

Bhaji off the hook

AFP, Sydney

Indian spinner Harbhajan Singh was cleared here Monday of making racist gestures and spitting at fans during his team's one-day win over Australia on Sunday.

Harbhajan was crucial in Sunday's victory that gave India a 1-0 lead in the tri-series finals, claiming the key wickets of Andrew Symonds and Matthew Hayden.

However, it was then claimed in the local media that he made monkey gestures by scratching his armpits with both hands in a similar fashion to Indian fans taunting Symonds last year, then spat at the crowd.

Indian officials leapt to his defence and match referee Jeff Crowe, who investigated the claims, found no evidence to support the allegations.

"I have investigated the alleged incident with Cricket Australia's ground security officials after reading newspaper reports and viewing related photographs that have been published," Crowe said.

"After reviewing all available information, I conclude that there is no need to take any action against Harbhajan Singh."

Harbhajan was suspended for three Tests after January's second Test at the Sydney Cricket Ground for allegedly calling Symonds a monkey, a suspension that was overturned at a subsequent International Cricket Council hearing.

Indian team manager Bimal Soni condemned the reports prior to Crowe's investigation.

"I think it is wrong," Soni said. "Nothing has been done like that, they are making a mountain out of a molehill."

"He did nothing. These stories, I do not believe them and I strongly condemn them."

Australian batsman Mike Hussey said he knew nothing of the allegations, but added that he was sick of all the controversies of a testing summer.

"I think the Australian and Indian public have had enough of all the controversies," he said. "We just want to concentrate on the cricket."

Indian heroes get cash awards

AFP, New Delhi

India's cricket chiefs on Monday announced a cash award of 1.5 million rupees (37,500 US dollars) for each member of the under-19 World Cup-winning squad.

Virat Kohli's junior cricketers regained the Cup on Sunday with a 12-run victory over South Africa in the rain-hit final in Malaysia.

"The team has done a great job. It has demonstrated there is a lot of potential in the squad and that the future of Indian cricket is bright," Indian cricket chief Sharad Pawar said while announcing the award.

Coach Day Whatmore and members of the team's support staff will each receive one million rupees (25,000 US dollars), the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) said.

Dilip Vengsarkar, former India captain and chief selector of the senior team, lauded Whatmore for his role in the triumph.

"It's a great day for Indian cricket. Whatmore has played a crucial role this time. I would credit the BCCI for appointing him as coach," he said.

Former Australian cricketer Whatmore was also the coach of Sri Lanka's 1996 World Cup-winning senior squad and also guided Bangladesh to the second round of the 2007 senior Cup in the Caribbean.

The Indian juniors' triumph came after Mahendra Singh Dhoni's senior team completed a six-wicket victory over world champions Australia in Sydney to take a 1-0 lead in the best-of-three finals.

The results caused Indian media on Monday to go to town praising cricketers for serving up a double delight.

"Our men and boys show who's the boss," screamed a Hindustan Times front-page headline, accompanied by pictures of Kohli with the trophy and senior batsman Sachin Tendulkar.

Tendulkar played a key role in his team's victory with his 42nd one-day century -- his first in Australia.

"Sach is life..." said a headline on the sports page, but the seniors had to compete with the juniors for space in various newspapers.

"India Thunder-19," said another headline with a picture of Kohli raising a stump to celebrate the victory.



Did U Know?

The first man to swim the English Channel without a life jacket was Captain Matthew Webb. He did it in 1875.



New Zealand wicketkeeper Brendan McCullum, who recently struck a 52-ball hundred in a domestic one-day game, eyes a target to throw at during practice yesterday ahead of today's first Test against England in Seddon Park in Hamilton.

Ryan fit to play

First NZ-Eng Test from today

Cricket

BBC ONLINE, undated

England have been handed a major boost ahead of the first Test against New Zealand with the news that Ryan Sidebottom has been passed fit.

The Nottinghamshire left-arm seamer had been doubtful after a tear to his right hamstring, but has recovered quickly.

It means England can pick from a squad at full strength with skipper Paul Collingwood also shaking off some hamstring trouble of his own.

"I'm fighting fit and available for selection," said Sidebottom.

"It's a bit of relief because it's a worry when you get injured. You don't want to miss Test matches and you don't want to miss tours. I'm raring to go now."

"You don't want to make it worse and you need time for these things to recover, but I've had two or three days rest and recovery and preparation."

Sidebottom's recovery has set the stage for his showdown with former New Zealand captain Stephen Fleming, who has already announced this series will be his last.

