

Kiwis distracted

Cricket

CRICINFO, undated

In body, if not in spirit, New Zealand's cricketers last night arrived in England for the start of their three-Test series. Ordinarily, such a tour would represent one of the biggest challenges that any of these players could hope to face - last month, their former captain, Stephen Fleming, recalled his team's 2-1 victory in 1999 as the proudest moment of an illustrious career. But times they are a-changing, and when the coach, John Bracewell, and the stand-in captain, Jamie How, faced the media at Lord's on Thursday afternoon, neither man could quite pretend that they are entirely focused on the job.

Even allowing for the jetlag, their distraction was hardly surprising. New Zealand's five finest players are scattered to the four corners of the subcontinent, earning life-changing sums of money in the Indian Premier League, and with that in mind, Bracewell seemed more intent on flirting with his former county, Gloucestershire, than discussing his squad's strategy for the summer. How, meanwhile, looked as quizzical as his surname would suggest, as he tried to fathom whether it was an honour or an insult to be lumped with the leadership of such a threadbare unit.

"It's not ideal, but this is the reality of the landscape we live in," said Bracewell. His players take on an MCC side captained by Chris Cairns at Arundel, on Sunday, and

then decamp to Canterbury for a three-day match against Kent. Only then will their superstars deign to make an appearance - one of whom, Brendon McCullum, has now officially entered the big-time following last week's incredible 158 not out from 73 balls in Bangalore.

Since time immemorial, the success of a touring side has had a direct correlation with the cohesiveness of the players in the squad, but on the face of it, this situation is as divisive as they come. Bracewell, however, insisted his players were mature enough to adapt to cricket's changing world. "All things have the potential to cause friction, but our group understands it," he said. "For us, it's a glass-half-full situation. This brings us into line with New Zealand's rugby players in terms of salaries, and the bottom line is it's our best players who get invited, so it's an incentive-based scheme."

There was a distinct them-and-us vibe in the air, however. "I think everyone wishes they were in India at some point," said How, a touch more candidly than you might expect of a brand-new international captain. His words harboured no pretence as to the importance of his current role, however. Of New Zealand's first-choice eleven from last month's series, two batsmen (Matthew Bell and Mathew Sinclair) have been dropped, another (Fleming) has retired, while five have gone to a higher calling. In fact, of the 13 players in the country, only How, Tim Southee and Chris Martin can realistically expect a place at Lord's on May 15.

No wonder Bracewell wasn't about to get too bombastic with his series predictions. "We're the underdogs," he said. "It'll be hard work for us given our experience, or lack of. We're rebuilding and setting some lines to get over as a team, but in Test cricket England are way ahead of us, and we'll have to work extremely hard to beat them."

When asked if he thought New Zealand play enough Test cricket, Bracewell was unequivocal in his answer. "No," he declared, and he has a point. New Zealand have played just seven Tests in the last 18 months, and two of those came against Bangladesh. "It's an administration thing, in terms of the Future Tours Programme," he said. "We recognise we don't play enough, but we are trying to get more."

But with the advent of the IPL, and the general shake-up that the game is currently undergoing, it's a vain hope. Bracewell cited McCullum's international career as an example of how under-exposed his players are. McCullum has been ever-present in New Zealand's Test side since making his debut in March 2004, yet he has played only 32 matches, which is 14 fewer than Andrew Strauss's tally in spite of the fact that Strauss's debut came two months later, and that he has, on occasions, missed matches for England.

New Zealand's situation is hardly aided by the amount of learning-on-the-hoop that their players are forced to undergo. "Domestic cricket in New Zealand is not that strong, so our players have got to develop at international level," said Bracewell. "We think the ones we've

picked are form players domestically, and they have earned their opportunity. But now we need to see whether they can become not just Black Caps, but great Black Caps. To do that, they need to make some tough sacrifices."

In particular, Bracewell was talking about the Otago batsman, Aaron Redmond, who comes into the reckoning as a replacement for Bell. There are few environments more hostile to a debutant opener than England in May, although Bracewell felt that New Zealanders come better prepared than most. "There's not a heck of a difference," he said. "We're used to playing on wickets that do a bit, and we produce similar sorts of bowlers. We just need to get our skills up, because we can't keep throwing our bowlers out there after only 60-70 overs' rest. They have got to have enough fuel in the tank to get through, and in the last series, they ran out."

