

Age doesn't matter for Thompson

CRICINFO, undated

Ewen Thompson, New Zealand's new left-arm seamer, believes he's fit and ready to make a mark in international cricket despite getting a late call-up, at the age of 29. Thompson, who was included in the squad for the two Twenty20 internationals against West Indies starting on Friday, is known in domestic circles for his commitment to fitness.

"At 29 you're starting to mature as a cricketer," Thompson told NZPA. "If you look at other sports, like athletics, you don't see many 22-23-year-olds winning that. You certainly respect your body a little bit more as you age."

"I do things a lot better than I did as a youngster and I find I get through the seasons a lot easier now."

Thompson is currently the leading wicket-taker in the State Championship with 17 wickets from four games. He said he was confident of carrying on his good form to the international scene and his skills as an all-rounder will be put to test in cricket's shortest format. The selection chief, Glenn Turner, praised Thompson for his lower-order hitting.

"I think you just got to be aggressive with the ball, vary [your deliveries] as much as you can and enjoy the occasion," Thompson said. "You just stick to what you know, and stick to your disciplines."

"It will be nice to walk out of the sheds and get the first ball under my belt and then start trying to compete."

The Twenty20s will be played in Auckland and Hamilton on December 26 and 28 respectively.

We never gave up: Dyson

CRICINFO, undated

West Indies coach John Dyson has said his team deserves credit for pushing New Zealand in an evenly-contested draw in the final Test of the two-match series. A series of convincing individual performances ensured an outright result was never in prospect in the decider, but Dyson said earning a draw was "better than losing".

"We came here obviously trying to win, as the first match was affected by the weather. We expected a very good pitch here and that's what we got. I'm pleased with the way the team fought throughout this match," Dyson said. "At no point in this match did we give up and that is what I'm very pleased about. It ended up a pretty good game and could have gone either way in the final afternoon."

Key contributors to the draw in Napier were the Australian-born Brendan Nash, with scores of 74 and 65, and fast bowler Fidel Edwards, who took a career-best 7 for 87 in the first innings before making an invaluable 20 with centurion Chris Gayle to delay New Zealand's second innings until only 60 overs were available. Nash featured in crucial partnerships in both innings to stall New Zealand's progress. In the second innings West Indies were effectively 42 for 4 when he combined with Gayle to add 124 for the fifth wicket. "He's done very well for his first series," said Dyson.

West Indies' second-innings 375 was largely down to Gayle's 197, a vital knock which spanned roughly eight-and-a-half hours, and contributions from the lower order. Though he was out first ball in the second innings, Shivnarine Chanderpaul made a vital century in the first on a batting pitch where taking 20 wickets was not easy.

The drawn series means West Indies remain at seventh place and New Zealand one behind them on the ICC Test rankings. Daniel Vettori, meanwhile, identified opener Tim McIntosh and Jamie How as positives from the series -- one that extended New Zealand's unbeaten record against West Indies to ten Tests, five won and five drawn, dating back to a ten-wicket loss at Bridgetown in 1996.

McIntosh, in his second Test, batted for 455 minutes for his first-innings 136 in Napier, and that pleased his captain. "It was an opener's hundred, I think as a New Zealand team that's something we've been crying out for a long time," said Vettori.

NZ, WI change gear First T20 international today

CRICINFO, undated

After no results in a drawn two-match Test series, it's understandable that both New Zealand and West Indies would be desperate to slip into a new format with hopes of notching up a result. While neither side has really been comfortable in Test cricket this year, it might be stretching it to say they're more comfortable in Twenty20.

New Zealand haven't proven a very good Twenty20 side, as five wins in 16 outings indicate. In fact, they've lost their last seven matches, dating back to September 2007. West Indies have just three wins from eight games -- in the ICC World Twenty20 in South Africa last year, they lost both their matches and a six-wicket defeat at the hands of Bangladesh was particularly galling.

It is against that scenario that the two teams move into the limited-overs leg of the tour -- starting with a pair of Twenty20 matches before five one-day internationals. The venue for the first game on Boxing Day is Auckland's Eden Park, where the two teams

have played just one Twenty20 match, in February 2006, which resulted in a tie when both teams scored 126.

