

NZ tour litmus test for Dhoni, says Ganguly

PTI, Mumbai

Expressing concern over lack of practice matches for the Indian cricket team on the tour of New Zealand, former skipper Sourav Ganguly on Friday said the visit will test Mahendra Singh Dhoni's leadership ability.

"The series will judge Dhoni as a captain as he has led the squad mostly in the sub-continent. But the side did well under him to beat Australia in the ODI's down under," Ganguly told reporters here.

The left handed batsmen, who led India during the last tour to New Zealand in 2002, said lack of match practice for the squad in tough conditions will only add to the challenges.

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Rapid Chess title Sagar's

SPORTS REPORTER

FIDE Master Minhazuddin Ahmed Sagar edged Grandmaster Abdullah Al Rakib in tiebreakers to become unbeaten champion in the Shaheed Dibash Rapid Chess tournament, sponsored by Spain Probashi Daba Samaj in assistance with Bangladesh Chess Federation.

Sagar and Rakib both earned eight points in the daylong competition at the chess hall-room yesterday before being separated by the tie-breaking system.

Four players earned seven points each with GM Ziaur Rahman finishing third. He was followed by FM Abu Sufian Shakil, Arman Monir and Mohammad Ali in the

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Did U Know?

American legend Pete Sampras is the highest earner in professional tennis, claiming an incredible 41,994,440 dollars during his 13-year career.



Sachin Tendulkar

(Indian batting maestro) "I used to receive letters written in blood, but not anymore." Reflecting on how the adulation directed at him has changed over the years.



TEN Sports

Pakistan v Sri Lanka
First Test, Day One
Live from 11:00am

ESPN

English Premiership
Aston Villa v Chelsea
Live at 6:40pm
Arsenal v Sunderland
Live at 8:55pm

STAR Sports

English Premiership
Bolton v West Ham
Live at 8:55pm

Man United v Blackburn
Live at 11:25pm

Spanish Primera Liga
Barcelona v Espanyol
Live at 1:30am (Sunday)

Sevilla v Atletico
Live at 3:00am (Sunday)

Cricket stifling competition?

AL MUSABBIR SADI

Just when it looked safe for football and cricket to settle down at their respective homes, the long-lingering ghost returned.

The recent comments of the country's sports minister and cricket officials stating that they want to host the opening ceremony of the 2011 Cricket World Cup at the Bangabandhu National Stadium and are also looking forward to having it as an alternate venue for World Cup matches has given birth to a burning question: Will the old tug-of-war between football and cricket over the national number one stadium resurface?

If it really happens, where will football go? No one would argue cricket's rise to be the number one game in recent times but everyone feels that no country can rely on just one game's glory and put the other sports to bed.

It was by their own choice that cricket high-ups had decided to quit the BNS and make Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur their 'home'. Although many had then severely criticised the move, it proved to be a wise decision and the Mirpur venue is now well recognised worldwide for its excellent facilities, especially for ground conditions.

After cricket's departure, a healthy atmosphere was created as football found hard ground beneath its feet. They got a permanent ground and after a year of hibernation, football rolled again under the federation's charismatic new leadership.

After a long time, the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) has successfully completed the second edition of the B. League and also announced a busy schedule for the latter part of 2009.

BFF's new president Kazi Salahuddin has not only introduced new competitions but he also ensured lucrative sponsorship deals that were unheard of in the past. Almost a dead game a year ago, country's once most popular sport is now set to revive its glory.

But even talks of cricket's possible return could end all that.

If the venue is chosen for the World Cup, for just the opening ceremony or matches, it will have to go through a lot of renovation. To do that, it will need over a year, meaning cessation of all football competitions. The ground now belongs to football and athletics as the government has also built an expensive track here.

Can this country afford to remove the track and put up another one? It can be mentioned that top athletics competitions were also halted for seasons when the track at the Mirpur Stadium was removed for the making of the 'home of cricket'.

With the South Asian Games coming to the country in early 2010, the BNS remains the only venue for preparation of local athletes as well as for competition.

There is no need for jeopardising all of that when cricket has both Mirpur and Fatullah grounds in the capital and international venues at Bogra, Chittagong and Khulna within an hour's distance as the crow flies.

