

Onus on sisters

AFP, Melbourne



The Williams sisters have emerged as the bookies' favourites for more Grand Slam glory at the Australian Open...

Triple champion Serena just pips her sister Venus as favourite, with other realistic contenders including world number one Jelena Jankovic...

The ever-confident Serena is searching for her 10th Grand Slam title and gets her campaign underway against China's Meng Yuan on Tuesday.

"I'm actually pretty happy about my preparation. I felt like I got some really good matches under me in Sydney and still with plenty of time to rest and get ready for this event," she said.

Williams added that she felt she was a better player now than five years ago when she dominated the game, winning Roland Garros, Wimbledon and the US Open in storming 2002.

"I hope I'm better than what I was five years ago. I would say that I am," she said. Seven-time Grand Slam champion Venus has never won the title here but feels the time could be ripe for her to lift the trophy.

"I don't feel any extra pressure or anything like that because I haven't been fortunate enough to win here," she said ahead of her opener against Germany's Angelique Kerber, also Tuesday.

"I just stay focused on what I need to do. Obviously, I want to win every event. I feel good. I definitely feel like one of the players who has the opportunity to take it home."

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On-song Olympic champion Dementieva is a dark horse but clings to the belief that she can break through for her first Grand Slam title after 10 years of underachievement.

The world number four is in a rich vein of form, capturing back-to-back WTA titles in Auckland and Sydney.

Dementieva, 27, is confident she can become the second oldest maiden women's Slam winner of the Open era, after Czech Jana Novotna (29) at Wimbledon in 1998.

"I do have such goals in my career, and I'm trying to achieve them. I don't know if it's going to come soon or not, but I'm trying so hard," she said.

Serbia's Jankovic is world number one despite never winning a Grand Slam, and is another who could be poised to go the distance after crashing in the semis to Sharapova last year.

She is relaxed about her chances. "If I win it, you know, it's great for me. But I play because I like to play. I enjoy the sport," she said.

"If I win a Grand Slam, it will be great result, great achievement. But I'm already number one and I believe all of these girls here want to be where I am now. So I'm just enjoying it and really having fun."

Ivanovic, who lost to Sharapova in last year's final, was bundled out of the Brisbane International last week in the quarterfinals by Amelie Mauresmo.

The French Open champion knows she has to knuckle down if she is to have any chance here.

