

NZ, WI neck and neck Decisive Napier Test from today

Cricket

APP, Napier

New Zealand skipper Daniel Vettori believes there is little separating his team and the West Indies going into Friday's decisive second cricket Test here.

Neither New Zealand, ranked eighth out of cricket's nine Test teams, with West Indies one spot higher, could claim a decisive advantage after the rain-ruined draw in the first Test in Dunedin.

"Both teams will come away thinking they are in a reasonable space and looking forward to this Test match," Vettori told journalists.

"Before the first Test it was probably a 50-50 call and it's probably pretty much stayed the same."

New Zealand scored 365 and 44 for two in Dunedin, while the West Indies made 340 in a Test in which more than two days' play were lost to rain.

Napier's McLean Park

pitch has the reputation of being a benign batting surface and both the West Indies and New Zealand pace attacks are expected to find the going tough.

New Zealand coach John Dyson believes the second Test is going to be decided by who shows the most character.

"It's going to make for hard cricket. Whoever holds their nerve and whoever plays hard the longest might come out on top," the former Australian Test batsman said.

New Zealand appear almost certain to bring in a second spinner to complement Vettori, who finished the West Indies innings in Dunedin with six for 56.

Off-spin bowler Jeetan Patel has played only five Tests since his debut against South Africa in March 2006, but Vettori sees the 28-year-old as the perfect foil for his own left-arm spinners on what promises to be a lifeless pitch.

"I probably put the onus on Jeetan and myself to be the strike bowlers throughout this Test match," Vettori said.

"The seamers will be complementary to what we're trying to do."

Opening bowler Mark Gillespie is the most likely candidate to give way to Patel, after struggling in Dunedin to finish with none for 102 from 21 overs.

The other possible contender to miss out is Kyle Mills, although he was the most successful of the pace bowlers in Dunedin, with three for 64.

All-rounder James Franklin has been cleared to play after receiving a heavy blow to the ribs while batting in the first Test.

Batsman Ross Taylor is also expected to play, despite dislocating a finger while dropping a slips catch in Dunedin.

The West Indies are also considering a second spin option to back up captain Chris Gayle, who took three for 42 in Dunedin.

Sulieeman Benn, a tall left arm spinner, could come in at the expense of fast bowler Lionel Baker, who made little

impact in his Test debut in Dunedin.

The West Indies star batting trio of Gayle, Ramnaresh Sarwan and Shivnarine Chanderpaul have every reason to be impatient to get on to McLean Park.

Gayle scored a commanding 74 before falling to a rash attempted pull shot in Dunedin and Chanderpaul was the anchor of the innings with a patient 76 from 200 balls.

TEAMS

NEW ZEALAND (from): Tim McIntosh, Jamie How, Daniel Flynn, Ross Taylor, Jesse Ryder, James Franklin, Peter Fulton, Brendon McCullum, Daniel Vettori (captain), Kyle Mills, Jain O'Brien, Mark Gillespie, Chris Martin, Jeetan Patel.

WEST INDIES (from): Chris Gayle (captain), Sewnarine Chattergoon, Xavier Marshall, Ramnaresh Sarwan, Shivnarine Chanderpaul, Brendon Nash, Denesh Ramdin, Jerome Taylor, Daren Powell, Fidel Edwards, Lionel Baker, Sulieeman Benn.

Asif hearing in London

AFP, Karachi

Pakistan's Mohammad Asif will face an Indian doping tribunal in London next month after the hearing was shifted to a neutral venue at the fast bowler's request, his lawyer said Wednesday.

The 25-year-old tested positive for the banned steroid nandrolone during the Indian Premier League (IPL) competition held between April and June this year and has since been suspended from all cricket.

The tribunal will quiz Asif about the outcome of the test result and could ban him from all cricket for two years.

It comes after a first hearing held in October proved inconclusive and the next one set for November 29 had to be put off due to the terrorist attacks in Mumbai.

Since then the tribunal was unable to hold the inquiry in India due to strained relations between Pakistan and India.

Asif's lawyer Shahid Karim said the IPL tribunal agreed to shift the hearing.

"We requested to IPL tribunal that since there has been a delay in the proceedings due to the aftermath of the Mumbai incidents, it should be shifted to a neutral venue, so it will now be held on January 24 in London," Karim told AFP.

The tribunal comprises former India captain Sunil Gavaskar, Ravi Bapat, the former vice-chancellor of India's Maharashtra University of Health Sciences, and lawyer Shirish Gupta.

Lewis on remand

AFP, London

Former England all-rounder Chris Lewis was remanded in custody on Wednesday after being charged with attempting to smuggle cocaine with an estimated street value of 200,000 pounds into Britain.

