



The lucky Punter

AFP, Bridgetown



If there is one skipper who is smiling all the way in the World Cup, it is Australian Ricky Ponting whose side have been crushing all opposition with ruthless efficiency.

Never before has captaincy looked so easy and comfortable.

Ponting is the captain with a smile.

His main contribution is that his team have been maintaining lofty standards in two successive Cups.

When he was named skipper in 2002, he had to keep alive a tradition which had seen Australia grow in strength with each passing year under the captaincy of Allan Border, Mark Taylor and Steve Waugh.

Ponting is now on the verge of making history. He is aiming to do what none of his illustrious predecessors have done -- helping Australia win the third successive title. They were the champions in 1999 and 2003.

He has rich batting and bowling resources at his command as his team have so far never looked like losing a game in the ongoing tournament. And he says his unchallenged side can still improve and play better cricket.

"We have maintained very high standards throughout the tournament and our skills have been exceptional," he said ahead of Saturday's final.

"We think we have got some improvements to come. When the bigger games come, the Australian team stands up. I hope we will do it in the final."

Australia are unbeaten in their

last 28 Cup matches, including 21 wins under Ponting's captaincy.

Like his Sri Lankan counterpart Mahela Jayawardene, Ponting also leads by example. It is a tribute to his consistency that he has maintained his high batting standards in successive Cups.

Ponting likes challenges and his explosive century in the 2003 Cup final against India was one of the most memorable innings played in a big match of a big tournament.

He was only the second captain to have made a century in the Cup final, the other being West Indian Clive Lloyd who did it in 1975 against Australia at the Lord's.

Ponting was also the fourth batsman to score a hundred in the final after West Indians Lloyd and Viv Richards (v England in 1979), and Sri Lankan Aravinda de Silva (v Australia in 1996).

But he was to face the biggest test before leading his team to victory.

Many captains would have failed to cope with the absence of two key bowlers before and during a mega event, but not Ponting who was made of stern stuff.

He lost leg-spinner Shane Warne before the event following a drug-ban and then in-form Jason Gillespie to an injury after a few group matches, but did not let the setbacks affect his team's performances.

Ponting was in a similar situation this time also when he did not have the services of ace paceman Brett Lee, who was ruled out of the tournament due to an injury. Still, Australia's standards did not slip.

He has so far scored 502 runs in 10 matches with one hundred and four half-centuries. He is Australia's leading run-getter in the shorter version of the game, with 10,358.

Australian cricketers play volleyball at the Needham's Point beach in Bridgetown on Thursday. Australia take on Sri Lanka tomorrow at the final of the World Cup in Barbados Tonight.

PHOTO: AFP

Bucknor gets five on five

AFP, Bridgetown

West Indies umpire Steve Bucknor will officiate in an unprecedented fifth World Cup final on Saturday after being named by the ICC to oversee the 2007 title clash between Australia and Sri Lanka.

Bucknor will stand in the Kensington Oval encounter alongside Aleem Dar from Pakistan.

The third umpire will be Rudi Koertzen of South Africa, reserve umpire is New Zealander Billy Bowden while former New Zealand captain Jeff Crowe will be match referee.

Bucknor, 60, also stood in the 1992, 1996, 1999 and 2003 finals.

The only officials who come close to that mark are Englishmen Dickie Bird (1975, 1979 and 1983) and David Shepherd (1996, 1999 and 2003), who both stood in three finals.

Shepherd officiated with Bucknor in the 1996, 1999 and 2003 deciders but his retirement in 2005 meant there was always going to be at least one official standing in Saturday's match who was new to the final and 38 year-old Aleem Dar has been given that honour.

Television official Koertzen, 58, passed Shepherd's record for on-field ODI umpiring appearances earlier in the tournament.

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McGrath set for farewell

AFP, Bridgetown


ICC Cricket World Cup
WEST INDIES 2007

He was branded too old and too hittable. But like the horse who won the Derby despite being bred for

a shorter distance, if someone told Glenn McGrath this was a World Cup too far, he didn't hear them.

