

Malik to lead Pakistan in T20

AFP, Karachi
Pakistan said Monday that sacked captain Shoaib Malik would return to lead the team's Twenty20 match on tour in Australia after star all-rounder Shahid Afridi was banned in a ball-tampering row.

"Malik will lead the Pakistan team in the only T20 match against Australia in the absence of Afridi," the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) said.

Afridi, 29, was caught by television cameras biting the ball in Pakistan's fifth and final one-dayer against Australia at Perth on Sunday.

Under International Cricket Council rules any attempt to change the condition of the ball through illegal means is a violation of the players' code of conduct and is liable to punishment.

The on-field and third umpires reported the incident to match referee Ranjan Madugalle who conducted separate hearings with team manager Abdur Raqeeb and Afridi before handing the player a two-match international Twenty20 ban.

The ban forced Pakistan to find another captain to lead the side in the only Twenty20 match at Melbourne on February 5.

Afridi had led Pakistan in the shortest form of the game since Younus Khan retired from T20 after guiding Pakistan to the World Twenty20 title in England last year.

Malik, 28, was sacked as captain after a 2-1 home one-day series defeat against Sri Lanka in January last year. He led Pakistan to finish runners-up in the first World Twenty20 held in South Africa in 2007.



South Africa cricketers train during a practice session at VCA Stadium in Nagpur yesterday. The Proteas will open their tour of India today with a practice match.

'Rahul absence a blow'

Cricket

CRICINFO, undated

Gautam Gambhir, the Indian opener, has described Rahul Dravid's absence from the Test series against South Africa as a 'big blow' but remains confident after beginning the year on a positive note, beating Bangladesh 2-0.

"Rahul Dravid has been the wall of the Indian middle order batting and his absence against a quality team such as South Africa will be a big blow," Gambhir said. "But we have begun 2010 well [by winning against Bangladesh]. The players would want to carry the momentum against South Africa. Moreover, injuries are part and parcel of sports, and it gives other players an opportunity to prove their mettle against a tough opposition."

Dravid had injured his upper left jaw in the second Test against Bangladesh in Mirpur and underwent surgery in Bangalore on Friday. He has been advised two to three weeks' rest, making him an unlikely prospect for the two-Test series.

South Africa last toured India in 2008, drawing the series 1-1. They drew the first Test in Chennai, won the second comfortably in Ahmedabad and were upstaged in the third on a minefield in Kanpur. "They [South Africa] did well when they were here the last time, but didn't win the series," Gambhir said. "They will surely carry some confidence from that tour. But we have started off the year well by winning the series against Bangladesh. We have a lot of cricket ahead and it is good to start the year on such a positive note."

"We have to play well as a team. It would be crucial for us to get a good start, either batting or bowling first. If we are batting first we need to put up a good total to back up the bowlers. If we are bowling first, we need to take crucial early wickets."

Gambhir also said South Africa possessed a strong pace attack but the recent form of Ishant Sharma and Zaheer Khan, who excelled in the Test series against Bangladesh, Gambhir said, makes for an exciting contest. "They have a strong bowling pair in Dale Steyn and Morne Morkel. We need to start off well upfront to keep them in our bay," he said. "Though we don't have Sreesanth, Zaks [Zaheer Khan] has been bowling extremely well recently. His performance in Bangladesh speaks volumes of the bowling he is in. Ishant Sharma has also been bowling well in Test and we do have a good balance in bowling."

Sreesanth suffered a thigh strain during the first Test against Bangladesh in Chittagong, but was hopeful of being fit for the second Test against South Africa at Eden Gardens. "There is nothing serious and I am having very good training sessions at the NCA. I am very happy with my progress and I am recovering very fast," Sreesanth told PTI in Kolkata. "I have started running sprints and will start bowling soon, may be by Wednesday or Thursday. Everything is looking good and hopefully I should be fit for the second Test. I really don't want to miss any game in it against Bangladesh, Sri Lanka or South Africa."

"I will not say it will be a 2-0 for us, but I am sure it will be a good contest. I am looking forward to play if I get fit and if I get selected for sure."

Hamidul

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lifted 117 kg in the snatch and pulled out 140 kg in the clean and jerk to take the total to 257 two kg's more than his compatriot challenger Monoronjon Roy.

Monoronjon however claimed that he was deprived of a gold medal as the authority didn't allow him to call more as per his desire.

"I don't know why they stopped me from calling more. Maybe they wanted to see a senior weightlifter win the first gold medal," complained Monoronjon.

