

Shoaib goes after WC

AFP, Colombo

Pakistan's maverick paceman Shoaib Akhtar, whose colourful career has been a heady mix of on-field brilliance and off-field controversy, will quit international cricket after the World Cup.

Akhtar made up his mind after Pakistan's 110-run defeat against New Zealand last week, in which he went for 70 runs in his nine overs.

"I have decided to retire. Mentally I wanted to go on forever but I have decided to make way for the youngsters," the 35-year-old said on Thursday.

"I have no regrets. I made lots of friends but some people have misunderstood me. I thank all the players who played with me and against me.

"It was an honour to have played with Wasim Akram and Waqar Younis. I never imagined I would play for Pakistan. It was my greatest moment.

"Pakistan's last match in this World Cup will also be my last. I hope that will be the final on April 2."

After his mauling against New Zealand, Akhtar was dropped for the match against Zimbabwe on Monday and was thought to be an unlikely starter for Saturday's last Group A match against Australia.

Akhtar, who made his international debut in 1997, took 178 wickets in 46 Tests, the last of which was against India at Bangalore in 2007.

He is three wickets short of 250 in 163 one-day internationals and has taken 19 wickets in 15 Twenty20 internationals.

Pakistan squad members hugged him in the dressing room on Thursday before captain Shahid Afridi embraced him as the players entered the R Premadasa stadium in

Colombo for practice.

"I want to be remembered as an honest and patriotic player who never trod a wrong path," said Akhtar.

Akhtar, known as the Rawalpindi Express during his tearaway days as one of Test cricket's most feared if unpredictable talents, once cracked the 100mph barrier at the 2003 World Cup.

His career will always be remembered for a series of fitness problems, discipline violations as well as a doping offence that put the brakes on achieving his true potential.

Most recently he was fined 2,000 dollars for breaching discipline after the defeat to New Zealand following an on-field spat.

Akhtar and the now banned Mohammad Asif failed drugs tests in 2006 and were suspended for two years and one year respectively, both of which were lifted on appeal.

Fitness problems forced him to miss the 2007 World Cup while he was fined heavily and banned for 13 ODIs after he hit Asif with a bat two days before the 2007 World Twenty20 in South Africa.

In 2008 he was banned for five years after publicly criticising the Pakistan Cricket Board following his exclusion from the list of centrally contracted players.

The ban was reduced to 18 months by a tribunal, which levied a fine of 7.0 million Pakistani rupees (105,000 dollars at the time). His appeal against the ban is still pending.

Coach Waqar Younis and Afridi praised Akhtar, for whom the 2011 World Cup was always likely to be his swansong.

"I think he served the team and country well and it's a graceful way to leave the game to make room for youngsters," said Waqar.

Afridi said Akhtar was a great teammate. "Akhtar always tried his best for the team and we wish him every success in his life," said Afridi.



RAWALPINDI EXPRESS TERMINATES: Pakistan fast bowler Shoaib Akhtar announced his retirement from international cricket at the end of Pakistan's World Cup campaign.

PHOTO: AFP

A superstar who is a prima donna too

AFP, Colombo



For his raw speed and popularity with the crowds, Shoaib Akhtar was a superstar; for his lack of discipline, the maverick paceman was also tagged as a prima donna.

From his fitness problems to a doping scandal, heavy fines, fall outs with management and hitting a teammate with a bat, Akhtar, who announced his international retirement on Thursday, was never far from the headlines.

His international career even started on the wrong foot when he was dropped from the team for the Sahara Cup in Canada in 1996 on disciplinary grounds.

"I want to be remembered as an honest and patriotic player who always played in pain simply because of the passion and love for the game and someone who wanted to do something for his country," said Akhtar.

"I know a lot of people will remember me as a controversial person, but I never trod on a wrong path."

Even his greatest critics would appreciate the way he battled through injuries -- when he was a flat-footed youngster, doctors advised him against taking up sport.

He missed 38 of the 84 Tests Pakistan played since his debut against the West Indies at Rawalpindi in 1997.