While these two Twenty20 matches will ideally provide a platform for results after the Tests ended without a definitive winner, both sides will need to pick themselves up. Seven of the current West Indies squad were part of the Stanford Superstars side that won the 20 million dollar winner-takes-all Stanford 20/20 for 20 extravaganza in Antigua last month, so that should give the side plenty of confidence.

Jacob Oram returns for the hosts after missing the drawn Test series. He was also sidelined for the Australia series in November because of a back problem which had forced his early return home from the tour of Bangladesh and New Zealand coach Andy Moles was glad to have the hard-hitting all-rounder back.

New Zealand's line-up will look virtually the same to those who watched them in action in the Tests, with nine of that squad line-up expected to play apart.

West Indies will have a new-look opening pair compared to the Tests with Xavier

Marshall likely to partner captain Chris Gayle. Shawn Findlay and Brendan Nash will compete for a middle-order spot while all-rounder Kieron Pollard, who scored 120 runs in two innings in the WICB Cup as well as taking nine wickets at 14.22, might play if West Indies want to rest one of their strike bowlers.

The Eden Park pitch has traditionally suited batting, not always providing the bowlers sharp bounce or speed, and there could be more of the same for this Twenty20 outing. Also Auckland forecast says partly cloudy, but by the time the match starts the conditions should have cleared up and a cool evening is on the cards.

TEAMS

WEST INDIES (possible): Chris Gayle (captain), Xavier Marshall, Ramnaresh Sarwan, Shivnarine Chanderpaul, Brendan Nash, Kieron Pollard, Denesh Ramdin, Jerome Taylor, Suleiman Benn, Fidel Edwards, Shawn Findlay.

NEW ZEALAND (possible): Brendon McCullum, Jesse Ryder, Daniel Flynn, Ross Taylor, Scott Styris, Jacob Oram, Tim Southee, Daniel Vettori (captain), Kyle Mills, Mark Gillespie, Jeetan Patel.

PCB & SLC sit Saturday

CRICINFO, undated

Officials from the Pakistan and Sri Lanka cricket boards will meet at the Asian Cricket Council (ACC) in Kuala Lumpur on Saturday to discuss the fate of Sri Lanka's tour to Pakistan in January.

The tour, which materialised after India pulled out, had been confirmed between the two boards but is now in some doubt after the sacking of Arjuna Ranatunga as chairman of the interim board of Sri Lanka Cricket (SLC).

Sri Lanka's Sport Minister Gamini Lokuge, who dissolved Ranatunga's administration on Tuesday, said Ranatunga's decisions -- presumably including the one to tour Pakistan -- will be reconsidered.

"Everything has been handed over to Sports Secretary S. Liyanagama, the competent authority to oversee the cricket administration, and he'll be looking into security in Pakistan before a final decision is taken with regard to the tour," he said.

He said he would hold discussions with the President Mahinda Rajapaksa and wait for word from the foreign ministry on the issue.

Ranatunga had earlier said that Sri Lanka would not hesitate to send a team to Pakistan and expressed confidence in their ability to provide adequate security.

The Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) has not yet heard anything from the SLC, but hopes the situation will become clearer after Saturday's meeting. "Our last official contact with them was when they requested the itinerary change and we accepted. Since then we have heard nothing," Saleem Altaf, PCB's chief operating officer, told Cricinfo.

"The change in their board is an internal matter. We deal at a board-to-board level and not just with individuals. We've got a confirmation from them but the issue will be taken up at the ACC meeting. Until then we go ahead with the preparations as planned," he said.

There are indications already, however, that should the SLC show further hesitation over the tour, the matter might be taken up at the government level.

Pakistan haven't played any Tests in 2008 and their last one-day series was against West Indies in Abu Dhabi in November. They also played in the Kitzly Cup -- a tri-series tournament involving India and Bangladesh -- and the Asia Cup, but having managed full-fledged ODI series against Bangladesh and Zimbabwe at home this year, any cricket against credible opposition will be greatly appreciated.

Clark not in a hurry

CRICINFO, undated

Stuart Clark, who had a successful surgery on his right elbow last week, has said he will not rush himself back into action for Australia's tour to South Africa if it puts his career at risk.

