

Cause for optimism

SPORTS REPORTER

As always, the Pakistan cricket team will be one of the more fascinating outfits during the World Cup. The 1992 World Cup winners always seem to have an intriguing subplot simmering underneath their words and actions. It is no different before the 2011 World Cup, with the team being ravaged by the spot-fixing controversy that saw them lose their Test captain Salman Butt, and star opening bowlers Mohammad Afsar and Mohammad Aamer.

Adding to the intrigue is that the team often play their best cricket in these situations, making them impossible to write off. They come into the World Cup having beaten New Zealand away in the Test and ODI series, which will make the other teams wary of the most unpredictable side in the world. The team arrived in Dhaka on Saturday to play two warm-up games, against Bangladesh on February 15 and England on February 18.

"Conditions are good, weather is fine especially since we've come back from New Zealand. We have a good chance to prepare ourselves from the warm-up games," said batsman Younis Khan at a press conference in Dhaka's Sheraton Hotel yesterday. When asked about the impending warm-up encounters, the former Pakistan cap-

tain said, "Bangladesh have a nicely balanced team. They have done well against New Zealand, and have a good chance in this World Cup. It would be nice for me and my team as well if I get two scores against the big teams."

On Pakistan's chances in the global tournament, Younis was optimistic given the team's tribulations over the past year, and had an interesting prediction for the final. "I think we have a good chance. We play 5-6 games before the quarterfinal. I think India and Pakistan will play in the final, and Bangladesh as well in the semifinal."

Sitting beside him was Umar Gul, the reverse swing specialist on whose performance much will depend. It is no secret that Pakistan's strength since the days of Imran Khan and Sarfaraz Nawaz has been the bowling. A big factor during this World Cup taking place in the subcontinent in early Spring will be the dew, especially for sides bowling second under lights.

"I think it is not just a problem for the fast bowlers but also for the spinners. The ball doesn't get out of the fingers properly and comes on to the bat very easily," said Gul when asked about the dew factor.

Gul also stressed upon the importance and benefits of having a former great in Waqar Younis as coach. "I am working very hard with Waqar on the new ball. I think it's always good for the team when great fast

bowlers are coaches of the team."

Misbah-ul-Haque, Pakistan's Test captain during their series victory over New Zealand, believed that the side is gelling as a strong unit without any apparent weakness. "The main thing is that the team is gelling and we are performing as well. I think that will really help us. There's no weakness."

Referring to the ordeal the side went through during the spot-fixing saga, Misbah said, "I think everyone is working hard to improve their performance. That's the way cricket goes on, life goes on. If the opportunity arises, I just want to make the best use of it. That's the way I'm looking at this World Cup."

The batsman gave a simple answer to a query regarding what will motivate the side for good performances in the World Cup: "World Cup itself is the biggest motivation. It is a big event and everyone should want to perform well in this tournament."

He also took heart from the youngsters' performance in New Zealand. "The way we've played over the last two months in New Zealand, I really like the way our batting going. Our youngsters are performing. For the first time, the team is performing like a unit. Everyone is doing their task, it is a good combination of youngsters and experienced players," added Misbah.

