

OLYMPIC GAMES

Beijing tickets sold out

AFF, Beijing

China's mad dash for Olympics tickets in Beijing ended on Wednesday with the final tranche earmarked for domestic customers sold out a month ahead of schedule, organisers said.

After tens of millions went online and queued at banks for the last 1.38 million tickets, all seats at venues in the capital and for equestrian events in Hong Kong had been snapped up, the organising committee said on its website.

Only tickets for Olympic football matches at Shanghai, Shenyang, Tianjin and Qinhuangdao were still available to domestic buyers in the sales period ending on June 9.

Beijing had allocated around 75 per cent of the seven million tickets in total to its vast domestic audience, with the rest made available overseas through each country's national Olympic committee.

Huge numbers of Chinese went online or lined up at Bank of China outlets on Monday to buy tickets, but fans and official media complained of long delays due to the high demand.

A second phase, on a similar first-come, first-served basis, was launched in late October but had to be suspended for a month after excessive demand crashed the computer sales system.

Sales were eventually held under a lottery system.

Beijing, the venue for the vast majority of events, and its co-host cities will stage the Games from August 8-24.

Kolkata count on batsmen

PTI, Kolkata

With their stars failing to live up to pre-tournament billing, two struggling sides Kolkata Knight Riders and Bangalore Royal Challengers face off in a crucial battle to stay afloat in the Indian Premier League on Thursday.

After a string of four losses, the Sourav Ganguly-led Knight Riders now occupy the fifth place, while the visitors languish at the bottom of the eight-team table despite having cleaned four points each.

The Knight Riders have failed to keep up the momentum after a good start and the inability of their top order to forge good partnerships in the initial overs is giving sleepless nights to the team management.

"The batting is an area of concern. We have to back each other and it's time for all of us to perform," Ganguly, himself going through a run drought, said at the customary match-eve media meet.

Pakistan's embattled paceman Shoaib Akhtar, who joined the team two days back after his Pakistan Cricket Board-imposed ban was lifted for a month, does not feature among the 14 members shortlisted for the match.

"He is coming up reasonably well. He wants to play. But he is not in the condition he should be," said Knight Riders coach John Buchanan.

Delhi's Aakash Chopra is in the squad and speculation is rife that Ganguly would come lower down the order, with any two among Chopra, Australian Brad Hodge and Pakistan's Salman Butt likely to be asked to open the innings.

Sehwag hopes top-order fire

PTI, New Delhi

Delhi Daredevils skipper Virender Sehwag reckons his top order's cracking form in the IPL so far will give his side an edge over Chennai Super Kings when the two teams lock horns here on Thursday.

Sehwag's top three has been in fine nick with himself and his opening partner Gautam Gambhir, second and third respectively, in top run-getter's list and Rajat Bhatia doing a fine job.

"In Twenty20, whenever the top order fires the team has the chance to win. This is for all teams and fortunately my team has been doing well in that department," Sehwag told reporters at the match eve press conference here on Wednesday.

"Our top order had done well in four out of six matches so far and I am looking ahead at least one of the top three fires in the remaining matches," he said.

Daredevils had beaten MS Dhoni's boys comprehensively at their own backyard less than a week ago but Sehwag said his side could lower their guards at their own peril.

"Super Kings have struggled with their combination (after departure of Matthew Hayden and Michael Hussey), they were scoring more than 200 initially but could not maintain that form," the Delhi captain said.

"They are struggling now but no team is weak. I have said it earlier, any player can turn a match single-handedly; it is a short game," the Delhi icon players said.



Papla of BKSP (R) and Comilla's Sohag flash V-signs after they won the girls and boys' 100-metres in the 24th National Junior Athletics competition at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

Lord's eyes big money

Cricket

CRICINFO, undated

Lord's could stage neutral Test matches and matches in the proposed Twenty20 Champions League to assist the MCC in fund raising as it plans to spend up to £200 million to redevelop the ground ahead of its bicentenary in 2014.