Rameez Raja, who was chief executive of the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) when an inquiry was launched against Akhtar over allegations he had feigned an injury in 2004, said he would like to remember the tearaway fast bowler.

"With his phenomenal strike rate, he was a match-winner on his day," said former captain Raja.

"He battled through injuries and controversies with a lot of heart."

Akhtar was the subject of two of the PCB's heaviest ever fines handed out to a player.

The first, which also included a 13-match ODI ban, came after he hit teammate Mohammad Asif with a bat, two days before the World Twenty20 held in South Africa in 2007.

His career then seemed to be on the rocks after he publicly criticised the board following his removal from the list of central contracts in January 2008. That led to a five-year ban, subsequently reduced to 18 months on appeal.

Akhtar's two English county signings, first with Nottinghamshire in 2000 and then with Worcestershire in 2005, ended in bitterness.

John Elliot, the Worcestershire chairman, described him as a prima donna and a disruptive element.

SRI LANKA V NEW ZEALAND: MUMBAI

Kiwis look for top finish



In-form New Zealand batsman Ross Taylor makes his way to the batting nets during practice at the Wankhede Stadium yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

AFP, Mumbai

New Zealand will look to make most of their last World Cup league match against Sri Lanka on Friday after captain Daniel Vettori and key fast bowler Kyle Mills were ruled out over fitness issues.

It is an important match for the Black Caps as a positive result could assure them a top-two finish in Group A and a potentially more comfortable quarterfinal opponent from Group B.

New Zealand have emerged as the tournament's dark horses, winning their past three matches, including an emphatic 110-run victory against the talent-packed but unpredictable Pakistan, their fourth success out of five.

The Black Caps have stumbled only once, against four-time champions Australia, but they appear to have put that blip behind them.

Sri Lanka vice-captain Mahela Jayawardene said his team could not take the Kiwis lightly despite them not being at full-strength for the day-night clash at the Wankhede Stadium.

"Those two guys [Vettori and Kyle]

probably are the senior-most bowlers in their line up," said Jayawardene. "But we can't take things lightly. What I have seen of New Zealand is that they always play as a unit.

"Especially with Daniel and Mills not being there, they might get together and have a different gameplan against us. That's something we have to look out for. For us it's all about making sure we execute our plans well."

New Zealand stand-in captain Ross Taylor tried to play down the absences.

"It's disappointing not to have them for the match but their absence gives an opportunity for someone else to step up and perform their role," said Taylor.

"We are looking at having Mills and Vettori fit for the quarterfinals. Their injuries have come along fine but they

SRI LANKA V NEW ZEALAND	
Matches:	71
Sri Lanka win:	32
New Zealand win:	35
No result/Tied:	4
First meeting:	June 9, 1979, Nottingham -- New Zealand won by 9 wickets

probably are not ready for this match." Veteran fast bowler Daryl Tuffey has been called up to the squad as cover for Mills.

Taylor said the Black Caps would have to choose whether to go in with an extra bowler in left-arm spinner Luke Woodcock or an extra all-rounder.

"Luke Woodcock comes into the twelve. We have to discuss what balance we go in with, an extra bowler or an extra all-rounder," he said.

Runners-up in the 2007 edition, Sri Lanka have cantered to easy wins over Canada, Kenya and Zimbabwe but lost to Pakistan and saw their much-anticipated clash against Australia abandoned due to rain.

They have also brushed aside the issue of having to play their final league game in Mumbai despite being one of the tournament co-hosts.

"When we came to India, we had a couple of really good days when we played some games together and had some activities," said Jayawardene.

"It's a good thing for the team as well to come out of Sri Lanka and bond together, and analyse a bit more as a team what we need to do."

Akhtar told goodbye

AFP, Colombo

Teammates and former greats Thursday welcomed paceman Shoaib Akhtar's decision to quit international cricket after the World Cup, saying he served the country well despite his controversies.

