

Group Captain Tendulkar

India's batting great Sachin Tendulkar was on Friday awarded the honorary rank of group captain by the chief of the Indian Air Force (IAF) for his contribution to cricket. Tendulkar, the first personality without an aviation background to receive the honour, was conferred amid loud applause from fellow officers at a ceremony in New Delhi. "It was wishful thinking (that I would be part of the armed forces) and it has come true today. I'm extremely proud to be a part of the IAF. So dream, because dreams do come true."



PHOTO: AFP

Superstar Maria Sharapova of Russia returns against Iveta Benesova of the Czech Republic (not pictured) during her second round match in the US Open in New York on Thursday. Sharapova won 6-1, 6-2.

Cash in Butt's belongings

PTI, London

Cash used in the spot-fixing scandal during last week's Lord's Test is understood to have been found in the belongings of Pakistan Test captain Salman Butt, a report said. According to a report in the Daily Mail, Scotland Yard officers would question Butt over how marked notes were discovered from his hotel room and in his locker at the Lord's cricket ground. The money is believed to have been part of 150,000 pounds handed over by an undercover News of the World reporter to the alleged fixer Mazhar Majeed, the newspaper said. The cash, given to Majeed for fixing three no-balls of the Lord's Test between Pakistan and England, is understood to have been secretly marked so that it could be later identified by police.

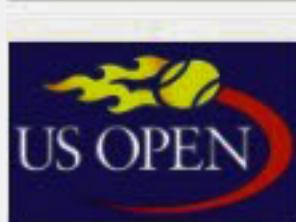
According to the report, the recovered money was undergoing forensic tests to confirm police suspicions that it came from the News of the World sting.

"Early indications suggest the money found in possession of Butt originated from the sting. There are good reasons to believe this was the case," the newspaper quoted sources as saying.

The revelation came after the International Cricket Council had charged and provisionally suspended the tainted Pakistani trio -- Butt, pacer Mohammad Asif and Mohammad Aamer -- from all forms of the game pending a decision on the charges.

Roger rolls, Nikolay falls

AFP, New York



Roger Federer and Novak Djokovic rolled into the US Open's third round on Thursday while sixth seed Nikolay Davydenko lost and Japan's Kei Nishikori dumped 11th seed Marin Cilic in a five-hour battle. Swiss second seed Federer, seeking his 17th Grand Slam crown and a seventh consecutive trip to the US Open final, eliminated Germany's 104th-ranked Andreas Beck 6-3, 6-4, 6-3 in one hour and 41 minutes at Arthur Ashe Stadium.

Federer jumped ahead 5-0 in only 12 minutes, claimed the first set in 27 minutes and was seldom threatened.

"It's the perfect start," Federer said. "I played Monday, had two days off, I had another easy one physically and here I am in the third round feeling like I'm completely in the tournament."

Federer, a five-time US Open champion, will face 109th-ranked Paul-Henri Mathieu to decide a berth in the last 16 on the Flushing Meadows hardcourts.

"Body is well. Mentally obviously I'm fresh, too. I haven't played too much, so I'm really eager," Federer said. "I'm ready for tough matches coming around. It's good I'm saving myself, really, and my game is fine."

Serbian third seed Djokovic advanced 7-5, 6-3, 7-6 (8/6) over German Philipp Petzschner, saying, "I was shaky the whole match but I was able to hold on." Djokovic will face American James Blake for a berth in the round of 16.

Djokovic reached the 2007 US Open final and the Flushing Meadows semifinals the past two years, each time losing to Federer, whom he could again face in the semifinals.

Asked if he could duplicate Federer's now-infamous between-the-legs shot from a Monday victory and last year's semifinal triumph over Djokovic, the Serbian drew a laugh from the Arthur Ashe Stadium crowd.

"No, I have something else between my legs. But don't worry, I will not show it to you tonight," Djokovic said.

"Definitely it's not one of my better shots. I think Roger is better at that."

Russian Davydenko, a 2006 and 2007 US Open semifinal loser to Federer, fell 6-3, 6-4, 6-2 to 38th-ranked Richard Gasquet. He next faces South African Kevin Anderson, a 6-7 (4/7), 6-4, 5-7, 6-4, 7-6 (7/2) winner over Brazil's Thomaz Bellucci.

Gasquet, among a record 12 Frenchmen to

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Rubicic's big test



ANISUR RAHMAN

The appointment of the largely unknown Croatian coach Robert Rubicic has left both the local football fans and media angling for information about the newcomer. Speculation has arisen even more since the BFF have yet to provide any details about the coach.

