



PHOTO: AFP

Russia's Alisa Kleybanova plays a forehand return against Flavia Pennetta of Italy during their match of the WTA Paris Indoors Open on Wednesday.

'We are the Rocky'

CRICINFO, undated

Afghanistan's battle against adversity during their rise up the cricket ranks has all the makings of a Hollywood script.

"I am a big fan of American television and movies and my favourite film is Rocky -- I vividly remember watching it when I was growing up -- and one of my heroes is Sylvester Stallone," Hassan wrote in his Cricinfo blog.

"I think that there is a similarity in the story of Rocky and the Afghanistan cricket team -- we both started at the bottom and gradually made our way up the rankings. It is easy to forget how far we have come in the last two years since we played at the World Cricket League Division 5 in Jersey."

Afghanistan is now one step closer to reaching the World Twenty20 in West Indies having just missed out on qualification for the 2011 World Cup and Hassan couldn't help but think ahead to the possibility of facing the leading teams in the world.

Modi asks ECB

FROM PAGE 17 Modi also denied an ECB statement that it was not consulted over the dates. "[This is] not true," Modi said, adding that Dean Kino, a member of the Champions League governing council, "is and has been in touch with [David] Collier [the ECB chief executive] on a regular basis since December [2009]."

The Champions League Twenty20 is run by the boards of India, Australia and South Africa and its governing council comprises representatives from each board. Other countries participate in the tournament by invitation.

Modi said the scheduling is always complicated due to the fact that the Champions League timings are adjusted according to the international schedules in an existing FTP. "Given that Australia's tour to India begins on October 2 and other countries also have pre-committed FTP games it was the only window available this year," Modi explained.

Dementieva reaches qtrs

Tennis AFP, Paris

Russian top seed Elena Dementieva beat compatriot Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova in straight sets to reach the quarterfinals of the WTA Paris Indoor Open here on Wednesday.

"It wasn't an easy match to play," said Dementieva, who lost in last year's final to home favourite, the now retired Amelie Mauresmo.

"Anastasia had an opportunity to play on this court already and she was playing with a lot of confidence. I don't think I played 100 per cent and I was up and down in the match, but in the end it was good to win in two sets. Now I'll focus on my quarterfinal match."

Dementieva, who received a bye in the first two rounds, was joined in the last eight by Italian second seed Flavia Pennetta, who beat Russia's Alisa Kleybanova 7-6 (7/4), 6-1.

Tathiana Garbin followed her compatriot Pennetta into the quarterfinals after downing Russian number eight seed Elena Vesnina in three sets, 6-4, 2-6, 6-2.

Croatian wild card Petra Martic earlier sprung a surprise by ousting third seed Yanina Wickmayer of Belgium after winning their first-round encounter 6-4, 3-6, 7-5.

"I feel great," said 19-year-old Martic. "She was a big favourite, so I didn't have expectations, but I just played and enjoyed every point, and I made it."

Wickmayer was left to lament a heavy schedule that saw her feature in Belgium's 3-2 Fed Cup World Group II victory in Poland last weekend.

"I was super, super tired today. I had a very hard weekend, playing in Fed Cup, so it was very hard for me," said the world number 15.

"She played a very good match. I tried everything I could but my legs weren't there. She was just too good. That's how it is, that's tennis. You win some, you lose some, and today I lost."

Martic faces Hungary's Agnes Szavay in round two, while French fifth seed Aravane Rezaï will play Germany's Andrea Petkovic following a 6-4, 6-4 win against qualifier Evgeniya Rodina of Russia.

Kayes hits maiden

FROM PAGE 17 delivery onto his off stump. Martin Guptill came to the crease and was in supreme touch from ball one, timing it superbly to the straight boundary, both along the ground and over the infield.

The running between the wickets was especially impressive while Guptill was in the middle, stealing lightning-fast singles to men in the infield. Shakib then came into the attack dismiss Peter Ingram in his first over, playing inside the line of a well-pitched drifter that hit off stump.