A report it the Guardian on Wednesday says that a number of proposals are being considered by Keith Bradshaw, the MCC's secretary and chief executive, after a whistlestop visit to India over the weekend.

Bradshaw met with Lalit Modi, the IPL's commissioner, in Mohali and the possibility of bringing the Twenty20 Champions League to London was discussed. The main stumbling block appears to be the timing as the event can only be played after the ICC Champions Trophy which finishes in late September. "The MCC was positive about the idea and are eager to proceed, subject to ECB clearance," an IPL official told Cricinfo.

The Guardian also claimed that the possibility of Pakistan playing Australia at Lord's had been raised earlier in the year after the Australians' tour of Pakistan had been scrapped on security grounds.

"It is our heartbeat to have major matches, so as well as our England Tests and ODIs we have to look at whether there is the potential to stage other sorts of cricket here such as neutral Test matches," Bradshaw, who could face some tough questions at the MCC's annual meeting later on Wednesday, told the newspaper. "We would be very open to staging neutral Tests and, in terms of embracing what's been mooted in terms of IPL, the Champions League or the English Premier League, why not? We have a very open mind."

While the ECB, who would need to be consulted before any other matches could be staged at Lord's, might not object to the Twenty20 Champions League being held in London, it would probably take a dimmer view of neutral Tests for fear of the impact they might have on the traditional summer fixtures.

However, Lord's is under threat as a venue because of the ECB's new strategy of allocating international matches which has seen traditional venues struggle to get high-profile fixtures with games being switched to new centres such as Cardiff and Southampton. That has led to speculation that Lord's, which in recent years has hosted two Tests every summer, might only get one as more venues fight for the limited number of matches.

"We would prefer to know exactly what our major matches are going to be for the next 10 years, given that we are spending £200m on the ground, but we have moved to a very commercial situation where our fellow grounds are no longer our family but our competitors in a bidding process," Bradshaw said. "We bid a lot more for those matches than we ever have before. We will take account of what the ECB is trying to achieve and we are conscious of player fixtures and broadcasting contracts, but we have a very open mind and we would be very keen to host a Champions League event."

Sultan Azlan Shah hockey starts today

AFF, Ipoh

Four Olympic-bound nations aim to fine-tune their preparations at the Sultan Azlan Shah Cup this week, while India struggle to pick up the pieces after a tumultuous few months.

Defending champions Australia are not playing, which opens the door for Canada, Belgium, Pakistan and New Zealand, who have all qualified for the Beijing Games in August.

Other teams in the fray at the annual men's field hockey tournament which starts Thursday are hosts Malaysia, runners-up to Australia last year, and Argentina.

How India fare will be closely watched with the national team in crisis after a bribery scandal and failure to qualify for the Olympics for the first time in 80 years saw their controversial hockey federation sacked.

The omens however do not look good, with the fallen giants winning only one of eight games at two mini tournaments in Australia over the past fortnight.

Once the masters of the sport, the Indians have not won a major tournament since taking the Asian Games gold medal in Bangkok in 1998.

The eight-time Olympic champions have dropped nine players who took part in the Australia series and named eight rookies among their 18-strong squad as they look for a new beginning.

Junior team coach A. K. Bansal has been put in charge with new technical director, Australian wizard Ric Charlesworth, accompanying the team as an adviser.

Drag Flicker Sandeep Singh, who missed India's Olympic qualification campaign, is included while Prabhat Singh, William Xalko, Adrian D'Souza and Ignace Tirkey are left out.

CWAB stands

FROM PAGE 17 take help from experts teachers of different universities for making national skipper Roquibul Hasan.

Another former skipper Aminul Islam however pointed out the lack of mental toughness behind the poor showings of Bangladeshi cricketers in the international stage.

Everybody however urged not to be frustrated with the current state of affairs.

LOCAL SNIPPETS

SPORTS REPORTER

Comilla's Sohag and Papia of BKSP won gold in the boys' and girls' 100m race respectively in the 24th National Junior Athletics competition at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

In the 800 meter of the under-17 age-group, Milon of Chandpur came out first while BKSP's Popy won the girls' event of the 800m run.