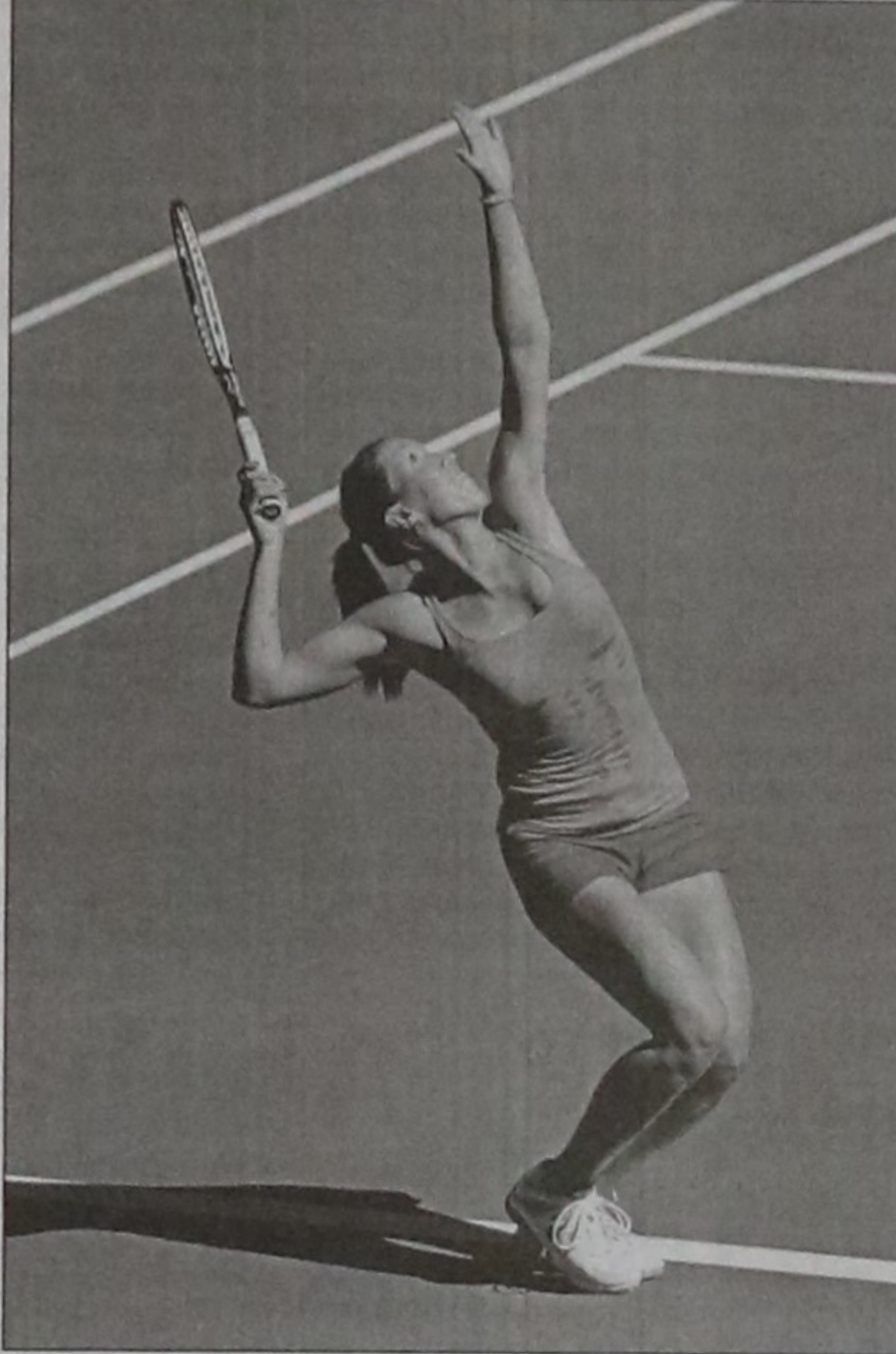
"Unfortunately, I didn't find my best tennis in Brisbane, but it was a good work-out and I have a lot to work to do," she said.

The effervescent 21-year-old needs a lift after a poor second half of last season. After winning her first Grand Slam at Roland Garros, she lost 10 out of 20 matches and won

only one title, a tier-two event in Linz.

Safina is also well placed to make her Grand Slam breakthrough after climbing to third in the world rankings at the end of 2008. She heads into the tournament in the best physical shape of her career.

Fellow Russians Svetlana Kuznetsova and Vera Zvonareva are seen as outside chances.



World number one Jelena Jankovic of Serbia serves during a training session before the start of the Australian Open today.

Siam on top

SPORTS REPORTER

Ikrumul Haque Siam maintained solo lead in the 29th National Sub-junior Chess Championships with maximum seven points after yesterday's 7th round games at the BCF hall-room.

Siam beat Shahidul Alam Abir in the seventh round to stay one point ahead of defending champion Abdullah Al Saif, Ahely Sarkar and Fahad Rahman who are chasing the leaders.

In other matches, Saif beat Aninda, Fahad beat Ahariat, Ahely beat Pratibha, Tani beat Sharmin and Papel beat Tamanna.

Asif released after airport confusion

CRICINFO, undated

Suspended Pakistan fast bowler Mohammad Asif narrowly landed in another controversy on Saturday, Asif, who arrived in India to sort out financial issues with his Indian Premier League (IPL) team Delhi Daredevils, was stopped at the Delhi airport due to visa-related problems, but was later allowed to move out following intervention by the Pakistan High Commission officials, PTI reported.

