

Aussies favourites now

Cricket

AFP, Melbourne

Australia carry the momentum of their thumping Perth victory over faltering England into the fourth Melbourne Test on Sunday with the series finely balanced at a win each.

A shroud of national gloom lifted as Ricky Ponting's team hit back with a commanding 267-run win in the third Test at the WACA just as England looked poised for their first series triumph down under since 1986-87.

The tourists need only one more win from the remaining two Tests to hold on to the urn won back last year. But after Australia's comprehensive victory, local bookmakers have installed them as favourites to go on and win the series.

Australia looked a different team in Perth with pacemen Mitchell Johnson and Ryan Harris taking 18 wickets between them as England slumped to sub-200 scores in both innings.

Ponting believes man-of-the-match Johnson's spell of four wickets in just 27 balls in England's first innings changed the complexion of the series after England's crushing win by an innings in Adelaide.

"Mitch's spell was unbelievable, probably one of the all-time great Ashes spells, it set up the victory and no doubt has now set up the series for us," Ponting said.

A dilemma for Australia will be whether to retain the four-man pace attack that was so effective on the lively WACA wicket, or call up untried spinner Michael Beer on the drop-in MCG pitch.

Meanwhile, England will be trying to rid the perception that their own four-pronged bowling attack is feeling the pinch after three com-

pressed Tests and mounting injury concerns.

Main bowler Jimmy Anderson looked pained by a side strain and Steve Finn fatigued after bowling 36 overs in Perth, coming on top of Stuart Broad's series-ending abdominal injury in Adelaide.

Premier spinner Graeme Swann had a forgettable time in Perth, capturing just two wickets and conceding plenty of runs.

"All the work we have done so far on this tour has given us a lot of confidence," opener Alastair Cook said. "We scored runs heavily against the bowling attack before and we can do it again. We have to trust ourselves."

England coach Andy Flower preferred to focus on Australia's top-order batting frailties as he mapped a way back into the series.

"There is no doubt that everything is not rosy in their camp. One Test match does not create that, we realise that," Flower said.

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Hussey is the series top-scorer with 517 runs at an average of 103.40 and Watson has made 293 runs. But Ponting has just 83 runs at 16.60 and vice-captain Michael Clarke has only made it into double figures twice.

Ponting also has injury issues after fracturing the little finger on his left hand in Perth.

The drop-in pitch for the Boxing Day Test is expected to be more favourable for Australia's pace attack, but ground officials deny any skulduggery.

Melbourne Cricket Club chief executive Stephen Gough said the decision to use the alternative, greener, drop-in pitch was made before last week's Perth Test.



OLD IS GOLD: Sachin Tendulkar turns his weapon over to survey the damage to his patched-up 'lucky charm' bat on the fourth day of the first Test against South Africa at SuperSport Park in Centurion on December 19. He has scored 14 Test tons with this bat, including the landmark 50th at Centurion.

Superstitious Sachin

Cricket

AFP, New Delhi

Indian cricket superstar Sachin Tendulkar scored his record 50th Test century this week using a damaged and patched-up 'lucky charm' bat which has now scored 14 hundreds, a report said Thursday.

Tendulkar's favourite piece of willow showed plenty of war wounds caused by hours of hard-hitting at the crease, with tape across its toe (bottom) and shoulder.

But its effectiveness was in no doubt as he scored an unbeaten 111 against South Africa in Centurion to notch up his 50th Test century -- sparking national jubilation and a message of congratulations from the prime minister.

Somi Kohli, the owner of Beat All Sports which makes Vampire bats, told the Indian Express that he had insisted on repairing the bat after seeing Tendulkar trying to do the job himself earlier this year.

"Sachin's knowledge about bats is phenomenal but I told him that just like doctors are specialists, a willow also needs to be looked after by bat doctors," he said.

"Even though Sachin was reluctant, I took the bat away from him. The edges were repaired and we did a bit of grafting and protected the toe too. Sachin couldn't believe how good the bat was when I returned it to him."

Kohli said Tendulkar, the most prolific batsman in history, never uses his special bat during practice but instead saves it for matches.

"I hope he can bat with this willow till the end of the World Cup," Kohli said. "We will repair it again. But I pray he gets a big century in the final of the World Cup with this bat."

The World Cup will be hosted by India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh between February and April.