But what is clear is that for the 46-year old Rubicic, who will take over the helm of the national side from next week, coaching Bangladesh will be a new and entirely different challenge. Bangladesh will mark the first time that the Croatian will take charge of a national side as his only previous experience in coaching came at HNK Rijeka, in the Croatian top division.

It is generally believed that the Bangladeshi footballers have improved under the guidance of foreign coaches. Rubicic will be Bangladesh's 14th foreign coach, and in just the recent past, the Brazilian Edson Silva Dido and the Serbian Zoran Djordjevic have had largely successful stints.

But, crucially, both Dido and Djordjevic had regional experience.

Dido was coach of the Vietnam national side while Djordjevic had a long stint with Indian league side Churchill Brothers. Subsequently, Dido guided Bangladesh into the AFC Challenge Cup finals while Djordjevic led an unfancied U-23 side to the South Asian Games title.

In Rubicic's case however, this regional experience is lacking and the key question is whether this will hamper the progress of the national team. Under both Dido and Djordjevic, the national side had played attacking football, sometimes bordering on the fluent and this has largely proved to be successful and a step forward for the national side.

But that said, Rubicic's qualities, as a coach should not be called into question. The Croatian has played top-flight football for most

of his career and spent all but one of his full playing seasons at his home club Rijeka.

As a player, Rubicic was a fighting left full-back who sometimes filled in at midfield. His elongated stay at Rijeka saw him graduate to become captain of the club in the early nineties. He also managed one senior cap with Croatia, coming as a late substitute in a friendly against Romania.

After hanging up his boots, Rubicic graduated to coaching and managed some of the Rijeka youth sides. He later became a sports director at his home club and then took over the reigns full time.

His first season was quite successful, when he led Rijeka to a third place finish in the Croatian first division and even entered into the qualifying rounds of the Europa League. But his fortunes took a nose-dive soon after as his stint in the Europa League qualifying rounds saw them just manage to scrape past amateurs Differdange by the skin of their teeth. Rubicic's end came soon after, as he handed in his resignation following a 6-0 humbling by Dinamo.

According to fanzines of Rijeka, Rubicic prefers to build from the back with a strong defensive unit. His favoured formation of 4-5-1 might seem defensive but his team played quite fluid football through most his time there.

Like his predecessors Dido and Djordjevic, Rubicic is also not one to rely solely on experienced players. At Rijeka he bought in a number of players through the academy although not all them were successful. Team spirit was also reportedly mostly high during his time at the club and the players repeatedly expressed their fondness for Rubicic in interviews with the press.

Apart from the duties of the national teams, the BFF is also thinking of using the Croatian in development programmes and it may be a worthwhile plan as Rubicic, was also involved with Rijeka in youth development.

Pak trio suspended



AFP, London

British police questioned one of three Pakistani cricketers embroiled in betting scam claims, as the sport's governing body said it had suspended the trio because they had a "case to answer".

Bowler Mohammad Aamer arrived at a police station near the "home of cricket", Lord's in north London, and detectives are also expected to quiz Test captain Salman Butt and Aamer's fellow bowler Mohammad Asif on Friday.

Shortly afterwards, the International Cricket Council (ICC) said it had acted as soon as it could to charge the trio with "various offences" under its anti-corruption code and to suspend them pending a decision on those charges.

"The conclusion that we have come to is that there is a really arguable case to answer," Ronnie Flanagan, chairman of the ICC's Anti-Corruption and Security Unit, told a press conference at the Lord's ground.

The former Northern Ireland police chief said the players had been charged under Article 2 of their code and the trio knew the specific charges

against them, but declined to go into details.

Article 2 relates to offences under the code, including corruption, betting and misuse of inside information.

Calling it a complex investigation, he said that if the players were found guilty they could face a life ban.

The charges all relate to the fourth and final Test between England and Pakistan at Lord's, which finished with an England win on Sunday, in which a tabloid newspaper said deliberate no-balls had been bowled.

The sanctions have infuriated the Pakistani authorities, but ICC chief executive Haroon Lorgat dismissed the notion that there was a conspiracy against Pakistan.

"There is no truth that there is a conspiracy against Pakistani cricket," Lorgat told the news conference.

The South African expressed his "extreme disappointment and sadness" at the situation, however, and repeated that "we will not tolerate any sort of corruption in the sport."

Pakistani High Commissioner Wajid Shamsul Hasan said Friday the ICC had "no business" to suspend them while the police investigation was ongoing. He said Thursday he thought the trio might have been set up.

"I met the cricketers for two hours, cross-questioned them, got to the bottom of it and concluded that they were innocent," Hasan told BBC radio.

The ICC "have done the wrong thing. When there's a live police inquiry, this takes precedence over both the ICC, civil or regulatory investigations and any internal disciplinary investigations."

