

All roads lead to India-Pakistan

AFP, New Delhi



Bitter rivals India and Pakistan are on a World Cup collision course, but the two neighbours still have quarterfinal hurdles to overcome as the marathon tournament enters its sixth week.

India take on defending champions Australia in Ahmedabad on Thursday while a resurgent Pakistan face an inconsistent West Indies in Dhaka to kick-start the last eight stage on Wednesday.

Victory for both Asian giants will set-up a semifinal blockbuster in Mohali on March 30.

But Pakistan captain Shahid Afridi insisted he was not even thinking about the semifinals.

"Our focus is on the quarterfinals, we have to win that to reach the semifinal, so we are not thinking that far. First we have a must-win match against a dangerous opponent," Afridi told AFP.

New Zealand and South Africa meet in Dhaka on Friday before Sri Lanka and England clash in Colombo on Saturday as the World Cup, which staged its opening ceremony on February 17, comes down to the world's eight top-ranked sides.

Despite criticism of the length of the

tournament and the succession of one-sided matches, International Cricket Council president Sharad Pawar claimed on Monday it is potentially the greatest ever.

"We have surely been treated to a real feast of 50-over cricket with some outstanding games," said Pawar, as the World Cup enjoyed its first rest day.

"The standard has been impressive and there's no doubt that 50-over cricket has a real attraction and an amazing appeal for players, spectators in the grounds and the hundreds of millions watching around the world."

India's 80-run win over the West Indies on Sunday handed Mahendra Singh Dhoni's men a quarterfinal against Ricky Ponting's Australians.

India have lost to Australia in nine out of 15 matches played on home soil in the last five years.

"Australia are a very strong side and very expressive on the field," said Dhoni.

"But it's about how we prepare. Preparation is very important and we are just thinking about that particular day and match rather than thinking about the result."

Pakistan, meanwhile, topped their qualifying group with 10 points. They will be overwhelming favourites to defeat West Indies who squeezed into the quarterfinals by virtue only of a superior run-rate over Bangladesh.

Afridi said that his team's win over Australia at the weekend, where they ended the champions' 34-match unbeaten World Cup run, had restored his country's image after a series of bodyblows.

"We knew that beating Australia would be very important for us and this win has enhanced our image, sending a good signal to the cricket world that we can win despite our difficult situation," Afridi told AFP.

The West Indies are enduring a roller-coaster tournament.

They were on the brink of victory against England in Chennai when, chasing a modest target of 244, they were comfortably placed at 222-6 before losing their last four wickets for three runs.

Against India on Sunday, they caved in again as eight wickets fell for 34 runs after they were 154-2 and lost by 80 runs.

The West Indies, who have now lost 18 successive matches against the leading nations, will be returning to Dhaka where their bus was stoned earlier this month.

But Dhaka police commissioner Benazir Ahmed told AFP the West Indies would be provided with the "highest security" possible.

"The West Indies are our valued guests and we will ensure the highest state-level security to them, he said.



BUSINESS ABOUT TO PICK UP: Mahendra Singh Dhoni's (pictured) India will take on Australia in a blockbuster quarterfinal clash at Ahmedabad on Thursday, and if the stars align, will play archrivals Pakistan in a prospective humdinger of a semifinal.

PHOTO: AFP

Ravi elated at Sachin scalp Asoka axed

AFP, Chennai



West Indies fast bowler Ravi Rampaul said he had delivered the "perfect ball at the perfect time" after dismissing India great Sachin Tendulkar in the World Cup.

Tendulkar came into Sunday's game needing just one more century to complete a hundred international hundreds.

But instead he was out for just two when, off the last ball of the first over of the match, Rampaul produced a brilliant lifting delivery on the line of off-stump that cut away and took the shoulder of the bat before going through to wicketkeeper Devon Thomas.

Australian umpire Steve Davis rejected Rampaul's raucous appeal but a sporting Tendulkar walked off anyway to a stunned silence from a capacity Chidambaram Stadium crowd.

"It was the best ball of my cricket career," said 26-year-old Trinidad paceman Rampaul, who is of Indian descent.

"It was one of those moments in life you dream of. When I saw him walk I felt great. It was an amazing feeling. I wasn't sure how to celebrate.

"Here was I, in one of the biggest matches of my career, getting the wicket of one of the greatest batsmen. I felt really great to get such a massive breakthrough for the team," Rampaul added.

What made Rampaul's performance even more impressive was that this was

his World Cup debut and, after replacing the ill Kumar Roach, he marked the occasion in style with career-best figures of five for 51.

Unfortunately for the West Indies, a batting collapse meant they still lost the match by 80 runs but the result was good enough to secure a quarterfinal against Pakistan in Dhaka on Wednesday.

"I was happy to get into the team and play my part," Rampaul said.

"It was very exciting to play in front such a large crowd on such a big stage...I was happy to be able to make the most of my opportunity.

"The pitch had some extra bounce at the start of the India innings and I knew if I got the ball in the right areas I would be successful," added Rampaul whose previous best was four for 37 against India in Kingston in June 2009.

Dhoni gunning for glory

AFP, New Delhi

Sri Lankan umpire Asoka de Silva was left off the International Cricket Council's list of officials for the World Cup quarterfinals on Monday.

De Silva had had a poor tournament and was involved in one of the most controversial incidents of the first round when he gave Ireland's Gary Wilson out lbw against West Indies.

The decision was challenged by Wilson and replays showed the ball struck his pad outside off stump while he was playing a shot, but de Silva refused to overturn his decision.

