

AUSTRALIA V CANADA: BANGALORE

Last chance for
experiment

AFP, Bangalore

Australia head into their penultimate group match against Canada on Wednesday knowing it is likely to be the last time in this World Cup they can tinker with their line-up.

The reigning champions eased into the quarterfinals with an unconvincing 60-run win against Kenya at Bangalore's Chinnaswamy Stadium on Sunday.

Australia captain Ricky Ponting's decision to bat first and Kenya's spirited effort in making 264 for six in reply to the champions' 324-6 ensured the match went the full 100 overs.

The game was Australia's first complete match in more than a fortnight following their no-result washout against co-hosts Sri Lanka.

But several frontline batsmen, including Ponting himself, did not spend as much time in the middle as they would have liked, while all of Australia's spinners went wicketless.

With tougher challenges ahead, Australia may decide to rest one of their pace trio of Brett Lee, Mitchell Johnson and the injury-prone Shaun Tait for the Canada match, with back-up seamer John Hastings champing at the bit.

Australia, bidding for a fourth straight World Cup title and fifth in all, may be the only unbeaten side in this tourna-

ment but they have yet to be tested ahead of their final Group A match against Pakistan in Colombo on Saturday.

The result of that match could have a major bearing on Australia's quarterfinal opponents, with the title-holders' net run-rate -- something damaged by Kenya's defiance with the bat -- a potential factor.

Australia may also alter their batting order against Canada to give the likes of Cameron White, out for just two against Kenya, another chance.

One thing Ponting will want to see on Wednesday is an improved display by his slow bowlers after leg-spinner Steven Smith, off-break bowler Jason Krejza and left-arm Michael Clarke's combined 19 wicketless overs against Kenya cost 93 runs.

"Through those middle overs in this tournament when the ball gets old, and the wicket starts to spin, we are going to need our spinners to strike for us, and that didn't happen against Kenya," Ponting said.

However, Australia did receive a big boost in seeing Michael Hussey mark his first appearance of the tournament with a typically composed fifty.

It had seemed the veteran left-hander would miss the World Cup because of hamstring trouble but he was sum-

moned to the subcontinent as a replacement for injured fast bowler Doug Bollinger.

"It looked like he hadn't missed a beat," Ponting said of Hussey, selected instead of younger brother David Hussey. "It's a great sign for us."

Canada, who beat Kenya by five wickets for their only win of the tournament so far, should be heartened by their rival associate nation's performance against Ponting's men.

However, they suffered a 97-run

AUSTRALIA V CANADA

Matches: 1
Australia win: 1
Canada win: 0
No result/Tied: 0
Only meeting: June 16, 1979, Birmingham -- Australia won by seven wickets