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PHOTO: STAR

A Narayanganj player (2nd from left) tries to stop her Ansar opponent from taking possession of the ball during their Citycell Women's National Football Championship match at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

LOCAL SNIPPETS

SPORTS REPORTER

Harinsinga High School defeated Islamia High School by 130 runs in the Standard Chartered Young Tigers National School Cricket competition at the Gaibandha Stadium yesterday.

Batting first, Harinsinga boys made 192-9 in 36.4 overs and later bowled out Islamia for 62 in 22.2 overs. Rubel top scored for the winners with 49 runs.

WOMEN'S FOOTBALL

Bangladesh Ansar advanced to the semifinals of the Citycell National Women's Football Championship with an emphatic 4-0 win over Narayanganj at the Bangabandhu National Stadium.

Nubai Ching Marma and Suinu Pru Marma each scored a brace in Ansar's second successive win in the finals after an 11-0 crushing of Rajshahi in the group opener.

Suinu Pru Marma was adjudged player of the match.

Sathkira registered their first win also on the same day to keep their hopes alive for a semifinal berth, beating Rajshahi 2-0 at the same venue.

Salma Sultana and player of the match Jannatul Ferdous scored one goal each for the winners.

DIV III FOOTBALL

Rainbow SC edged Shantinagar Club by a solitary goal in the Citycell 3rd Division Football

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Army, BKSP win

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh Army and BKSP won their respective matches in the Shaheed Smriti Hockey Tournament at the Moulana Bhasani National Hockey Stadium yesterday.

Army blanked Bangladesh Air force 4-0 with Hamidul, Sirajul, Jamal and Sanwar scoring one goal apiece.

In another match, BKSP framed past Bangladesh Navy by a lone goal scored by Puskar Khisa.

Windies' great escape

Cricket

AFP, St John's

England and West Indies drew the third Test on Thursday when play was called off due to bad light with the home side on 370-9 and with four overs to bowl at the Antigua Recreation Ground.

West Indies still lead the five-match series 1-0, but they were indebted to their last pair of Daren Powell, who finished unbeaten on 22 off 55 balls in a knock spread over 65 minutes, and Fidel Edwards who made five in a stay which ate up a crucial 34 minutes.

Adding to England's problems was a worrying right hip injury suffered by star all-rounder Andrew Flintoff which could rule him out of the fourth Test in Barbados from February 26. He will undergo a scan later on Friday.

West Indies had earlier seen Ramnaresh Sarwan make 106, his 13th Test hundred.

"It's pretty tough to take. We had to work exceptionally hard for our wickets today," admitted England skipper Andrew Strauss who set West Indies an unlikely 503-run victory target.

"The guys dug deep. Flintoff was bowling on one leg, so to get very close is a great effort."

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Heroes hail drawn Test

Cricket

AFP, St John's

Two key players who helped West Indies draw the third Test against England on Thursday felt it was one of the team's finest performances in recent memory.

Ramnaresh Sarwan, who led the West Indies batting with his 13th Test hundred, a defiant 106, described the Test as "one of the best he has ever played in".

And Daren Powell, who batted agonisingly for 10 overs in a last wicket stand with Fidel Edwards to formalise the result, felt the entire match was a "test of character" for the home team.

Sarwan felt the draw justified the emotional roller-coaster on which the team been put through over the past week, following the aborted second Test at the Vivian Richards Cricket Ground.

"We knew we were up against it from the very first day when England got away to a pretty good start," he said.

"We knew how important it was to bat and occupy the crease. For me to bat and occupy the crease, and get a century was very pleasing."

"This Test match was up there for me. It is something that I will hold very dear to me the way we fought back."

"With two Test matches left, and the position in which we were, I know many people thought we would have lost it. But for us, this result is a victory."

Powell said the rest of the team felt that they could not let down Sarwan and compa-

triot Shivnarine Chanderpaul, after they shared 148 for the fourth wicket to put West Indies in a position to draw the match.

"When we saw the way Sars and Shiv batted in the second innings, there was total consensus from everybody else in our team that everyone that came behind them had to make sure we did not let them down," he said.

"Sarwan played a brilliant innings, and for us to back it up, we needed to draw this Test match."

He added: "We won the Test in Jamaica with a day to spare. We did not expect it, but we did, and coming into this

game, Tuesday was the only day we had practice. After that it was total chaos."