The 40-year-old was arrested on December 8 after border control officers at London's Gatwick airport found four kilogrammes (nine pounds) of the illegal drug in liquid form in fruit tins in baggage that had arrived from the Caribbean island of St Lucia.

Lewis was arrested with Chad Kirnon, a 26-year-old one-time English league basketball player, and they were questioned by customs officials before being charged.

PCB turns to Lanka 'Champions Trophy not in danger'

Cricket

CRICINFO, undated

The Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) has moved on swiftly from the cancellation of India's tour, making an official request to Sri Lanka to visit in India's place while expressing its disappointment at the Indian board's decision.

"We received a note from the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) explaining the decision," Saleem Altaf, the PCB's chief operating officer, told Cricinfo. "Obviously we are very disappointed because Pakistan-India is always a major series. They have toured many times since 2004 so it is disappointing that such a major team, with so many superstars, will not be coming."

There had been talk of the series being possibly played at a neutral venue in the Middle East, but that scenario has also been ruled out.

"Right now, there is no cricket between the two at neutral venues or anywhere," Altaf said. "We are still on normal terms with the BCCI. This is a decision that was neither in our hands nor theirs."

Though the cancellation is a blow and Pakistan will suffer financially after India's pull-out, they are at least likely to have some serious cricket to look forward to during that period.

Sri Lanka had already publicly expressed their keenness to tour in India's place and with Pakistan now sending an official invite, only logistics remain to be sorted. "We have officially requested Sri Lanka to tour in place of India," Altaf said. "They had expressed an interest and we are confident the series can go ahead."

TV rights for Sri Lanka's visit will not be as high as that for India -- AFP quoted a PCB official as saying the loss from India pulling out would be around 25-30 million dollars -- but given that Pakistan has gone over a year without a Test, playing any cricket is currently the key. If Sri Lanka do come, it will be for a series of three Tests, three ODIs and one Twenty20 international. They can only arrive after January 16 for they are on a tour of Bangladesh till then.

The matches are likely to be held in Karachi, Lahore and Multan.

Meanwhile, India may have cancelled their tour to Pakistan, but the decision is

unlikely to affect the country's status as hosts of the ICC (International Cricket Council) Champions Trophy, scheduled to be held in 2009, a senior Pakistani official said.

The tournament was postponed from the original September 2008 slot after a number of countries expressed reservations over touring Pakistan due to security concerns. It was then decided that a security review of India's tour in January would form the basis of another assessment before the tournament was cleared.

India's pulling out could affect the Champions Trophy but the PCB pointed out that security had nothing to do with the BCCI's decision. "It is too early to say anything about the Champions Trophy," Altaf told Cricinfo. "India has not pulled out over security concerns. Their government has not given them clearance to tour."

The matter is likely to be discussed during an ICC board meeting in Perth on January 31. It is understood, however, that the ICC is likely to consider the security situation in Pakistan at that point in time, and will not be influenced by India's decision not to tour, which is being seen as a political decision.

India call Pak

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resumed after a 15-year gap caused by cross-border tensions.

Indian batting legend Sunil Gavaskar had said it would be "impossible" for India to tour Pakistan in the current climate.

"Diplomatically, there has been a fall-out between the two nations and I don't see why cricket won't follow suit. So at the moment it is impossible to go ahead with the tour," he told a television channel recently.

The tour was first put in doubt when the Indian government denied permission to the national junior hockey team to visit Pakistan.

Australia cancelled a Test tour of Pakistan in March and the International Cricket Council (ICC) put off the high-profile Champions Trophy there in September due to security concerns.

The attacks in Mumbai left 172 people dead, including nine gunmen, and wounded more than 300.

England in a dilemma

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the series, said he was not in favour of reshuffling the team after just one defeat.

"We have got to try to win the game and get the victory, that's our sole purpose now," the England captain said.

"I think the boys played brilliantly last week, they played great Test cricket, but we just unfortunately got pipped on the last day.

"I don't see a reason to change much. If a few things had gone our way on the final day we would have won that Test and been 1-0 up.

"It's a bitter pill to swallow but at least we got a lot closer than we thought in really pushing this strong Indian team to the last session of the Test."

Pietersen said England were beaten in Chennai by Sachin Tendulkar's brilliant 103 not out on the final day and Virender Sehwag's blistering 83 off 68 balls on the fourth evening.

"You've got a freak of a bloke (Tendulkar) who bats at number four for India, and a freak who opens the batting (Sehwag)," said Pietersen.

India, meanwhile, are set to play the same team with the struggling Rahul Dravid getting another chance to redeem himself after making just 342 runs in his last 10 Tests.

"We have a lot of faith in Rahul," said captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni.