Selina of Kishoreganj won the girls' shot-put, beating stiff competition from Reshmi and Munira, who claimed silver and bronze respectively.

DIVII CRICKET

Iqbal took three wickets to help East End crush Young Ones by 105 runs in the Second Division Cricket League at the City Club ground yesterday.

Chasing a modest 190, Young Ones were bowled out for only 84 in 30.2 overs with Iqbal taking three wickets for only seven runs. Earlier, East End scored 189 before being bowled out in 44.5 overs.

In the other matches of the same group, Sinha Textiles (102-2) hammered Uday Club (101 all out) by eight wickets at the Dhammondi Cricket Stadium and Gopibagh Friends (235 all out) defeated North Bengal Cricket Academy (116-5) by 74 runs through the Parabola method after the match was interrupted by a late-afternoon shower at the Dhaka University ground.

GOJU-RYU KARATE

Bangladesh will take part in the two-day 3rd International Goju-Ryu Karate Do Championship to be held in India on June 7-8.

The Championship will be held in 22 weight categories -- 14 for men and 8 for women.

Meanwhile, Karate Federation has requested the medallists in the National Karate Competition to send their entries with one copy passport photograph by May 15 to the Federation office.

Flintoff cleared of speeding

AFF, London

England all-rounder Andrew Flintoff was acquitted of speeding Tuesday because his prosecution notice did not arrive within the 14-day deadline.

The 30-year-old was caught on camera driving at 87 miles (140 kilometres) per hour in a 50 mph zone on a motorway near Liverpool, northwest England, on July 1 last year.

But his lawyer Nick Freeman told magistrates in the city that the prosecution had not followed procedures correctly. The prosecution then said they would offer no evidence against the Lancashire player.

Freeman, who has earned the nickname "Mr Loophole" for exposing procedural discrepancies in speeding cases often involving high-profile figures, said outside court that the prosecution notice arrived on July 19.

"It is fundamental in any speeding case that the notice is sent and received within 14 days," he added.

Flintoff, who has been plagued by injury in the last year, said nothing to waiting media but Freeman said his client was "relieved" at the decision and could now concentrate on his cricket.

Footage not conclusive?

PTI, New Delhi

With video footage failing to provide any clue on what might have provoked Harbhajan Singh into slapping India teammate Shanthakumar Sreesanth, BCCI-appointed commissioner Sudhir Nanavati on Wednesday said he may now view the recording of the match before the incident to establish the exact chain of events.

"I want to find out (about the provocation) only for the purpose that whether it was a reaction as far as Harbhajan is concerned," Nanavati said.

"So far the documents I have received do not indicate to that extent (that there was any provocation). I might have to see the whole recording of the cricket match," he told NDTV.

Harbhajan slapped Sreesanth after an Indian Premier League match in which his side Mumbai Indians lost to Sreesanth's Kings XI Punjab in Mohali.

He was subsequently banned from the rest of the IPL besides being fined heavily.

Nanavati said he may also speak to Kings XI skipper Yuvraj Singh, Mumbai Indians coach Lalchand Rajput and the team managers of the both the sides.

"I might have to discuss with some other players like Yuvraj, Lalchand Rajput or even team managers because the umpire's statement that I have recorded does not indicate that (provocation)," he said.

Nanavati has summoned Harbhajan and Sreesanth to Ahmedabad this weekend and he will submit his final report to BCCI president Sharad Pawar on Monday.

Hayden turns new leaf

Cricket

INTERNET, undated

As a diplomat on the field, Matthew Hayden makes a particularly good cricketer.

Rarely -- make that never -- will he back down from an opponent, as became obvious in last summer's tinkerbox series against the Indians which placed him squarely in the middle of one of the most explosive confrontations the game has witnessed.

Hayden started that campaign by saying India had eclipsed England as his favourite team to beat, then ended it by branding serial agitator Harbhajan Singh an "obnoxious little weed" on live radio.

