

Spinners want to spark

AFP, New Delhi

15 wickets.

If spinners are seeking a spark of inspiration to succeed on sub-continental pitches in the World Cup, they need look no further than Australian Shane Warne or India's Anil Kumble.

Leg-spin wizard Warne turned the 1996 Cup semifinal in Mohali on its head with 4-36 off nine probing overs as the West Indies crashed to 202 after being strongly placed at 165-2 chasing a modest target of 208.

Sri Lankan Muttiah Muralidaran, India's Harbhajan Singh, England's Graeme Swann, New Zealander Daniel Vettori and Pakistan's Saeed Ajmal need not lose heart in the latest edition.

Bangladesh's talented left-arm spinners Shakib Al Hasan and Abdur Razzaq recently made a strong statement for the slow men, playing crucial roles in their team's one-day series wins over New Zealand and Zimbabwe at home.

Three slow men in 1987, including Pakistan's leg-spinner Abdul Qadir, and four in 1996 finished among top-six bowlers when the event was held in the sub-continent.

Leg-spinner Kumble was the

most successful bowler in 1996, with

15 wickets.

Sri Lanka skipper Arjuna Ranatunga stressed the significance of spin when he cleverly used Muralidaran, Aravinda de Silva, Sanath Jayasuriya and Kumar Dharmasena to restrict Australia to 241 before winning the 1996 Cup final.

Muralidaran, the only player in the current squad to have figured in the 1996 final at Lahore, has been his team's match-winner for than a decade on all surfaces.

The 38-year-old, playing his last World Cup, is a big turner of the ball and also has a deceptive 'doosra', a delivery that turns away from right-handers instead of coming into them like a conventional off-break.

Muralidaran, who quit Test cricket last year with a record 800 wickets, is also the world's leading bowler in one-day internationals.

Harbhajan has already showed that he is a difficult bowler to get away in home conditions with a tidy line and length which can keep batsmen under control in middle overs.

He is likely to be the only specialist spinner in the playing XI as India also have useful part-timers in Virender Sehwag, Yuvraj Singh and Yusuf Pathan.

Off-spinner Swann, who bagged 15 wickets in his team's recent Ashes triumph in Australia, is expected to play a

major role on slow turners.

Former India left-arm spinner Bishan Singh Bedi, known for his smooth action, was all praise for the England bowler.

"Swann is an outstanding bowler. He is the best off-spinner at the moment," said Bedi.

"The fact that he attacks makes him extraordinary. He has a nice, clean action and I think he should do really well. His performance in the Ashes should boost his confidence."

Left-arm spinner Vettori will be keen to do justice to his stature in his last assignment as captain. He is a vital part of New Zealand's attack, capable of drying up runs as well as taking crucial wickets.

New Zealand, who suffered 11 successive one-day defeats in the sub-continent late last year, hope the burden of captaincy does not affect their skipper's performance at the big stage.

Vettori is also a gritty lower-order batsman who has contributed at important stages.

Bangladesh, playing all their league matches at home, will largely rely on spinners in a bid to advance to the quarterfinals. They have effective spinners in Mohammad Mahmudullah, Naeem Islam and Sohrabadi Shuvo.



PHOTO: AFP

Australia captain Ricky Ponting runs during a training session at the M Chinnaswamy Stadium in Bangalore yesterday.

Duffin replaces Mawoyo

AFP, Mumbai

Zimbabwe on Thursday called up experienced batsman Terry Duffin to replace Tinotenda Mawoyo, who has an abdominal muscle tear, in their World Cup squad.

Duffin, 28, has played two Tests and 23 one-day internationals, in which he has scored 80 and 546 runs, respectively.

Mawoyo is the seventh player to be replaced in the tournament after compatriot Sean Ervine, Nathan Hauritz, Michael Hussey (both Australia), Praveen Kumar of India, England's Eoin Morgan and Sohail Tanvir of Pakistan were earlier ruled out.

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"But this time, I will try to bat 50 overs and give a good start to the team. I have been unsuccessfully trying this for the past 10 years, but the effort is still on."

Sehwag said he was not feeling any pressure as his captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni and coach Gary Kirsten had always backed him to play his natural game.

