



PHOTO: AFP

India batsman VVS Laxman (L) is all smiles as he listens to batting maestro Sachin Tendulkar (2nd from L) while captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni has his sights set on something else during a practice session at the Eden Gardens in Kolkata yesterday.

Here comes VVS again

Cricket

CRICINFO, undated

In March 2001, India were falling apart at the Eden Gardens. Steve Waugh's ruthlessness had seen Australia string together a record 16 Test wins on the trot as they reached Kolkata. Another victory seemed imminent by the end of the third day after India were made to follow on.

It was a desperate situation -- the series was at stake -- and Sourav Ganguly and John Wright, India's men in charge, were pushed to the wall. Call it impulse, instinct, hunch or plain desperation, their decision was pure left-field: they asked VVS Laxman to get ready to bat at his most desired position -- No. 3.

Laxman was yet to unstrap his pads; he was the last man out in the first innings, having survived two hours of rigorous examination, but was the sole Indian batsman to hit a half-century. Yet he went out at the fall of the first wicket and the rest is history.

Nine years down the line, India find themselves in a similar difficult position, with more than the series at stake -- they could also lose the world No. 1 ranking to South Africa. And, in the absence of Rahul Dravid, the stage is set for Laxman to bat again at No. 3, ahead of Murali Vijay, who batted one-drop at Nagpur and has the attitude but not the experience.

Wright, though, has no doubt in his mind. "If Dravid is not there I'll play Laxman at three without question straightaway," he told Cricinfo. His confi-

dence in Laxman, he said, stems from his ability to put the fast bowlers under pressure. "If it is the Laxman I knew, he is particularly good against the opening bowling attack because he takes the attack to the bowlers."

Recalling the events of 2001, Wright said the strategy of playing Laxman up the order in that Test was based on his batting in the first innings. "But he has the ability to punish the bad balls. You just can't bat to survive, you have to be positive. He is that sort of a player and he loves batting at No. 3," Wright said.

It's not just a matter of instinct -- the numbers, too, support a move up the order. Laxman has batted at No. 3 in 20 Tests and averages 47.45, which is slightly higher than his career average. What's significantly higher is his rate of converting fifties into hundreds: in his entire career 14 out of 57 fifty-plus innings have been converted into centuries (a rate of 24.56); at No. 3, it goes up to 40 per cent (four out of ten). He averages almost 76 when batting at that position at home, and India have won five out of the six Tests when he has batted there. The last time he played in that position at home was in a winning cause, when his fighting century against Sri Lanka in Ahmedabad in 2005 set the tone for the victory. And minimising the risk factor further is this factoid: Eden Gardens happens to be his favourite ground in India -- he has scored three centuries here in eight Tests, and averages almost 82.

Of course, the theory comes with caveats. His fitness, for one: Laxman opted out of the Nagpur Test at the last

minute, having failed to recover completely from the wrist injury to his left hand. But he's been practising hard; on Friday, he batted at No. 3 in the nets and also received some slip catches from Gary Kirsten to allay fitness concerns.

He hasn't been in great nick of late; Laxman's last century was the unbeaten 124 in Napier a year ago, where he helped ensure India drew the match. He made half-centuries in each of the three Tests against Sri Lanka at the end of 2009 but each time failed to convert though he had enough time. Seen differently, though, it could be that Laxman will be driven by the hunger to make a big score.

It would still be an unconventional decision but in Mahendra Singh Dhoni India have an unconventional captain with a record of unexpected decisions. Like Ganguly, he relies on his instinct and it would not be a surprise if he promotes Laxman to make the top order more solid.

"Leadership is very instinctive, you've got to with your gut feeling," said Wright, who brought Dhoni into the Indian team. "Sometimes when you have come out of a big loss some captains can tend to become more cautious. But I don't think it will happen [with Dhoni]. I just don't think Mahendra is that sort of guy."

Wright concedes, though, that the stakes are very high. "That is what it is about being the No. 1: you are always being challenged. You need to be positive and have a lot of self-belief. India would have been under some challenging situations on their journey to No. 1 but South Africa are hungry for it."

Afghans in T20 finals

Dump hosts UAE

AFP, Dubai

Afghanistan's fairytale story in the world of cricket continued on Saturday as they defeated hosts United Arab Emirates to reach their first major tournament, the World Twenty20 finals in the West Indies which runs from April 30 to May 16.

The Afghans won by four wickets, restricting UAE to 100-9 off their 20 overs -- Mohammad Nabi taking 3-17 -- and then reaching their target in 19.3 overs with opener Noor Ali topscoring with 38 not out.