Asif had flown into Mumbai from Karachi and took a connecting flight to Delhi where he was stopped by immigration authorities at the airport for having "insufficient documents."

"Asif has a five-year visa issued to him which states he can travel to India as an international cricketer to play in the Indian Premier League," a source said. "But since he has gone on a private visit and not to play cricket, he was supposed to inform the Indian High Commission in Islamabad for clearance which he didn't do."



Did U Know?

John Newcombe and Tony Roche, both Australians, won 12 men's doubles Grand Slam titles (four Australian, two French, one US, and five Wimbledon) between 1965 and 1976.

India call up rookie for SL ODIs

Cricket

AFP, Mumbai

India's cricket selectors on Sunday included uncapped all-rounder Ravindra Jadeja for the five one-day matches and a Twenty20 international against Sri Lanka starting later this month.

Jadeja, 20, replaced injured off-spinner Harbhajan Singh in the 15-man squad announced by Sanjay Jagdale, the joint secretary of the Board of Control for Cricket in India, here.

"Harbhajan Singh is suffering from a hamstring injury and Jadeja will take his place in the squad," Jagdale said. Left-handed Jadeja gave a good account of himself in India's premier first-class tournament for the Ranji Trophy, picking 42 wickets from nine matches while scoring 737 runs.

Medium-pace Praveen Kumar was recalled at the expense of batsman Virat Kohli after being ignored for the home one-day series against England which India won 5-0.

The Indians will play the first two one-dayers in the central town of Dambulla on January 28 and 30. The remaining three games will be held in Colombo on February 2, 5 and 8.

The Twenty20 international is to be played in Colombo on February 10. India last toured Sri Lanka in July-August 2008, losing the

Abahani extend

FROM PAGE 17 chances in the last five minutes but Emily, who was taken off at the break, shot just wide under pressure from the defenders while Emeka again found the safe hands of Piru.

The Sky-Blues began lively after the break but Emeka and Zahed fluffed three opportunities before Arambagh paid for coming out of their defensive shell for the first time.

Arambagh, who has little chance to finish among the top eight for a place in this year's Super Cup after remaining on 11 points, failed to test Biplab at the Abahani goal for once but their first penetration inside the rival zone sparked a counter attack.

Ibrahim raced from their own half and squared the ball to Zahed, who tapped it behind the defence line for a speeding substitute Tipu to toe-poke past Piru to double the lead in the 70th minute. Arambagh visibly gave up after the second goal and two

minutes later, Emeka finally kept a sublime shot on target, swerving in a low drive into Piru's left hand post from the top of the area. It was Emeka's 12th goal, the same number the second highest scorer of the ongoing competition had scored in the inaugural B. League for Mohammedan.

There was more and Siraji sealed the victory in the 77th minute. The Abahani rightback overlapped from the middle of the pitch and fired into the top far corner from a very tight angle to stun substitute keeper Mitul, who had yet to touch the ball.

TEAMS ABAHANI: Biplab, Siraji, Nazrul, Sujan, Waly, Zahed, Pranotosh, Emeka, Abul (Sony), Emily (Tipu) and Ibrahim (Obaidur). ARAMBAGH: Piru (Mitul), Tutul, Nadir, Akram, Kaba, Moudud (Turjo), Moloy, Nayan, Imrul, Surat, and Tabith (Parvez).

Referee: Monsur Azad.

Palolic shock champs Russel

SPORTS REPORTER

Newcomers Palolic upset defending champions Sheikh Russel KC 3-1 on the opening day of the Senior Division KDS Metropolitan Table Tennis League yesterday at the Woodendfloor Gymnasium.

Last year's first division champions Palolic rode on West Bengal player Soumyajit Sarker's superiority to pull off the surprise. The Indian import defeated Billah brothers, Mahub and Mostafa, while Ripon defeated Russel's Shovon to shape the victory.