In the 85kg category, Pakistani Khuram Shahzad was by far better than his three challengers and lifted 293kg to bag the gold while Sri Lankan Romesh Samarasekera finished second for silver by pulling off 273kg while Bangladeshi Abdulla Al Mummin secured bronze with a total lift of 260kg.

Mashrafe

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Seddon Park in Hamilton tomorrow.

The three one-day internationals are scheduled for February 5, 8 and 11 while the only Test match will take place also at the Seddon Park over February 15-19.

SA relish challenge

Cricket

AFP, Nagpur

Graeme Smith's South Africa open their tour of India on Tuesday with a practice match ahead of their bid to dislodge the hosts as the number one Test nation.

The tourists take on the Indian Board President's XI in a two-day match in Nagpur before the first Test begins at the new Vidarbha Cricket Association Ground on the outskirts of the city on Saturday.

The two-Test series -- the second match will be played at the Eden Gardens in Kolkata from February 14 -- could be one of the most important the Proteas have played in recent years.

The second-ranked South Africa need a 2-0 series win to displace India from the top. A 1-0 result in favour of the tourists will leave both teams level on 123 rating points.

South Africa were rattled last week by the resignation of long-time coach Mickey Arthur over what he said were differences with Cricket South Africa on the future course of action.

The entire selection committee, headed by former Test all-rounder Mike Procter, was also sacked following a 1-1 series draw to England at home.

National high performance coach Corrie van

Zyl has taken over from Arthur for the Indian tour, which includes three one-day internationals after the Tests.

Skipper Smith was, however, confident the team would recover from the recent setbacks and perform well in India.

"It's been an emotional week and not many teams go to India and win," Smith was quoted as saying in Johannesburg prior to the team's departure over the weekend.

"The players who have been part of the set-up for a while have dealt with a few difficult things in recent years and handled them very well."

"I expect them to be as professional as normal, and I'm looking to them for responsibility and guidance for the youth."

The 15-man squad includes right-hand batsman Alviro Petersen, 29, and left-arm fast bowler Lonwabo Tsotsobe, 25, both of whom have yet to play Test cricket.

Tsotsobe is part of a five-man pace attack led by Dale Steyn, but there is no place for former spearhead Makhaya Ntini.

SQUAD

Graeme Smith (captain), Hashim Amla, Ashwell Prince, AB de Villiers, Jacques Kallis, Jean-Paul Duminy, Alviro Petersen, Mark Boucher, Paul Harris, Johan Botha, Ryan McLaren, Morne Morkel, Wayne Parnell, Dale Steyn, Lonwabo Tsotsobe.

Afridi says sorry

Cricket

AFP, Karachi

Pakistan's star all-rounder Shahid Afridi apologised Sunday after being caught biting the ball in the final one-dayer against Australia, a bizarre episode which cost him a two-match ban.

The 29-year-old Afridi, leading the team in the absence of rested captain Mohammad Yousuf, was caught by television cameras chewing on one side of the ball while walking with bowler Navedul Hasan in the fifth and final match at the WACA in Perth.

Under International Cricket Council rules any attempt to change the condition of the ball through illegal means is a violation of the players' code of conduct and is liable to punishment.

The on-field and third umpires reported the incident to match referee Ranjan Madugalle who conducted separate hearings with team manager Abdur Raqeeb and Afridi before handing the player a two-match international Twenty20 ban.

Afridi pleaded guilty and told AFP from Perth he was ashamed of the mistake.

"I am ashamed. I did it in the heat of the moment as the match was a close one, but I should not have done that, it's a serious offence," Afridi said.

"I apologise to all and everyone involved in the match and to the fans around the world. This will never happen again."

Pakistan lost Sunday's match by two wickets for a 5-0 cleansweep, only their second such whitewash in one-day history.

The ban means Afridi, who is Pakistan's captain in the shortest format, will miss the February 5 Twenty20 match against Australia in Melbourne and also the first of two Twenty20 games against England in Dubai on February 18.

The dashing all-rounder was banned for four one-day matches after he tried to hit a spectator during a match in South Africa in 2007.

He was also banned for a Test and two one-day internationals for deliberately damaging the pitch in the second Test against England at Faisalabad in 2005.

"Being the captain I should have been a role model for my players which I was not but I hope I will be forgiven," added Afridi.

The International Cricket Council confirmed that Afridi had received two suspension points after breaching the ICC Code of Conduct during the game. Two suspension points in the code means a ban of a Test, two ODIs or two T20Is.