Ricky may play 4th Test

Cricket

AFP, Melbourne

Ricky Ponting said Thursday his chances of leading Australia in Sunday's fourth Ashes Test against England were "very high" after completing training without mishap.

Ponting fractured the little finger on his left hand while attempting a slip catch during the third Test win in Perth last weekend.

The Australian skipper told the Network Ten television station he rated his chances of playing in Melbourne as "very high" and said his injury had shown even greater improvement than he had expected.

Ponting's determination to play in Sunday's crucial Ashes Test despite a broken finger will provide great inspiration to the Australia team, wicketkeeper Brad Haddin said.

Uncapped New South Wales batsman Usman Khawaja has been put on standby for Ponting but the skipper is giving every indication he will be fit to lead Australia in the Boxing Day Test.

The series is tied at one Test each with two matches remaining and England will retain the urn if they win either in Melbourne or the New Year Test in Sydney.

But Haddin said Ponting played a key role in

rallying the side for a confidence-boosting win in Perth last week which got the Australians back into the series.

"He's our leader and we get a lot of inspiration from him," Haddin told a press conference on Thursday.

"He's been a great leader for Australia for a long time and especially with this group of players.

"You just have to see the turnaround we had from Adelaide to Perth to see the effect he has on the cricket team. It's very important that he plays."

Ponting is Test cricket's second-leading runscorer with 39 hundreds, but is averaging only 16.60 in the current Ashes series.

After breaking his finger attempting a catch in the slips in Perth, Ponting appears likely to move himself to a new fielding position for the fourth Test.

"He had a field and things pulled up well there," Haddin said.

"He's going to have a bat tomorrow and with a bit of luck all that goes to plan.

Haddin said the performance in Perth had boosted the side's confidence and the players were looking forward to Boxing Day.

"It's a massive Test match, the MCG, maybe a world-record crowd [of 91,000] so from the players' point of view, it doesn't get any better a stage than this," he said.

Jose says he's number one

AFP, Rome

Jose Mourinho said on Thursday he deserved to be named coach of the year and not Spain's World Cup winning coach Vicente del Bosque.

The ever-immodest 47-year-old Real Madrid coach told the 'Gazzetta dello sport' that he firmly believed he had achieved more in 2010 when he was in charge of Inter Milan than the Spanish handler, who delivered Spain their first world title when they beat the Netherlands 1-0 in July's final.

"Me, I've made my choice. 11 months work, 57 matches played, three titles including the most important of all, 'THE' tournament, the Champions League (plus the Italian Cup and the Italian league title)," said Mourinho, who left Inter for Real in the summer.

"I have won everything, I could not do any more than that, equally so for the players."

Mourinho, whose successor as coach of Inter Rafael Benitez was sacked on Thursday, also defended his Dutch playmaker at Inter Wesley Sneijder, who was not even nominated for the Ballon d'Or, an award which according to Gazzetta will go to Barcelona's Spanish playmaker Andres Iniesta.

Sneijder to many people's amazement including that of UEFA president Michel Platini was not even on the shortlist despite his inspirational play for Inter last term and then outstanding performances for the Dutch at the World Cup.

Mashrafe blow

FROM PAGE 16 that though it would be different it would not be weakened significantly. The loss of Mash will be seen in his leadership and experience. We cannot cover this aspect of his loss," he added.

Here it may be mentioned that both the pacemen were out of favour for the recently concluded five-match one-day series against Zimbabwe as Mashrafe shared the new ball with Shafiqul Islam.

The latest injury of Mashrafe definitely made the job easy for the board to take decision about the captain for the World Cup but Siddons believes that it has never been a tough decision.

"I am not aware of any captaincy saga. To me it is the easiest decision we will ever have to make. Unless something has happened that I am unaware of," he opined.

ICC's no

FROM PAGE 16 the suspended trio, were given money to take instructions during the Lord's Test from alleged bookmaker Mazhar Majeed.

Salman and Amer had their appeals against the suspensions rejected in October. Asif withdrew his appeal before initially deciding to challenge the sanction.

Police in London raided the Pakistan team hotel following the newspaper allegations and submitted two reports to the Crown Prosecution Service which has yet to decide on charging the suspended players.

Scotland Yard interviewed the three players along with paceman Wahab Riaz, who was not suspended by the ICC and is on the New Zealand tour with the Pakistan team.

Sun back in Durban

Cricket

CRICINFO

The sun has made a welcome appearance in Durban to ease some of the concerns for the ground authorities, but Wilson Ngobese, the chief groundsman at Kingsmead, doesn't want to predict too much about the nature of the pitch for the Boxing Day Test.

