



MARVELLOUS MAHELA: Sri Lanka captain Mahela Jayawardene thrashes the ball through the covers on 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 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 on 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-day. He has made 3,949 one-day runs with one hundred.

Flemo tired of semi exits

AFP, Kingston



Stephen Fleming said it's time New Zealand started producing World Cup players who can break through the constant disappointment of falling at the semifinal hurdle.

The Black Caps suffered their fifth semifinal defeat in the nine-edition history of the tournament when they slumped to a heartbreaking 81-run loss against Sri Lanka here at Sabina Park on Tuesday.

Sri Lanka, the 1996 champions, piled up an imposing 289 for five with skipper Mahela Jayawardene's 115 not out the centrepiece.

In reply, New Zealand lost five wickets for 11 runs in 23 balls against Sri Lanka's spinners, with Muttiah Muralidaran striking three times in six balls alone, as they collapsed to 116 for seven before being dismissed for 208.

Fleming, who after the match announced his resignation as New Zealand's one-day captain, said:

"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 semifinals 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 Sport.

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 after the 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.

For a time, it seemed the hosts would be swept away. But somehow they clung on and, thanks to Rooney, head to Italy with a pre-

cious lead.

"I don't think anyone expected us to fold when we fell behind," said Ferguson.

"We have an outstanding chance now because, with the speed of our game, I believe we will score in Italy. Whether it will be enough I don't know."

"It will not be easy - but it will not be easy for them either."

The one regret for United is the booking Patrice Evra picked up which will rule him out of next week's decider.

However, Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti has problems too with Paolo Maldini almost certainly out as well with a knee injury and influential midfielder Gennaro Gattuso facing a race against time to recover from a toe problem which forced him off midway through the second-half.

"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."

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."

Rooney's late goal -- a fierce first-time drive from Ryan Giggs' through ball that caught Milan's goalkeeper, Dida, on his heels and out of position -- was his second of the evening, matching the opportunistic double that Kaka had claimed to give Milan a half-time lead following Ronaldo's early opener.

"At 2-1 down to a team of that standard, it is difficult," Ferguson said. "But we said at half-time to persevere and keep playing with speed because that was what was going to make the difference."

"The way Wayne played tonight has put us in a fantastic position. With the speed of our team I think we will score over there. Whether it will be good enough I don't know but it will be a fantastic game."

Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti admitted that Rooney's strike had left United as marginal favourites to progress to the final, but he refused to blame the poor positioning of Dida, who was also at fault when he failed to hold Ronaldo's early header and then helped the ball over the line.

"Perhaps he could have done a little bit better on the final goal but it was a fantastic shot by Rooney and Dida made a number of very important saves for us early in the match."

said Ancelotti, who is hoping to have key striker Filippo Inzaghi fit in time for the second leg.

Milan were unfortunate to lose both Paolo Maldini, who failed to emerge for the second half because of knee problem, and their midfield enforcer Gennaro Gattuso, who went off ten minutes after the restart but is expected to be fit for next week.

"It is difficult to say if things would have been different if they had stayed on, but there is doubt that players with their kind of experience play a vital role when you are under pressure," Ancelotti said.

"I think it pretty much boiled down to the ball we lost that led to the winning goal. It was pretty much over at that stage and 2-2 would have been a good result for us."

"But that goal has complicated things. This result will suit Manchester. It means they can play on the counter attack which is one of their great strengths but it is all still to play for and we have a lot of confidence and belief going into the game next week."

Gattuso himself said he would do his best to recover in time.

"There's a week to go and I will do everything to be there. It will be a battle," said Gattuso.

Ferguson is hopeful Rio Ferdinand could have recovered from the groin injury that kept him out on Tuesday in time for the second leg, although he is resigned to the likelihood of another defensive reshuffle.

"I don't think (Nemanja) Vidic will be ready and Patrice Evra is out now (suspended following a yellow card here), so I could be forced to put John O'Shea in the middle and pull Darren Fletcher back to right-back, which I don't want to do after the way he played in midfield tonight."

Ronaldo gave United the lead with a header from a Giggs corner that cannoned into Dida's chest before spinning towards the top corner of the net.

The goalkeeper might still have been able to clear the danger but in his haste to claw the ball away succeeded only in deflecting it into his own net.

The Brazilian was to make amends with a string of high-quality stops and, at the other end, Kaka ensured the match had swung in Milan's favour by the break.

Clarence Seedorf's diagonal

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Manchester United forward Wayne Rooney (C) pokes the ball home past the despairing lunge 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.

PHOTO: AFP