"The ICC had no business to take this action. The ICC is just playing to the public gallery."

The players withdrew Thursday from Pakistan's tour of England, with Hasan citing "mental torture". They missed Pakistan's eight-run win over county side Somerset the same day.

Pakistan team manager Yawaz Saeed said he was "not happy" about the situation but was trying to focus on his duties ahead of the forthcoming two Twenty20 internationals and five one-day games against England.

"I'm not happy about it, naturally," he said, while insisting that the tour would go ahead. He is due to call up three players as replacements. He declined to name them or say whether batsman Younis Khan was among them.

The players have 14 days to request a tribunal hearing at which they can challenge the charges.

I was never approached: Ganguly

PTI, Kolkata

Sourav Ganguly on Friday said he had never been approached by any bookie during his stint as Indian captain, even as the world cricket is rocked by 'spot-fixing' involving Pakistani cricketers. "Three former India captains -- Sachin Tendulkar, Rahul Dravid and Anil Kumble -- too were never approached and such a situation was beyond their imagination," Ganguly said.

Urging the cricketers to be responsible, Ganguly said the International Cricket Council (ICC) was not a policing body and could not have a constant watch on the players. "ICC is not a police station, it has some set of laws. If those are violated, they will take action. Nothing is foolproof," the 38-year-old said.

Referring to the 'spot-fixing' scam, Ganguly said "In our playing days, we could hardly believe such a thing. During my captaincy, betting issue used to figure in the discussions with Tendulkar, Dravid, Kumble and me. But nobody could dare approach us. May be they (the bookies) judge players by their characters before making the move. I can never in my life believe that this may happen. The captain and his boys have a role to play, they must act responsibly," Ganguly said.

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Open chess

SPORTS REPORTER

GM Ziaur Rahman won his fourth round board of the seventh IGB Dato Arthur Tan Malaysia Open Chess Championship as Zia beat FM Pham Chuong of Vietnam at CitiTel MidVally, Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

Zia has now three points from four games, while GM Niaz Murshed and Abdullah Al Saif earned 2.5 and two points respectively.

Saif beat Fong Mi Yen of Malaysia while Niaz drew against Wang Jue of China.

A case to answer



AFP, London

Three Pakistan players suspended over betting scam allegations have a "really arguable case to answer", the

anti-corruption chief of cricket's world governing body said Friday.

"The conclusion that we have come to is that there is a really arguable case to answer," Ronnie Flanagan, chairman of the Anti-Corruption and Security Unit



PHOTO: AFP

ICC CEO Haroon Lorgat (L) and ICC ACSU chairman Ronnie Flanagan host a press conference at Lord's in London yesterday.

(ACSU) of the International Cricket Council (ICC), told a press conference at Lord's in London.

The ICC has charged Test captain Salman Butt, plus bowlers Mohammad Aamer and Mohammad Asif, with "various offences" under its anti-corruption code and has suspended them pending a decision on those charges.

Flanagan said the players had been charged under Article 2 of the code and the trio knew the specific charges against them, but declined to go into the details.

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Pakistan points finger at India



PTI, London

Pakistan High Commissioner to Britain Wajid S Hassan on Friday gave a new twist to the spot-fixing scandal involving the Pakistan cricket team, saying the three accused players were "innocent" and Indian bookmakers were involved in the whole murky episode.

"I found that all these three players were absolutely innocent. They were not involved, they have been taken for a ride and the agent (Mazhar Majeed) was the culprit, in the sense that he was responsible for defrauding some Asian bookies," Hassan said.

"The British press says Asian but if they were from Pakistan they (British media) would have called Pakistanis, which means some Indian bookies were involved in it. This Majeed allegedly defrauded these Indian bookies and so the newspaper investigated this sort of sting operation through their sources here," he said.

Hassan's statement came even as the International Cricket Council had charged the three players -- Test captain Salman Butt and pacers Mohammad Asif and Mohammad Aamer -- with corruption offences and provisionally suspended them from all forms of the game pending a decision on the charges.

Succumbing to all round pressure, Pakistan had dropped the tainted trio from the ODI series against England scandal but strongly defended them and vowed full support.

Refusing to accept that the three players were dropped in the wake of the spot-fixing scandal, the Pakistan High Commissioner had said the trio had opted out.

"They are extremely disturbed with what has happened in the past one week. They have maintained that they are innocent and on account of the mental torture that has hugely affected them, they are not in the right frame of mind to play any further," Hassan had said. "Therefore, they have requested the Pakistan Cricket Board not to consider them for the rest of the matches

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SPORTS POLL

TODAY'S QUESTION
Is dropping Asif, Amir and Butt for the ODI series enough to punish them?

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