Fleming was a key influence on

Sidebottom when the pair were together at Nottinghamshire as they led the county to Championship glory in 2005, and has spoken since spoken about the 30-year-old in glowing terms.

"He's had some lovely words to say about me," added Sidebottom.

"He's a lovely bloke and for someone like him to say those things about me is quite an honour, but I'm looking forward to bowling at him and hopefully I can knock him over."

"He's a very positive captain and he's made me into a much more positive character when I'm bowling, and encourages me to keep plugging away and not give up."

England actually turned to Fleming for a recommendation about Sidebottom when searching for a replacement for the injured Matthew Hoggard prior to the second Test against West Indies at Headingley in the summer of 2007.

He has emerged with 29 wickets in 10 Tests, at an average of 19.00, and has also become England's premier bowler in one-day internationals.

Meanwhile Andrew Strauss, who made sure of his place in the starting side after hitting an unbeaten 104 in the final warm-up match, is confident his form is back.

Strauss is back after being dropped for the pre-Christmas tour to Sri Lanka, having played 12 months of Test cricket without scoring a century.

"I don't feel I'm batting worse now than I did earlier in my career and in some ways I've improved technically," he said.

"It's about getting into that mental zone when you get into your little bubble and you don't let people affect that."

"If I can get into that frame of mind, I don't see any reason why the best years of my Test career shouldn't be ahead of me rather than behind me."

SQUAD

NEW ZEALAND (from): Daniel Vettori (captain), Mathew Bell, Grant Elliott, Stephen Fleming, Jamie How, Chris Martin, Brendon McCullum, Kyle Mills, Iain O'Brien, Jacob Oram, Jeetan Patel, Mathew Sinclair, Ross Taylor.

ENGLAND (from): Michael Vaughan (captain), Tim Ambrose, James Anderson, Ian Bell, Stuart Broad, Paul Collingwood, Alastair Cook, Steve Harmison, Matthew Hoggard, Phil Mustard, Monty Panesar, Kevin Pietersen, Owais Shah, Ryan Sidebottom, Andrew Strauss, Graeme Swann.

Here comes Sybrand

Cricket

CRICINFO, Kuala Lumpur

Most of the South Africa Under-19 bowlers, barring their captain Wayne Parnell and his new-ball partner Matthew Arnold, will not strike fear into the hearts of opposition batsmen. The medium-pacers and spinners during the middle-overs will need an exceptional day to run through most teams; yet on Sunday they managed to restrict India, the strongest batting side of the Under-19 World Cup, to a meagre 159, thank to their fielders.

The athleticism in the field made South Africa's attack doubly efficient: the bowlers stuck to a disciplined length on one side of the wicket and relied on their teammates to cut off the runs. India's batsmen saw scorching cover drives stopped by bodies that flew out of nowhere, and a few of them succumbed to the frustration.

While all of South Africa's fielders are top draw, some are more potent than the others and none more so than Sybrand Engelbrecht. He was an unknown until South Africa used him as a substitute often during the group stages and then he made people gape by pulling off a catch against Papua New Guinea that would rival Jonty Rhodes' best.

Engelbrecht was the most visible player on the field in the final against India. Fielding at point during the initial overs, he walked in with purpose as the bowler ran in, made quick ground to dive to his left or right, rushed to back up throws from fielders and egged his teammates on vocally. He moved from point to cover or midwicket when the spinners came on to bowl, always coveting the position where the ball went often. When Manish Pandey drove Mohammad Valie twice to cover, Engelbrecht, at midwicket, indicated that he wanted to change positions. Towards the final overs, South Africa had him at long-on for that's where the batsmen were hitting the ball most frequently.

Engelbrecht had a key role in three crucial wickets. Tanmay Srivastava was batting fluently to consolidate India's innings after two early wickets. The boundaries were difficult to find because of the sharp fielding and Srivastava tried to slice Roy Adams over point. Engelbrecht timed his jump to perfection and was several feet off the ground when he took the catch. That followed a similar but even more spectacular catch at point to dismiss Virat Kohli, who had begun to open up by clouting Pieter Malan over extra cover for six. Engelbrecht later displayed a calm mind during his run-out of Iqbal Abdulla: he had sprinted in quickly to cause confusion between Ravindra Jadeja, who had tapped the ball towards point, and Abdulla. Engelbrecht's speed and smooth pick-up forced Jadeja to send Abdulla back. He had a view

of the stumps but Engelbrecht waited for the bowler to move into position before timing his lobbed throw to catch Abdulla short.

While Engelbrecht was the stand-out performer in the field, the others could have bettered the best in most other teams. Riley Rossouw is a tall boy but he used his reach to good effect at cover and Jonathan Vandiar stopped several boundaries at long-off with his quick ground speed.