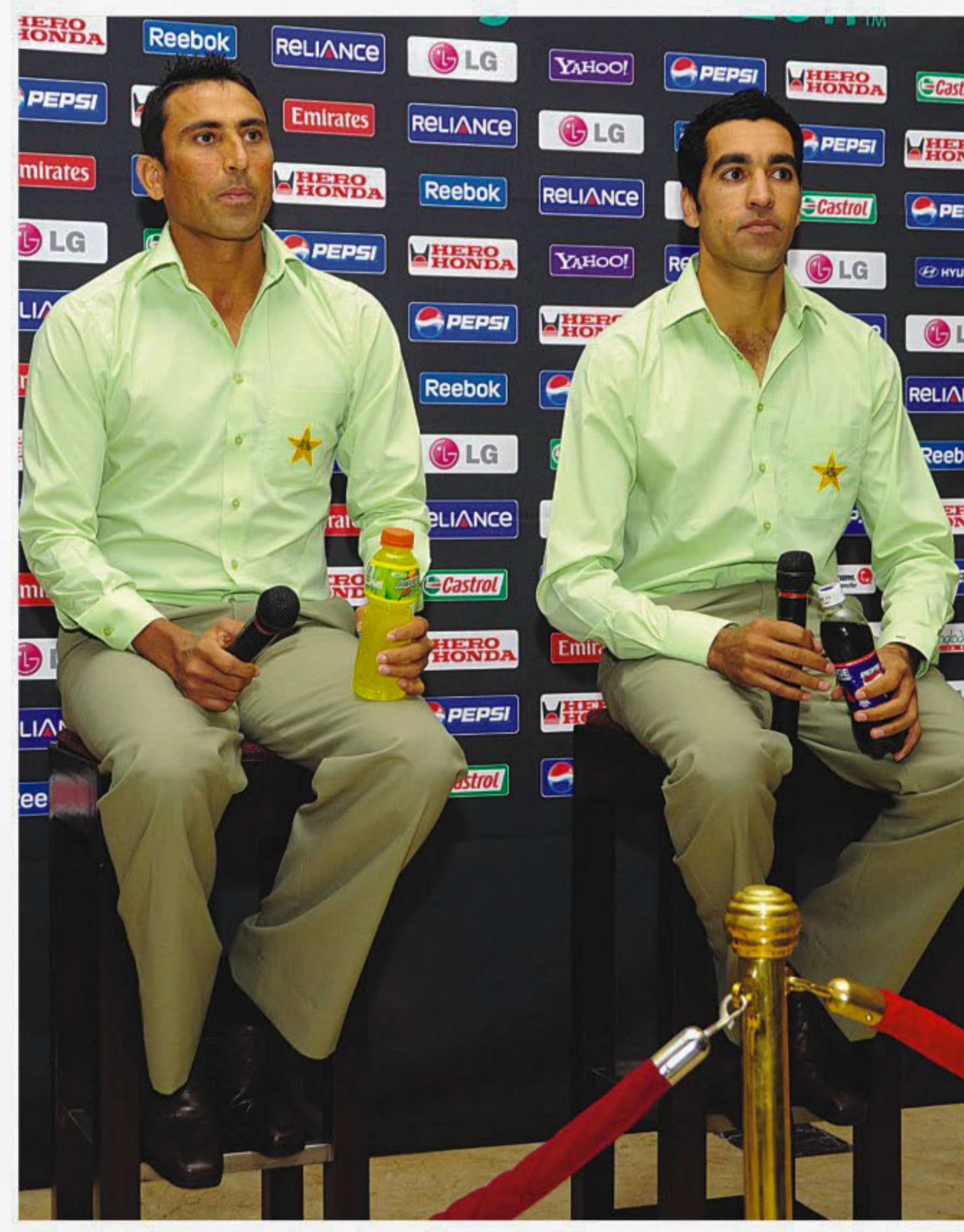


PHOTO: STAR
Pakistan cricketers Younis Khan (L) and Umar Gul (R) answer questions during a press conference at the city's Sheraton hotel yesterday.

Smith calls for better pitches

AFP, Chennai

South Africa skipper Graeme Smith has criticised the wicket prepared for their World Cup warm-up game against Zimbabwe and called for better tracks during the tournament.

The pitch caused worries to Smith despite his team cantering to an eight-wicket win in the day-night game at the Chidambaram Stadium in Chennai on Saturday.

"I don't think it was a great wicket," Smith said afterwards. "It probably suited them (spinners). The wicket probably helped them a little bit being, I think, maybe a bit under-prepared."

South Africa's frontline spinners Imran Tahir (3-35), Robin Petersen (2-21) and Johan Botha (1-18) benefited as Zimbabwe were bowled out for a paltry 152.

Smith called for better tracks once the actual action started in the tournament. South Africa are set to play England in Chennai on March 6.



PHOTO: AFP FILE

The whole of India will be praying that the great Sachin Tendulkar (pictured) is able to add the last string to his bow by winning the World Cup.

Sachin longing for it

AFP, New Delhi



A billion hearts will beat for Sachin Tendulkar as he attempts to win the World Cup for India in his record-equalling sixth appearance in cricket's showpiece event.