Saturday's final against Sri Lanka will be the 37-year-old quick's last match before retirement and unlike so many players before him, McGrath is bowing out while still giving opponents huge problems.

He nears his fourth successive final having set a new World Cup record of 25 wickets for a tournament, beating the record previously held by Sri Lanka duo Chaminda Vaas (23 in 2003) and Muttiah Muralidaran (23 in 2007).

McGrath is also the leading wicket-taker in World Cup history with 70 victims, having passed Pakistan great Wasim Akram's previous best of 55 earlier in this competition.

And to think before the recent Ashes series, which marked McGrath's goodbye to Test cricket and in which he played a major role

as Australia won 5-0, he was branded a member of a 'Dad's Army' ageing team by Ian Botham.

McGrath's career was never at any stage built on sheer speed of the kind exhibited by Australia team-mates Brett Lee and Shaun Tait.

Instead he concentrated on remorseless accuracy and developing the ability to move the ball late off a good length -- something that torments top batsmen far more than brute pace.

In recent times, the likes of England batsman Kevin Pietersen have tried to hit McGrath off his customary good length by advancing down the pitch and trying to strike him over the in-field.

But although Pietersen has occasionally succeeded, McGrath has generally had the last word by breaking one of the South African-born shotmaker's ribs in Australia or by taking wickets.

Wednesday's semifinal win against South Africa, where McGrath took three for 18 in St Lucia as Australia cruised into the final, provided a brilliant snapshot of his recent career.

Earlier in the week Australia captain Ricky Ponting had tried to rile Jacques Kallis by suggesting the Proteas' No 3 was a slow scorer.

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'Bounce me, if you can'

PTI, Bridgetown

Sri Lanka's marauding opening batsman Sanath Jayasuriya has thrown down the gauntlet at the Australians to bounce him if they can in Saturday's final of the cricket World Cup.

"It doesn't matter what they bowl to me. I have been around long enough in international cricket to face any sort of bowling. If they bounce me, I can pull and hook as well," said Jayasuriya with characteristic modesty.

Australians have tried to bounce Jayasuriya in recent times, suggesting the left-hander is vulnerable to the left-handed.

"I'm still happy to finish up at the end of this World Cup. I think the fact that I have decided to retire is probably one of the reasons why I'm bowling so well."

"There's no pressure, no fear, no anything. I'm happy with the way I'm bowling. For me personally it has been really enjoyable. One match to go and I'm really looking forward to it."

The Kensington Oval showpiece will see McGrath up against fellow 37-year-old Sanath Jayasuriya, the opening batsman whose dynamic strokeplay was such a feature of Sri Lanka's victorious 1996 World Cup winning campaign where they beat Australia in the final.

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ESPANYOL BLANK WERDER

Osasuna stun Sevilla

AFP, Paris

 Spanish league strugglers Osasuna turned on the style to claim a precious 1-0 home win over reigning UEFA Cup champions Sevilla in the first leg of their semifinal here

Thursday. And an all-Spanish final in Glasgow on May 16 looks a distinct possibility after Espanyol defeated German side Werder Bremen 3-0 in the other semifinal first leg in Barcelona.

Osasuna came out fired up but appeared to be lacking the required focus in the early stages when veteran striker Savo Milosevic threw Sevilla's Christian Poulsen to the ground with a forceful shove in the face.

However the Serbian's rather conspicuous foul, which went unpunished by the referee, was followed by a period of first half domination for the hosts, who finally broke the deadlock in the 55th minute.

Osasuna midfielder David Lopez was a thorn throughout for Sevilla, who struggled to find their game and had even more trouble getting the ball to their usually effective striker Fred Kanoute.