The cornerstone to South Africa's pressure-building tactics, however, is their wicketkeeper Bradley Barnes. He stands up to the stumps against the medium-pacers, though Ray Jennings said he could do it against Parnell as well, and does not allow the batsmen to stand, or step out, of the crease to try and put the bowler off his length. His reflexes and presence of mind are razor-sharp. During the final he was alert enough to stump Saurabh Tiwary even though the batsman had his back foot firmly grounded. Barnes, however, was wise to the fact that Tiwary's runner Srivastava had backed up too far and was outside the crease. Excellent catch and sharp stumpings apart, Barnes has let only two byes go through the entire tournament.

Superior fielding teams often win one-day matches. Sunday's final was an exception but South Africa's magnificent effort was the difference between India making 160 and somewhere close to 200.

India could finish it today

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In a state of mind that gives them every opportunity.

The assignment has become much harder as they prepare for their third match in five days. Only three times have Australia lost the opening game of the home finals and come back to take a three-match series -- twice against South Africa in the 1990s and once in 2005-06 against Sri Lanka. On three occasions when they have lost the opening encounter the contest has been concluded in two affairs, including last year's 2-0 defeat by England. That result embarrassed the hosts and as the tri-series concept prepares to depart the same emotion is being felt.

While Australia are low, India are on a massive high. The young team accepted many handshakes from local and Indian well wishers during their travel from Sydney to Brisbane on Monday and they were relaxed by their success. Ishant Sharma (finger) and

Tendulkar (groin) have nagging concerns -- the batsman's injury has been troubling him for a while -- but both are confident of playing. Two spinners will not be used at the Gabba, which is bad news for Piyush Chawla, who bowled well in Sydney, and Irfan Pathan's treatment from Matthew Hayden may create some discussion.

With each team leaning towards an extra fast bowler a summer of high energy may end in a battle of speed. The swing-friendly conditions mean Sreesanth should come in for Chawla and he is more likely to move the ball through the humid Brisbane air than the seamer Munaf Patel.

Although a couple of light showers are predicted for Tuesday, there should be no repeat of the heavy rain that forced the abandonment of the opening match of the series. On that occasion India's bowlers had the best of the conditions and the home side was reduced to 3 for

51. Since then things have got only slightly easier for Ponting's men. Australia's major worry is their batting form and more meetings were held on Monday in an effort to fix the problem. The tension continues to increase and with one more slip they will be out of their own competition forever. If that happens Hogg and Gilchrist will never return.

TEAMS AUSTRALIA (likely): Matthew Hayden, Adam Gilchrist (wicketkeeper), Ricky Ponting (captain), Michael Clarke, Andrew Symonds, Michael Hussey, James Hopes, Brett Lee, Mitchell Johnson, Nathan Bracken, Stuart Clark.

INDIA (likely): Sachin Tendulkar, Robin Uthappa, Gautam Gambhir, Rohit Sharma, Yuvraj Singh, Mahendra Singh Dhoni (captain and wicketkeeper), Irfan Pathan, Praveen Kumar, Harbhajan Singh, Shanthakumaran Sreesanth, Ishant Sharma.

LOCAL SNIPPETS

SPORTS REPORTER

Habib's fantastic all-round show gave Azad Sporting Club their fourth win in the First Division Cricket League at the Dhaka University ground yesterday.

Azad Sporting took only 38.4 overs to get past Lalmitia's score of 198-8 in 50 overs as they won by seven wickets. Habib, bowling medium-pace, took two for 41 and then struck an unbeaten 96 to guide his side.

Former giants Brothers Union also equalled Azad's feat of four victories, beating Dhaka Wanderers by four wickets at the City Club ground.

Batting first, Wanderers were bowled out for 168 runs in 49 overs as Nayan and Shahriar took four wickets apiece. Sayem and Tanvir struck half-centuries for Wanderers. Brothers' Mukhter struck 58 and Faiyaz scored 36 as the Gopibagh-based club scored 170-6 in 38.3 overs.

In a low-scoring affair at the Jahangirnagar University ground, Orient (184 all out in 44.2 overs) beat Agrani Bank (171 all out in 44.4 overs) by 13 runs.

NAT'L WOMEN'S CHESS

IWM Rani Hamid won her tenth round match to maintain a half-a-point lead over WFM Shamima Akhter Liza in the Aromatic Gold 29th National Chess Championship. The veteran defending champion Rani beat Arifa Khatun Moni to take her tally to nine points. Challenger Liza defeated WFM Tanima Parveen.

