an incredible hit."

"He didn't take a touch on it, just hit it first-time. It was a brilliant goal."

"On an occasion like tonight, we needed our big players to hit the heights."

The victory was all the more remarkable given it was achieved without six key players, including three-quarters of Ferguson's first-choice defence.

Cristiano Ronaldo gave the hosts a perfect start when he met Giggs' corner with such power Dida was unable to keep it out despite two attempts.

At that stage, another hand-some win appeared to be on the cards, only for Milan's own boy-wonder, brilliant Brazilian Kaka, to turn the game on its head with a well-taken double which exposed United's defensive frailties.

"Manchester United probably do have a slight advantage," conceded Ancelotti.

"We are disappointed about their winning goal because I felt we had the match pretty much in hand."

"It seemed we were going to get a good result but that goal has complicated matters."



Manchester United forward Wayne Rooney (C) pokes the ball home past the despairing lung of Milan goalkeeper Dida (L) as left-back Marek Jankulovski looks on during their Champions League semifinal first leg encounter at Old Trafford on Tuesday.