Match referee Ranjan Madugalle handed Afridi the maximum penalty under the provision of the code.

"I imposed the maximum penalty under the code to Shahid and reminded him of his responsibilities as a national captain which is to ensure that the match is played according to the laws of the game and in the spirit in which it is intended to be played," said Madugalle.

"Shahid, when pleading guilty, apologised and regretted his actions."



NATIONAL CRICKET LEAGUE
Rajshahi v Khulna
Venue: Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium, Chittagong
Chittagong v Dhaka
Venue: Shahid Chandu Stadium, Bogra
Barisal v Sylhet
Venue: Sheikh Abu Naser Stadium, Khulna

SOUTH ASIAN GAMES
Football (Men's)
Sri Lanka v Afghanistan
Time: 3:00pm
Pakistan v India
Time: 6:00pm
Venue: M A Aziz Stadium, Chittagong

Football (Women's)
Nepal v Sri Lanka
Time: 2:30pm
Bangladesh v Pakistan
Time: 5:20pm
Venue: Bangabandhu National Stadium, Dhaka

Bangladesh v Sri Lanka
Time: 1:00pm
Venue: Shahid Kamruzzaman Stadium, Rajshahi

Basketball
Sri Lanka v Pakistan
Time: 2:30pm
Afghanistan v India
Time: 4:30pm
Bangladesh v Maldives
Time: 6:30pm
Venue: Basketball Indoor Stadium, Dhaka

Badminton Preliminaries
Time: 9:00am
Venue: Wooden Floor Gymnasium

Hockey
Nepal v Sri Lanka
Time: 1:00pm
Bangladesh v Pakistan
Time: 3:00pm
Venue: Maulana Bhasani Hockey Stadium

Shooting (Women)
Time: 9:00am
Shooting (Men)
Time: 10:00am
Venue: National Shooting Complex

Kabaddi (Men)
Bangladesh v Pakistan
Time: 9:30am
Nepal v Sri Lanka
Time: 10:30am
Kabaddi (Women)
Nepal v Sri Lanka
Time: 4:30pm
Bangladesh v India
Time: 5:30pm
Venue: Kabaddi Stadium

Weightlifting (Men)
Category 105
Time: 1:00pm
Weightlifting (Men)
Category +105
Time: 4:30pm
Venue: NSC Gymnasium

Looking back at Aussie Open

AFP, Melbourne



The Grand Slam of Asia/Pacific

self as the undisputed king and queen of tennis as the Australian Open kicked off the new season, while Chinese players gave a glimpse of the future.

The opening Grand Slam of the year will also be remembered for the remarkable return of Justine Henin, who entered as a wildcard and set pulses racing with her run to the final.

Meanwhile, injuries to some of the world's top players, including Rafael Nadal and Dinara Safina, once again reheated the debate over a shorter season.

In the end, the championships belonged to Federer and Williams, who once again justified their rankings as the number one players in the world.

The consistent Federer was in the zone as he won his 16th Grand Slam title, beating a gutsy, and hugely improved, Andy Murray 6-3, 6-4, 7-6 (13/11) in the final.

It means the British men's Grand Slam drought continues, 74 years after the last win.

"I'm over the moon winning this title again," said Federer. "I played some of the best tennis in my life over the last two weeks."

At 28, Williams now has 12 Grand Slam titles and said she has no plans to slow

down as she looks to cement her place among the all-time greats.

"I don't even think of me as a great, I think of me just as normal," she said after ending the Henin dream, 6-4, 3-6, 6-2, in the final.

"I don't see an end now -- I feel like (I'll keep playing) as long as I'm happy and I want to do it and I enjoy being out there."

The return of former world number one Henin added a welcome new twist to the women's game and her comeback was the feel good story of the tournament as she chewed up three seeds on the way to the final.

The Belgian proved she has lost none of her tenacity or skills.

"I learned a lot of things in the last few weeks," she said.

"Many things were positive in my game, on and off the court, and I think I really enjoyed every moment of it."

The breakthrough of Chinese players was another theme running through the tournament, with Li Na and Zheng Jie both making the semifinals.

It was an historic achievement that had never been managed before at Grand Slam level and WTA chief executive Stacey Allaster acknowledged how important the growth of the game in China was to the future of women's tennis.

"It is very significant," she said of China. "Building the business in China is critically important."

While Li and Zheng's star was shining, others were fading.