NAT'L HANDBALL

Bagerhat won two matches in Group C of the Exim Bank 18th National Handball Championship at the Jessore Stadium. In the first match, Bagerhat defeated Patuakhali 20-14 and then in the 3pm match-up, they squeezed past Sathkira 12-10. Hosts Jessore, Kushtia and Faridpur won their respective matches.

GAIBANDHA CRICKET

Our Correspondent adds: Ghagot Kriya Chakra rode on Shujon's half-century to crush Cricket Coaching Centre by 158 runs in the Naheed Cotton First Division League at the local stadium here. Winning the toss, Ghagot scored 224-9 in 50 overs with Shujon scoring 53 off 87 balls. In reply, CCC were bowled out for only 66 in 32.5 overs.

TABLE TENNIS

The KDS Invitational table tennis tournament will be held in Chittagong from March 13-15. The Bangladesh Table Tennis Federation has already invited players for the men's, women's and boys' singles and doubles events. The invitees will receive pocket money and one-way travel allowance apart from accommodation facilities. Other players can entry by March 6 but will have bear their own costs.

UNB adds:

PREMIER KABADDI

Bangladesh Army earned an easy 84-20 victory over Jurain Janata in the 11th Pran Juice Premier Division Kabaddi League at the Outer Stadium kabaddi court. In the day's other matches, Bangladesh Rifles defeated Azad SC 54-25 while Sonali Bank outplayed Fire Service 33-8.

JABBARTENNIS

Ayami of Japan reached the women's singles semifinal of the Jabbar Memorial tennis tournament, eliminating Ma Hai Ching of Bandarban 6-0, 6-0.

In the boys' Under-16, Yu Sue of BKSP advanced to the semi-finals being Akib Monir of National Tennis Complex (NTC) 6-0, 6-2. In boys' Under-14, Jamil beat Sajib Pashi 3-6, 6-3, 7-5 and Rustom defeated Ranjit Pasha 6-2, 6-2 to reach the last four.

In men's singles Amol Roy beat Mazharul Islam 7-6 (5), 6-2, Niranjan Ram defeated Nurul Islam 6-0, 6-3, Alamgir Hossain beat Zakir Hossain 6-0, 7-5, Delwar Hossain defeated Milan 6-3, 6-3, Dipu Lal beat Hafiz Munna. Anwar Hossain beat Mamun 6-4, 6-4, Ranjan Ram beat Asmatullah 7-5, 6-2 to reach the quarterfinals.

Norm O'Neill passes away

AFP, Sydney

Norm O'Neill, one of the great Australian Test batsmen of the 1960s, died early on Monday at the age of 71, Cricket Australia said.

O'Neill played 42 Tests from 1958 to 1965, scoring 2,779 runs at an average of 45.55, including six Test centuries. He died after a long battle with throat cancer.

He was an aggressive right-hander but gained the nickname "Nervous Norm" for his reputation of being an uncertain starter in his innings.

O'Neill, who toured England twice with Australia in 1961 and 1964, was also a handy leg-spin bowler and captured 17 wickets at 39.24 with a Test best of 4-41 against the West Indies at Port-of-Spain in 1965.

Cricket Australia chairman Creagh O'Connor said O'Neill was a great sportsman and an entertaining cricketer.

'Pakistan still unsafe'

Cricket

AFP, Sydney

Australian Cricketers Association (ACA) president Darren Lehmann said Monday he would not send a delegate on a pre-tour security inspection of Pakistan due to safety concerns.

Cricket Australia and the ACA will meet with foreign ministry officials in Canberra on Wednesday for the latest information on the security situation in Pakistan amid a recent spate of suicide bombings there.

But former Test cricketer Lehmann said he would not be allowing any of his employees to go to Pakistan because he did not think it was safe to do so, and because the players' board have voiced their disapproval.

ACA chief executive Paul Marsh had been scheduled to join Cricket Australia representatives on a mid-March advance trip to Pakistan ahead of Australia's tour, which is scheduled to begin on March 29.

"We're not sending Paul Marsh on the pre-tour visit and that's basically because we as a board don't feel comfortable sending one of our employees there at the moment," Lehmann told reporters on Monday.

"At the moment our advice is not to, and I don't feel comfortable sending anybody to be perfectly honest, and the (players') board

doesn't. There's been a lot of things going on in Pakistan -- hopefully it settles down, but only time will tell."

Lehmann is convinced CA will push ahead with plans for the tour unless it is made patently clear the trip cannot proceed.

He said he and the players would require plenty of assurances to sway them from their stance.

"On Wednesday we'll meet with the government departments and see what is really out there," he said.