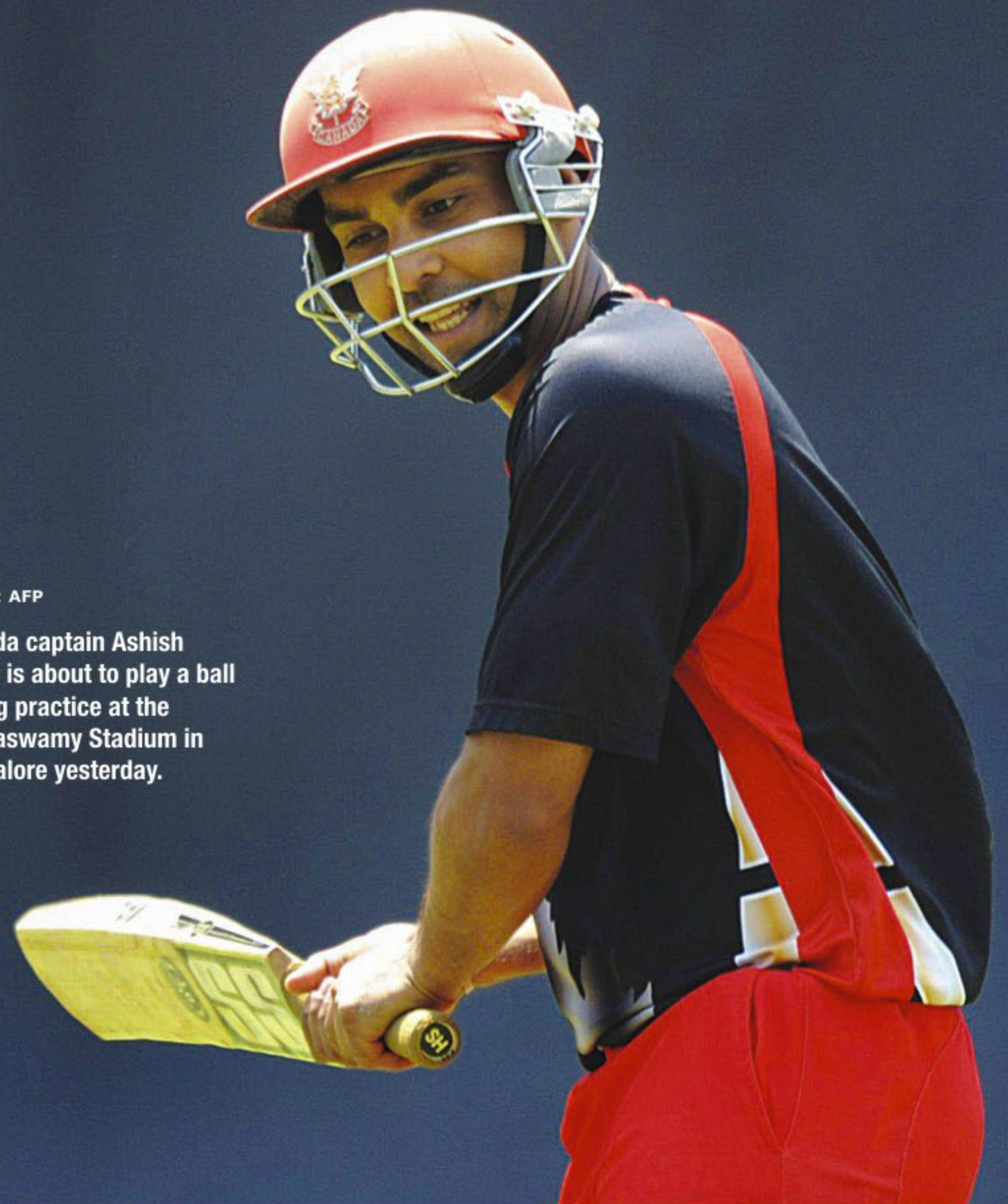
thrashing by New Zealand on Sunday with the Black Caps piling up huge total of 358 for six.

"We didn't bowl in the right areas and the fielding was probably the worst we had in a long time," said Canada captain Ashish Bagai.

Canada's veteran off-break bowler John Davison will have been heartened by seeing Kenya captain and off-spinner Jimmy Kamande take two wickets against Australia on a Chinnaswamy Stadium pitch offering plenty of turn.

PHOTO: AFP

Canada captain Ashish Bagai is about to play a ball during practice at the Chinnaswamy Stadium in Bangalore yesterday.



Canada have a point to prove: Bagai

AFP, Bangalore

Canada captain Ashish Bagai said the way his side play against champions Australia on Wednesday can force a change in plans to cut the number of teams at future World Cups.

The International Cricket Council aim to have only 10 nations competing at the 2015 World Cup, compared to the current 14.

As there are 10 Test sides, this has left second-tier nations such as Canada, who have also appeared in the 1979, 2003 and 2007 editions, fearful they could be frozen out.

Wednesday's match is Canada's final Group A fixture of a tournament where they have beaten fellow Associates Kenya by five wickets but suffered convincing defeats in all of their other five first round fixtures.

What could be Canada's final-ever World Cup match has been given added spice by Australia captain Ricky Ponting's assertion that "the World Cup should be a place only for the best eight or 10 teams".

Bagai said: "I don't think it's just a point to prove to Ricky.

"It's for us to put on a good show to give reasons to the ICC to rethink their decision, not just for Ricky but for ourselves as well. To prove a point to ourselves and the people watching us."

Canada off-spinner John Davison said the way the North Americans' leg-spinner Balaji Rao had taken nine wickets at a respectable 28.11 was an example of how exposure to top-class opposition could raise standards.

