

FINAL: AUSTRALIA V SRI LANKA

SL playing for the world

AFP, Bridgetown



Sri Lanka have the chance to prove that international cricket is not simply a case of Australia and the rest when they face the double-defending champions in Saturday's World Cup final here at Kensington Oval.

Such has been Australia's overwhelming dominance in the Caribbean during their quest for a third straight World Cup title and fourth overall, that West Indies great Vivian Richards, when asked about the best way to beat them earlier this month, suggested "food poisoning".

It is not difficult to see why Ricky Ponting's men, unbeaten in 28 World Cup matches, are such strong favourites to extend their run.

With opener Matthew Hayden, who tops the tournament list of run-scorers with 621 at an average of nearly 78, and Ponting, third in the standings with 502 at just under 72, Australia have a powerful batting line-up where a once challenging score of 300 is now regarded as the bare minimum if they bat first.

Meanwhile, Australia's attack, with the exception of an over-reduced clash against Bangladesh, have bowled out

HEAD TO HEAD

Australia v Sri Lanka World Cup head-to-head record ahead of the World Cup final at Kensington Oval here on Saturday:

Total World Cup meetings: 7
Australia wins: 5
Sri Lanka wins: 2
Tied: 0
No result: 0

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every opponent in the West Indies. Three of the tournament's five leading bowlers are Australians with veteran quick Glenn McGrath, who retires after Saturday's match, leading the way.

The 37-year-old has 25 wickets – a record for a single World Cup – while spearhead quick Shaun Tait is joint-second with 23 and left-arm wrist spinner Brad Hogg third with 20.

It is that combination of variety and excellence which makes battling against Australia so challenging and that's without considering impressive left-arm quick Nathan Bracken.

When the finalists met recently in the Super Eights in Grenada much was made of Sri Lanka's decision to rest bowlers Chaminda Vaas and Muttiah Muralidaran, two survivors from the side that beat Australia in the 1996 final.

With unorthodox quick Lasith Malinga, who has yet to play a one-dayer against Australia, injured for

that game, it looked as if Sri Lanka had hidden their three strike bowlers from Ponting's team.

But the fact Australia dismissed a full-strength Sri Lankan batting line-up for 226 that day may be just as significant.

"I thought they had a chance to make a bit of a statement against us and they chose not to by resting three of their best bowlers," Ponting said.

"But they had their full complement of batsmen in and we bowled them out for 226. We just have to pick them to pieces again."

And Ponting even said the likely pitch conditions on Saturday would favour Australia.

"The wicket in Bridgetown, if it has some pace and bounce as it has in some other games, it should suit us beautifully."

But Australia, like any side, are vulnerable to individual brilliance and Sri Lanka are a team overflowing with flair.

As Malinga showed in his comeback match against New Zealand in the semifinal, he can combine sheer speed with excellent accuracy – a combination the Australia top order have yet to face this tournament.

Tait, while an exciting wicket-taker, can be wayward and any short-pitched deliveries could be seized on by experienced opener Sanath Jayasuriya.

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PHOTO: AFP

CANT SHARE THIS: Australia captain Ricky Ponting (L) and his Sri Lankan counterpart Mahela Jayawardene pose with the World Cup trophy at the Needham's Point beach in Bridgetown on Thursday.



Slingers take stage

AFP, Bridgetown



Arjuna Ranatunga

(Sri Lanka's World Cup winning captain)

"He is a sharp-shooter who can take wickets with both new and old ball. He has really added edge to the bowling attack."

On Lasith Malinga.



They're the youngest slingers in town, but Shaun Tait and Lasith Malinga know that Saturday's World Cup final shootout can produce only one winner.

Malinga has never played a one-dayer against Tait's Australians.

But if the defending champions want information on how dangerous the Sri Lankan fast bowler can be, all they have to do is ask South Africa.

The Proteas had been starting the celebrations when, after four incredible deliveries, they turned to find themselves in deep trouble in a World Cup Super Eights game against Sri Lanka last month.

The cause of their unexpected pain was Malinga, the bleach-blond paceman with the distinctive, low-

slung round-arm action and eye-brow ring who grabbed four wickets off successive balls to almost engineer an unlikely victory in Guyana.

On Saturday, he will meet Tait, the Australian tyro with his own slinging brand of delivery who has defied the sceptics at the World Cup by taking 23 wickets.

Malinga is 23 and Tait 24.

But both have been troubling batsmen with their pace and variations on their maiden Cup appearance. They are the second-highest wicket-takers in their respective sides.

The Sri Lankan has already made history when he became the first bowler in one-dayers to take four wickets off consecutive balls in that clash in Guyana.

South Africa looked set to complete a formality when they were 206-5 chasing a 210-run target before slipping to 207-9 and eventually winning the match by just one wicket.

Sri Lanka coach Tom Moody

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believes that facing Malinga in the nets would help his batsmen prepare against Tait.

"They might find adjusting to Tait's line and trajectory a little bit easier given they are used to facing Malinga in the nets," said Moody, a World Cup winner as a player with Australia.

Tait has so far grabbed 23 wickets in 10 matches, behind only veteran paceman Glenn McGrath (25).

He may be sometimes expensive and sending down more wides than expected, but his captain is not complaining.

"Whenever I called on him to get us a wicket he's done that. He's still finding his feet in international cricket, but he has been a wicket-taker in middle overs. He has been very impressive," said Ricky Ponting.

The South Africans were the latest to face the fury of Tait, who captured four wickets to set up his team's emphatic seven-wicket

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Murali hopes for war wounds

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