As of now, the track looks green and is rock solid, but if it doesn't get enough sun, Ngobese fears a repeat of Centurion where the toss became a major factor because of the moisture retained by the covered pitch. And there has been only two days of fair weather until now: Tuesday and Wednesday have been the only dry days over the last week. Even Tuesday was overcast, though it didn't rain.

"I want to give a wicket that is fair for everybody," Ngobese said, looking relieved to have uncovered the pitch. "It must not excessively help the bowlers too, and then if you can't bat I

can't help it. But we are expecting more rain till the start of the match, and I am hoping for more such sunny days. Still, it should help the bowlers with good bounce." BBC Weather has forecast light rains for Friday and Saturday, and heavy showers for the first day of the match.

Ngobese said a lot depended on the weather. "If that man [pointing towards the sky] has other plans, I am helpless." The sea breeze, he said, will help the bowlers, but the one blowing from west to east, into the Indian Ocean, can prove dangerous -- for the batsmen and the game. That's because the breeze from the west will bring rain, and the one from the sea will blow it away.

Ngobese said he would cut the grass a bit, but not too much. "I don't want to show cracks on the pitch."

Including Wednesday, there are four days to go until the start of the match, and the ground staff are hoping for good weather.

Eight of the last nine Tests in Durban have produced results, with South Africa losing twice to Australia and once to England.

Rubic unhappy

FROM PAGE 16

Rubic said releasing players for the national side is a well-known ritual over the world.

"The coach or the club officials (of Sheikh Jamal) could have discussed the matter had they had any problem, but they did not even bother to inform us and it is not a professional approach," complained Rubic.

Citing the example of allowing five players of Abahani to travel to Thailand with the club, the coach said that he would also release the Sheikh Jamal players if they wanted.

The soft-spoken Croatian said that he wanted discipline in the side.

Federation Cup runners-up Sheikh Jamal will open their first-ever Bangladesh League campaign against holders Abahani in the opening match.

Rubic was however essentially happy with the way his charges played against Mohammedan yesterday as the boys tried to implement his instructions on the pitch.

The coach, however, is still in search of two players, who can build up the game from the midfield to provide enough fuel to the hitmen. He also praised midfielders Monayem Khan Raju, Mohammad Yousuf and teenage striker Sohel Rana for their efforts in the game.

Defender-turned-mid-fielder Ripon Khan struck both goals for Mohammedan, who saw their foreign recruits like the previous season skip the training for the second successive day over unpaid wages dispute.

'No MCG pitch conspiracy'

AFP, Melbourne

The head of the ground staff at the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) said Thursday there was no conspiracy in his switch of drop-in pitches for the crucial fourth Ashes Test against England.

MCG curator Cameron Hodgkins dismissed speculation that he has prepared a Boxing Day Test pitch to give Australia an advantage as the Ashes hang in the balance at one win each.

The pitch being prepared for Sunday's Test is Hodgkins' second choice after he decided to ditch his initial selection a fortnight ago before the third Perth Test, which Australia won to tie the series.

"The last time I spoke to someone from Cricket Australia was in the middle of winter," Hodgkins told reporters.

"It was entirely a personal thing [changing pitches]."

"Two weeks ago it became pretty evident that my first option wasn't going to be ideal for what I envisaged for a Test pitch. I was able to then go to what I thought would be a better surface."

Hodgkins said the drop-in pitch was likely to give spinners some encouragement on Sunday's opening day, then flatten out over the rest of the five days.

"It's a wicket which offers a little bit up front and is quite flat towards the end of the match," he said.

"Most of the turn we've had in matches here has been on day one."

"The most successful teams have had variety in their attack here."

Drop-in pitches are used for cricket at the MCG once the Australian Football League season finishes each October.

'Eng playing better'

Cricket

AFP, Melbourne

Australia may have momentum from their big Perth Test win but England are playing better cricket going into the fourth Ashes Test, England batsman Ian Bell said on Thursday.

Australia's stunning reversal of form to win last week's third Test by 267 runs and level the five-match series at one-all has given Ricky Ponting's men a massive confidence boost.

"Certainly, they have got some momentum going into it [the fourth Test]," Bell told a press conference on Thursday.

"They played some fantastic cricket at the WACA. [But] out of the three Test matches I'd say we've been playing the better cricket."