Tendulkar will not be short of support in what is expected to be his last World Cup -- even his teammates want to win it for him.

The most celebrated cricketer of the modern era has amassed 32,331 international runs and hit 97 centuries, making him the most prolific run-getter in both Test and one-day cricket.

But a World Cup title has eluded the master batsman, an anomaly he hopes to correct when he equals Pakistani great Javed Miandad's record of six tournament appearances.

Tendulkar, who turns 38 in April and holds all coveted batting records except Don Bradman's astounding average of 99.94, has often expressed his dis-

appointment at missing out on a World Cup triumph.

He was just 10 when Kapil Dev held aloft the trophy at Lord's in 1983, the only time India has won the tournament, but he remembers that moment clearly.

"No Indian can forget that and, like any player, I too have dreamt of winning the World Cup for the country," Tendulkar said. "By God's grace, we will achieve what we want to achieve."

During his five previous World Cups since 1992, India reached the semifinals at home in 1996 and finished runners-up in 2003 in South Africa.

Both times Tendulkar ended as the tournament's highest scorer, making 523 runs at average of 87.16 in 1996 and 673 runs at 61.18 in 2003.

He has scored more World Cup runs (1,796) than any batsman in history, but not even his individual brilliance could win the ultimate prize in a team sport like cricket.

Tendulkar admitted his worst moment came in the World Cup in the

Caribbean in 2007 when India were knocked out in the first round after being stunned by minnows Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

"It is always painful when the team loses, but our early exit in 2007 was particularly disappointing," he said, blaming a lop-sided batting order for the loss to Bangladesh.

Tendulkar, who has played his best one-day cricket as an opener, was asked to bat at number four by the then coach, Greg Chappell, behind Sourav Ganguly, Virender Sehwag and tyro Robin Uthappa.

Tendulkar has enjoyed a great run under current coach Gary Kirsten and captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni, smashing an age-defying 200 not out last year, the only double-century in the history of one-day internationals.

India, second behind Australia in one-day rankings, get a chance to end a 28-year drought by winning the final on Tendulkar's home turf at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai on April 2.

'Pak worst prepared'

PTI, Karachi



The current Pakistan cricket team has had the "worst" possible preparation for the World Cup but is still capable of lifting the trophy if it manages to stay united through the mega event, feels the country's 1992 World Cup winning captain Imran Khan.

"The team had the worst preparation for the World Cup but it is all a matter of some players putting up their hands and performing consistently in the tournament and the team clicking and gelling together after a good start and anything can happen," Imran said when asked about the team's chances in the event starting February 19.

But Imran said the team management and the captain need to be very clear about how they approach the tourna-

ment.

"My mind is clear and my planning is clear the specialist players can win you matches so play them at the top. The top three or four batsmen should all be specialists and you can't have 'pinch hitters' coming in at the top even on the sub-continental pitches," the former captain said.

Imran feels the responsibility lies primarily with seniors such as Younis Khan and Misbahul Haq as far as batting is concerned.

"They have to play central roles in every match. The team management must focus their plans and strategy for every game around them. Because the World Cup is all about pressure and once you lose quick, wickets it becomes difficult for the incoming batsmen to handle the pressure," he said.

The cricketer-turned-politician also felt that it was wrong for critics and

pundits to describe captain Shahid Afridi as a batting all-rounder.

"I don't consider him a batting all-rounder. To me he is a very energetic captain on the field a very good stock bowler and brilliant fielder. His batting is a bonus. We should not depend on it we should consider his captaincy, bowling and fielding as his main assets," he explained.

"He has all the batting talent in the world but he lacks management while batting and that has always been his weakness."

Imran said there were a number of players in the team who were not doing justice to their talent.

"Umar Akmal, Kamran Akmal, Afridi and even Abdul Razaq are examples they have immense batting abilities but don't manage their innings well," he said.

Srinath's tips to WC teams

PTI, Bangalore

Former India paceman Javagal Srinath on Sunday said that on sub-continental wickets, both spinners and pacers can flourish if they possess special skills and each side will have to play to its strength if it wants to lift the World Cup starting from February 19.