On one level at least, Bracewell was clearly looking forward to the tour, but it was perhaps not for the reasons that his team might have hoped. "I really enjoyed the time I had here," he said, recalling his days as Gloucestershire's coach in the early 2000s. "There's a great lifestyle and environment for cricket here, and yes, I'd like to return to county cricket at some stage. There are a lot of options out there for coaches, as well as players, with the opening-up of world cricket." Everyone's eyes seem averted from the immediate task at the moment, but in Bracewell's case, he's not simply gazing towards the IPL.

Sachin celebrates with teammates

PTI, Chennai

A quiet but warm celebration marked Sachin Tendulkar's 35th birthday as the master batsman cut the cake surrounded by cheerful Mumbai Indians teammates at a hotel here on Thursday.

As Sachin cut the rectangular-shaped cake which had the logo of Mumbai Indians, he was joined by two other teammates, Luke Ronchi and Vikrant Yelgati, who had a delayed celebration after their birthday clashed with the team's match against Chennai Super Kings on Wednesday.

New Zealander Ronchi turned 27, while Yelgati celebrated his 23rd birthday.

Tendulkar admitted missing his family on the occasion and said, "I wish I could celebrate my birthday with wife and children, but that is not so. They are joining me at Mohali on Friday."

Meanwhile, Kings XI Punjab players team greeted Sachin on his 35th birthday, adds another report from Chandigarh.

"Happy birthday Sachin. It's always been great to play with you and you have always been there to help us," said right-arm pacer Sreesanth, who looked enthusiastic and also wished the master batsman "best of luck".

Australian speedster Brett Lee said: "We wish you well".

Sri Lanka's prolific batsman Kumar Sangakkara said: "Sachin is one of the great batsmen that the world has known".

Left-arm pacer Irfan Pathan said it was a great honour to play alongside Sachin.

The difference between Sachin's 34th birthday and his 35th could not be starker.

One year ago the master batsman, considered to be among the all-time greats, was distraught following India's early exit from the World Cup and celebrated his birthday quietly at home.

Tendulkar, true to his fashion, lifted himself as well as the country's cricket from that low by making his bat talk in England and Australia to play a leading role in the campaigns in both countries.

The stalwart contributed mightily to the team's Test and ODI victory as well as a first-ever triumph in the tri-series Down Under after helping India match the world champions step for step in the acrimonious Test series that they lost narrowly to the hosts.

The ace batsman, who in the process also increased his century count to 39 in Tests and 42 in ODIs, besides overtaking Sri Lanka ace Sanath Jayasuriya as the leading run-getter in the 50-over game, has truly bounced back in style after some critics wrote his epitaph in the aftermath of India's dismal display in the World Cup in the Caribbean.

4-NATION HOCKEY

India hold Australia

AFP, Perth

India, who will be missing from this year's Olympics for the first time, grabbed a last-minute equaliser to rock-fancied Australia in the four-nations field hockey tournament here on Thursday.

VR Raghunath was India's hero when he forced home a penalty corner in the 70th minute for the 2-2 draw after the reigning Olympic champions had looked set to post their second victory of the tournament.

South Korea, who drew 2-2 with China in Thursday's early match, and Australia both have four points after two matches, but the Koreans have a superior goal difference.

Australia and South Korea will meet each other in the last round robin match on Saturday ahead of Sunday's final, while India take on China.

India scored first in the 27th minute from a penalty corner before rapid-fire field goals from Grant Schubert put Australia in front and looking the likely winners until Raghunath's late intervention.

India's record of having played in every Olympic Games men's field hockey tournament since 1928 ended last month when they were beaten in a crucial qualifier by Great Britain in Chile.