"We're going to have to start the Test match well," he said. "We don't want Australia winning the first hour or that first session."

"It'd be great for us to be able to come out and win that first session, whether we're batting or bowling, and try and take [back] a bit of that momentum."

Bell, 28, is second in England's batting averages for the series with 213 runs at 71.00, trailing

opener Alastair Cook's tally of 495 at 123.75.

His sparkling form, including top-scoring with 53 in England's first-innings total of 187 in Perth, has prompted calls for Bell to be promoted to number five ahead of Paul Collingwood.

Collingwood is averaging 15.50 in the series and looked out of sorts in Perth, making 5 and 11.

"It's always nice to get moved up the order," Bell said, but the 60-Test veteran added he has not spoken with team management about a promotion.

"Whether I move up the order doesn't really matter as long as we're winning the next two Test matches," he said.

"That's the most important thing to me, contributing to this team winning the Ashes."

"It's probably one of the most exciting Test matches we're going into. Playing in Melbourne is something you look forward to, a Boxing Day Test match is always special."

Bell, who averaged just 25.68 in 13 previous Ashes Tests before the current series, feels he has improved significantly in the past 18 months.

However, a century in an Ashes Test eludes him.

"I'm desperate for an Ashes hundred, there's no doubt about that. I'm hoping with the way I'm playing there's one around the corner," he said.

Carlo slams fixture

AFP, Cobham



Chelsea manager Carlo Ancelotti has slammed the Premier League fixture planners as his side prepare to play twice in three days over Christmas.

Ancelotti's team, who trail leaders Manchester United by three points, will play a crucial clash against title rivals Arsenal on December 27 before a home match against Bolton two days later and the Italian is unhappy with the champions' workload.

Bolton host West Bromwich Albion on December 26 as part of the traditional Boxing Day schedule, while Chelsea have to wait another 24 hours before their fixture at Arsenal as the game is being shown live on television in England.

That means Owen Coley's players will have an extra day to ease their aching limbs before travelling to Stamford Bridge to face the Blues and Ancelotti believes that gives Bolton a significant advantage.

"I want to say something about the Bolton game

because we won't have the possibility to recover," Ancelotti told reporters on Thursday.

"We'll have two days, compared to Bolton who, unfortunately, play on the 26th. We play on the 27th."

"That's not a good thing, to have one day less to recover. I'm not happy about that."

Meanwhile, Ancelotti insists Chelsea are not interested in signing Tottenham midfielder Luka Modric following reports that the Blues were ready to make a 30 million pounds (46 million dollars) bid for the Croatian during the January transfer window.

Modric has been a key figure in Tottenham's impressive form over the last 18 months and would offer Ancelotti a different kind of option in midfield but the Italian played down talk of a big-money move.

"Modric is a good player but we are not interested," he said. "We have to have respect for Tottenham. He is a good player but nobody speaks of Modric here."

"If we need to have something we are able to do it but now there are four games in a

few days.

"This period is very important for the Premier League. We have to be focused on this period. I don't need to talk about anything else."

Cup Facts

FROM PAGE 16 unequalled since. Against Bangladesh at Pietermaritzburg on February 14, Vaas took a hat-trick off the first three balls of the match. He added another wicket off the fifth ball, making it four wickets in the first over.

Vaas also set a Cup record for most wickets taken with 23 from ten matches. Australian firebrand Brett Leestard Cup career with a bang, finishing second on the wickets list with 22.

Glenn McGrath, the great Australian bowler, had the best bowling figures of the tournament, with his seven for 15 against Namibia at Potchefstroom on February 27 topping the chart.

The top keeper of the tournament was Australian Adam Gilchrist with twenty-one dismissals from ten matches, while Sri Lankan Kumar Sangakkara finished second with seventeen (15 catches, 2 stumpings).

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

Crossword puzzle grid with clues for Across and Down words.

Cryptquip puzzle grid with letters and numbers.

CRYPTOQUIP FDGA U NUAPZZO NJTAS CDG SVUWUUAL FPCGV WUWG U FPR RGGUAL NJV SPOR, U RPUS "ZGPB AJ NTVCDGV." Yesterday's Cryptquip: SINCE A VERY BEAUTIFUL LADY RESCUED THE FELLOW, I WOULD SAY HE'S BEEN SAVED BY THE BELLE. Today's Cryptquip Clue: J equals O