"Playing with spinners in sub-continent pitches is conducive for any team but spinners will have to have special skills to do well here. What is important is playing to your strength. If you have a good fast bowling unit you should play with it," said Srinath at a press conference

of Gatorade during the innings break of India-Australia warm-up game. Srinath said that some of the teams have quality fast bowlers in their side, who can be successful on Indian tracks.

"India, Australia and South Africa have good fast bowlers who can succeed in these conditions. England too have few very good fast bowlers," he said.

Stating that India have a good fast bowling attack, Srinath heaped special praise on Zaheer Khan and Ashish Nehra.

"I have tremendous faith in Zaheer's abilities. Since 2003 World Cup, Ashish Nehra too has developed and has gathered lot of experience in the last seven years. India have got a very good fast bowling unit," he said.

Dirty Warne!

Cricket

PTI, London

Australian spin great Shane Warne has reportedly slept with a London-based porn star and bombarded her with a series of raunchy text messages even while his romance with Hollywood beauty Elizabeth Hurley was blossoming, a report has claimed.

British tabloid newspaper Sunday Mirror reported that Warne had bedded 26-year-old Chloe Conrad in the same presidential-type suite at London's Bentley Hotel where he and 45-year-old mother of one Hurley later spent two nights.

The 41-year-old Warne

and London-based Australian Conrad were put in touch by a mutual friend. At a time when the flirtation between Hurley and Warne was well advanced, the cricketer was busy sending lewd text messages to Conrad, according to the report.

"If Liz thinks he has changed, she's sorely mistaken. On the night he was with Liz at the Bentley he was sending texts to me. I never for a second thought I was the only woman. Everyone knows Shane is not the ideal guy to settle down with. Liz is a lot older than me and should be wiser," Conrad was quoted as saying by the tabloid.

Conrad described how Warne was desperate to meet

her in a London hotel after she asked him for a meeting.

"Let me know if you want to party in London one night," Conrad texted Warne. He responded in just over a minute. "Hey Chloe, only one night??? Ha ha ha I'm ... busy till Monday ... But in town for three weeks, be great to catch up."

Warne told Conrad how excited he was after receiving the messages sent at take-off on his flight to the UK, and when he landed.

When Conrad later suggested she might bring a friend along, Warne replied, "Can't wait Chloe!! Look forward to it Let's party!!! I have royal suite at the hotel so should be fun."

Outsiders no strangers

AFP, New Delhi



Ireland's stunning defeat of Pakistan in 2007 and Kenya's run to the 2003 semifinals sent shockwaves through the World Cup.

They are also in danger of becoming museum pieces as efforts intensify to cut the fat from a 14-team tournament which stretches over six, exhausting weeks, by trimming it to a slimmer 10-nation contest.

It's a proposal the International Cricket Council is looking at, but it's one which terrifies the second-tier Associate Members who believe they are being muscled out in an effort to make the World Cup a virtual private club made up of Test-playing nations.

Sixteen teams took part in the widely-criticised 2007 World Cup.

There are two less this time around with 10 the maximum in 2015.

"To remove the opportunity of playing in a World Cup, the icing on the cake for non-Test cricketers, would slowly kill the sport in Associate nations," Tim de Leede, a Netherlands selector and veteran of three World Cups, told the Wisden Cricketer.

"The ICC needs to make up its mind if it is serious about developing the game."

"The Associate nations exceeded expectations in recent World Cups, with Kenya reaching the semifinals in 2003 and Ireland progressing to the Super Eights in 2007. The success of the underdogs provided some of the most exciting drama of those tournaments."

That opinion is backed up by Collins Obuya, who was part of the famous 2003 Kenya team and who will be play-

ing in the 2011 World Cup which starts on Saturday.

"The ICC needs to move away from the mentality that cricket is an exclusive old boys' club for the Full Members," he said.

"If it is serious in wanting the sport to grow, it cannot close the door on associates. The World Cup provided me with a platform for a professional career and others deserve the opportunity to be challenged against the world's leading teams."

Ironically, a poll on the ICC's website showed 73 percent in favour of a 16-team World Cup in 2015 with only nine percent supporting a 10-team competition.

Despite the fears of the Associates -- the batch of nations just below Test status -- the ICC insist limiting the number of teams for the 2015 World Cup to 10 is merely a proposal.

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