Rawshan Ali football title Dipu SC's

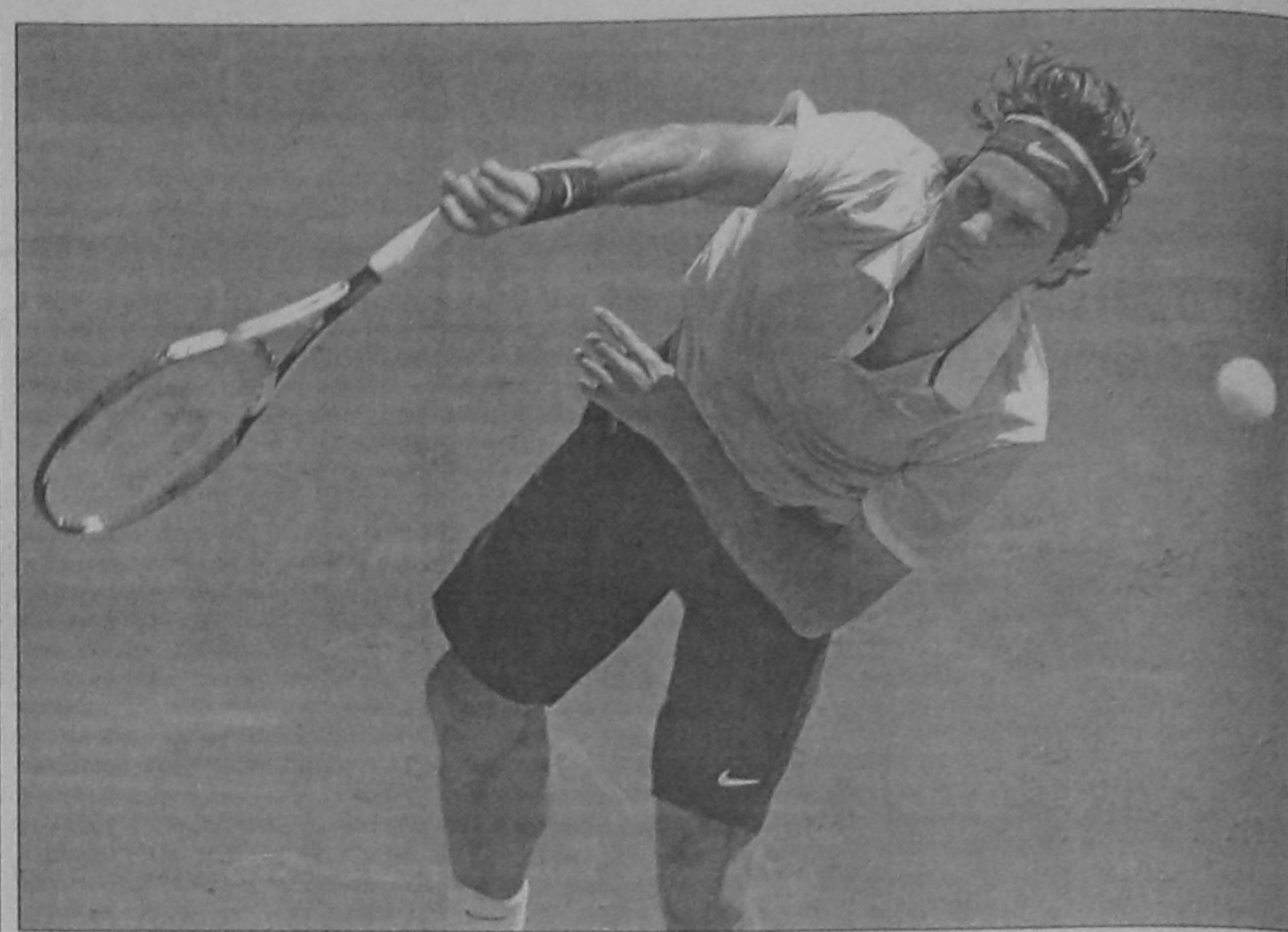
SPORTS REPORTER

Dipu Sporting Club emerged champions in the Shaheed Rawshan Ali football tournament with a 1-0 win against Ghatat Char Juba Samabay Samity at the Ati Bhawal High School ground in Keraniganj yesterday.

Sumon, adjudged player of the tournament, scored the decisive goal.

Yusuf Ali, former Headmaster of the school and brother of late freedom fighter Rawshan Ali, handed over the champions' trophy as chief guest. Renowned freedom fighters Salauddin and Rezaul Karim also distributed prizes.