"We'll get our advice from them, security issues, any other problems we have with Pakistan."

"I think they'd need a lot of assurances along the way."

A weekend suicide attack at a gathering of tribal elders in insurgency-hit northwest Pakistan killed 43 people, officials said Monday.

The blast took place on Sunday in Zarghon village near the tribal town of Darra Adam Khel, where Pakistani troops were involved in violent clashes with Islamic militants earlier this year.

The attack was the third in as many days in Pakistan, posing an immediate challenge to the country's incoming government.

Hundreds of people have died across the northwest of the country in recent months in clashes between pro-Taliban militants and security forces and in a wave of suicide attacks blamed on the extremist rebels.

Nokia connects football

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financial details for the sake of football," said BFF president SA Sultan at a press conference at the BFF Bhawan yesterday.

The future relationship between Nokia and the BFF however, will depend on how good mileage it gets from its involvement with football in Bangladesh. If things go the right way, Nokia will get involved in development programmes into the grassroots, especially at school level.

The world loves football and the Bangladeshis are no exception. And we at Nokia take pride in having our logo and name being carried by the team while they represent not only the country but the love of game," said Prem Chand, managing director of Nokia Emerging Asia.

He said that the organisation would consider the 'suck and taste' method in this regard, meaning that it will stick to Bangladesh football if benefited from the involvement.

"I have seen young boys play football in the villages and also the craze during the World Cup football.

Nokia wants to utilise this passion for football," Prem Chand added.

BFF vice presidents Abdur Rahim and Sirajul Islam Bachchu, acting general secretary Manzoor Hossain Malu and Nokia's marketing manager Nowfel Anower were also present.

The national team will get financial support and use the Nokia logo on their gear although they would not be allowed to show the sponsor's name on their jersey during matches.

Bangladesh will take part in the AFC Challenge Cup qualifiers from May 5-10 in Kyrgyzstan where they face Laos, Afghanistan and the hosts. Only one team from a group will reach the finals, which is expected to be hosted by India, one of the four automatic qualifiers.

In the 5th SAFF Football Championship, 2003 winners and 2005 runners-up Bangladesh are pitted against hosts Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Bhutan in the group stages to be played in Colombo.

The SAFF Championship will be hosted jointly by Sri Lanka and Maldives from June 3-14.

Baichung sinks

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giant East Bengal missed out when they finished bottom of the three-team Group B following a 1-1 draw with Santos at Howrah.

Unbeaten Santos won the group with four points and Mahindra runners-up with three points that came from their 2-0 victory against East Bengal.

It takes time

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Kallis 6 3 13 0 Peterson 13 2 33 5 Note: Injured Aftab Ahmed did not come out to bat.

Result: South Africa won by an innings and 205 runs and clinched two-match series 2-0.

Man-of-the-match: Graeme Smith. Man-of-the-series: Dale Steyn. Toss: South Africa

Umpires: Aleem Dar (PAK), Steve Bucknor (WIS)

TU Umpire: Nadir Shah (BAN) Match referee: Ranjan Madugalle (SRI).

Tigers too

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"I think I am bowling nicely. I am quite happy with the way I am going at the moment, with the result at the end of the day. It shows that hard work is paying off. But obviously there is always room for improvement, I don't want to settle for what I am doing right now. I can do better. I want to keep working hard, keep trying to improve my game," he said.

"Conditions have allowed us to use it in this Test match. In the first Test, there was hardly any bounce in the wicket, you know there was more reverse swing in that game. Here there wasn't much reverse swing around, only during the later part of our innings. So we had to find other ways to get people out. With the wicket having little bit of more carry, it definitely allowed us to be more aggressive," he explained the reasons behind his success in Chittagong.

With Chelsea favourites to beat Olympiacos on Wednesday after the first leg of their Champions League last-16 tie ended goalless, and Bamble their only barrier to reaching another FA Cup semifinal, Cole insisted they were in a good position.

The England midfielder, who scored the second of the four goals at Upton Park, added: "It's looking good because we have everyone fit now and this is the right time to be going forward."

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

Crossword puzzle grid with clues for Across and Down words.

Cryptogram puzzle grid with letters and numbers.

CRYPTOQUIP B K B A D J X W X X D L C Q B I V J R ' R G C Y Y G C ' R B E V F . L C W F G K C C L E B O V Q D A B Q V R S B O O D J L B S I O D - A D D O A C . Yesterday's Cryptogram: MIGHT ONE REFER TO THE CENTRAL PROCESSING UNIT OF A CERTAIN COMPUTER AS AN APPLE CORE? Today's Cryptogram Clue: X equals P