As the effigies burned on the subcontinent, Hayden was chastised by Cricket Australia for his remark, sinking relations between the rival sides to a new low.

Now, after a cameo in the Indian Premier League, Hayden is talking like a man who has just returned from a voyage of self-discovery. What guru Maharishi did for The Beatles, the IPL has done for the burly Queenslander.

What was meant to be a feast of smash-and-grab Twenty 20 cricket became a calming ashrum of introspection and reflection on last summer's ugly chain reaction of unsavoury events.

Back in his native Brisbane and in training for the upcoming tour to the West Indies, Hayden said the mingling of Australia and Indian players in the IPL had begun to mend bridges that were seemingly shot to ruins while he gained a deeper understanding of India's complex cricketing culture.

Charu fired?



CRICINFO, undated

Charu Sharma, who was removed as CEO by the Bangalore Royal Challengers on Tuesday, says he did not step down from the job as the IPL franchise said, but was "summarily dismissed". Cricinfo has learned the decision was a result of discontent at the highest level since the team's defeat in the first match of the tournament on April 18.

"I am not a quitter, especially when the chips are down," Sharma said in a statement. "The company has every right to hire and fire personnel. For details of why I was summarily dismissed from my duties, three hours before I was to board a flight to Kolkata for the next match, please contact representatives of the company."

Only the team owners can explain why Charu was sacked, he said, adding that he could "understand their disappointment at the team not being the fastest off the block".

Bangalore, currently at the bottom of the IPL table with two wins from seven games, issued a press release on Tuesday night, which said Sharma "stepped down due to personal reasons" and had been replaced by Brijesh Patel, the former India Test player and secretary of the Karnataka State Cricket Association (KSCA), which runs the game in the franchise's home city.

Sources close to Sharma confirmed that he was asked to quit on Tuesday afternoon by a senior official from United Spirits Limited (USL), the liquor company that bought the team. USL is owned by Vijay Malaya, the Bangalore-based industrialist who also owns Force India, a Formula 1 team.

However, sources in the franchise told Cricinfo that the decision to sack the chief executive was the result of growing discontent at the highest level ever since Bangalore suffered a humiliating defeat to Kolkata Knight Riders in the inaugural IPL match in front of a record television audience and a capacity home crowd, including top ICC and BCCI officials, Bollywood actors and corporate leaders.

"Quite a few harsh words were used that night to describe the team's performance. And ever since then, serious questions were being asked at the top level within the franchise about the team's composition and performance. Things turned nasty as the team continued to lose and there was even talk about whether the players were underperforming, and making a laughing stock of the owner," the sources said.

"In such a scenario, the franchise wanted to send a strong message that it was in control of the situation and the CEO was the obvious target. Sacking the players would have generated a wave of negative publicity, considering their iconic status," the sources said.

Mallya bought the franchise from the IPL council with a bid of 111.6 million dollars and then faced a barrage of criticism after the players' auction where Rahul Dravid took the lead in picking the squad -- including South Africa's Jacques Kallis and India's Wasim Jaffer -- that has since been tagged as a Test XI.

On Monday night, after the team's fifth loss, Mallya is learnt to have been extremely upset and had a "very serious chat" with Sharma, before the franchise owner was "persuaded" to give the team a "small pep talk" during a party that followed the match against Kings XI Punjab.

"The team was assembled and were told by Mallya he was still backing them. But it was clear that a major decision was around the corner," the sources said. Around 3 pm the next day, Sharma was asked to leave by the franchise.

On Wednesday morning, a senior player told Cricinfo that the team was

complex cricketing culture.

"I think as a player, my view on IPL cricket and Twenty-20 cricket as a whole is that it's an incredible experience and one that has broken down a lot of the cultural barriers that perhaps existed throughout the course of this summer," Hayden said.

"We left last summer feeling a bit hollow about the whole experience. As a cricket team in general we felt that we loved to play the game in a way that's hard we love to win."

"That's very important in our culture and it's certainly important for this cricket team."