Bhawal Juba Samity organised the eight-team event.



Swiss world number one Roger Federer serves to his French opponent Gael Monfils during their Monte Carlo Masters match in Monaco on Thursday.

Federer enters quarters

Tennis

AFP, Monte Carlo

Rafael Nadal closed in on Monte Carlo Masters history on Thursday while Roger Federer confidently buried his previous day's heart-stopping brush with humiliation to move into the quarterfinals.

But third seeded Serb Novak Djokovic, the 20-year-old Australian Open champion, served up a 6-0, 6-4 demolition of Britain's Andy Murray to hammer out a devastating indication of his claim to the trophy.

Second seed Nadal, chasing a record fourth successive Monte Carlo title, eased past Spanish compatriot Juan Carlos Ferrero 6-4, 6-1 to record his 21st win in 22 matches in the principality.

Top seed Federer, who had been just two points away from defeat against world number 137 Ruben Ramirez Hidalgo in the second round, saw off Frenchman Gael Monfils 6-3, 6-4.

Nadal, who has defeated Federer in the last two finals, now takes on fellow Spaniard David Ferrer while the world number one must get past David Nalbandian of Argentina who took just an hour to see off Spanish 12th seed Tommy Robredo 6-1, 6-0.

"I was patient and happy to have played so well after yesterday," admitted Federer who said he had held an immediate inquiry into his failings against Ramirez Hidalgo.

Bycotts by the various news agencies have meant overseas coverage of the competition has been limited, but even one or two members of the Australian press had picked up on Symonds' struggles during his first two games for the Deccan Chargers. Innings of 32 and 12 were not helped by the 30 runs he conceded here in an over to Virender Sehwag on Tuesday.

And to make matters more intense, this was his last home game before he rejoins the calmer world of the Test and ODI circuit in the Caribbean. Imagine returning to an Australian dressing room full of banter about his costly four-game stint on the subcontinent. No, Symonds probably doesn't want to think about it either.

He got his chance early after Adam Gilchrist and Afridi - two potential match-winners who now total 56 between them in five innings - fell in the same Yusuf Pathan over, and pushed his first ball, from Shane Watson, to mid-on for a quick single. He then took a couple of boundaries off Munaf Patel, before swatting Watson through extra cover and, capturing the tone of the rest of his innings, blasting Siddharth Trivedi over long-on for six.

But it was in Warner's second over

with interim coach Jose Higueras.

"I made a lot of errors in my first match but with Jose I was able to analyse the good and the bad and to see how I turned it around. We created a plan for today. It's been an interesting 24 hours for me."

Nadal, whose title here last year took him level with Ilie Nastase's three consecutive wins from 1971-1973, said he was happy with his trouble-free progress.

"It's never easy to play Juan Carlos on clay so to beat him 6-4, 6-1 is a very good win," said Nadal who has now racked up 95 wins in 96 matches on clay since April 2005.

"I've had a great start beating Mario (Ancic) in the first round and now Juan Carlos. The first claycourt tournament of the year is never easy especially this season because I played Davis Cup indoors in Germany last week."

"Then I had a few days at home in Mallorca before coming here to prepare for three days."

The triple French Open champion broke in the fourth game of the first set to lead 3-1 before the gritty 13th seeded Ferrero, twice a champion in 2002 and 2003, hit back in the seventh game.

But Nadal, wrapped up the opener with a vicious, deep forehand on his fourth set point.

Nadal stormed into a 5-1 second set lead which was converted into victory courtesy of a smooth forehand pass.

Federer was broken in the third game of the first set to trail world

number 64 Monfils 1-2 before hitting back straightaway.

He broke again to lead 4-2, teed up a set point in the ninth game with an incisive volley before closing out the opener when Monfils hit long.

The Swiss broke to lead 2-1 in the second set before going to three match points on serve in the 10th game. Monfils saved one but went down to defeat with a weary netted return after a 71-minute tussle.

Djokovic reached his first Monte Carlo quarterfinal with a stunning victory over Murray, reeling off the first seven games of the contest.

"I wanted to keep control of the match and be patient and aggressive at the same time," said Djokovic.

