

SA offers to be neutral venue

CRICINFO, undated

South Africa are willing to step in and host a one-day series between Australia and Zimbabwe but the Australian government believes it is "highly unlikely" the games will eventuate. The government wrote to Cricket Australia ordering it not to tour Zimbabwe but CA said it was considering whether the matches could be played at a neutral venue.

Gerald Majola, Cricket South Africa's chief executive, said there would be no problem if both countries wanted to play in South Africa. "I haven't heard anything from anyone," Majola said in the Sydney Morning Herald. "Obviously Australia and Zimbabwe would have to agree to move the tour first. If the two parties agreed to play there, then we would be fine with that."

The Australian government would prefer that the series was cancelled completely and Alexander Downer, Australia's foreign minister, said it would be unpalatable for Zimbabwe to play elsewhere. "It seems to me highly unlikely that the Zimbabwe Cricket Union would want to play the game in another country," Downer told the ABC.

"For them, I suspect, and at least for the Zimbabwean government, it would be seen to be humiliating to acknowledge that they're not able to play against the top cricket team within their own country. My guess is that this won't come about."

Downer said relocating the three matches to a neutral venue, such as South Africa, would be less of a propaganda win for Robert Mugabe. "The worst possible thing that could happen would be that our team would actually go to Zimbabwe," he said. "Zimbabwe would have to put up with the humiliation of acknowledging that the best cricket team won't play in their own country."

Aus rejects Zim charge

APP, Sydney

Prime Minister John Howard on Monday said it was ludicrous to suggest Australia was racist for banning its cricketers from touring Zimbabwe, as he faced questions at home about mixing sport with politics.

Howard on Sunday ordered Australian cricketers not to tour the impoverished African nation, saying the presence of the world champions would be used as a propaganda tool to support the rule of "grubby dictator" Robert Mugabe.

Mugabe's junior Information Minister Bright Matonga hit back by saying the ban was a racist policy designed to keep Zimbabwe out of international sport.

Rijkaard puts

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win. But then we always want to win.

However, Rijkaard conceded that his men's confidence had been shaken after dropping two vital points and slipping to second in the Spanish title race.

"The faces of disappointment were the same in the dressing room as those you saw leaving the field. The talk was of how many games remain," admitted Rijkaard.

It was the second dismal result in just four days for Barca and came in the wake of their 4-0 humiliation at modest Getafe in the Spanish Cup semifinal on Thursday.

Title race opens

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sure," lamented Gimnastic coach Paco Flores.

Gaizka Garitano and Savio quickly put Sociedad 2-0 ahead.

Javier Portillo got one back for Gimnastic after 31 minutes but Ion Ansotegui, as good as sentenced Gimnastic to playing in the Spanish second division next season with a goal from close range 18 minutes before the end.

Sociedad themselves are still in trouble and third from bottom but Celta Vigo drop down to the penultimate place after being defeated 2-1 by Levante.

Levante's Gustavo Reggi put the visitors ahead from the spot after 39 minutes, after Alvaro had been fouled by Celta's Gabriel Tamas, and Riga Mustapha got their second from the edge of the area just after half-time.

Fernando Baiano, with his 12th goal of the season, got one back for Celta on 62 minutes.

Athletic continued their fight to preserve their historic status as one of only three teams to be ever-present in the Spanish first division along with Barcelona and Real Madrid by drawing 1-1 with Deportivo La Coruna.

"We lost a good chance to put some space between us and the relegation zone," reflected Athletic coach Mane Esnal.

Athletic are just one place above the relegation zone but have a four-point advantage over their fellow Basques Real Sociedad.