"But we came to the Antigua Recreation Ground for this Test, and we toiled away. But this result has proven to us that if we go out there and fight every day, we can do the job."

Sarwan hoped West Indies can avoid a similar situation in the fourth Test at Kensington Oval in Barbados, starting next Thursday, and can put themselves in a formidable position to win the match from early.

"It is important that we get ourselves mentally ready and physically too, because I think

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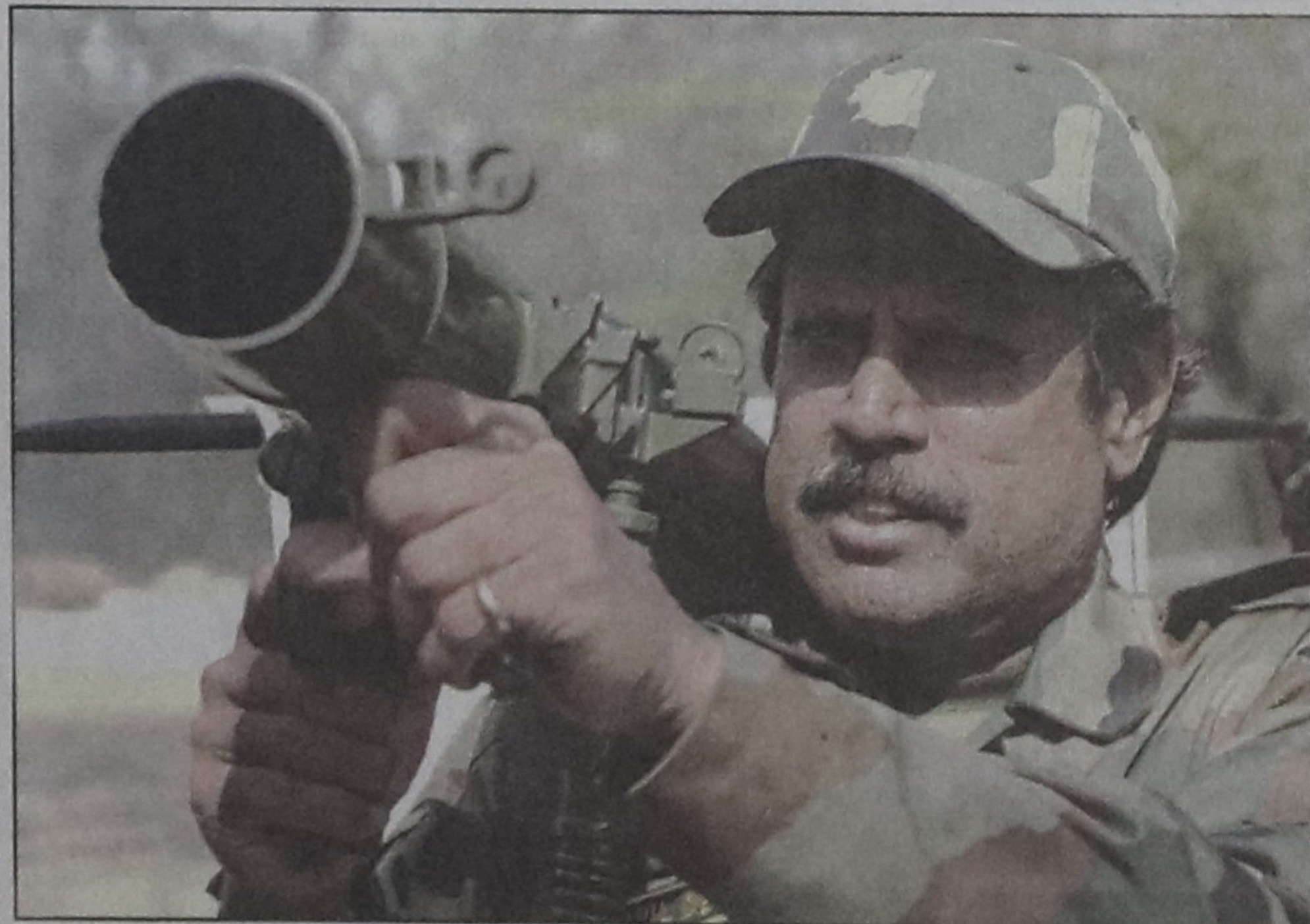


PHOTO: AFP

COMMANDO! Former India cricket captain Kapil Dev, who has been made honorary lieutenant colonel in Indian Army in September last year, holds a mortar as he takes part in an introductory military training course in New Delhi yesterday.

