

'C'Ron the new Di Stefano'

Real Madrid forward Cristiano Ronaldo is the true heir of Alfredo Di Stefano according to Real director general Jorge Valdano. World Player of the Year Messi was compared to Real great Di Stefano by Atletico Madrid coach Quique Sanchez Flores on Saturday after the Argentina forward netted his fourth hat-trick of the season in a 3-0 win over Atletico. Ronaldo, the world's most expensive player, scored twice in Real's 4-1 home win over Real Sociedad on Sunday and Valdano, a former Real and Argentina forward, said the Portuguese was the Di Stefano of the 21st century.

- REUTERS



Tigers move to No.8

SPORTS REPORTER

With the 2011 World Cup only eleven days away, the confidence levels of fans and players alike will have been boosted by Bangladesh's recent elevation to number eight in the pecking order of ODI cricket.

The Tigers' ODI team have overtaken the West Indies, whose 2-0 defeat at the hands of the Sri Lankans in an ODI series that ended Sunday no doubt contributing to the two teams exchanging places.

Over the ranking period Bangladesh has mustered 2121 points from 32 matches while West Indies has garnered 1321 points from 20 matches. West Indies and Bangladesh have been drawn in the same group for the preliminary stage of the 2011 World Cup.

Ansar reign in TT

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh Ansar lifted titles in both men's and women's team events of the AB Bank 31st National Table Tennis Championship in Chittagong yesterday.

Men's team crushed Feni

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PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

READY TO PARTY: The brilliance of the overhead decorative lights, part of the city's facelift for the 2011 World Cup, on the road in front of the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium at Mirpur has pedestrians and motorists gazing in awe yesterday.

Eden awaits WC verdict

AFP, New Delhi

Under-fire officials at India's Eden Gardens in Kolkata expressed confidence about hosting their share of World Cup matches ahead of a final inspection of the famous ground on Monday.

The stadium was stripped of the high-profile match between India and England on February 27 because of concerns about unfinished renovation work, echoing the shambolic buildup to the Commonwealth Games in New Delhi last year.

The match has since been shifted to Bangalore.

A decision on whether Kolkata will host the remaining three World Cup matches -- none of these involving India -- would be taken after an International Cricket Council inspection on Monday.

A Cricket Association of Bengal (CAB) official said all the concrete and structural steel work had been completed and workers were busy dismantling their set-ups.

"We will be working till everything is complete," CAB joint-secretary Biswarup Dey was quoted as saying by the Kolkata-based Telegraph newspaper. "We are confident of being 100 per cent ready."

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BATTLE PLAN

Cultivating a winning habit

QUAZI ZULQUARNAIN ISLAM



For Mohammad Ashraful, the moment when everything started to change is very clearly etched in memory. It was a cool January day in 2009 at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur and Bangladesh was up in a tough match against the visiting Sri Lankan side.

Aided by two marvellous spells of fast bowling from Mashrafe bin Mortaza and the then upcoming Rubel Hossain, Bangladesh had skittled their illustrious neighbours for 147 in just over 30 overs. In reply however, the Tigers found themselves in a spot of bother after the loss of three quick wickets with just 11 on the board.

"Shakib [al Hasan] and I then joined in a partnership of nearly a hundred," recalls Ashraful. "I made only 26 but I think at that time, it was an important innings, especially since Shakib went on to get 92 that day."

The current Bangladesh captain was in imperious form, playing a swash-buckling innings on a pitch where every other batsman had struggled to impose themselves. Shakib's 92 that day came off only 69 balls and propelled the team to victory and into the final of the tri-nation tournament also featuring Zimbabwe.

"During that game, I had a feeling that things were changing," says Ashraful. "Previously we were happy just competing with the big teams, but that day there was a feeling prevalent that we will be able to beat the big teams if we played to our true potential," he continues.

The feeling continued into the final which turned into a spell-binding encounter when Bangladesh almost defended a partly total of 152 with some spirited bowling and fielding. Shakib grabbed two wickets, Nazmul Hossain grabbed three and Mashrafe bowled ten overs for 18 as Bangladesh somehow grabbed defeat from the jaws of victory.

"Despite that loss, no one was crestfallen," continues Ashraful. "These close games seemed an affirmation of our increase in quality more than anything else. It was the moment when I felt, we all truly started believing in ourselves," says Ashraful.

For Ashraful though, that series was personally disappointing. Ever since he had hit the heights at the World Cup in the West Indies, Ashraful had struggled to cope with the burden of match-winning that had been his for too long over the last decade.

"But there were other match-winners coming through," says Ashraful, referring to the likes of Tamim Iqbal and Shakib and harbouring no resentment at the loss of his elevated status in the team.

"Things are now very different to what it was in 2007. In that World Cup, we were hoping for an upset or two, but this time around we are firmly aiming for the quarterfinals. There is a significant change in the mentality."

For Shakib though, everything is to be taken in stride.

"I don't feel that there is anything special in terms of attitude. Ever since I have started playing cricket, I have always been playing to win. It is this mentality that I go out with every time I go out to play, against whichever opposition," he says.