Ross Taylor too was stumped off Shakib after a flighted delivery beat the bat and left him well short of his crease. Guptill, however, batted beautifully to string the New Zealand innings together, punishing the bad deliveries down the ground and through point, while rotating the strike with incredible efficiency to keep the run-rate well above what was required.

The departure of Neil Broom and Jacob Oram in

quick succession, however, put some pressure back on the hosts, but Ian Butler and James Franklin had plenty of overs to play with. Despite the tension, they negotiated the remainder of the run chase without much drama. Franklin hit the winning runs in the 45th over, leaving Bangladesh to rue the missed opportunity to score 25-30 more runs, which might have made for a much tighter finish.

SCOREBOARD Scoreboard of the third one-day international between New Zealand and Bangladesh at AMI Stadium in Christchurch on Thursday:

Table with columns for batsman, runs, and balls. Includes players like Tamim b Southee, Imrul b Vettori, and Aftab c Southee b McKay.

Table with columns for bowler, overs, maidens, runs, and wickets. Includes players like Southee, McKay, Butler, Oram, Vettori, Franklin, Guptill, and New Zealand players.

Man-of-the-match: Martin Guptill. Toss: New Zealand.

Barisal lose despite Laxman

FROM PAGE 17 Rasel captured three wickets for 58 runs. Khulna achieved the target with 95 for 2 in 16.4 overs thanks to Taposh Ghosh who hit a 51-ball 55 that contained 12 boundaries.

SCORES IN BRIEF KHULNAVCHITTAGONG KHULNA: First innings 446-9dec and Second Innings 95-2 in 16.4 overs (Taposh 55, Tushar 37 not out; Sunny 2-33).

CHITTAGONG: First innings-199 and Second Innings (overnight 318-5) 340 all out in 99.4 overs (Karim 85, Salahuddin 88, Faisal 62, Sunny 45; Dollar 4-51, Rasel3-58).

Result: Khulna won by eight wickets. RAJSHAHIVBARISAL RAJSHAHI: First Innings 336 all out and Second Innings 183 all out.

BARISAL: First Innings- 244 all out and Second Innings (overnight 162-0) (Nafees 83, Rabbi 95, Hannan 46, Nayeem 21).

India were forced to play rookie wicket-keeper Wriddhiman Saha as a specialist batsman in Nagpur after Rohit Sharma, the first-choice replacement for Laxman, got injured just before the toss.

SQUAD Mahendra Singh Dhoni (captain), Virender Sehwag, Gautam Gambhir, Murali Vijay, Sachin Tendulkar, Venkatsai Laxman, Subramaniam Badrinath, Harbhajan Singh, Amit Mishra, Zaheer Khan, Shanthakumaran Sreesanth, Ishant Sharma, Prayagn Ojha, Dinesh Karthik, Suresh Raina.

Davydenko's solid start

AFP, Rotterdam

Russian second seed Nikolay Davydenko pulled off an impressive win over in-form Spaniard Feliciano Lopez here on Wednesday in the first round of the Rotterdam Open beating him 6-4, 6-2.

Davydenko, a two-time semifinalist here, was surprisingly easy winner over Lopez, who arrived on the career of the second title of his backer the South African Open last Sunday.

Davydenko took full advantage in his 75-minute victory, and will play Cyprus' former Australian Open finalist Marcos Baghdatis after he came through in straight sets against American James Blake 6-4, 6-2.

Fourth-seeded Frenchman Gael Monfils, up half the night feeling ill and feeling the need to document his sorry state on Twitter, scraped through with a 4-6, 6-1, 6-2 win over Olivier Rochus.

But Monfils, world ranked 13, denied that he should be wary of giving constant updates lest his information be used by gamblers.

"I love to play tennis but I don't think about it much off the court," said Monfils, who failed to justify his number one seeding in South Africa as he exited in the semifinals.

"I'm a 23-year-old person. What we do off court -- it's private life. I don't even know all of the rules of tennis, I just play."

Monfils tweeted on Tuesday evening that he was feeling poorly a day prior to his opening match at the Ahoy stadium, then came back online at 1 am saying he could not sleep.

