

Umpires given more power

AFP, London

Officials will be allowed to reduce the length of the interval between innings during the remainder of the one-day series between England and New Zealand.

The second fixture of the five-match campaign ended in controversy on Wednesday when rain saw the players leave the field for the last time at Edgbaston with one more over required for a result.

Afterwards, Australian umpire Steve Davis and Ian Gould, his English on-field colleague, came under fire for not reducing the interval between innings from 30 minutes on a day when rain was an ever-present threat.

But Davis insisted their hands were tied by the way in which the regulations were framed, a view supported by match referee Javagal Srinath, the former India fast bowler.

The ICC chief executives' committee will examine the matter when it meets in Dubai at the end of the month to see if a permanent change to the rule needs to be made.

England, 1-0 up in the series, face New Zealand in the third one-day international at Bristol on Saturday.



Footballer Feroz Mahmud Titu (standing third from right) and his teammates watch Mukti Jodha officials sign documents to seal the transfer deals at the BFF Bhawan yesterday.

Pawar softens ICL stance

Cricket

CRICINFO, undated

Sharad Pawar, the BCCI president, has said that all teams participating in the proposed Champions League have the freedom to include players of their choice for the US\$5 million multi-club Twenty20 tournament, even it means including players with ties to the unauthorized Indian Cricket League (ICL). But he placed the onus on letting such teams go through on the countries they represent and warned that the BCCI would then have the freedom to take its decision on the issue.

"This is not within the BCCI's jurisdiction," Pawar told Cricinfo. "They can do what they want. If any country takes any decision on this, they have every right to do so. They have the freedom to take a decision on the teams they choose to represent them (in the Champions League). But then, we also have the freedom to take our decision on the issue later."

Pawar's statement turns the spotlight firmly on the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB), which is the only national board to have allowed players associated with the ICL to play in its domestic circuit. The ECB has permitted around 25 such cricketers to represent 15 of its 18 counties after it faced legal action from the ICL, which was backed by the country's strong trade laws that protect the rights of individuals. The Champions League, which is being powered by the BCCI, is expected to feature the top 20 Twenty20 domestic teams from India, England, Australia and South Africa.

An ECB spokesperson had said last week that it would wait for the tournament rules to be finalised before taking a stand on the issue.

Asked to elaborate on the possibility of English county teams with ICL players qualifying for the Champions League, Pawar referred to the ICC's stand on the ICL and

said that all countries "have been informed about it". The ICC has clarified that it would go by the BCCI's policy towards ICL. "The ICL is a domestic event that takes place in India so our rules prescribe that any decision as to whether an event be regarded as official or not must be made by the country that event is played in," Dave Richardson, the ICC's acting chief

executive, said.

The BCCI has cut off all official links with players associated with the ICL, which was launched last year before the BCCI's high-profile Indian Premier League (IPL). Asked whether the BCCI would be more generous now, especially towards young Indian players in the ICL, Pawar said, "If anybody approaches us, we will consider their case."

Booters' transfer

FROM PAGE 17 After finishing distant runners-up with their youngest and inexperienced side ever, Mohammedan returned to the tradition of assembling top notch booters.

National captain and number one custodian Aminul Haque returned to the black and whites after 13 years while his fellow Mukti Jodha players Rajani and Arman Aziz also decided to come back. Others to join from the Reds tent are Hassan Al Mamun and Maruf Ahmed.

Mohammedan, who kept just half a dozen players -- Himel, Kamal, Sharif, Mithu, Roni, Ripon -- from their previous squad, retracted Faisal Mahmud (Brothers) and Pappu (Russel) while adding three promising members of the national team, Chittagong Mohammedan centre-back Saikat, Farashganj striker Robin and Fakirerpool sharpshooter Komol.

"It's good to return to a side where I spent the 1994-95 season under a rookie contract. The overall team look good and I feel Mohammedan have managed to stay in line with the tradition of having top players of the country," commented Aminul.

Hassan Al Mamun said he had fantasised playing for Mohammedan after being with Abahani and Mukti Jodha.

"We have a balanced team and addition of quality foreign players will make us real contenders. We also have a technically strong coach in AKM Maruf, whose knowledge and analysis will help us play modern football for our huge fans," said the full-back.

Rahmatganj and Khulna Abahani were the other teams to finish the job on the last day, forming mediocre teams who will have to fight to stay above the relegation zone.