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Sehwag plans to bat 50 overs

AFP, Bangalore

Hard-hitting Indian opener Virender Sehwag on Friday sounded a warning to rival bowlers ahead of the World Cup, saying he planned to bat right through the innings.

Sehwag, who opens the innings with batting superstar Sachin Tendulkar, is known for giving his team flying starts with his hard and clean hitting and has so far scored 7,380 runs in 228 one-dayers with 13 centuries.

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"The coach and captain just allow me to bat the way I bat. So, they are not putting any pressure on me. They have said 'you just go

and play your natural game', " said Sehwag. "My role is to go out there and enjoy myself and give a good start to the team. If I score 20 runs in 10 balls or 100 in 70 or 80 balls, I am happy with that."

He said India were eagerly looking forward to their opening match against Bangladesh in Dhaka on February 19, a repeat of their 2007 World Cup clash in the Caribbean where they lost by five wickets.

The defeat eventually led to India's first-round exit.

"I think we have lost just two games against Bangladesh, including the one in the World Cup," said Sehwag.

"We know that in the last World Cup we lost to them, so we are waiting for the match against Bangladesh. We are charged up for the game and hopefully, we will do well against them this time."

Sehwag, who missed a recent one-day series in South Africa due to a shoulder injury, is also a useful off-spinner, having taken 92 wickets.

India are in Group B with South Africa, England, the West Indies, Bangladesh, Ireland and the Netherlands, with the top four sides making it to the quarterfinals.

Tigers aim for a tune-up

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"Both teams are going to play more than eleven players, so it's not a legitimate match. We will probably play 12 players where Nazmul (Hossain) will probably play as an extra bowler. There is a big question mark about whether Ash (Mohammad Ashraful) or Rokibul Hasan will play as we are still talking about that," informed Siddons.

"We are not thinking about Canada rather we are concerned about how we play the first practice match," he said, adding that they have got a fair bit of knowledge about their opponents through fielding coach Julian Fountain and bowling coach Ian Pont who have both previously worked with the Canada team.

"We want to see that our process is right. Powerplay is important as well as the opening bowling spell as we need to do really well with the new ball rather than relying on Razzak and Shakib coming in. We have practised a lot with the last Powerplay and now we need to implement it in the matches. We need to put a decent score with all the batsmen sticking to the plan as well sticking to

the team rules," Siddons said.

Bangladesh might not be interested to recall the 2003 memory but their opponents wanted to take inspiration from that victory.

"Our morale is high and definitely we want to take inspiration from our victory in 2003 against Bangladesh. It's a young side as five players came from the Under-19 team but they have the quality to prove themselves on the big occasion. We want to start with a win and gain momentum and we are capable enough to do that," said Canada's Sri Lankan coach Pubudu Bathiya Dassanayake, who has been working with the team for two years.

The former Sri Lankan player was excited with the fact that they have got the opportunity to play the practice match against Bangladesh at their own den as they believe it will help them to play good cricket in the tournament proper in India and Sri Lanka.

"Bangladesh have some good spinners in the side, so it will help us when we play the group matches in India and Sri Lanka," he added.

The Tigers' talisman

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aggressive Bangladesh have had, and with him at the helm, the previous era of 'just competing is enough' has been truly put to rest. It helps also that his performances with both bat and ball are stellar, never more so than during last year's 4-0 drubbing of New Zealand. He leads by example, but it is not just the example of his cricketing skills, it is an example of attitude.

One of cricket's abiding myths is that a captain is as good or bad as his team. Bangladesh's example proves that it is only partly true. A good captain lifts an underachieving team into a competitive one. An ordinary one makes sure that under-achievers stay underachievers. One can only imagine what deflating it was to watch a captain play out the last

over of an ODI match as a maiden, that too against a part-time bowler.

That is exactly what Mohammad Ashraful did in the first match of the Kitply Cup against Pakistan when he played out a maiden against Younis Khan in his quest to see his side not bowled out, and thereby seem to evade responsibility. He should remember that the best captains are those who unite teams under one banner and create an environment in which all the talent on offer can be expressed and fulfilled. This is his team, and that lesson would be a good one to take into the World Cup and beyond.

Double delight

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double final.

In the U-16 boy's singles final, Biplob Ram defeated Rustam Ali 6-4 and 7-5 while Ishita beat Ayesha Sultan 6-2 and 6-4 to lift the girl's singles title.