"The important thing for him is to get to the 30-run mark, which will give him a lot of confidence. Unfortunately, he is getting out before settling in."

Dravid, who turns 36 next month and is one of only four batsmen after Tendulkar, Brian Lara and Ricky Ponting to score 10,000 runs in both Test and one-day cricket, made just three and four in Chennai.

Dhoni said he was undecided on pushing Dravid

down the order from number three to release the pressure on the beleaguered batsman.

"It can work both ways," he said. "If (Venkatesh) Laxman goes in at three and gets out early, the pressure will return to Dravid."

"At least he gets a chance to prepare himself mentally at number three, knowing he will go in at the fall of the first wicket."

TEAMS

INDIA (probable): Gautam Gambhir, Virender Sehwag, Rahul Dravid, Sachin Tendulkar, VVS Laxman, Yuvraj Singh, Mahendra Singh Dhoni (captain), Harbhajan Singh, Zaheer Khan, Ishant Sharma, Amit Mishra.

ENGLAND (possible): Andrew Strauss, Alastair Cook, Owais Shah, Kevin Pietersen (captain), Paul Collingwood, Andrew Flintoff, Matt Prior, Stuart Broad, Graeme Swann, Steve Harmison, Monty Panesar.

Johnson wrecks SA

FROM PAGE 17

Johnson, a Queenslander, moved to Western Australia so he could be closer to his girlfriend. Now the ground has another hero of speed.

He was operating well above 140kph, gaining bounce and tricking the right-handers with his subtle arc away. De Villiers and Kallis both fell for that, while the fending Duminy was undone by speed.

Showing he wasn't all brawn, Johnson used a slower ball to Morkel that was popped to Krejza and then forced Harris to clip to leg gully. Exhausted by his effort, he needed the trainer for some muscle problems, but his body was probably overwhelmed by such instant success.

Once again the day swayed like a swing, with Australia starting and finishing with whoops of joy. In between

South Africa were the ones having most fun, especially with de Villiers and Kallis combining so well. Following the loss of Graeme Smith and Hashim Amla in nine deliveries, which cut South Africa to 3 for 110, the middle-order pair first hit back before tea, and then consolidated after the break.

Johnson's first dismissal of Neil McKenzie, relied on a horrible error and an ugly pull, but South Africa moved forward with confidence. Smith and Amla seemed to be setting the perfect platform until the trend of the opening day repeated when Australia hit back with two wickets before lunch. Krejza provided the speed bump to the 90-run partnership when Amla tried to turn a well-flighted, spinning delivery to the legside and was bowled for a breezy 47 from 67 balls.

In the next over Smith, who was battling a nagging left elbow problem, was attempting to continue his acceleration by driving at a wider delivery from Johnson, but he played on to his leg stump for 48. Both settled batsmen departed in quick succession, something that de Villiers and Kallis copied.

The pair went in the same way for the same score of 63. Separating de Villiers and Kallis was difficult as they played similar innings, mixing solid defence with punishment of loose balls. While they appeared subdued at times, they were always managing to switch the strike in a combination that looked unbreakable until Johnson intervened.

SCOREBOARD Scoreboard at stumps on the second day of the first Test between Australia and South Africa at the Western Australia Cricket Association ground in Perth on Thursday.