"I think the performance of Balaji shows that if we get a lot of opportunity to train in good conditions and play against good teams, you can see how someone can lift their game to the standard required," said Davison.

The veteran player won't, however, be part of any future international plans as he'll retire after Wednesday's match.

Ponting has no problem if Tait takes wickets

AFP, Bangalore



Australia captain Ricky Ponting is prepared to tolerate Shaun Tait's waywardness if the fast bowler keeps taking wickets at the World Cup.

Tait, who now restricts himself to one-day matches after an injury-plagued career, has a 'slingshot' action which can be hard for batsmen to face. But he can also be way off target too.

Tait's career was arguably encapsulated in champions Australia's group win over New Zealand in Nagpur where his first over-and-a-half cost 19 runs, including wides and no-balls.

However, the 28-year-old old South Australia speedster then dismissed Kiwi dangerman Brendon McCullum and finished the match with figures of three wickets for 35 runs in seven overs.

"You probably do treat him a little bit differently than others because he's an out and out wicket-taking bowler, that can deliver the unplayable ball quite a few times through his 10-over spell," said Ponting.

"You give him a licence to run in, bowl fast and take wickets. The best illustration of Shaun as a bowler was the New Zealand game.

"I think he was halfway through his second over and he had none for 19 and in three or four overs he had three for 30 or whatever

it was. That's the sort of impact he can have on games."

Australia, bidding for a fourth straight World Cup and fifth in all, are now the only unbeaten side at this tournament and are already through to the quarterfinals ahead of their group match against Canada on Wednesday.

They round off their Group A campaign against Pakistan in Colombo on Saturday in what is expected to be their first major test after a match against co-hosts Sri Lanka was washed out last weekend.

Ponting though insisted Australia's focus was firmly on the present. "We haven't looked that far ahead. We want to win every game that we play and we want to continue to improve on each performance as we go through this tournament," he said.

"One of our great keys to success in previous World Cups is we've been able to build our way up through tournaments and when the semifinals and final have come around is generally when we've been playing our best cricket."

Ponting added the Canada match represented a last chance for Australia to fine tune their plans.

"From now on, I don't think we can afford to be experimenting too much, we have to get down to playing a brand of cricket that's going to hold up in big games," the star batsman explained.

ZIMBABWE'S EXIT
Elton holds batsmen responsible

AFP, Pallekele

Zimbabwe captain Elton Chigumbura singled out poor batting as the reason for his team's first round exit in the World Cup.

Zimbabwe, who play their last group match against Kenya on March 20 in Kolkata, were sent packing following a seven-wicket defeat against Pakistan on Monday.

"Throughout the tournament we have fielded well and bowled superbly, but it can't be said about our batting. It was a big problem."

Zimbabwe have managed only one total of more than 200 during the tournament, hitting 298 in their only win so far, against Canada. They are fifth in the seven-team Group A with two points from five matches.

Zimbabwe lost their top four batsmen in Pallekele for just 43 runs before Craig Ervine (52) and Chigumbura (32 not out) lifted them to 151-7 when rain curtailed their innings after 39.4 overs.

India's crisis man

AFP, New Delhi



With 12 wickets so far, Zaheer Khan is the leading fast bowler at the World Cup and India skipper Mahendra Singh Dhoni's go-to man when the going gets tough for the hosts.

At the World Cup, where there have been constant question marks over the staying power of India's attack, Dhoni has turned to the burly left-arm whose mastery of the ball is matched by the ferocity of his character.

The 32-year-old, however, prefers to keep a low profile. "I'm enjoying the space I am in," he said.

"There's a lot more responsibility and I have no issues going to sleep with this pressure. I'm ready for the next day. I have to lead by example, which I find challenging."

The bowler's calm disposition was on show during the tied game against England in Bangalore.

Zaheer was taken for 40 runs in his first five overs by rampaging England batsmen but he did not lose heart.

Bowling in his second spell, an inspired Zaheer cleaned up Andrew Strauss and Ian Bell off successive deliveries to bring India back into the game.

His 12 wickets from five games put him ahead of fast bowling rivals Dale Steyn of

South Africa, who has 10, and fiery Australian Shaun Tait on eight.