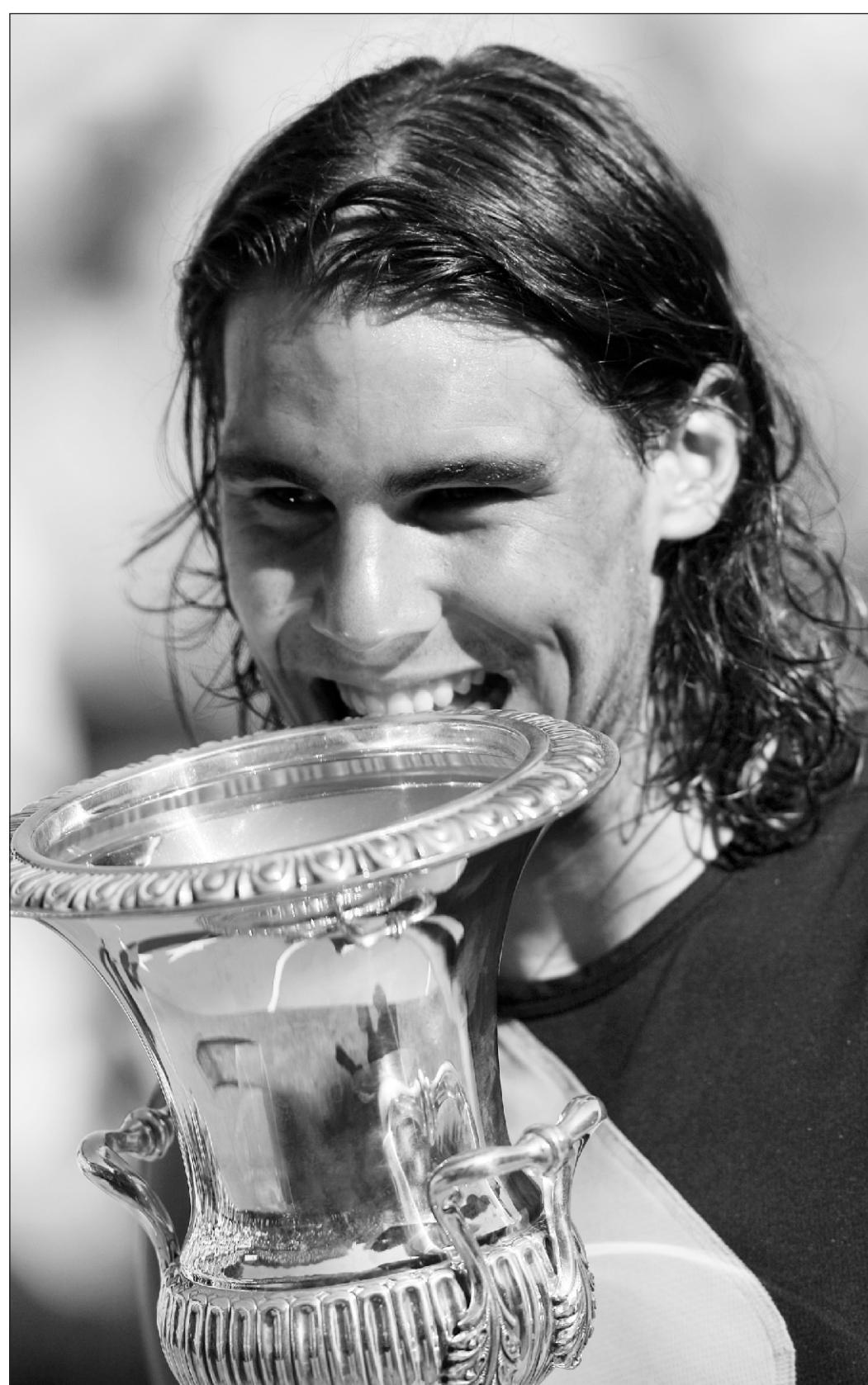


PHOTO: AFP

TASTE GOOD: Spaniard clay king Rafael Nadal bites the trophy after beating Chilean Fernando Gonzalez in the Rome Masters final yesterday.

Nadal's record third

Tennis

APP, Rome

High-flying Rafael Nadal continued his record clay-court run after lifting a third straight Rome Masters title on Sunday in beating Chilean Fernando Gonzalez 6-2, 6-2.

Nadal looks like reaching Roland Garros with a running start after playing four events in the five weeks which lead to the May 27 kick-off of the clay-court test.

The undisputed king of clay has extended his unbeaten run on the surface to 77 matches, his last loss coming in April, 2005, in Valencia to Russian Igor Andreev.

During that massive span, Nadal, winner of the last two editions of Roland Garros, has lifted 13 titles.

If his fitness holds up, the world number two and his uncle-coach Toni will look like master planners, with the 20-year-old having lifted

titles at Monte Carlo, Barcelona and the Foro Italico this spring.