"It's my goal to win a major on clay and I believe I have a good enough game to do it."

The Serbian now faces Sam Querrey, who put out French seventh seed Richard Gasquet 2-6, 6-4, 6-3 to become the first American to reach the last eight since Vince Spadea in 2003.

Fourth seeded Russian Nikolay Davydenko beat German 16th seed Philipp Kohlschreiber 3-6, 7-5, 6-2 and now faces compatriot Igor Andreev who needed seven match points to defeat Spain's Nicolas Pietrangeli 7-5, 4-6, 6-4 and secure his first place in the last eight.

Ferrer reached his fourth successive Monte Carlo quarterfinal by brushing aside Serbia's Janko Tipsarevic 6-4, 6-0.

Wasim predicts early departures

PTI, Karachi

Wasim Akram has no doubt that the cash-awash Indian Premier League (IPL) would improve the lifestyle of the cricketers but the Pakistani bowling great fears it might also trigger premature retirements among some players.

Akram said in interview from Lahore that he enjoyed watching the IPL matches and the abridged format was necessary keeping in mind the time constraints.

"But I still believe that the IPL and Indian Cricket League will create problems in international cricket. You will see players retiring prematurely from international cricket to play in these lucrative leagues," Akram said.

Explaining the case, he said, "Suppose I am a 34-year-old bowler with an uncertain future in the national side. I would retire prematurely to play in IPL or ICL rather than risk being dropped from the team," he said.

Akram, however, supported payment of good money to players.

PCB orders inquiry into partial report

PTI, Karachi

Pakistan Cricket Board Chairman Nasim Ashraf has ordered an inquiry into the submission of incomplete documents, relating to financial packages of PCB top brass, to the National Assembly, which drew flaks from the irate senators.

Ashraf said the inquiry in fact has already started and efforts were being made to find out why incomplete documents were sent to the Parliament when they requested details of salaries and other benefits paid to senior employees.

A lot of hue and cry was raised in the assembly over the incomplete report and the Sports Minister promised a Parliamentary inquiry after PCB documents stated Chief Operating Officer was getting a basic salary of Rs 38,000 whereas in reality he gets around Rs 600,000 monthly from the board.

LOCAL SNIPPETS

FROM PAGE 17
at the Uttara Friends Club ground. Orient posted a moderate 198 in 49.1 overs with Babul's 52 and Tareq making 41.

Pragati were put on the backfoot by Ashish's bowling, as the spinner took five wickets for 31 runs. Pragati were restricted to 183-9 in 50 overs.

In the day's other matches, Young Pegasus A (219-7) beat Sheikh Russell (218 all out) by three wickets at the Dhanmondi Club ground and Kamrangirchar (155 all out) defeated Uttara Friends Club (132 all out) by 23 runs at the Dhanmondi Cricket Stadium.

RU CRICKET

Our Correspondent: Apollo Cricket Club made a confident start in the Twenty20 cricket tournament when they defeated Dingadoba Cricket Club by seven wickets in the opening match at the divisional women's sports complex playground here on Thursday.

Digonto Proshari Sangha defeated E-Haque Coaching Center by six wickets in the other match.

Former national skipper Khaled Masud was present on the opening ceremony where Imteaz Ahmed, general secretary of Rajshahi Zila Krira Sangstha, was also present.

In the 15-day tournament, organised by Rajshahi Cricket Academy, a total of 32 teams split into eight groups are taking part.

Pakistan Premier League soon?

PTI, Karachi

The Pakistan Cricket Board will launch a new look Twenty20 domestic tournament next year on the lines of the Indian Premier League, offering franchises of city-based teams to sponsors and companies.

A senior official of the board said that this year's Twenty20 competition, which has been delayed until August 10, would be the last time that the popular domestic event would be held on regional basis and without team sponsors.

"From next year, we will offer franchise of teams like in the IPL to interested companies and individuals and work has already begun in this direction," the official told PTI.

He said the Twenty20 national championship would also be expanded to possibly include foreign players.

"But that will definitely depend on the sort of money the companies and individuals buying the franchise of teams are willing to offer for overseas players," the official said.