It is a remarkable feat by the Afghans -- most of whom learnt to play cricket in refugee camps over the Pakistan border -- as they were in the fifth division of the world cricket league just two years ago.

Afghanistan, who showed their talent when they came within one place of reaching the 2011 World Cup finals, will play either Ireland or The Netherlands -- both of them are the joint holders from the previous tournament -- in Saturday's final.

The winners of the final will be placed in Group C alongside India and South Africa while the losers will go into Group D with the West Indies and England.

Enamul back

FROM PAGE 17 sacked Brazilian coach Edson Silva Dido, will begin their campaign taking on Tajikistan in one of two matches on the opening day at Sughatadasa Stadium on February 16.

The next two group matches against Myanmar and hosts Sri Lanka will be held on February 18 and 20 respectively as top two teams will move into the last four.

No deal for Zoran

FROM PAGE 17 I don't feel better here and will leave Bangladesh when I get my passport, tickets and remuneration," said the 57-year old coach.

Zoran, however, was also critical of the BFF officials. "I am very upset. They don't have vision and they don't want the betterment of football. These people have no future, they are gangsters and they are not working for football," claimed Zoran.

Salahuddin, however, said that he found Zoran totally a different person after and before the SA Games.

"There is no similarity in his words and behaviour before and after the South Asian Games as he had prepared two teams -- one for SA Games and other for AFC Challenge Cup during the training but he was now talking

other things and I can't accept this," said Salahuddin.

Salahuddin is now looking forward to gaining a good European coach before the national team's assignment in the World Cup Qualifying in October. The BFF boss said that Zoran had contribution in making Bangladesh champions, but the federation did a great job investing a lot of money during the off-season.

"Zoran has contribution but it is not a lone success of Zoran because we spent a lot of money to keep the players fit throughout the year after arranging a conditioning camp during the off-season," said the former Bangladesh international.

He also believed Zoran wanted to cash in on the people's passion on football through pressing them hard to make a new contract.

Smith to play

FROM PAGE 17 the pressure will take its toll."

Rival skipper Mahendra Singh Dhoni backed fit-again Venkatsai Laxman to fire with the bat and make up for the absence of the injured Rahul Dravid (jaw) and Yuvraj Singh (wrist).

"Laxman is an important part of our batting line-up. He rotates the strike very well and is capable of getting the boundaries."

Laxman, 35, has scored 6,993 runs in 109 Tests at an average of 45.70 with 14 centuries. In eight Tests at the Eden, he has amassed 898 runs including an epic 281 against Australia in 2001.

Dhoni hoped the younger batsmen in the side will grab the chance to prove themselves against a quality opposition.

"We expect the youngsters to do well as it is a dream come true for them to play against a side like South Africa. They have done well in the domestic circuit. It's important they do not get bogged down by the pressure."

"It is a challenge when you are not doing well as a team. They beat us convincingly in Nagpur but we are hoping to

play some good cricket and come back into the series."

TEAMS
INDIA (probable): Virender Sehwag, Gautam Gambhir, Murali Vijay, Sachin Tendulkar, VVS Laxman, Subramaniam Badrinath, Mahendra Singh Dhoni (captain), Harbhajan Singh, Zaheer Khan, Amit Mishra or Pragyan Ojha or Ishant Sharma, Shanthakumaran Sreesanth.
SOUTH AFRICA (probable): Graeme Smith (captain), Ashwell Prince, Hashim Amla, Jacques Kallis, AB de Villiers, Jean-Paul Duminy, Mark Boucher, Paul Harris, Wayne Parnell, Dale Steyn, Morne Morkel.

Govt allocates

FROM PAGE 17 academy in Sylhet, but later they reinstated their plan after the intervention of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who instructed the authority concerned to take proper steps during the final match between India and Maldives in the SAFF Championship in December last.

No IPL match in Hyderabad

CRICINFO, undated

Hyderabad, home to the Deccan Chargers, will not host any Indian Premier League (IPL) matches in the third season of the tournament starting March 12.

The state has seen political unrest and violence for the past few weeks in the wake of a separatist movement; Deccan's first game, the tournament opener, was shifted to Mumbai on the grounds that it needed extra preparation.

Lalit Modi, the IPL chairman, confirmed in his Twitter page that the next three games would be held in Nagpur and the last three again in Mumbai.

Mumbai's DY Patil Stadium will host Deccan's tournament opener on March 12. The next three, in March 19, 21 and 28, will be played at the VCA Stadium in Nagpur. The team will return to the DY Patil Stadium for the final three games, on April 5, 10 and 12.