"I would rate myself as an outside chance for the South African tour," Clark told the Sydney Morning Herald. "I'll be doing my best to make it, but I'm going to make sure I don't rush it and do more damage for the sake of making the trip."

The first Test against South Africa starts in Johannesburg on February 20 and Clark was unsure of how he would progress. He had bone spurs removed in an effort to eradicate an ongoing problem that emerged on the tour of India. He has begun a rehabilitation program, is attending regular physiotherapy sessions, and is working towards attaining a full range of movement.

"The surgeon reckons that if all goes really well, it'll be four to five weeks before I can start bowling gently again," he said. "Everything is on track in that regard, but it's hard not to feel a little edgy with the series going on."

If he is fit, it would be a dream scenario for Clark, who made a successful Test debut on the last tour of South Africa in 2005-06 where he was Player of the Series for 20 wickets at 15.85 in three games.

Clark said he had arrived in Perth hopeful of being able to play but it "all went awry from there". "The net session in Sydney on Friday wasn't great, but I was optimistic of getting through," he said. "I would tune in from time to time, then start thinking I could solve the problems of the world, then switch it off. You want to just pick the ball up and go out and solve the problem. But what good would I be? Useless."

Ricky hopes for best

CRICINFO, undated

As Ricky Ponting's toughest year in charge of the Australian team draws to a close he is facing one of the Test matches that could define his captaincy. A loss to South Africa in Melbourne this week would concede the series and cap off a disappointing year that began with a narrow but controversial series win against India at home and continued with a 2-0 loss in India.

"Yeah probably," Ponting said when asked if 2008 had been his hardest year. "Whenever the team doesn't have the success that we all want to have then as a captain your responsibility is to cop whatever criticism comes your way."

"The buck stops with me as far as our performance is concerned. I think we've all been a little bit disappointed with the way some of the results have gone. I think we all knew at the start of this year that we had some very tough cricket ahead of us."

Ponting is leading the side through a period of uncertainty the likes of which the country has rarely seen since Allan Border's reign. Ponting was the first Australian leader to give up the Ashes since Border's men regained the prize in 1989; he is desperate to

avoid being the captain to lose Australia's first series at home since Border's side went down to West Indies in 1992-93.

After South Africa's brilliant win in Perth, Australia were left in the unfamiliar situation of being 1-0 in a three-Test series. It is a position they have never recovered from for a series win in their 120 years of Test cricket. For such a comeback to occur this time, Ponting needs his senior men to lead the way.

Matthew Hayden and Brett Lee have come under fire during the week as both men have struggled to find their trademark spark and Ponting is desperate for the pair to lift themselves on the biggest stage. He also needs stronger contributions from the rest of the batting line-up. Much was made of the failure of Australia's bowlers, Mitchell Johnson aside, in Perth but it was the inability of the batsmen to build an impregnable lead that frustrated Ponting as much as anything.

In the first innings they wobbled to 3 for 15; in the second they teetered to 7 for 162. On a pitch where South Africa chased down 414 with six wickets in hand it was not a good enough effort. Ponting was at least happy that the batting problems did not seem to stem from technical failures or lack of ability.

"The top-order batting in both innings left a little bit to be desired so that's one area that

we all want to tighten up," Ponting said. "For us as a batting group there's some positives that we can take out of that, knowing that we all did get off to some good starts and probably mentally more than anything is where we let ourselves down. That's to be changed this week."

The experienced batting line-up is even more important in a side whose attack is relatively young. Peter Siddle has kept his place and will play his first Test at his home ground the MCG, despite taking only one wicket in Perth, while Nathan Hauritz has been added for his second Test of the summer.

The inexperienced men will be under intense pressure at the MCG, where the crowds are massive and vocal. The significance of the Test was not lost on Ponting; the next five days could either end Australia's dominance at home or prove their fighting qualities have not deserted them.

"There's no doubt that this is a big one and generally the Australian team under adversity or when a big moment comes up or a big game comes up, we generally bring out our best performance," Ponting said. "You can argue last week that it probably wasn't our best performance in a big game and maybe it wasn't ... now it's about making sure that everything does work out for us this week."