"And I think just the fact we could get together and see some of the subtle variations and differences between an Indian side -- as a player within an Indian side -- was just an incredible experience and one I think changed my viewpoint, moving forward."

India's ostentatious celebrations were a serious sore point for the Australians, who grimaced at the sight of Harbhajan sprinting out to the boundary to celebrate another Aussie scalp.

But a month with the Chennai Super Kings has convinced Hayden to re-evaluate India's behaviour throughout that bitter summer series which stirred emotions in all corners of the cricketing world.

"We're quite subtle and we'll give each other a high five and a bit of a hug. Generally speaking, our levels of celebration are quite subdued. From our point of view, we've always looked at the other side and thought 'that's a bit over the top'," Hayden said.

"But that's the melodramatic nature of their sport -- the belief that they have in their culture --

and they love success equally as much as Australia."

He refused to take a free kick at Harbhajan over his incredible slap on Indian teammate Shantha Sreesanth, simply labelling it "disappointing".

"I think we've all tried to move on from anything to do with taking a backward step in the way last summer went on. More than anything, it was just the perfect way for someone like myself who was entangled in it (the controversy) to act get amongst it (the IPL) and get involved," Hayden said.

Even if he was in a philosophical mood, Hayden stressed neither he nor his world champion team had any regrets over their actions in the heat of battle.

"No regrets from us at all. In saying that, the only regret is we could have performed a little bit better," Hayden said.

"We won the Test series but the one-day series was comprehensively won by India in a two-match final and that wasn't acceptable for us."

"I guess like all losses, it brings the most out of our side. We're going to have to dig deep moving forward."

Australia, who were on Wednesday buoyed by the surprise presence of troubled quick Shaun Tait at training, head to the West Indies on Saturday for a three-Test tour before playing five one-day internationals over seven weeks.

The five-day training camp at Allan Border Field is designed to have the 15-man Test squad ready to hit the ground running for their sole tour match before the Test series starts in Kingston on May 22.

Afghans stun

FROM PAGE 17 opened the account for the hosts in the sixth minute but his header was off the target. Eight minutes later, Karimi's shot from the left was saved by Kyrgyz goalkeeper Maksim Agapov.

Kyrgyzstan mounted several attacks after the break but their strikers failed to find the target. Afghanistan's Hashmatullah Barezai was given his marching orders in the last minute of injury time but the South Asians held on for a historic victory.

Stark was happy with the result saying, "I am unbelievably happy. We have had a lot of luck but my team played with a lot of spirit and determination. I think we deserved the win because of our hard work."

"This is a historic day for the Afghan football. We don't have an infrastructure like in other countries but we play European style football and this is the first step towards bigger success," said the German.

Kyrgyzstan coach Nematjan Zakirov said: "We created lots of chances but failed to capitalise on them. Afghanistan converted their only chance of the game."

"We don't want to let down our spectators and will try hard to beat Bangladesh in the final game," he said.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS	43 Gripe	3 Give over	21 "— was saying, ..."
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14 Actor McBride	52 Smack	7 Were-	30 U.K. fliers
15 Libyan money	53 Dance	wolf's inspiration	32 Appropriate
16 Hide	54 Musical link	8 Thilifer	33 "— Little Teapot"
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producing organ	56 Switch	bergh's view	36 Eucalyptus eaters
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24 De Mille or Moore-head	2 Hogan's "American Gladiators" co-host	19 Skinfllint	42 Obliterate
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27 Wild West transport			46 Basin accessory
29 Overlook			48 Green (ref.)
31 It may be lead or grease			50 Greek consonants
35 Anorak			51 Obtain
37 Heavy reading?			
38 Theme			
41 Mine car contents			

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CRYPTOQUIP

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TY'V TM W XDGI NTMG?
Yesterday's Cryptquip: THE RUG SALESMAN. SEEKING TO MAKE THE MOST OF LIFE'S OPPORTUNITIES, CRIED "CARPET DIEM!"
Today's Cryptquip Clue: Y equals T