Mostafa won Russel's lone match against Shahed.

In other matches, Biman blanked Engineers Club 3-0, Armanitola beat Mariners 3-0 and Wari defeated Brothers Union by the same margin.

Ajax received walkover against Mohammadpur Boys.

Pakistan

FROM PAGE 17 "We will definitely be positive and attack him."

Pakistan's first plan is to outwit Sri Lanka with pace as they named six fast bowlers in their squad of 15 with fit-again Shoaib Akhtar leading the pack.

Akhtar, 33, missed all matches in Pakistan's 3-0 win against the West Indies at Abu Dhabi in November last year.

The home team can also take heart from Sri Lanka's unimpressive batting despite winning the tri-series in Bangladesh last week.

Pakistan hastily arranged the one-day series with Sri Lanka after India pulled out of a planned tour amid heightened political tension in the wake of the Mumbai attacks.

The second match will be played here on Wednesday, while the final match is in Lahore on Saturday.

TEAMS PAKISTAN (from): Shoaib Malik (captain), Misbahul Haq, Salman Butt, Younis Khan, Shahid Afridi, Kamran Akmal, Sohail Tanvir, Shoaib Akhtar, Umar Gul, Rao Iftikhar, Saeed Ajmal, Khuram Manzoor, Sohail Khan, Yasir Arafat, Umar Amin.

SRI LANKA (from): Mahela Jayawardene (captain), Kumar Sangakkara, Sanath Jayasuriya, Upul Tharanga, Chamara Kapugedera, Jehan Mubarak, Tillakaratne Dilshan, Thilina Kandamby, Muthiah Muralidaran, Ajantha Mendis, Farveez Maharoof, Dilhara Fernando, Nuwan Kulasekara, Thilan Thushara, Angelo Mathews.

Umpires: Nigel Llong and Nadeem Ghouri.

Ana wants to make up for BBQ blues

AFP, Melbourne

Glamorous Serb Ana Ivanovic admits she was not the life of the party when her Melbourne-based relatives threw a barbecue in her honour following her defeat in last year's Australian Open final.

Rather than tempt fate, Ivanovic's relations this year held the annual get together on Friday, before the season-opening Grand Slam begins, leaving the fifth seed free to concentrate on making amends for last year's loss.

The 21-year-old said the defeat to Maria Sharapova last year overshadowed one of the few chances she has to socialise with relatives while on the tour and she did not want it happening again.

"Travelling on the tennis tour can be a lonely experience, so to have family around you during a tournament is always special," Ivanovic said in a diary for the Herald Sun newspaper.

"I remember having a barbecue at their house last year, on the night I lost in the final."

"I was so disappointed, I was thinking about the match the whole time and didn't enjoy it the way I should have. This kind of memory motivates me to try to do better this year."

In addition to catching up with relatives, the reigning French Open champion said she had enjoyed visiting Melbourne's restaurants in the lead-up to the tournament.

The only setback in her preparations came when she was stuck in a lift early in the week.

"It was scary, but luckily my phone had reception so I was able to call for help," she said.

We want

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"We did play well against them. We have got a lot of positives from that match. We will play in this series with the confidence we got from that match," said Utseya who confirmed he did watch the dramatic final between Bangladesh and Sri Lanka and enjoyed the competitiveness.

The 23-year-old was also confident that if his side could make any score over two hundred, it would be possible to win.

"I think it's a competitive total. If we put the ball in the right areas and minimise the extras, we should be able to defend anything over 200," added Utseya.

Ash expects

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Zimbabwe and there will be pressure to win this series 3-0.

TEAMS BANGLADESH (probable): Tamim Iqbal, Zunaed Siddiqui, Mohammad Ashraful (captain), Shakib Al Hasan, Rokibul Hasan, Mahmudullah Riyad, Nayeem Islam, Mushfiqur Rahim (wicketkeeper), Mashrafe Bin Mortaza, Nazmul Hossain, Rubel Hossain.