Virgin's day cut short

INTERNET, undated

Virgin Racing is up and running ahead of its first Formula One campaign, but the opening day of its first group test in Jerez proved to be something of a damp squib after the weather refused to co-operate.

The team and its new VR-01 car arrived in Spain on Tuesday, closely followed by some brand new parts which had been developed as a result of information gathered at last week's initial shakedown at Silverstone. To maximise the benefit of these new parts, the team pushed on through the night and into the morning to ensure that the car was fully updated for its first day on track with its rivals -- and then the rain arrived.

Unfortunately, the downtime meant that the team missed out on the only hour of dry running all day, and even though Timo Glock eventually took to a wet circuit at 1310hrs local time, it was decided to limit his running to two further short runs to ensure that the car was ready for a full day of testing today [Thursday].

"We've completed some short installation runs today without any car-related issues," reported technical director Nick Wirth, whose company conceived the VR-01 entirely using CFD. "A few new parts arrived here quite late yesterday and so the only option was for everyone to work through the night. Sadly, that meant that we missed the dry window and we are not at a point where it is worth risking the car in the wet running."

Bordeaux crash out

Football AFP, Paris

Champions Bordeaux alarming drop in form continued on Wednesday as they were knocked out of the French Cup by Monaco, beaten 2-0 at home in their last 16 clash.

Goals by Malian international defender Djimi Traore and young Niger defender striker Ouwo Maazou were enough to see Monaco progress at Bordeaux expense leaving the losers with just one win in their last four matches.

Marseille also saw hopes of a domestic sweep evaporate as just a week after they reached the League Cup final, and in sight of their first silverware since 1993, they were beaten 3-1 by Lens in a last 32 tie.

Bordeaux highly-rated coach Laurent Blanc admitted that his side was going through a difficult period - though he took some consolation that it eased their fixture schedule.

"It's not reassuring when you lose two in a row (they lost 4-2 to Rennes last Saturday)," said the 44-year-old World Cup and Euro winning former central defender.

Marseille coach Didier Deschamps - seen as Blanc's main rival to succeed Raymond Domenech as French coach after the World Cup final - was honest in his appraisal of the Lens defeat.

"I am of course disappointed to be eliminated," said the 41-year-old, who has not held a training session since January 10 as they have

played nine matches in that time. Lens will play high-flying French second division side Brest in the next round after the Brittany outfit beat top-tier outfit Toulouse 2-0.

Brest lie second in the Second Division as they seek a return to the top flight for the first time since 1991.

They grabbed two late goals via Romain Poyet, who lobbed a poorly placed Mathieu Valverde, and an 87th-minute penalty by his strike partner Richard Socrier to inflict a second cup defeat in a week on their opponents.

Brest coach Alex Dupont was extremely proud of his players, especially as he had left out several of his first-choice side.

"This really is something. You can certainly say that it is an exploit to come to Toulouse and beat them," said Dupont, whose side have suffered just one defeat in their last 22 matches.

Toulouse, who were without several international players including the injured French international striker Andre-Pierre Gignac, suffered heartbreak last Wednesday in their League Cup semi-final against Marseille when, having led 1-0 until the 85th minute, they ended up losing 2-1 after extra-time.

Third division Plabennec, however, were unable to repeat their knee-killing acts of the previous two rounds - they put out Nice and Nancy - as they were well beaten 4-0 by Auxerre, with Polish international Ireneusz Jelen scoring a hat-trick.

Guingamp will not be defending their trophy at the Stade de France as they were beaten 1-0 by First Division strugglers Boulogne-sur-Mer on Tuesday in a last 16 tie.

Winter Olympics begin in Vancouver today

AFP, Vancouver

Years of planning come to a head on Friday when the Vancouver Winter Olympics get underway, culminating a long slog for organisers who are confident there will be no major dramas despite unseasonably warm weather.

Excitement is building in this waterfront city, routinely voted the most liveable in the world, as more than 60,000 people prepare to witness first-hand the Olympic cauldron being lit in BC Place stadium during the opening ceremony.