The hosts' first sight of goal came in the 15th minute when Lopez completed a mazy run on the left, ghosting past three defenders to set up Paxi Punal, whose first strike shot flew two feet wide of David Cobeno's post.

Another Lopez cross then found the head of Juanfran Torres, whose close range header at the far post forced Cobeno to get down low and collect.

When Lopez delivered a more telling cross from a free-kick on the right wing 10 minutes after the restart, Cobeno was left clutching at thin air as Roberto Soldado's rising header drove its way in at the far post.

Soldado narrowly missed claiming his second goal on 63 minutes when he ran unchallenged down the left flank, cut inside his defender and sent his long curling effort just over Cobeno's top left hand corner.

Moments later Juanfran Torres beat his marker deep at the left-hand byline to deliver for Milosevic, whose

near-post header inched past Cobeno's right-hand upright.

A minute later the referee walked off the pitch, followed by the players, after it appeared he had been hit with an object thrown from the crowd.

Six minutes of injury time were allocated, but despite close efforts from Sevilla's Daniel and a late strike from Kanoute, Osasuna held on for a well-deserved win which could prove decisive ahead of the second leg next week.

Down in the Catalan capital Barcelona Espanyol were in front midway through the first half when Moises Hurtado headed into the top corner after an Ivan de la Pena corner.

It was a bitter sweet evening for Moises who five minutes later picked up a yellow card ruling him out of the second leg return trip to Bremen next week.

Espanyol doubled their lead when the competition's leading scorer this season, Walter Pandiani, got their second shortly after the break.

Again it came from a De la Pena corner with Pandiani heading the ball in at the near post for his 11th UEFA Cup goal.

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New hair day for Becks

AFP, Madrid

David Beckham is sporting a new platinum blonde hairstyle as he prepares to bring down the curtain on his Real Madrid career before joining American club Los Angeles Galaxy in the summer.

Beckham, who was uncharacteristically coy about showing off the look on arrival at Real's training ground as he hurried inside, has gone through a range of tonal metamorphoses in his four years in Spain.

Most notable was the "samurai" look with which he wowed Asian fans on first joining the club during an Asian pre-season tour.

Now a fashion icon as much as a footballer in the twilight of his career, the 31-year-old has changed his hairstyle ten times in his four years at Real according to a count by sports newspapers AS and Marca.

Both papers gave frontpage coverage to the news that the former England man has again spent time at the hairdressers.

Beckham, who turns 32 on Wednesday, is set to play in Sunday's encounter at Athletic Bilbao as Real chase hard in the final furlong for the league title.

They trail leaders Barcelona by just two points with seven games to go and Beckham therefore has a real



Front page of the 27th November issue of Spanish daily sports newspaper AS shows David Beckham with a new haircut and colouring.

'Kaka better than Ronaldo'

INTERNET, undated

Chelsea striker Andriy Shevchenko believes AC Milan's Kaka is the best player in the world ahead of Manchester United's Cristiano Ronaldo.

Shevchenko played with 25-year-old Kaka at Milan before joining the Premiership champions last summer.

When asked, in an interview in La Gazzetta dello Sport, to choose between Brazil international Kaka and Portugal's Ronaldo, Shevchenko did not hesitate.

"Kaka is the strongest player in the world," said the 30-year-old Ukrainian.

"He deserves the Ballon D'Or (European player of the year award) and I'm certain he will get it, if not this time maybe in the not-too-distant future."

Shevchenko believes his former team still have the upper hand in the race to reach the Champions League final despite losing 3-2 at Old Trafford in Tuesday's semifinal first leg against United.

"At Manchester, Milan played exceptional football in the first half and were hindered with the injuries to Gennaro Gattuso and Paolo Maldini," he said.

"Milan are a likeable team because they always play beautiful games."

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Osasuna's Jose Izquierdo (L) tackles Sevilla's Brazilian Adriano Correia during their UEFA Cup semifinal first leg match at the Reyno de Navarra Stadium in Pamplona on Thursday.