This past week reports of IPL matches being moved out of Hyderabad set off a controversy with a senior government official in Andhra Pradesh, of which Hyderabad is the state capital, asking Deccan to boycott the tournament altogether in that eventuality. Concerns over the political situation in Andhra Pradesh have already resulted in the shifting of an ODI between India and Sri Lanka from Visakhapatnam last December, and two ODIs scheduled for Hyderabad, during England women's tour of India in February-March, have now been split between Bangalore and Mumbai. Also, spectators were barred from entering the stadium for the first two days of the Duleep Trophy final between West Zone and South Zone in Hyderabad because of a perceived security threat.

Deccan are the defending champions, having beaten Royal Challengers Bangalore in the final in South Africa last year. The result was a massive improvement from their last-placed finish in the inaugural edition in 2008.

Aussies can win it today

Fourth ODI against West Indies

Cricket

CRICINFO, undated

West Indies' hopes of their first win were washed away by the rain in Sydney, ending their remote chances of taking the series. Australia still lead 2-0 and the best the tourists can hope for now is a drawn series. If they manage that it will feel like a victory.

Brisbane hosts the fourth game today and the bouncy Gabba isn't very friendly for touring batsmen, especially when sultry conditions force more curl from the ball. In Tests the ground is a fortress but in one-day internationals Australia do give their opponents a chance.

However, after their stuttering batting performance in Sydney on Friday -- the total of 225 was hard to gauge without West Indies' reply -- they will want to purr again and collect the series without needing the final game in Melbourne. Shane Watson has been called back from his break to replace Shaun Marsh, who has a sore back, and the move shows the serious mood of the locals.

Wavell Hinds on Friday played his first international match in three and a half years but the wash-out meant a further wait for the chance to bat. He adds experience to an order missing Shivnarine Chanderpaul, Ramnaresh Sarwan and Dwayne Bravo, and he is in fine domestic form, averaging 110 in the regional four-day competition this season.

It takes a lot for a player to be brought back early from a scheduled break, but Shane Watson has become one of Australia's most important men. Last year it happened to captain Ricky Ponting, thanks to a heavy influence from the host broadcaster, and Marsh's back has forced Watson's return this time. Don't expect Watson to bowl much, but watch out for his powerful batting on his former ground, where his highest ODI score is 44.

Adam Voges was the late replacement for Marsh in Sydney and made a scratchy 8, so he will be lucky to get another go. Watson should partner Tim Paine at the top while James Hopes is expected to hold his spot on his home ground.

Kemar Roach missed the game in Sydney with a sore left ankle and while the

injury is not serious, he is expected to sit out again. That should give Darren Sammy the chance to retain his place after removing Ponting and Michael Clarke.

After the slowish pitch in Sydney, the players will be happy for one with more speed in Brisbane, although it may carry the same patches of green. Brisbane has been warm and muggy throughout the week and those conditions should be repeated on Sunday, giving the bowlers some extra assistance with swing and seam. The forecast says there is a chance of a light shower.

TEAMS
AUSTRALIA (possible): Shane Watson, Tim Paine, Ricky Ponting (captain), Michael Clarke, Cameron White, Michael Hussey, James Hopes, Mitchell Johnson, Ryan Harris, Nathan Hauritz, Doug Bollinger.

WEST INDIES (possible): Chris Gayle (captain), Travis Dowlin, Narsingh Deonarine, Lendl Simmons, Wavell Hinds, Denash Ramdin, Kieron Pollard, Dwayne Smith, Darren Sammy, Nikita Miller, Ravi Rampaul.

Cricket goes to Florida!

Kiwis v Lankans

AFP, Wellington

New Zealand is poised to lead the way into the potentially lucrative United States cricket market with confirmation Saturday that talks are under way to play Sri Lanka in Florida this year.

A "strategic partnership" has been formed with USA Cricket which will be of commercial benefit to both parties, New Zealand Cricket (NZC) chief executive Justin Vaughan said.

He confirmed he was in discussions with Sri Lanka about playing a series of games between the New Zealand Blackcaps and Sri Lanka in Lauderdale in the sunshine state in May.

Vaughan stressed the games against Sri Lanka were not yet confirmed but was "optimistic" they would take place following the ICC World Twenty20 championship as New Zealand looked to attract new investment into the sport.

"It is widely accepted there is significant commercial opportunity for cricket within the USA market," he said.

The Indian Premier League (IPL) and Pakistan are also exploring the possibility of staging games in the United States.