ZIMBABWE (from): Prosper Utseya (captain), Elton Chigumbura, Graeme Cremer, Keith Dabengwa, Hamilton Masakadza, Stuart Matsikenyeri, Christopher Mpfu, Tawanda Mupariwa, Forster Mutizwa, Raymond Price, Edward Rainsford, Vusumuzi Sibanda, Tatenda Taibu (wicketkeeper), Malcolm Waller, Sean Williams.

PHOTO: INTERNET

Australian opener Shaun Marsh plays one down to long-on during his match-winning knock of 78 against South Africa at Bellerive Oval in Hobart yesterday.

Dawn

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Djokovic is breathing down Federer's neck for the second ranking but also has made an unedifying start to the season.

The Serb blamed a change of racquet after losing to Ernest Gulbis in Doha, and was then ousted in the Sydney International semis by Finland's Jarkko Nieminen. "My game's not 100 per cent, but it's getting there," Djokovic said.

Sixth-ranked Tsonga dazzled Melbourne with his run to the final last year, but his build-up has been hit by a back injury which forced him out of the Sydney International.

Czech player Radek Stepánek is buoyed by his Brisbane International win over Spaniard Fernando Verdasco, while Marin Cilic was victorious in Chennai and ex-number one Lleyton Hewitt may be a dangerous floater on home soil.

Federer opens his campaign on Monday against Andreas Seppi while Djokovic is playing Andrea Stoppini. On Tuesday, Nadal faces Christophe Rochus and Murray plays Andrei Pavel.

Strauss bucks KP up

Cricket

BBC ONLINE, undated

New England captain Andrew Strauss expects batsman Kevin Pietersen to star for England in the West Indies and in time become a cricket legend.

Strauss became skipper in the wake of Pietersen's resignation earlier this month and has not been slow to pick his brains ahead of the Caribbean tour.

"I've spoken to Kevin a few times and I've been very pleasantly surprised by his attitude," he told BBC Sportsworld. "I have no doubt that he will go to the West Indies and get millions of runs."

He continued: "It is easy to use the word legend -- but I think he will become a legend of the game."

"People like that, when their backs are against the wall, they invariably go out and perform. Kevin is clearly passionate about playing cricket for England for a long period of time."

Strauss acknowledged that it had been a "pretty low time" for everyone connected with

the team following the rift which led to Pietersen's resignation and head coach Peter Moores being sacked by the England and Wales Cricket Board.

But he said: "I've been very reassured by the chaps that we have not been badly affected as a group and any divisions the press made out were in the side are not evident."

"The players are excited about going to West Indies which is a great tour. No-one likes reading these things in the press and a tour is a great way to bring people closer together."

England play their first match in the Caribbean on January 25 when they take on a St. Kitts & Nevis Invitation XI, with the first Test following in Jamaica on February 4.

The squad sets off on Wednesday and Strauss admitted his task has been made harder because there was no head coach to help with the preparations.

"It's been very busy," said Strauss, who previously led England in five Tests and 13 one-day internationals in 2006. "Everything is being thrust firmly at my door to get every-

thing ready for the tour, but at the same time it's a fantastic position to be in as I've got a blank canvas to work with and it gives me an opportunity to put things in place."

England are still searching for a replacement for Moores, with Graham Ford and Tom Moody among the potential candidates, and Strauss said he wants a chance to have an input before the next head coach is appointed.

Strauss was also open about his desire to captain England in this summer's Ashes series against Australia.

He said: "I've been given the opportunity to captain England and I'm fairly hopeful it is going to be a long-term appointment."

"That's certainly the indication I've been given from the ECB and that's the way I'm looking at it."

"At the moment I think the England team could do with a bit of stability at the top."