Zaheer's control, nagging line and length and ability to reverse swing the old ball have often led to comparisons with legendary Pakistan left-arm Wasim Akram.

Zaheer may not be as skilled as Akram but he has definitely carried India's pace attack, grabbing 264 wickets from 187 one-day internationals at an average of just over 29.

That Zaheer is indispensable as evident in the three-wicket defeat against South Africa.

The Baroda seamer gave away just four runs in what turned out to be penultimate over of the match before Zaheer's pace partner Ashish Nehra conceded 16 to let the game slip from India's hands.

Dhoni summed up Zaheer's effectiveness.

"It's not that whenever Zaheer plays, he gets wickets," said Dhoni.

"But with his amount of experience, he always has a back-up plan ready in case the first strategy doesn't work."

Zaheer's journey to the top has not been without its share of ups and downs.

A shoulder surgery in 2009 threatened to cut short his career but he fought back to emerge as a stronger and more competitive bowler.



Woodcock waiting in the wings

AFP, Mumbai



Desperate Luke Woodcock is waiting his turn to make his World Cup debut after being overlooked by New Zealand for their league games so far.

The bowler appeared to have the best chance to get a look-in on Sunday against Canada after skipper and fellow left-arm spinner Daniel Vettori was ruled out the game with an injured knee.

But the Kiwi team management decided to pick an extra seamer instead. "I am chipping away the best I can," said Woodcock, who turns 29 on Saturday.

"I'm working pretty hard on my training. I think I was pretty close to getting into the team until it was decided to play an extra seamer. It wasn't to be the way it was.

"I got pretty close to it and will continue to work hard in case my name comes up for selection."

This is the first overseas tour with the Black Caps for the left-arm, who has played just two one-day internationals, against Pakistan at home.

With spinners striking it rich on the slow sub-continental wickets in the tournament, Woodcock's wait may end sooner than later, especially now that the Kiwis have made it to the quarterfinals from Group A.

Davison's swansong

AFP, Bangalore



Canada's John Davison, who once held the record for the fastest World Cup century, will retire from international cricket after his side's final match against Australia.

Davison, born in Canada but brought up in Australia, smashed the then fastest hundred in the tournament's history in 2003, off just 67 balls, including six sixes and seven fours, against the West Indies at Centurion.

"I suppose it's pretty fitting it's against Australia," 40-year-old Davison said of his final international match on Wednesday.

"I've lived all my life there, never quite good enough to get a game for them but it will be a great experience to play against them."

"There are some guys in their team I have had a fair bit to do with, both playing against and coaching so it would be nice to have a good showing," added Davison, now a coach at Australia's Centre of Excellence in Brisbane.

Australia's Matthew Hayden broke Davison's record at the 2007 World Cup and it was broken again at the ongoing tournament by Ireland's Kevin O'Brien, who reached three figures off just 50 balls against England.

What made Davison's record-breaking innings in 2003 all the more remarkable was that he made his name with state sides Victoria and

South Australia as an off-spinner.

"I was hitting it a lot better than I am now," joked Davison as he recalled his whirlwind century. "It was a fantastic wicket, the ball wasn't swinging and I was able to hit through the line of