IPL chairman Lalit Modi held talks earlier this week with the chief executive of USA Cricket, Donald Lockerbie, to discuss taking the IPL to North America and allowing top American cricketers to play in the IPL.

The IPL wants the league's franchisee teams to begin playing in America as early as 2011.

Pakistan, which has become increasingly isolated as a cricketing nation due to security problems, also said this week it was in talks with USA Cricket.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE TWENTY20

Yes-no over Pak team

Cricket

CRICINFO, undated

The possibility of a Pakistan domestic side participating in the Champions League Twenty20 this year -- though bleak -- has not been entirely written off yet, either by the league or the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB).

Pakistan did not have a representative in the inaugural tournament last year, the only Test-playing nation other than Bangladesh to not have a representative in the 12-team league. Sialkot Stallions -- then Pakistan's domestic Twenty20 champions -- had been invited to participate in the very first Champions League, but that was postponed because of the Mumbai terror attacks in November 2008.

Since then, as ties between the governments and cricket boards of India and Pakistan have become frostier not only have the two countries not had a bilateral series, Pakistan's players have not participated in the Indian Premier League (IPL) and not been invited to the Champions League.

Relations have worsened further following the decision of the IPL franchises this year to not pick any Pakistani players, despite Pakistan being the World Twenty20 champions and having as many as 12 players up for auction. The PCB eventually decided to revoke all NOCs it had given to players hoping to participate in the IPL, but the door may remain open for participation in this year's

Champions League, which is a multi-board venture and may not be played in India.

Discussion on a Pakistan representative was expected to take place in the last meeting of the league's governing council between officials from the Indian board, Cricket Australia and Cricket South Africa. But a senior league official said the number of teams in this year's tournament -- to be held in September -- has not been finalised.

"No final decision on participating countries/teams has been made for this year's event," Dean Kino, the league's director of business and legal affairs and key member of the core management, told Cricinfo when asked specifically about the possibility of a Pakistan side being invited.

No contact has yet been made with the PCB and though the IPL remains off-limits, the Champions League is a possibility. "Nothing has been discussed with us by any of the boards involved in the tournament as yet," Ijaz Butt, the PCB chairman, told Cricinfo. "The IPL remains persona non grata for us, but if there is some contact about the Champions League we will consider the situation, where it is played and when. We would be amenable to sending a team should we get an invite and the situation is feasible."

Pakistan's domestic Twenty20 tournament has not yet been held this season; it is scheduled to be played between late February and early March. Pakistan's ODI series with England in September also clashes with the dates of the Champions League, which makes it unlikely that any domestic champion will be able to call on its best players should there even be an invite.