An estimated worldwide television audience of three billion are expected to watch the Games, the third in Canada after the 1976 Montreal Summer Olympics, which left the city mired in huge debt for years, and the 1988 Winter Games in Calgary.

About 2,500 athletes from more than 82 nations will take part in the February 12-28 showpiece, but it hasn't been a completely smooth ride.

As the clock ticks down, organisers continue to battle warm weather in Vancouver and on nearby Cypress Mountain, the host of the freestyle events.

Tonnes of snow have had to be driven and helicoptered in from higher elevations, with the last-minute rush continuing right up till Friday.

There are no such problems at Whistler, site of the blue-riband alpine skiing events, although there is a good chance of fog becoming an issue. Eleven venues are being used from BC Place in Vancouver where the opening and closing ceremonies are held, to Canada Hockey Place, which hosts the bulk of ice hockey and where the home nation starts as men's gold medal favourites.

In all, 15 sports will be contested with Germany and Canada the bookmakers' favourites to top the medal table, with the United States, South Korea and Japan also challenging.

International Olympic Committee chief Jacques Rogge said he was happy with what had

been achieved so far. "Hosting the Games is always a complex and challenging undertaking. VANOC and its partners rose to the challenge without compromising the original vision for these Games," he said.

"The Games are a global celebration of sport. But we must never forget that the Games are not an end in themselves.

"They exist to promote the Olympic values. Every athlete, including those who never get to the medal podium, can be a role model for all of us."

A key issue for organisers in the lead-up has been balancing the budget in a time of global economic turmoil and after the fiasco of Montreal in 1976 when the debt took 30 years to pay off.

Dave Cobb, the deputy chief executive of organising committee VANOC, insisted their would be no big budget blow-out.

"It hasn't been easy. It certainly required us to spend a lot more time watching our dollars than we would have preferred to," he admitted.

"A number of our sponsors had serious difficulties but all our sponsors delivered. Every one of our partners that has a direct relationship with us has delivered."

The overall Winter Games costs top two billion Canadian dollars (1.65 billion US), with the city of Vancouver having to step in last year and provide funding for the 875 million dollar Athletes Village.

A further 955 million US dollars was needed for security, which has been stepped up ahead of the opening ceremony as protesters gear up to make their point.

Over 15,000 security personnel are in place to monitor demonstrations, which are expected to highlight everything from the plight of the homeless and poor to claims by pro-Native Canadian groups that the Games are being staged on 'stolen land'.

Milan hope to rebound

FROM PAGE 20

Coach Leonardo has been playing former England captain David Beckham in an advanced position on the right hand side of an attacking trio but that has not borne fruit as he and right-back Ignazio Abate have failed to link up well while Brazilian Mancini, who replaced Beckham in the home draw with Bologna at the weekend, fared no better.

The team not only needs a win to boost their hopes but also to improve confidence ahead of next week's plum

Champions League clash against Manchester United, also at the San Siro.

And it is because of that match, on Tuesday, that this game was brought forward to Friday night, a first in Italian football.

The league has decided to do what it can to help its teams prepare for crucial European encounters, and have given Milan an extra day's rest -- an important boost since Man United have the weekend off due as they have been knocked out of the FA Cup.

But first to domestic matters and Milan centre-back Thiago Silva is convinced that this will be a tough match.

"In the away game in Udine we played well but Udinese scored and at the end they bettered us only in the result, he said.

"It will be an interesting game, not least because they're coming into it off the back of a sensational result against Napoli (a 3-1 victory) while we're trying to get back to winning ways."

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

Crossword puzzle grid with clues for Across and Down. Includes clues like '1 Initial stake', '36 Red Sea nation', '2 - con-tender', '24 Cry of discovery', etc.

Cryptoquip puzzle grid with letters and numbers. Includes clues like 'P U X Z C N B U Z J L C Q L T Q R X H H', 'U N J V N A J Z V Q P Z N C Q J', etc.

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: BECAUSE THE WEAVER TENDS TO PRODUCE VERY BIG CLOTHING SAMPLES, WOULD YOU SAY HE LOOMS LARGE? Today's Cryptoquip Clue: H equals L