The 35-year-old announced he wanted to put an end to a 14-year international career which was plagued with injuries and by discipline problems.

"We feel sad for Akhtar as he has been a very nice teammate and we'll always remember him as someone who always tried hard for the team and every player thanks him," said skipper Shahid Afridi.

Teammates embraced Akhtar before Thursday's practice at R Premadasa stadium where Pakistan play Australia on Saturday in their final group game ahead of the quarterfinals.

"Akhtar told us about his decision and we respect that, so everyone wished him the best of luck in his future. I enjoyed playing with him," said Afridi.

IRELAND V NETHERLANDS: KOLKATA

Battle of big-hitters

AFP, Kolkata



Irish batsman Kevin O'Brien and Dutch counterpart Ryan ten Doeschate get their last chance to repeat their big-hitting shows when their teams clash in their final World Cup match Friday.

Both teams are out of contention for a place in the quarterfinals, with Ireland having secured just two points and the Dutch yet to open their account after five matches.

But the spotlight at Eden Gardens will be on O'Brien and ten Doeschate, who have already hammered rapid-fire centuries against England.

Ireland, who go into the match as favourites after emerging the most impressive of non-Test-playing nations, owed their upset three-wicket victory over England to O'Brien.

The middle-order batsman smashed the fastest World Cup hundred off just 50 balls to help his side achieve a stiff 328-run target.

More important than the runs were the circumstances in which they came. Ireland were facing defeat at 111-5 before O'Brien turned the match upside down with a 63-ball 113, containing six sixes and 13 fours.

Ireland continued to stretch bigger teams with their gutsy performances in the next three games before losing against India, the West Indies and South Africa, but O'Brien could not

regain his touch, his highest being 19.

Ten Doeschate also enjoyed his most memorable moment in one-dayers against England, cracking a 110-ball 119 with the help of three sixes and nine fours to help his side set a challenging 293-run target.

England went on to win the match by six wickets with eight balls to spare in Nagpur but Ten Doeschate won the man-of-the-match award for his all-round show as he also claimed two wickets.

"It was pretty special for me. Personally, it is about as close to a perfect innings as I want to play in one-day cricket," South Africa-born ten Doeschate said.

Unlike O'Brien, the Dutchman managed to play another solid innings when he scored an unbeaten half-century against Bangladesh in the last match in Chittagong.

Ten Doeschate has so far scored 1,435 runs in 32 one-day internationals with four hundreds and nine half-centuries, while O'Brien has made 1,519 runs in 57 matches with two tons and seven half-centuries.

IRELAND V NETHERLANDS

Matches:	7
Ireland win:	5
Netherlands win:	1
No result/Tied:	1
First meeting:	Aug 8, 2006, Ayr -- No result
Last meeting:	Aug 18, 2010, Dublin -- Ireland won by nine



Irish command respect

AFP, Kolkata



Ireland have earned respect with their plucky performances at the World Cup despite failing to qualify for the quarterfinals, coach Phil Simmons said on Thursday.

"We need to play more games against big guys because they all have respect for us now," Simmons said on the eve his team's last match against the Netherlands at the Eden Gardens.

Both the sides are out of contention for a quarterfinal berth, with Ireland having secured just two points and the Netherlands none after five games.

But Ireland emerged the best of the non-Test-playing nations in the tournament as they pulled off a shock victory over England and gave a tough fight in their remaining matches.

"We can play against big guys. We now no longer play to compete only, but to win. I think the biggest improvement is that we come looking to win the game [against bigger sides] and planning how to win the game," said Simmons.

The coach said the biggest disappointment was that they could not finish off a couple of close games, especially against Bangladesh and the West Indies, and get to the quarterfinals.

"It's disappointing that we put ourselves in a position to win, but could not follow up. I think it shows that we need more games at this level to get us ready against big guys," said Simmons, a former West Indies all-rounder.



Sri Lanka captain Kumar Sangakkara arrives for practice at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai yesterday, ahead of today's World Cup match against New Zealand here.

PHOTO: AFP