PHOTO: COURTESY

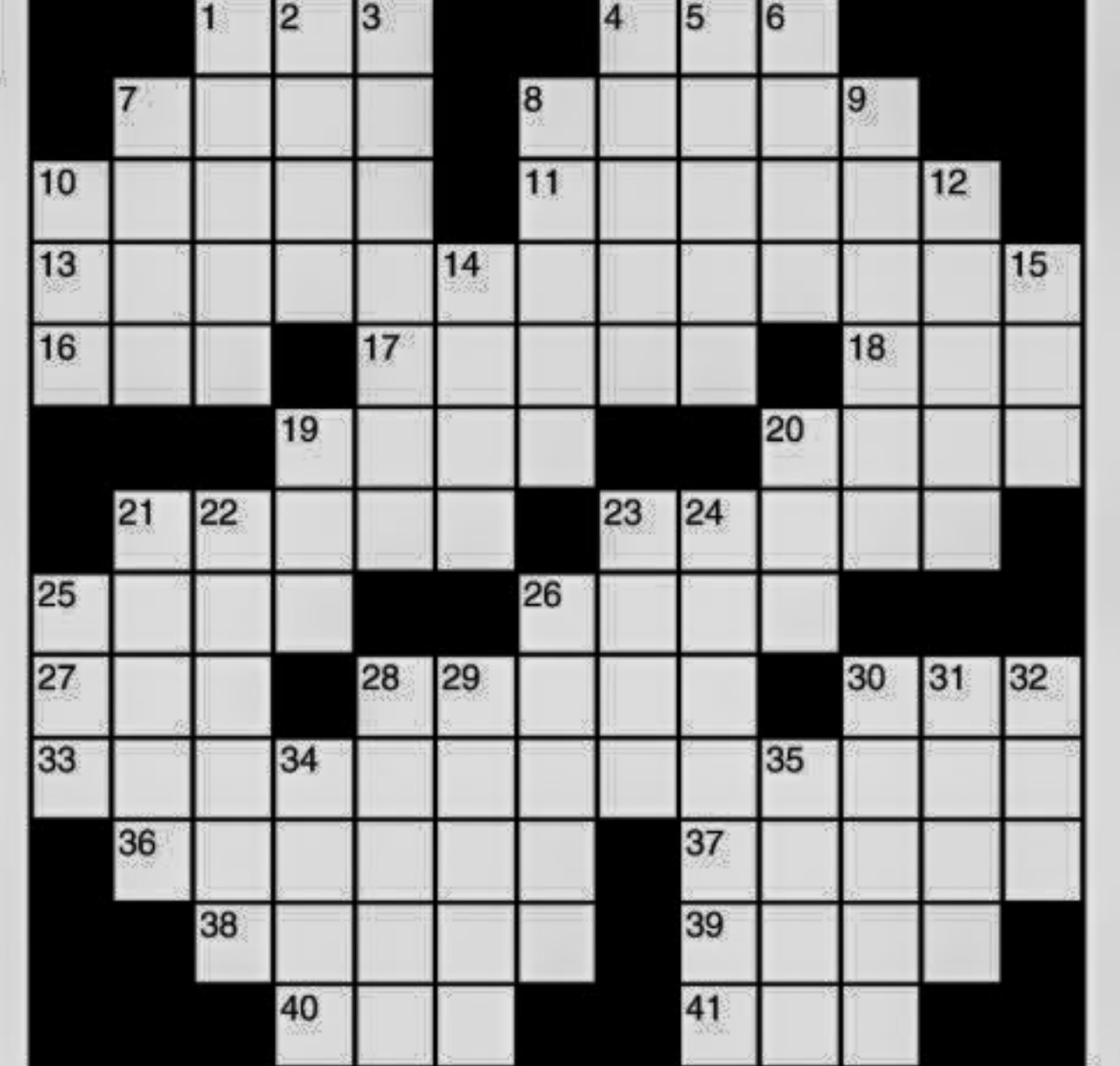
Dhaka Physical Education College principal Mahmud Ali Khan (2nd from L) inaugurates the daylong annual sports competition of Shaheed Lt Selim Sikkhlyaya at the Modhubag ground in the city yesterday.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

- ACROSS**
- 1 Mas-sage items
 - 4 Acorn producer
 - 7 Parsley partner
 - 8 "Sesame Street" character
 - 10 Chamberlain nickname
 - 11 Experts
 - 13 Property of uranium, e.g.
 - 16 Office-holders
 - 17 Prepare to propose
 - 18 "Golly!"
 - 19 Apportion (out)
 - 20 Writer Kingsley
 - 21 Backbone
 - 23 "I Know Who Killed Me" actress
 - 25 Noisy
- DOWN**
- 12 Oktoberfest souvenir
 - 2 Wrinkly citrus in a chip
 - 3 Give evidence
 - 4 Give a speech
 - 5 Tiny bone in the ear
 - 6 Chicken --
 - 7 Ollie's pal
 - 8 Host
 - 9 Baffler
 - 10 Lanka lead-in
 - 12 Oktoberfest
 - 14 Chip in a chip
 - 15 "Certainly"
 - 19 Central
 - 20 Oohs' mates
 - 21 Sensitive spots
 - 22 Students
 - 23 Crazy
 - 24 Calls into question
 - 25 Trail behind
 - 26 PC user's shortcut
 - 28 When pigs fly
 - 29 Action venue
 - 30 Fermi's particles
 - 31 Relinquish
 - 32 Before
 - 34 Fence entry
 - 35 Tidy

Solution time: 21 mins.

ANTE	SPA	BUSH
LOUP	AUG	UNTO
ALTO	GROUND	
SOUNDER	RIOTS	
YES	IDO	
POEMS	BOUNDER	
OHM	GUN	AVA
POUNDER	YEMEN	
OIL	CON	
AGOGO	FOUNDER	
FLOUNDER	EURO	
RANT	ETA	ANNA
ODAS	CAL	DEED



CRYPTOQUIP

S B R O R Q K M F G M O K W R O G
H S S R W I F L K Y M T E T Q R M S -
I G G C T M Y S B K S T S B T M C G E
S B R L K O Y G W Y R G H O Y G W Y R O .

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: WHAT MIGHT SOMEONE CALL HIS FIRST FEW TIMES LEAPING OUT OF AN AIRPLANE? CHUTING PRACTICE.
Today's Cryptoquip Clue: O equals S