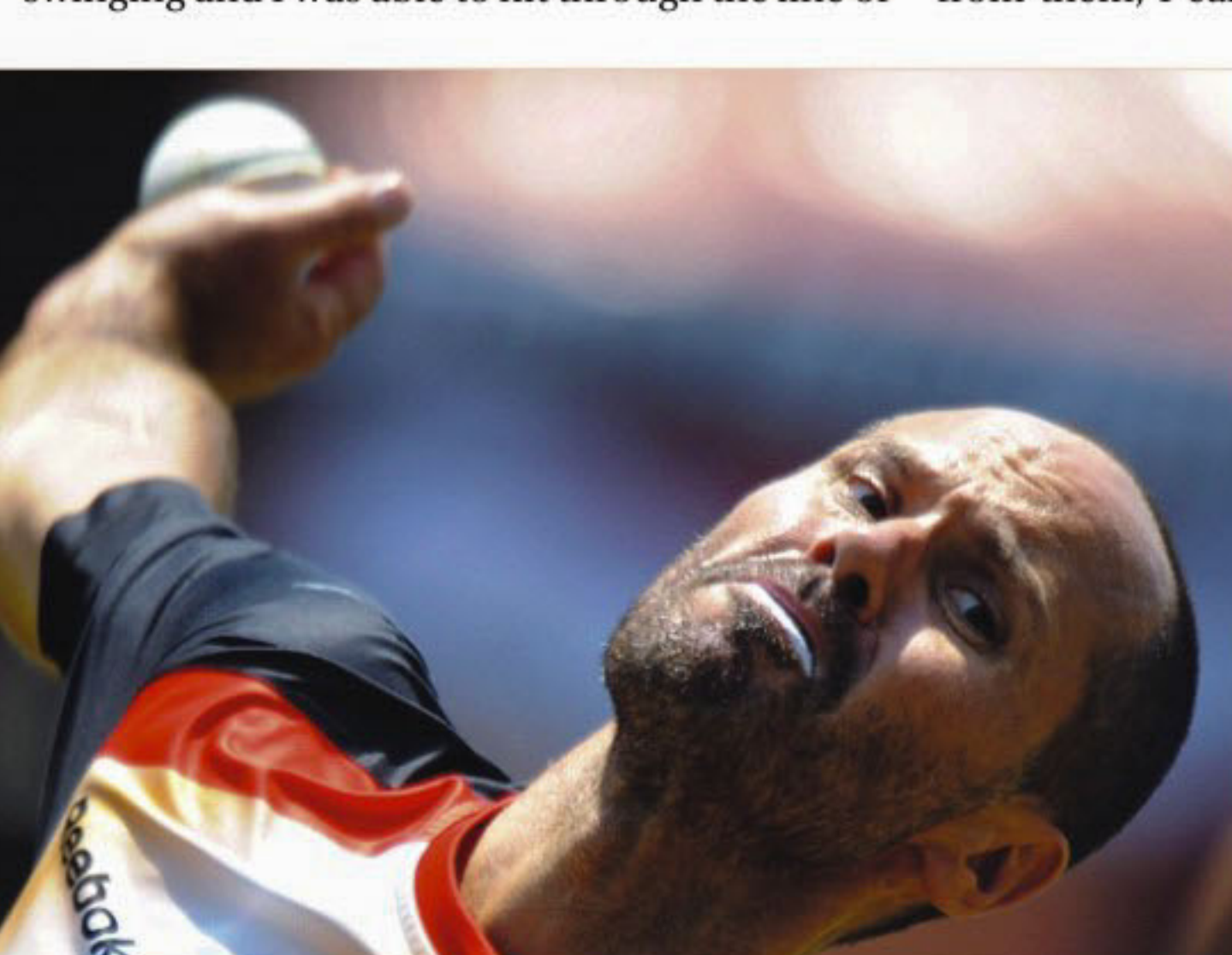


PHOTO: AFP

FINAL BATTLE CRY: Canada all-rounder John Davison bowls during practice at the Chinnaswamy Stadium in Bangalore yesterday, ahead of today's World Cup match against Australia here.

the ball.

"It was just one of those days where everything I tried came off, so hopefully there's one more innings like that left in me."

Wednesday's match is also set to see Davison being in the unusual position of playing against two players he's coached in Australia spinners

Jason Krejza and Steven Smith.

"I'm really looking forward to that experience," Davison said. "If I can manage to stay out in the middle for a while, and face some balls from them, I can't imagine a better place for a coach to give feedback from."

Australia captain Ricky Ponting said he had many memories of Davison.

"We were at the academy together in an intake in 1991," said Ponting.

"We had a few overseas tours as part of that academy and we played with and against each other for quite a period of time through different state competitions back home.

Ponting added: "He's got some great memories now out of World Cup cricket, playing with Canada, that he probably never thought he would have."

"At one stage to have the fastest World Cup hundred ever is a great achievement for him. He'll be able to look back at the end of his career and look at some pretty good memories."

Davison has had a poor World Cup, scoring just 19 runs in four innings.

Wednesday's game will be his 32nd ODI. He has scored 785 runs with five fifties and a century.