He joins Austrian Thomas Muster with three trophies at the Foro Italico but becomes the first to win his three in a row.

Nadal remains undefeated in Rome with 17 straight wins after triumphing in his 16th consecutive clay-court final for a flawless undefeated record in that category.

The title was the fourth of the season for Nadal, who also won Indian Wells, Monte Carlo and Barcelona.

But the Spaniard admitted that his exertions over three and a half hours in winning a marathon semifinal against Nikolay Davydenko did colour his preparation.

"Normally I have one hour of practise but today I had 15-20 minutes," he said. "I was a little bit tired, but prepared, I didn't know how I would feel in the match, but I tried to come in with the best chances."

"But he's tough because he's in good shape and he can be hours playing there," said the Chilean. "Today I tried to go for it, tried to win the match. I cannot wait on this kind of surface."

"It's boring if he's winning every clay-court tournament," said the number six who has won two of his last three trophies on surfaces other than red clay.

"But he's tough because he's in good shape and he can be hours playing there," said the Chilean. "Today I tried to go for it, tried to win the match. I cannot wait on this kind of surface."

The minister further said he would soon have detailed discussions with Pawar.

Sibal said that he would offer a permanent arrangement so that whenever the BCCI has to fix the itinerary of a tournament, the IMD could provide proper weather inputs and if needed, there could even be a permanent representative of the IMD on the BCCI to provide guidance on a continuous basis.

"I tried to play with the big concentration. My special goal today was playing a little bit more aggressive than yesterday."

The winner accomplished that as Gonzalez struck 31 unforced errors and lost serve five times.

The Chilean saw his 3-1 career lead over the young hotshot start to slide after going down in just under 90 minutes.

The trademark hard-hitter who lost the Australian Open final to Roger Federer admits that he was outplayed, but added that the Nadal superiority may have a downside.

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Curbishley

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Lille said Moody would also bring Trevor Penney, his assistant at the post vacated by Wayne Clark at the end of last southern summer.

Reports said Moody would receive a salary from the WACA similar to Clark's, but it would be topped up by a sponsorship deal with Indian industrialist Vikas Rambal, who lives in Perth.

It is believed to be the first exclusive sponsorship deal of its type in Australia.

Delhi-born Rambal said after being welcomed to the state he wanted to give something back.

"Nothing is free ... it is a substantial investment by my family for the next couple of years," Rambal said. "I believe every cricket fan in WA will be delighted, excited at the news."

WACA chief executive Graeme Wood said securing Moody was a coup.

"We have been able to secure an internationally-respected mentor with an impeccable record and in the prime of his coaching career," Wood said.

Moody's contract with Sri Lanka ends on May 31. Before then, he is due to tour Abu Dhabi with the team for a one-day international series with Pakistan.

The former Worcestershire all-rounder was appointed Sri Lanka's national coach in 2005, succeeding compatriot John Dyson.

Angell also said police have departed for South Africa to brief Gill Woolmer and her family on the progress of the investigation.

In addition to their working relationship with Scotland Yard, Angell, said, "due to the open and transparent approach to the Woolmer investigation, the JCF has also welcomed assistance of the Pakistani authorities and INTERPOL."

SLC begins coach hunt

APP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's cricket authorities said Monday they would immediately start the search for a new foreign coach to replace Tom Moody, who is leaving at the end of his contract this month.

"We will look for a foreign coach from tomorrow," Kangadaran Mathivanan, secretary to Sri Lanka Cricket (SLC), the governing body of the sport, told AFP.

Tom Moody, who guided the islanders to the World Cup final last month, told the SLC on Monday that due to family and personal commitments he was unable to continue in the job.

Mathivanan said the SLC would continue the policy of obtaining a foreign, as opposed to a local, coach and said it was too early to name possible contenders for the job.

Moody has recorded a high rate of success with the Sri Lankan team, particularly its performances overseas since he took up the job in May 2005.

He guided the Sri Lankans to draw Test series in England and New Zealand and is largely credited with carrying Mahela Jayawardena's team to the World Cup final with Australia.

He was the fourth Australian to be in charge of the Sri Lankans after Dav Whatmore, Bruce Yardley and John Dyson.