Pakistan ready for SL Karachi Test starts today

Cricket

AFP, Karachi

Pakistan's newly-appointed captain Younis Khan said his new-look team would not be under pressure when they take on Sri Lanka in their first Test in 14 months starting here Saturday.

The 31-year-old, leading Pakistan in the two-Test series against Sri Lanka, has to overcome the problems of lack of

match play and absence of key players, including star batsman Mohammad Yousuf and frontline paceman Shoaib Akhtar.

Yousuf is banned from international cricket for featuring in the rebel Indian Cricket League, while injury ruled Akhtar out of the two-Test series.

Younis, who took over from Shoaib Malik following Pakistan's humiliating 2-1 one-day defeat against Sri Lanka last month, dismissed

the problems.

"True, we are playing a Test after 14 months but our players have been featuring in domestic matches and I hope it will not affect our performance," Younis said on Friday.

Drug and disciplinary problems and a series of poor results plunged Pakistan into crisis before multiple bomb blasts and the Mumbai attacks robbed the team of playing opportunities.

Pakistan's last Test match was against India at Bangalore in December 2007.

Younis said he believes the team's new players will deliver.

"These seniors won't be with us forever... it's not possible for Akhtar to remain with us nor will I be there all the time. Some newcomers have come and I hope they fill up the gap," he said.

Sri Lanka have no such problems, having played eight Tests last year, including a home series win over formidable India, and a settled squad.

The tourists have a balanced bowling attack with spinners Muttiah Muralitharan, with a world record 769 Test wickets, and Ajantha Mendis, along with paceman Chaminda Vaas.

Skipper Mahela Jayawardene is confident -- but not ready to rule out Pakistan just yet.

"Both the teams have exceptional cricketers and we thoroughly enjoyed our Test cricket over the last 12 months and have some good wins against top sides. We would love to continue that," said Jayawardene.

"I know Pakistan has not played Tests for some time but you still can't underestimate their capabilities so it's going to be a good tough series."

Sri Lanka lost the limited overs two-day tour match by 112 runs ahead of the Test, but

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PHOTO: AFP

Pakistan captain Younis Khan (L) and his Sri Lanka counterpart Mahela Jayawardene (R) hold the trophy of the two-Test series, which begins today, during a ceremony in Karachi yesterday.

India arrive in NZ

National duty matters most for Dhoni

Cricket

CRICINFO, Christchurch

India arrived in New Zealand on Friday, with captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni adamant that the lures of lucrative Twenty20 tournaments have not sidetracked or preoccupied his side. India have not won a Test in New Zealand since 1976 and Dhoni, on his first tour to the country, said the international game was top priority.

"Playing cricket for your country is most important for us. I'm playing for my country so it's not about money," Dhoni said on arrival in Christchurch. "With Indian cricket I know that if I'm playing for my country and doing well than I will get money that will be more than enough for me and my family so I don't think it is a distraction."

"Whatever fame or whatever status we have now is all because of that. It's about going onto the field and giving 100 per cent, day in, day out for India. The money flows in but one thing for sure is that if you're not playing good cricket then you won't get the money."

This is India's first tour to New Zealand in six years. Coming off consecutive Test series wins over Australia and England and a 4-1 one-day

success over Sri Lanka, Dhoni felt he had a productive unit. "I'm proud to say that this Indian team is not relying on any individual," he said. "Everybody is contributing and everyone has a definite role to play in the side and that's what they are doing."

"If we fail to get a good start from the openers someone in the middle order stands up. If the batsmen don't score too many runs then it's the bowlers who stand up and take the opportunity to prove themselves and that's why we are winning more games."

Dhoni felt the core of this side would hold firm after the retirements of the veterans.

"There are people who can fill the gaps who won't really be a Sachin Tendulkar or a Rahul Dravid, but they accept they have been given a chance," he said. "Whoever comes in needs to be himself and play the kind of cricket he loves to play."

Dhoni said his team does not start favourites against the hosts although it is better-prepared to handle the seaming conditions they may face during the tour.

"It's not about what is going around in the media or who is considered favourite. You start from scratch when you go out to the middle. Whatever we have been doing in the past one

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