"I'd be very surprised if I don't have an input into which the next coach is going to be. I don't think the captain should choose the coach, but he should have some say."

Aussies draw level

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Ponting eventually fell in quick succession. Ponting holed out to De Villiers at deep backward square leg, while Marsh was superbly caught by Kallis at extra cover off JP Duminy's occasional off-spin.

At that stage, Australia were 166-3 with 17 overs remaining and the Hussey brothers at the crease, and when the powerplay was finally taken the first ball saw Mike Hussey (28) spoon Kallis to Herschelle Gibbs at backward point.

Cameron White fell cheaply and David Hussey, Brad Haddin, James Hopes and Ryan Harris -- making his ODI debut in place of Shaun Tait -- hit just two boundaries between them as they got bogged down in the final overs.

South Africa lost Hashim Amla cheaply at the start of their reply and Gibbs was caught on the mid-wicket boundary for 19 when he tried to hit Hopes over the top.

But with Kallis and De Villiers adding 93 for the third wicket, the visitors must have been optimistic of forging a 2-

0 lead in the series. As with Marsh and Ponting, however, both fell in quick succession to derail the South African reply.

Within nine balls, Ben Hilfenhaus, playing in front of his home Tasmanian crowd, had Kallis caught at backward point, while De Villiers stumbled while attempting a second run and was run out to leave them 156-3 in the 37th over.

Harris then bowled Neil McKenzie to claim his first international wicket.

As in the first one-dayer, South Africa delayed taking their batting powerplay until the start of the 45th over -- by which time they needed 60 from six overs.

But Nathan Bracken kept it tight, showing the control which has seen him ranked among the top ODI bowlers in the world -- and Duminy was run out for 35 after failing to pick a yorker from the left-arm seamer.

Not even some lusty blows from Mark Boucher (37 not out), who lifted Hilfenhaus for a huge six in the last over, and Albie Morkel could prevent

South Africa from finishing short. Honours are now even going into Friday's third ODI in Sydney.

"I don't think we can be too disappointed. Both sides could be 2-0 up at this stage, it has been that close," said Botha.

"It is probably a fair reflection at the moment that the teams are locked at 1-1 and there is everything to play for in the three remaining fixtures."

SCOREBOARD Scoreboard of the second one-day international between Australia and South Africa at Bellerive Oval in Hobart on Sunday:

Table with columns: Bowler, O, M, R, W. Rows include Marsh c Gibbs b Duminy 78, Warner c Boucher b Steyn 5, Ponting c De Villiers b Kallis 64, Hussey c Gibbs b Kallis 28, Hussey c Morkel b Ntini 19, White c Botha b Steyn 1, Haddin run out (Ntini) 23, Hopes c Morkel b Ntini 8, Harris c Duminy b Ntini 7, Bracken not out 0, Extras: (lb-8, w-8) 16, Total: (For 9 wks in 50 overs) 249, Did not bat: Hilfenhaus, Fall of wickets: 1-17, 2-152, 3-166, 4-190, 5-197, 6-218, 7-232, 8-249, 9-249.

Table with columns: Bowler, O, M, R, W. Rows include Steyn 10 2 36 2, Ntini 9 0 39 3, Kallis 10 0 57 2, Morkel 8 0 46 0, Botha 7 0 40 0, Duminy 6 0 23 1.

Table with columns: Bowler, O, M, R, W. Rows include Gibbs c Hussey b Hopes 19, Amla c White b Hilfenhaus 7, Kallis c Hussey b Hilfenhaus 82, De Villiers run out 44, Duminy run out (Haddin) 35, McKenzie b Harris 8, Boucher not out 37, Morkel not out 11, Extras: (b-3, lb-2, w-5) 10, Total: (For 6 wks in 50 overs) 244, Did not bat: Botha, Steyn, Ntini.

Table with columns: Bowler, O, M, R, W. Rows include Hilfenhaus 10 2 60 2, Bracken 10 0 38 0, Harris 10 0 54 1, Hopes 10 0 43 1, Hussey 7 0 28 0, White 3 0 16 0.