Although there had been no demotion in the inaugural B. League, one team will be relegated this year.

Diganta Prasari of Rajshahi finally stayed out despite getting the nod to play in the competition, which is expected to start in August.

The season is likely to kick off in the third week of July with the Federation Cup, which will be held after two years.

Asia Cup Indo-Pak tie made costly

PTI, Karachi

In a bid to cash in on the popularity of India-Pakistan clash, the Pakistan Cricket Board has kept the ticket prices for the encounter between the two sides in the Asia Cup at the highest pedestal.

Pakistan will play arch-rivals India on June 26 at the National Stadium in Karachi and the PCB authorities have fixed the highest ticket price for that match at Rs 2700.

The rise in ticket prices has also been fuelled by Shoaib Malik-led team's recent tri-series win over India in Dhaka.

"Look the Indian team is always a salable side in international cricket and it is no surprise everyone wants to cash in on their popularity and standing," Saleem Qazi, the senior marketing executive of a leading group said.

The last time India toured Pakistan in 2006, the highest ticket price for an ODI in Karachi was Rs 2000.

The Rs 2700 price range has been set for the top enclosures named after Hanif Muhammad, Javed Miandad and Fazal Mehmood.

"Basically it is a case of trying to take advantage of the tournament and the fact that India is playing in Pakistan after more than two years," one official said.

Interestingly, the PCB has fixed relatively low ticket prices for other matches of the Asia Cup.

In the match between Pakistan and Hong Kong, the highest ticket is Rs 500 and similar price has also been set for India's clash with Hong Kong in Karachi.

The lowest ticket rate for India-Pakistan encounter in Asia Cup is Rs 100, whereas normally the general enclosure tickets cost Rs 50.

No switches for Punter

PTI, Melbourne

Kevin Pietersen's innovative switch-hit has found yet another admirer in Ricky Ponting but the Australian skipper has no plans of trying it himself or encourage his teammates to experiment with it as he is "uncertain" about the shot's legality.

Pietersen's switch-hit invited as much admiration as criticism and Ponting felt, although innovative, the shot adds more pressure on the bowlers.

"I'm not sure how they're really going to govern that. It's obviously a great skill, if he's hitting a couple of sixes doing it. Once again, it's just something that will be inside the bowler's mind all the time," Ponting was quoted as saying in the 'Sydney Morning Herald'.

"The bowler running in won't know which way he's going to hit it. It just puts more pressure on the bowler, and as a batter in one-day cricket that's what you're trying to do," he added.

Ponting said although his batsmen are quite capable of striking such switch-hits but they would rather stick to tradition than try such an improvisation.

"It's probably something historically that we haven't been that good at, improvising that much as a batting group," he said.

"We've managed with our own skill to be able to hit different areas. But there's no reason why any of our players can't do that."

Federer opens with Hrbaty

AFP, London



Roger Federer will have to get past Novak Djokovic before a probable Wimbledon final showdown with his arch-rival Rafael Nadal.

Federer begins his bid for a sixth Wimbledon title against Slovakia's Dominik Hrbaty, while Nadal faces a first round clash against Germany's Andreas Beck.

But it is a scheduled semi-final clash with Australian Open champion Djokovic, who beat Federer in the last four in Melbourne, that will set pulses racing.

Federer, the defending champion and top seed, will have to extend his 59-match unbeaten run on grass first, starting with unseeded Hrbaty, who has won their only two previous meetings.

The Swiss world number one could play Australia's Lleyton Hewitt - the last man before Federer to win Wimbledon back in 2002 - if they both make it to the fourth round. But Hewitt, who starts against Robin Hasse of the Netherlands, would probably have to get past 15th seed Fernando

Gonzalez first.

Federer is scheduled to play David Ferrer, the Spanish fifth seed, in the quarter-finals before the Djokovic match-up.

French Open champion Nadal, fresh from his first grass-court title at Queen's, is the second seed and can't play Federer until the final.

The Spaniard has a probable fourth round clash against Radek Stepanek or Mikhail Youzhny before a quarter-final with France's Richard Gasquet, who reached the semi-finals at the All-England Club last year.

Nadal is scheduled to meet Nikolay Davydenko in the semi-finals, if the Russian fourth seed gets past a likely last eight match-up with Andy Roddick, twice a Wimbledon runner-up.