Good 2008 for India

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next couple of months, but there is little doubt that there is a team in place worthy of etching its name in history.

PTI adds from New Delhi, India emerged as the cricketing world's new superpower in 2008 making top-ranked Australia bite the dust while also exhibiting its financial might with the launch of the highly successful Indian Premier League which revolutionised the sport.

The year also marked the end of an era with Sourav Ganguly and Anil Kumble bidding adieu to international cricket even as 35-year-old Sachin Tendulkar continued to score high, making it clear he had no plans to retire in the near future.

As Ganguly and Kumble made an exit, a new era heralded in Indian cricket under the charismatic captaincy of Mahendra Singh Dhoni who cleverly camouflaged the

vacuum created by the departure of the two veterans and led the team to a series of triumphs during the year.

After India defeated the mighty Australia at Perth, the Dhoni-led team inflicted more humiliation on Ricky Ponting's men by defeating them 2-0 at home.

It was Australia's worst series loss since a 3-0 setback against the West Indies in 1983. As India prevented Australia from a record 17-match winning run for the second time, the signs were clear that the balance of power was finally shifting away from Ponting's men.

India also humbled South Africa and England in the year which proved to be annus mirabilis for the team.

India, placed second in the ICC Test rankings, and South Africa, just a point adrift on third, are now in race to topple Australia from the number one slot.

Destiny widen gap with Biman

SPORTS REPORTER

Destiny 2000 opened up a two-point lead over title contenders Bangladesh Biman after 13 rounds in the Dutch-Bangla First Division Chess League.

The 12th and 13th round matches were held yesterday at the Chess Federation hall room with Destiny, who beat Farashganj 3-1 and Dhaka University 4-0, taking their collection to 44.5 points.

On 42.5 points, Biman -- who led the table till the ninth round -- recorded identical 3-1 wins against Leonine and Pritam-Prism.

Pritam-Prism, who defeated Air Destiny 3-1 in their other game, were a distant third with 38 points.

Mahela has no doubt

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We have five quality pacers and two of them are injured and they are not here fortunately. For us it's a good place to be in. We will take a look at the wicket and pick the bowler best suited for the wicket.

"In the last Test match that we played Dhammika Prasad bowled brilliantly against a very quality opposition on a flat wicket. He has got pace, seam, swing, everything. And Vaasy, you know what he brings into the table," said Jayawardene.

It would be a massive task for the Tigers to face up to this bowling attack but Jayawardene was generous enough to praise the hosts.

"They (Tigers) have got some quality players. I know they make mistakes but at the same time there are guys who scored hundreds and five wickets against us. So they have got the quality. So we got

to make sure that we don't give them any advantage. From ball one tomorrow, we start putting pressure on them," said Jayawardene.

Some cynics have suggested that the Test match would not even last into the rest day but the Sri Lanka skipper did not want to hurry up matters.

"I don't care when the match is finished as I am not in a hurry to go back home. I haven't played like that before but you know it will be good for fast bowlers to have a break."

"But it all depends on what the situation is after three days, whether it will stop the momentum or start something going. It'll be interesting and something new for me," admitted Jayawardene.

But the best was saved till last when the Lankan captain was asked of his reaction to Shahadat Hossain's words. Here's the full version: "He has

got his opinion; I have no issues with that. I have no grudges against him. If he is comfortable bowling to me without the grunt I am happy with that. I have no cause."

"I haven't asked him to stop bowling at me. I want him to bowl. I just asked him not to make noises, that's all. I have seen him bowling in the nets and he doesn't make the noise. So I am sure he can bowl without the noise."

"That is within the laws and I am just applying that. I mean if the other batsmen are happy to bat with it then its fine, but it's me. If you wear black wristband with the red ball, some batsman will ask you to remove it. It's same with the plaster with a spinner. Some batsman will allow you to bowl with that, some don't."

"So it's like that. I hope it's not a bad thing. Don't complicate it too much. It's just between him and me."

Nasir inspires MSC

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An otherwise defensive Arambagh got their lone chance in the 25th minute and almost stunned their mighty neighbours but Mostafa Kaba headed a corner by Nayan onto the crossbar with Tabith Awal's silly effort on the rebound hitting the side netting.