He said the board had, however, decided to have a mandatory rule that every city team would have at least four under-19 players in their playing eleven in a bid to promote new talent and give them exposure alongside established players.

He said PCB's marketing department had already started the groundwork for a Pakistan Premier League but everything would depend on the response from sponsors and companies.

He said the board would offer exclusive television rights of the Twenty20 event in its package of international television rights which would be up for bidding this year.

"The fact is that Twenty20 leagues are now a popular form of cricket and we don't want to lag behind other countries in this regard," he said.

Only for millionaires

Football

AFP, Johannesburg

Football supporters wishing to watch the African Confederation Cup match between Highlanders of Zimbabwe and Al-Merreikh of Sudan in Harare Saturday will have to be multi-millionaires.

Cheapest tickets for the third round, first leg qualifier in the African equivalent of the UEFA Cup will set supporters back 100 million Zimbabwe dollars in the land of six-digit inflation.

And those fancying the comfort of the VIP enclosure at Gwanzura Stadium in the southern suburb of Highfields must fork out 800 million dollars to watch a match originally scheduled for the southern city of Bulawayo.

Admission prices have been hiked in a country where the official exchange rate is 30,000 Zimbabwe dollars to one American dollar so that cash-strapped Highlanders can fund the flight to Sudan next month for the return match.

The timing of the first encounter spells financial disaster for Highlanders with an international trade fair in Bulawayo this weekend foiling all attempts to accom-

modate the Sudanese.

Highlanders are at their best when playing at Barbourfields, a 25,000-seat stadium where the closeness of supporters to the sideline can induce claustrophobia among nervous visiting footballers.

After a routine aggregate victory over Ferroviario Nampula of Mozambique, the Zimbabweans shocked Zambian army club Green Buffaloes by drawing 1-1 in Lusaka and winning 1-0 in Bulawayo.

Cuthbert Malajila was Highlanders hero, scoring both goals, and is sure to receive special attention from experienced African campaigners Merreikh, who finished runners-up to CS Sfaxien of Tunisia last year.

Merreikh brushed aside Rayon Sport of Rwanda in the previous round, winning 3-0 in steamy Omdurman courtesy of goals from African veterans Haytham Tambal and Faisal Agab, and drawing 0-0 in Kigali.

South African clubs have long been accused of not taking African Football Confederation (CAF) club competitions seriously and Ajax Cape Town coach Craig Rosslee admits he will field a weakened team at home to Mount Cameroon.

Ajax top the national championship standings on goal differ-

ence with four rounds left and managerial rookie Rosslee does not want to risk injuries so close to the finish line and a one-million-dollar-plus prize.

Fortunately for Ajax, little known Mount are far from invincible as a 1-0 home loss to Primeiro Maio of Angola in the second round demonstrated after the central Africans built a two-goal first leg advantage.

Esperance of Tunisia, the biggest name among the 16 survivors having won every CAF competition bar the Confederation Cup, will be wary of US Masseda in Togo after coming close to a humiliating exit this month.

The 'Blood and Gold' needed the away-goal rule to eliminate Moroccan lower league outfit Rachad Barnoussi despite fielding an expensively assembled assortment of Tunisian internationals.

Sfaxien are away to erratic Linguere of Senegal, who trounced Entente Bingerville of Ivory Coast 3-0 at home only to lose by the same score in Abidjan before scraping through on penalties.

Asante Kotoko of Ghana, the other contenders to have won a CAF competition, are away to Dolphin of Nigeria, runners-up to FAR Rabat of Morocco in the 2005 Confederation Cup.

Speed's early

FROM PAGE 17

Mali, who is a staunch supporter of Zimbabwe and of its officials, has not yet commented publicly on the situation but it is a telling reflection on his inability to handle the media that it will be Morgan - renowned for his conciliatory manner - who fronts up at the press conference at Lord's tomorrow.

Mali is understood to have been incensed by Speed's conduct and gained support from a number of board members as he successfully moved to have Speed sidelined for the remainder of his tenure.

The ICC have refused to make the Zimbabwe audit available.



Action from yesterday's final of the Shaheed Rawshan Ali football tournament between Dipu Sporting Club and Ghatat Char JSS at the Ati Bhawal High School ground in Keraniganj.