Djokovic plays Michael Berrer of Germany first and the Serb could face an intriguing second round match against former world number one Marat Safin, with a quarter-final against David Nalbandian, a former Wimbledon finalist, on the horizon.

British number one Andy Murray, seeded 12th, will open his campaign against France's Fabrice Santoro.

The Scot, who has been struggling with a thumb injury, is Britain's only realistic prospect of

ending the long wait for a home-grown champion and he has a relatively smooth passage to a possible fourth round tie against Gasquet.

In the women's singles, Ana Ivanovic, the French Open champion and world number one, has been handed a first round match against Paraguay's Rossana de los Rios.

Ivanovic is scheduled to play Russia's Anna Chakvetadze in the quarter-finals and Serena Williams in the last four, if the American can get past a likely clash with fellow former Wimbledon champion Amelie Mauresmo in the third round and Svetlana Kuznetsova, the fourth seed, in the quarters.

Defending champion Venus Williams starts her challenge for a fifth Wimbledon title against British wild card Naomi Cavaday and could play India's Sania Mirza in the third round.

The American is in line to play Jelena Jankovic, the Serb second seed, in the quarterfinals and Maria Sharapova in the semis.

Sharapova, the 2004 winner, is likely to meet fellow Russian Elena Dementieva in the quarterfinals.

C'Ron not for sale: MU

Football

AFP, London

Manchester United slapped a 'not for sale' sign on striker Cristiano Ronaldo Friday following the Portuguese international striker's most recent bid to pave the way towards joining Real Madrid.

Ronaldo has been linked with the nine-times European champions since he hinted at a move to Real five days before United's triumph over Chelsea in the Champions League final on May 21.

And after Portugal were ousted from the Euro 2008 Thursday following a 3-2 defeat to Germany, the 23-year-old said he would announce his future intentions in "two to three days".

However United have moved

quick to quell speculation of a big-money move for their coveted star, and appear to have dug their heels in over the issue in a statement on their website.

"Further to Friday's press speculation about where Cristiano Ronaldo's future lies, the club has moved to reiterate its stance on the matter: United are not listening to offers," said the statement.

"Ronaldo has continually been linked with a move to Spanish side Real Madrid this summer."

"However, the club reaffirmed its position to ManUtd.com on Friday morning. And the message is simple: the 23-year-old United star is 'not for sale'."

Ronaldo told reports after Thursday's defeat: "There will be news in the coming days."

Asked about a move to Real, he said: "It's a big possibility, but it doesn't just depend on me."

"I think a concrete offer has been made (from Real), but we'll see what happens in the next few days and whether we can come to some kind of agreement."

Real are reportedly willing to pay United 60 million euros for the Portuguese striker, however Ronaldo -- whose contract with United does not expire until 2012 -- admitted that "negotiations (to leave the club) would be difficult".

He said he hoped to talk to United bosses, and seemed to leave no doubts over his preferred destination, adding: "Everyone knows what I want, and what my dream is."

"I hope to have talks with United. Hopefully everything will be decided in two to three days."

Ronaldo also said he will undergo a foot operation in Manchester in the coming days to remedy a problem that he said had plagued him in recent weeks.

Turning to baseball?

Cricket

MICHAEL ATHERTON

On the last Ashes tour I got talking to the Australia fielding coach, Mike Young, an American whose main expertise was in baseball. He was a figure of fun at times, prowling around the outfield shouting, "Let's play ball, Australia!" and perching by the boundary rope in typical baseball fashion -- left knee on the ground, right elbow on the other knee, right hand resting under a chin jutting forward in anticipation while regularly spitting out chewing tobacco and applauding the most mundane moments.

One evening I asked him, of all the international cricketers he had come across, who he thought would have the best chance of making it in baseball. He named three at once, with enough speed to suggest that he, too, had given it some thought: Andrew Symonds, of Australia, Dwayne Smith, the West Indian, and Kevin Pietersen, of England, were his picks. All three, he said, had the physical presence, ball-striking skills and speed to the ball to give it a go.

Young's comments came to mind this week after Pietersen gave us a sneak preview of what the future may hold, while at the same time confirming his outrageous talent. Once he has tired of cricket and England, could his talents transfer to baseball?