Egyptian midfielder Hazem, who scored their match winner in a 1-0 away win against Khulna in the last round, picked up Bukola with a fine lob seven minutes later but Mohammedan's top scorer from Nigeria was denied by Piru, who dived to parry an angled shot.

Nasir came into action soon but he failed to beat Piru, who was getting better save by save. The Arambagh custodian pulled off yet another brilliant save in the injury time when he left his goal to block Bukola's shot after Robin had created an opening.

The second half belonged to Nasir, the fullback who has effectively turned into an

attacking midfielder. His speed, skill and ability to score have proved that the young boy is ready to take his place in the national team, as a rightback even if not as a midfielder, after the ageing Hassan Al Mamun's retirement, which is very close.

He opened up the rival defence two minutes after resumption but Arambagh's defensive shell blocked three attempts inside from the box before finally giving up on the hour.

This time, Nasir exchanged passes at the right flank with Bukola before getting a rebound off Piru following a strong low drive, giving a lurking Robin the chance to slot in his sixth league goal.

After the inevitable happened, Nasir came close to score within four minutes but for Piru's acrobatics.

The Arambagh shot stopper finally showed his nerve during a corner by Hazem, making a weak clearance with his fists. Bukola returned the ball with a backvolley to Robin

who played it back towards the top of the box for Nasir, who neatly put the ball into the top left corner in the 68th minute.

For Nasir, who had also scored one in Mohammedan's 3-0 first-leg win over Arambagh, it was the fourth league goal.

It could have been 3-0 again but substitute Komol hit the crossbar with a left-footer, following which Mohammedan seemingly gave up the chase for goals.

Yellow card: Tutul (Arambagh)

TEAMS

MOHAMMEDAN: Aminul, Kamal, Emmanuelle, Rajani (Saikat), Ripon, Nasir, Aziz, Hazem, Faisal Mahmud, Bukola (Komol) and Robin (Roni).

ARAMBAGH: Piru (Mitul), Tutul, Ratan (Nadir), Akram, Shahjada, Moudud, Kaba, Moloy, Nayan, Tabith (Turjo) and Nicodemus.

Referee: Tayeb Hasan.

Focus firmly on cricket

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"Champaka Ramanayake (bowling coach) has been working with all the bowlers. But at end of the day its upto Shahadat (Hossain), Mash (Mashrafe Bin Mortaza) and Robin (Mahbubul Alam) to hit the stumps, using their skills to the best of their abilities and hitting the right areas," informed Siddons.

"And they all are going really well at the moment, so I expect them to do well. And Shakib of course doing a good job, hopefully he will keep striking," he headed.

Interestingly, Bangladesh will look forward to engaging a different kind of opponent -- the umpiring of West Indian Steve Bucknor and hope that

he will be accurate enough against them this time.

"We have had some bad decisions in the recent past, I think the decision that could have gone on our way could have made a lot of difference to the result of the game. Whether it is Steve or other umpires I don't know, but we just play. When we start getting success, I think a lot of 50-50 will come our way. So we will have that time -- hopefully in this game," was the cheeky answer of Siddons.

TEAMS

BANGLADESH (from): Mohammad Ashraful (captain), Mashrafe Bin Mortaza (vice-captain), Zunaed Siddiqui, Imrul Kayes, Rokibul

Hasan, Tamim Iqbal, Mehrab Hossain, Shakib Al Hasan, Rajin Saleh, Mushfiqur Rahim (wicketkeeper), Shahadat Hossain, Enamul Haque, Mahbubul Alam, Sajidul Islam.

SRI LANKA (from): Mahela Jayawardene (Captain), Kumar Sangakkara (vice-captain), Malintha Warnapura, Michael Vandort, Thilina Samaraweera, T. M. Dilshan, Prasanna Jayawardane (wicketkeeper), Chaminda Vaas, Muttiah Muralidaran, Dhammika Prasad, Chamara Kapugedera, Farveez Maharoof, Dilhara Fernando, Thilina Thushara Miranda and Rangana Herath.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

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