Maria Sharapova, the 2008 champion, crashed out in the first round with other early casualties including Serbian pair, Ana Ivanovic and Jelena Jankovic.

Injuries came back to haunt several players with world number two Nadal forced to retire from his quarterfinal with Murray with a hamstring-related injury.

Similarly, women's world number two Safina was forced out in the fourth round with a recurrence of back problems.

The shattered Russian described her latest injury setback as "really, really terrible," with her immediate career in limbo.

Andy Roddick, Lleyton Hewitt and Novak Djokovic were others to leave the tournament with injuries or health issues.

Djokovic said the leading players were united in their push for a shorter season, to allow their bodies time to heal.

"That is the highest priority, because players feel like the season is just too long," he said.

While Melbourne's traditional January heat did not compromise the schedule, rain did in the first few days.

But overall organisers were happy, with plans announced for a major redevelopment of Melbourne Park to ensure the Grand Slam stays in Australia, with cities like Shanghai and Doha keen to get their hands on the tournament.

The only black mark was the return of hooligans on the opening day, with 11 people thrown out for unruly behaviour and another group banned from entering.

Maldives

FROM PAGE 17
awarded Maldives another spot-kick. Nepal's players protested the decision and so did their officials. Play was held up for more than five minutes. Umair once again stepped up and aimed the right hand corner, but this time the Nepali keeper judged it right and made a one-handed save. Malla rescued his team on a couple of occasions more while the Nepalese strikers failed to convert their chances as the scoreline remained 1-0 till the end.

TEAMS
NEPAL: Bikas Malla, Sagar Thapa, Rohit Chand, Biraj Maharjan, Robin Shrestha, Nirajan Khadga, Yogesh Shrestha, Anil Gurung, Jumanu Rai, Ranjeet Shrestha, Bharat Khawas.

MALDIVES: Faailal Mohammad, Latheef Hussain, Umair Mohammed, Abdulla Ibrahim, Ashfaq Ali, Thasneem Mohamed, Ghasim Shamweet, Nafiu Ali, Abdul Ghani Akram, Ahmed Shafiu, Naseer Mukhtar.

India assert

FROM PAGE 17
"Sayali and Trupti, the national champion, played better to win both of their sets, but it was a bit difficult for Thulasi, who has just crossed the hurdles of junior level, but she finally controlled the games to win," said coach Archana Decodhar, who represented India for 12 years.

Archana hoped that the women's singles would be all Indian final.

Chetan beat Niluka Karunaratne 21-12 and 21-18, Gurusaidutta beat Dinuka Karunaratne 21-8, 21-18 and Avita Raviprakash beat Nuan DJ Hettiarachchi 21-10 and 21-15.

"After having won the first games, the players might feel relaxed and faced challenge from the opponents in their second set, but they finally got their rhythm back and won the matches," said coach Dipankar Bhattacharjee after the match.

Bhattacharjee said that they brought here their world-class shuttlers for the meet as a part of the preparation for the

Commonwealth Games in India later this year.

The coach from West Bengal also hoped that India would win all six gold medals yet to be decided to maintain their full dominance in the subcontinent.

He, however, said India were looking forward to finishing top in badminton of the upcoming Commonwealth Games in their own den and expecting a challenge from Malaysia.

Big win

FROM PAGE 17
In the first match of the day, India humiliated Sri Lanka 58-10, dominating the first half 28-02 at the same venue.

Almost all Indian players found the back of Sri Lankan net with Deepak scoring highest 10 goals. Feroz Ahmed and Sachin scored eight and seven goals respectively while Parseed and Siddharth scored six goals each for India. Nalaka was the most successful scorer for Sri Lanka with four goals.

Pitch invader charged

AFP, Sydney

A 37-year-old spectator has been charged with assault after wrestling Pakistan's Khalid Latif to the ground during a one-day international against Australia, police said on Monday.

The Perth resident will face common assault and trespass charges in a magistrates court on February 16 after Sunday's incident, which sparked calls for tougher penalties for pitch invaders.

Video footage showed the man running onto Perth's WACA Ground and tackling the fielder from behind, slightly injuring his neck. The game was also marred by Shahid Afridi's two-match ban for biting the ball.

NOTICE

Due to unavoidable circumstances, we could not print the CROSSWORD today. We regret any inconvenience. Sports Editor



The champions in the football and cricket tournament organised by Aparajeyo-Bangladesh, Pickler Dhaka-2 receive the trophy from State Minister of Home Affairs Advocate Shamsul Haque Tuku at Mirpur City Club ground on Sunday.