Switch-hitting is not unusual in baseball. It is a commonly held belief that right-handed hitters do better against left-handed pitchers and vice versa. The ambidextrous hitter, therefore, becomes a gem of a player and can take advantage of any idiosyncrasies in the size of the boundaries, while giving flexibility to the coach. All a switch-hitter has to do is take his place on one side of the plate or the other before the pitcher has stepped on to his mark. Once the pitcher has wound up, however, the hitter cannot switch.

Mickey Mantle, the great New York Yankees player of the Fifties and Sixties, was one of the most famous switch-hitters, described by Casey Stengel, the Yankees manager at the time, as having "more natural power from both sides than anybody I ever saw". Mantle hit 372 home runs left-handed and 164 right-handed, taking advantage of the short boundaries for the left-handed hitter at the Yankee Stadium much in the same way that Pietersen calculated his options for the shorter boundary at the Riverside on Sunday.

John Buchanan, the former

Australia coach, predicted some years ago (was this partly down to Young's influence?) that ambidextrous batting, baseball-style, would be the skill of the future. His comments were treated with scepticism and disdain, mainly because former Australia cricketers were suspicious of Buchanan's lack of international experience as a player. It didn't help that Australia lost the Ashes soon afterwards. Too smart by half, was the reaction.

But, as Buchanan well knows, cricket will continue to evolve. During the 1985 Texaco Trophy series, after poorly executed reverse sweeps by Ian Botham and Mike Gatting, Peter May, the chairman of selectors at the time, was forced to issue an edict that England batsmen should not reverse sweep. Such puritanism seems fanciful now.

This week Pietersen's audacity showed that Buchanan was not the crackpot some made him out to be. It also raises the question whether any cricketer has been better suited to trying to crack the United States. Botham had designs on Hollywood for a while, in a different guise, but they were not reciprocated. Will Botham, whose company manages Pietersen, encourage his client to go where he himself failed?

To my knowledge, no international batsman has played pro baseball in the US. Australian cricketers, such as Ian Chappell, often played amateur baseball in the winter months in Australia to keep their eye in. Ed Smith, the Middlesex captain, wrote an acclaimed book about the two sports, and Ian Pont, the former Essex fast bowler, had trials with six Major League Baseball teams as a pitcher, including an extended period with the Philadelphia Phillies.

Could Pietersen be the first? You cannot rule it out. After all, cricketers, even with the Stanford millions, really are playing in the minor leagues when it comes to earnings. Alex Rodriguez, of the Yankees, the leading home-run hitter of the past ten years, recently signed a ten-year deal for \$275 million (about £140 million).

It is tempting to applaud the swift and public-spirited reaction of MCC to Kevin Pietersen's switch-hit on Sunday. By Tuesday MCC had decided that no action would be taken to outlaw the stroke. It was, it said, "exciting for the game of cricket" and it reiterated its view that the shot, given the excessive risk involved, is "fair to both bowlers and batsmen".

How carefully did MCC officials think through the ramifications? Not very, according to Michael Holding, who rang me in some distress after its

pronouncement. His view is that MCC is not there to be public spirited and to pander to the prevailing public mood but to administer the Laws in such a way that the game is not held up to ridicule.

His point is this: imagine a scenario where a right-handed opening batsman comes out to bat in a Test match and takes guard as a left-hander. The opposition captain presumably sets his field accordingly, with slips and gully fielders positioned for the left-hander. Halfway through the bowler's run-up the batsman reverts to being a right-hander. Immediately half a dozen fielders have been taken out of the game, as has the leg-before decision to any ball pitching outside the off stump. The bowler, of course, does not have to release the ball; the batsman then repeats the procedure and stalemate occurs.

At the moment, because of Law 36.3, the captain cannot set his field with the notion in mind that the batsman will revert to being a right-hander because the leg side is dictated by the stance of the batsman at the moment the bowler runs up to bowl.

If, then, the captain sets his slips and gully fielders assuming that the batsman is right-handed, the ball on delivery immediately becomes a no-ball because there are more than two fielders behind square on the leg side. Still with me?

If all this sounds ridiculous and unlikely, imagine this scenario: there are ten overs left of a Test match and one team are pushing for victory against England. Monty Panesar comes out at No.1 to save the game. What is to stop him taking guard as a right-hander and then switching to render a number of fielders redundant and improve his chances of not being caught in the slips, or being out leg-before, or if the bowler refuses to bowl, of winding the clock down with the ensuing stalemate?