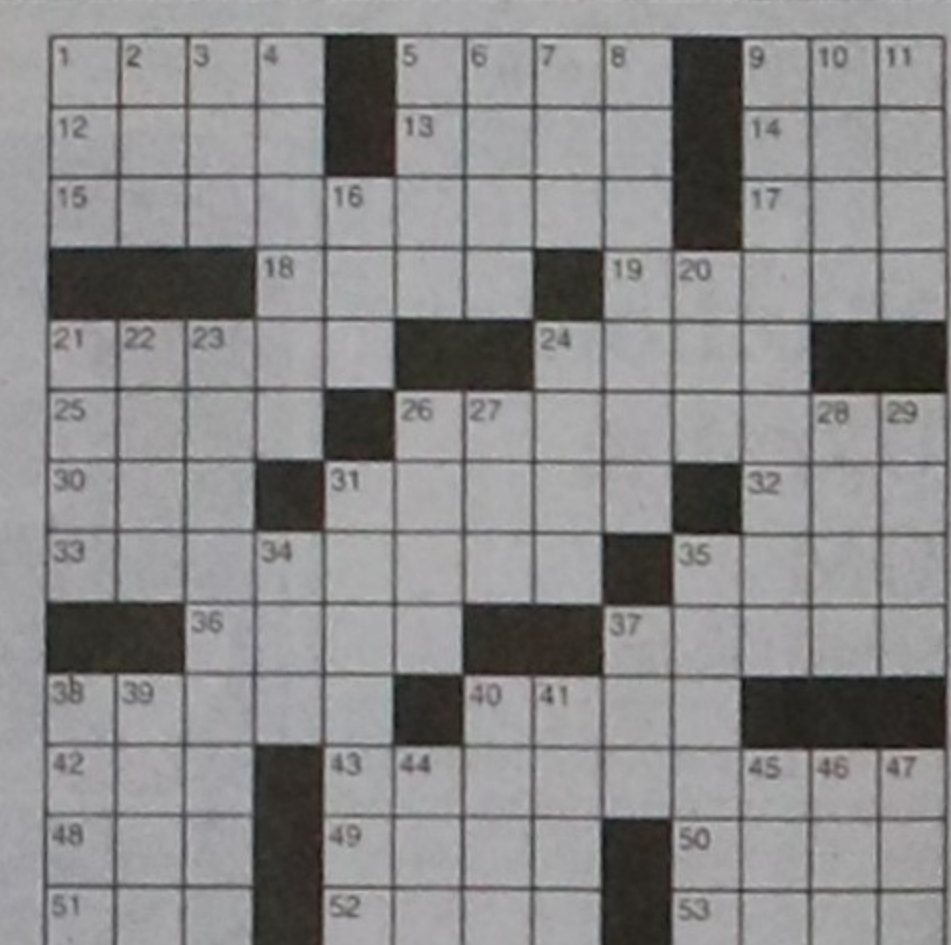
Result: Australia won by 5 runs. Man-of-the-match: Shaun Marsh. Toss: South Africa. Umpires: IJ Gould (England) and RJ Tucker. Match referee: RS Madugalle (Sri Lanka).



Australian opener Shaun Marsh plays one down to long-on during his match-winning knock of 78 against South Africa at Bellerive Oval in Hobart yesterday.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

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CRYPTOQUIP GLCH QTA FTRVBHE RGH PVDF RGH BTARASVHS KTPRHE TF GVP KSVCLRH KSTKHSRQ? "FT ESHPP KLPPVDF." Yesterday's Cryptoquip: BECAUSE I AM A SOUTHPAW WHO HAPPENS TO BE BIG AND STRONG. DO PEOPLE CONSIDER ME A HEFTY LEFTY? Today's Cryptoquip Clue: P equals S