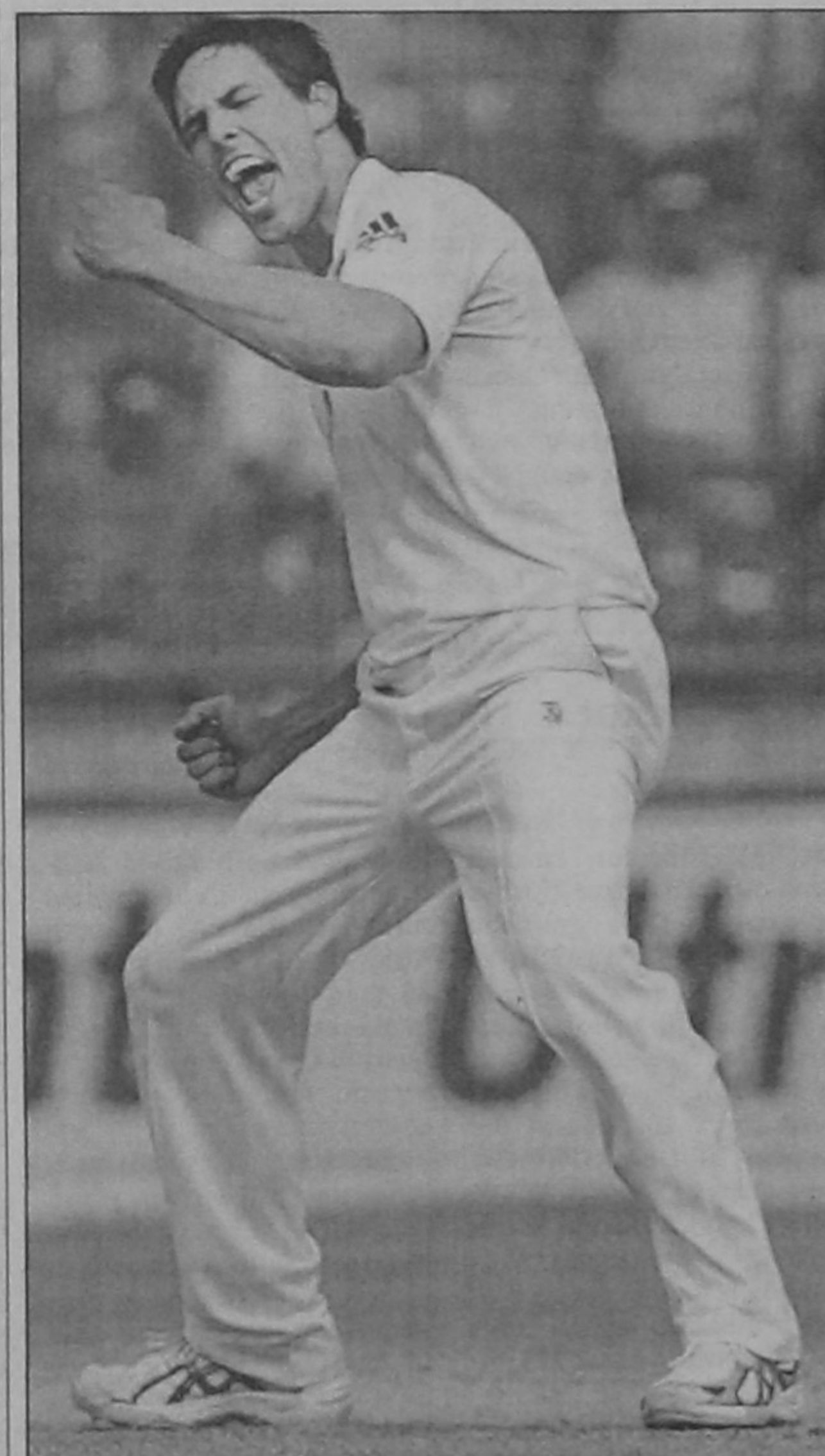


PHOTO: FILE

Australian left-amer Mitchell Johnson took seven wickets to destroy South Africa on the second day of the first Test at the WACA in Perth yesterday.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS 35 Sense; 36 Hairless; 37 Vends; 38 Dreaded; 39 Society; 40 Take to the lake; 42 Grooving on; 43 Lotion additive; 44 Under the weather; 45 Retailer; 46 Zedong; 47 Sandwich; 48 cookie; 49 Representative; 50 Mis-; 51 Soothe; 52 Soon; 53 Comedian; 54 Sand; 55 World-wide workers' grp.; 56 Strange; 57 Church's gesture; 58 Golf legend; 2 Geneticist's abbr.; 3 S-dispenser; 4 Withdraw; 5 Earnhardt; 6 Sako; 7 Saxe; 8 Self-abuse; 9 Meis; 10 Paper-back of; 11 Safe; 12 Verbe; 13 Schach; 14 Inspire; 15 Dadaist; 16 Jean; 17 Stokum; 18 Writer; 19 Kingsley; 20 Pop flavor; 21 Brass; 22 Saxes; 23 Saxes; 24 Saxes; 25 Progeny; 26 Coach; 27 Par-; 28 Sages; 29 Carina; 30 Morays; 31 Signs up; 32 Bando; 33 Crime; 34 Round; 35 Table address; 36 Eternally; 37 Birthday party; 38 must-have; 39 Pornography; 40 Lincoln and; 41 Vigoda; 42 Exist; 43 Teeny; 44 Crpe; 45 constantly; 46 Work unit.

Cryptogram puzzle with grid and solution: QJEY TFA'WJ YJRW JYFAUE. CF WAY RWFAYH PY CEJ WRQ. P WJBLFY TFA'WJ QPCPEY. OCWJRLPYU HPOCRYBJ. Yesterday's Cryptogram: COMING-OF-AGE COMEDY FLICK ABOUT SOME CATS THAT ARE IMPISH AND PLAYFUL: 'FRISKY BUSINESS'. Today's Cryptogram Clue: Y equals N

Invitation for International Tender against DFID Fund under the 9 PBSs Project of Rural Electrification Board. Includes table with tender details, funding information, and procurement entity details.