It is a tricky business administering Laws that were never intended to be held up to this kind of scrutiny. The validity of Holding's argument, though, is unquestionable and MCC partly acknowledges that by saying that it will continue to monitor other implications of the stroke. The answer lies somewhere in the suggestion in this space on Tuesday that greater latitude must be given to the fielding team, for field-setting and leg-before decisions, once a batsman has decided to switch. Maybe, for once in its history, MCC acted with undue haste.

(Former England captain Michael Atherton wrote this for the Times website)

Asif returns

FROM PAGE 17 Asif's release came two days after a Senate committee on sport asked the President and Prime Minister to intervene.

Meanwhile, the PCB has decided to "get to the bottom of the truth" in Asif's Dubai detention by quizzing the 'Hakeem', whom the pacer blamed for giving him the banned drug as a 'medicine'.

Asif, in a meeting with PCB chairman Nasim Ashraf last evening, said the contraband item recovered from his possession in Dubai airport, on his way back home after playing in the Indian Premier League, was actually a pain killer prescribed by a local Hakeem.

"He (Asif) told me that he had never taken drugs or banned substance in his life and no drugs were recovered from him in Dubai airport. We will even call that Hakeem for questioning to get to the bottom of the truth," Ashraf told reporters after the meeting.

The PCB chairman also insisted that authorities in Dubai had not charged Asif in any case and clarified that the speedster was not deported but repatriated from there.

"We have formed a three-member in-house fact finding committee to probe into the incident and report back. Based on the committee's report, we will decide if any further action should be taken against Asif or not," Ashraf said.



Sri Lankan superstar Kumar Sangakkara (R) shares a laugh with physio Tommy Simsek during a practice session at The Sinhalese Sports Club ground in Colombo on Friday.

Champions Trophy hockey starts today

AFP, Rotterdam

Five of the top six world ranked men's field hockey teams will meet at the Champions Trophy starting here Saturday in what is the last major international tournament before the Olympic Games.

Joining Germany, Australia, Netherlands, Spain and South Korea will be seventh-ranked Argentina, who failed to qualify for Beijing.

Sixth-ranked Pakistan was relegated from this tournament, which it inaugurated in 1978, replaced by Argentina, winner of the 2007 Champions Challenge.

Olympic champion Australia has problems with three key players - Brent Livermore, Aaron Hopkins and Nathan Eglington - injured and possibly unavailable for Beijing.

Australia coach Barry Dancer, sees this as an opportunity for younger players to seek Olympic selection.

"While team success will be the overall objective for the team, the Champions Trophy also presents itself as an excellent stage for individual players to step up and show the coaches they deserve a spot in the final Olympic squad," Dancer said.

Dancer's view is echoed by Germany coach Markus Weise who is without injured star striker Christopher Zeller, and by Maurits Hendriks, the Spain coach.

"I will nominate my team after the Champions Trophy so it is really essential for my players to give a high quality performance to improve their chances of securing a place in the final squad," Weise said.

"Obviously we will use the matches to play different systems and try out some players that still have a chance to make the final Olympic team," Hendriks said.

Last-minute

FROM PAGE 17 On 84 minutes, as Croatia maintained their almost constant pressure, Rustu earned his wages and some when only his outstretched hands edged out Srna's finely struck 20m freekick.

Extra time produced the badly needed fireworks, but only in the dying minutes.

Croatia thought they'd grabbed the winner when Klasnic struck but unbelievably after such a turgid affair Turkey struck back with Senturk equalising with a great shot into the top left hand corner to force the spotkicks.

The win came at a price to Turkey who will be missing Tuncay Sanli, Arda Turan and Emre Asik due to suspension after this trio picked up their second yellow cards of the competition while Nihat went off during extra-time clutching his groin.

Muktis to

FROM PAGE 17 (Mohammedan) and forwards Amin Rana (Sheikh Russel), Milon (Rahmatganj) and Walid (Mohammedan).

Promising players like Himel, Rajib, Rony, Bappi and Masud will provide the steam to the side who have lost all their stars to Mohammedan, Brothers and Sheikh Russel.

All set for last

FROM PAGE 17 instalment of the competition but failed to clear the group stage, winning just one match out of three.

In an all-South Asian clash, Nepal Police Club open the proceedings against Abahani at 4pm local time followed by an encounter between Regar and WAPDA at 6.30pm.

The tournament proper will be hosted by Kyrgyzstan from September 19-21, 2008, at the Spartak Stadium in Bishkek.