Kiwis confident

AFP, Nagpur

New Zealand captain Daniel Vettori said Friday the recent one-day victories against Pakistan had restored some of their confidence ahead of the World Cup.

New Zealand lost the home one-day series but managed to win two games against Pakistan to end an 11-match losing streak which started with a triangular tournament in Sri Lanka last August.

They were later blanked in one-day series in Bangladesh and India.

"Defeats in the last three series have affected our morale, but the wins against Pakistan have restored our confidence," Vettori told reporters in Nagpur on the eve of their warm-up game against Ireland.

The New Zealand skipper said the experience of playing in Bangladesh and India would stand his team in good stead.

"We have been playing in the sub-continent for some time and that has helped us gain more experience. We will focus on every match," he said.

Vettori was also banking on the expertise of newly-appointed coach John Wright, who helped India reach the 2003 World Cup final in South Africa during his five-year stint with the team.

"John is an important asset for us. He has vast experience, knowledge of local conditions, crowd and people and therefore he will be a good coach for New Zealand," said Vettori.

New Zealand are in Group A with defending champions Australia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Zimbabwe, Canada and Kenya, with the top four teams advancing to the quarterfinals.

They open their World Cup campaign on February 20 against Kenya at Chennai in India.

'Momentum with us'

AFP, Bangalore

"I don't care," Ponting said when asked about the missing favourites tag. "I'm not sure if there's a really hot favourite going into a tournament like this."

"I don't really care where we start the tournament. It's totally irrelevant. Yes, we are ranked number one but we won't be thinking about that."

Ponting however conceded India and South Africa "are probably two of the outstanding teams".

The Australian skipper also said he was hopeful of playing in Sunday's opening warm-up game against India in Bangalore despite having missed the one-day series against England due to a broken finger.

"The next couple of weeks are important for me. To be out of the game for a month going into a World Cup is not a perfect preparation. I have to really focus on my batting and my fielding," said Ponting.

Australia are in Group A with Sri Lanka, Pakistan, New Zealand, Zimbabwe, Canada and Kenya, with the top four sides making it to the quarterfinals.

They open their campaign against Zimbabwe at Ahmedabad in India on February 21.

'We're no chokers'

AFP, Chennai

Choking under pressure is a thing of the past for the new look South Africa, wicket-keeper-batsman AB de Villiers said on Friday as his team attempts to win the World Cup for the first time.

South Africa have been a formidable force ever since they made their World Cup debut in 1992, but have consistently fallen short on the biggest stage. They failed to clear the semifinal hurdle in the 1992, 1999 and 2007 tournaments despite starting among the favourites.

"We've shown recently that we can play in big situations and under pressure," de Villiers said in Chennai ahead of a warm-up game against Zimbabwe on Saturday.

"We are not focusing on what happened in the past. We have a different look now. In recent times, we have been the opposite of chokers. ICC tournaments are different, there is pressure in

the knockouts but we will be ready for it."

South Africa's build-up to the event this time around has been encouraging, with hard-fought one-day series wins over Pakistan and India.

De Villiers put the recent success down to his team's ability to perform in tense situations.

"We have shown more than enough flair," he said. "I don't want us to be the unpredictable side of the tournament and I think we are at the level where we can read situations and adapt."

The 26-year-old also dismissed the need for a mental conditioning expert, given their failures in crunch situations.

"The team does not need any extra help," he said. "We are focusing on the small things and not worried about failing under pressure at all."

The Proteas are fielding a fresh-looking squad for the tournament with as many as 11 players set to make their World Cup debuts.

South Africa open their

campaign against the West Indies in New Delhi on February 24, followed by games against India, England, Bangladesh, Ireland and the Netherlands.

The World Cup, being co-hosted by India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, starts on February 19.

Shaheed Smriti hockey

SPORTS REPORTER

Usha Krira Chakra and Shadharan Bima played out a 1-1 draw in the Chowdhury Group Shaheed Smriti Hockey Tournament at the Maulana Bhasani National Stadium yesterday.

Maksudul Alam Habul put Usha ahead in the eighth minute only for his goal to be cancelled out by Riaz just one minute before the break.

In the day's other match, Bangladesh Army defeated Bangladesh Air Force 2-0 with Siraj scoring both goals.



PHOTO: COURTESY