Div I TT results

SPORTS REPORTER

A total of seven matches were decided in yesterday's AB Bank first division table tennis league at the Woodenfloor Gymnasium.

Sports World and Palolic Group won their matches in straight sets, beating Young Pegasus and United International University Red 3-0. Synthia beat Mansoor Sporting Club by the same margin while Barma TTC blanked Durbar 3-0. Combined SC beat Reazul SS 3-0. Jagarani beat Management Net 3-1 and Linkers edged Udayan 3-2.

India'll play

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Bangladesh-India series.

In the presentation, it was mentioned that the series could have been avoided, as the climate of Bangladesh is generally quite warm and humid during May, with more than 60 per cent probability of occurrence of moderate to severe thunderstorm activity on most days.

This has already happened as the first one-dayer on May 10 was interrupted at the very start of the match, restricting it to 47-overs-a-side.

The second ODI on May 12 was again interrupted by rain, and this time, it was made a 49-overs-a-side match.

Speaking to reporters on Saturday, Sibal said that there were indications of Dhaka and Chittagong continuing to be affected by light to moderate rainfall activity, accompanied by thundershows during the next five days, and consequently the third ODI on May 15 could be interrupted as well.

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Ferguson

FROM PAGE 20

"It is a fantastic achievement by the players at the club. We are the best team in the country and play the best football."

"When you see the trophy in our hands you really know you have achieved."

Chelsea finished six points behind United, who they face in the FA Cup final on Saturday, after drawing 1-1 with Everton - a result that ensured the Blues equalled Liverpool's record of 63 consecutive unbeaten home league games.

John Obi Mikel added to manager Jose Mourinho's woes as he limped off with a hamstring injury that makes him a doubt for the Wembley showpiece.

The Nigerian joins Ricardo Carvalho on the list of possible absences, with Michael Ballack and Andrey Shevchenko already sidelined.

Mourinho said: "After losing Mikel we have 15 players for Wembley, so maybe I will have two goalkeepers on the bench and Hilario is not a bad midfield player, so maybe he will give me a hand."

Mourinho insisted the pain of missing out of the title will drive his side next season.

"I am very happy that we are not happy and that is motivation for next season," he said. "We want more."

"In such a big football country and in such a difficult league it is not easy to be second, especially with the problems we have had."

Super League starts with uncertainty

Sonargaon win, two matches unfinished

Cricket

SPORTS REPORTER

The Kai-Altech Premier Cricket League plunged into uncertainty on its resumption after three months as inclement weather and player crisis hit the Super League yesterday.

Only one match was completed on the opening day of the second phase with Sonargaon Cricketers snatching a one-wicket victory in a rain-interrupted match against Victoria Sporting Club.

Title contenders Abahani and Mohammadan both were kept waiting as their unfinished games, weather and the recent crisis permitting, will restart today.

With a cyclone expected to hit the coastal belts of the country early this morning, the fate of the two games looked doubtful.

However, leaders Abahani and bottom-table Old DOHS, who were pitted against each other at the Faizullah Stadium, faced another problem with no possible solution but postponing the super league for an indefinite period.

Abahani vice-captain Tushar Imran -- who scored a 48-ball 46 in

the side's 224 all out in 49.2 overs after electing to bat -- and DOHS batsman Mehrab Hossain both got surprise calls for the national team's third and final one-day international against India slated for today in Chittagong as cover for the injury-plagued Tigers.

Mehrab was yet to bat for DOHS, who were 18 without loss after four overs when rain stopped play. He and Tushar along with Rajin Saleh left Dhaka for the port city last night.

Abahani, who lost their last five wickets in the space of 12 runs and 20 deliveries, fielded Sri Lankan international Upul Chandana, who topscored 60 off 65 balls, while DOHS had Kenyan ace Steve Tikolo in their line-up.

The Cricket Committee of Dhaka Metropolis (CCDM) could not respond to the situation immediately but called an emergency meeting late last night to solve the issue.

According to a claim by their officials, Abahani -- who will not have more than seven players after yesterday's match due to injury and examination of players apart from the involvement of three cricketers in Test series against India -- were already expected to

appeal for delaying the rest of the league.

In the other incomplete game