Shakib's mark in Bangladesh's rapid ascent since the 2007 World Cup is clear for all to see. The Tigers have registered 28 of their overall 64 victories in ODIs since the World Cup and some of those have come in comprehensive circumstances, like for example the series whitewash of New Zealand.

The writing is clearly on the wall. These new bunch of players know what it is to win. And no one can identify this better than Shahriar Nafees. The left-handed batsman had defected to the Indian Cricket League (ICL) in 2008 after a poor run of form and after only just returning to the side, is possibly the only 'outsider' in a World Cup squad that has largely been playing together for three to four years.

He then can clearly identify this new found confidence.

"I think confidence is everything," says Nafees. "At the moment, the players are increasingly confident of achieving something. They know that at home we are considerably tough opposition and we can achieve good things

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PHOTO: STAR FILE

Bangladesh batsman Mohammad Ashraful (L) takes part in a fielding drill as Abdur Razzak awaits his turn during a national team practice session at the Zohur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chittagong.

Sony nat'l tennis

SPORTS REPORTER

Six players moved confirmed their quarterfinal berths in the men's singles of the Sony National Tennis Competition at the National Tennis Complex in Ramna yesterday.

Among the six pre-quarterfinals, the match between Anwar Hossain and Biplob Ram was the most entertaining lasting four hours where Anwar had the last laugh. Anwar bounced back from going 3-6 down in the first set before taking the next two sets 6-3, 7-6 to advance into the last eight.

Munir Hossain was locked against Mofazzal Hossain in 4-6, 6-4 before the latter retired with a muscle cramp to hand Munir the match. Ranjan Ram defeated Jamal Bhuiyan 1-6, 6-3, 6-2, Alamgir Hossain beat Mohiuddin Sabuj 6-1, 6-1 and Dipu Lal crushed Sajib Pashi 6-2, 6-3.

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Ponting sure of playing

AFP, Melbourne



Australia captain Ricky Ponting said Monday he was confident he would be fit to play in this month's World Cup despite a recent finger injury.

Ponting, who missed the final Ashes Test and the entire seven-match one-day series against England after surgery for a broken little finger, said the injury was improving quickly.

"It's a lot better now than it was last week," Ponting said at the Allan Border Medal presentation in Melbourne.

"I've been back in the nets this week, I've had three good hits, a bit of time out there, so it's actually probably a bit further advanced than I thought it would be."

Australia go into the World Cup, to be played in India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, in search of a fourth consecutive title.

Ponting said he had endured a frustrating month on the sidelines, but believed the way the team had performed in his absence, thrashing England 6-1 in their ODI series, showed they were ready to defend their crown.

"I'm really proud of the way the boys have played in the last few weeks, Michael (Clarke) led the side well and Cameron (White) led the side really well in Perth and we did start to get a few guys back to full fitness at the right time," he said.

"We've still got a few injury worries, but hopefully by the middle of this month and early March we'll be on the right track to winning a World Cup."

Ponting said it was difficult playing on the sub-continent,

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Pak greats call for reform



AFP, Karachi

Pakistan cricket faces an abysmal future unless it cleans up the game and institutes sweeping reforms after three key players were banned on corruption charges, former players and commentators said Monday.

Former Test captain Salman Butt was banned for 10 years, with five years suspended, bowler Mohammad Asif for seven years, with two suspended, and teenage pace sensation Mohammad Aamer for five years.

The bans follow alleged incidents during last year's Test against England at Lord's, when Britain's News of the World newspaper claimed players were willing to bowl no-balls deliberately.

The newspaper said the three colluded in a spot-fixing betting scam organised by British-based agent Mazhar Majeed.

On Friday, British prosecutors charged the players and Majeed with corruption, summoning them to appear in a London court on March 17.

"Pakistan's cricket image is tainted badly,"

former captain Zaheer Abbas conceded.

"But on the other hand the latest bans give us a last chance to root out corruption and indiscipline from our cricket or else we might be thrown out of international cricket," he told AFP.

After the scandal surfaced, the International Cricket Council (ICC) ordered the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) to keep tabs on players through an integrity committee and introduce harsher punishments in their annual contracts.

PCB complied, refusing to clear some tainted players for selection in the national squad, introducing a corruption code for domestic cricket and bringing in anti-corruption lectures -- all steps praised by the ICC.

Despite these measures, Imran Khan, the only captain ever to lead Pakistan to World Cup victory, called for major upheavals.

"Our cricket system is wrong," said Khan, now head of the political party Teherik-e-Insaaf (Movement for Justice).

"The chairman of the PCB should be an elected person held accountable for all such incidents.

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WINNING WAYS

	M	W	L	T/NR
Overall	238	64	172	2
After World Cup 2007	80	28	52	0

CHANGING OF THE GUARD

	M	Runs	HS	Avg.	SR	100s	50s
Shakib Al Hasan	73	1969	108	31.75	82.7	4	13
Mohammad Ashraful	65	1536	109	25.18	68.8	2	9

WHEN TIGERS WIN

	M	Runs	HS	Avg.	SR	100s	50s
Shakib Al Hasan	27	919	106	57.43	102.6	3	5
Mohammad Ashraful	20	691	109	40.64	73.9	2	5

All statistics are post 2007 World Cup