He was subsequently removed from standing in the England v West Indies game as well as the India against West Indies clash where he had been due to act as third umpire.

De Silva had seven decisions challenged under the review system and only on three occasions did his original call stand.

Quarterfinal umpire appointments:

March 23: Pakistan v West Indies, Dhaka

Umpires: Billy Bowden and Steve Davis; Daryl Harper (third umpire), Bruce Oxenford (fourth umpire); Chris Broad (match referee)

March 24: Australia v India, Ahmedabad

Umpires: Marais Erasmus and Ian Gould; Richard Kettleborough (third umpire), Asad Rauf (fourth umpire); Ranjan Madugalle (match referee)

March 25: South Africa v New Zealand, Dhaka

Umpires: Aleem Dar and Rod Tucker, Kumar Dharmasena (third umpire), Nigel Llong (fourth umpire); Roshan Mahanama (match referee)

March 26: Sri Lanka v England, Colombo

Umpires: Billy Doctrove and Simon Taufel, Tony Hill (third umpire), Shavir Tarapore (fourth umpire); Jeff Crowe (match referee)

India, media in Cup stand-off

AFP, Chennai

India all-rounder Yuvraj Singh has slammed Indian press criticism of cancelled squad training sessions at the World Cup.

"You, the media, seem to have decided how we should train," said Yuvraj.

"We obviously know what our bodies need and we know what will happen if we don't win."

India have kept their media obligations to a minimum at the tournament with only captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni fielding questions at pre-match conferences.

AFP, Chennai



India captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni vowed his team will be at their best when they face defending champions Australia in the World Cup quarterfinals.

India sealed an 80-run win over West Indies in the concluding group match of the tournament in Chennai on Sunday, but only after a spectacular collapse by the brittle Caribbean side, who crashed from 154-2 to 188 all out.

While India will tackle Australia in Ahmedabad on Thursday, the West Indies take on in-form Pakistan in Dhaka on Wednesday in the opening quarter-final tie.

"We will be at our best for the quarterfinals," said Dhoni.

"Australia are a very strong side and very expressive on the field. But it's about how we prepare for the game to achieve what we want.

"In the process, we hope to give our best." Dhoni praised strike bowler Zaheer Khan, whose three wickets included the key dismissal of opener Devon Smith who had made 81 when he was clean-bowled, a

wicket which precipitated the West Indies collapse.

"He changed the game. He got the breakthrough by getting rid of Smith. Once we got his wicket, we were able to put pressure on all the batsmen at both ends."

All-rounder Yuvraj Singh was man of the match for his 113 runs and 2-18 with the ball. Yuvraj overcame illness to help his team to victory and doubled-up in pain during his innings.

"I had stomach cramps and I was struggling in the morning but I was just worried about the match and the team," said Yuvraj.

Zaheer praised his team's tactics which saw the new ball tossed to spinner Ravichandran Ashwin.

"We knew that with the new ball it would come on to the bat and that the seamers would get reverse swing later on in the innings, so that's why we used a spinner to open the bowling," said Zaheer, who took 3-26.

West Indies captain Darren Sammy admitted that his men will need a radical improvement against Pakistan.

"We are in the knockout stages and that was our first objective," said Sammy.

"But we need to bring our A-game against Pakistan. We will have to pick things up."

Seize the day, says Yuvraj

AFP, Chennai



India star Yuvraj Singh has told his teammates to seize the moment and capitalise on Australia's vulnerability when the teams meet in Thursday's World Cup quarterfinal.

Yuvraj scored a century and took two wickets with his left-arm spinners as India beat the West Indies by a convincing 80 runs on Sunday to set-up a last eight clash against champions Australia in Ahmedabad.

India will go into the match buoyed by victory, Australia -- aiming for a fourth successive World Cup title and fifth in all -- suffered a four-wicket loss to Pakistan last time out where they were bowled out for just 176.

Defeat ended Australia's 34-match unbeaten streak at the World Cup dating back to 1999 and it was their batting, particularly the poor form of captain Ricky Ponting, that encour-

aged Yuvraj.

Ponting fell for 19 and in five innings at this World Cup has managed just 102 runs in all with a best of 36.

Not that Yuvraj, who hadn't turned two when India won their lone World Cup title back in 1983, was writing off Australia's chances completely.

"They've won four games at this World Cup. Teams are equal at the moment, it's just who plays better on the day," said Yuvraj, whose 113 was the centrepiece of India's 268 all out against the West Indies.

"Australia are a top side, they've won three successive World Cups but Shane Warne, Glenn McGrath, Adam Gilchrist and Matthew Hayden are not there.

"You can get into the middle-order and Ponting is not in great form. If we can get into their weaknesses, we can win the quarter-final."

Injuries and loss of form have blighted Yuvraj's career in recent times.

But runs -- he'd also scored three fifties -- and wickets have come his way

at the World Cup where he has been named man-of-the-match in three of India's four wins to date.

Sunday's innings was especially pleasing for Yuvraj as it marked his first ODI hundred in nearly two years since he made 131 against the West Indies in Kingston in June, 2009.

"Batting at number four, you get an opportunity you don't get at five," explained Yuvraj, who battled stomach cramps that led to vomiting during the course of his innings.

"I wanted to hit ball down the ground and not in the air."

India can expect to be roared on by a partisan crowd in Ahmedabad but Yuvraj, while grateful for the support, said motivation was primarily a personal issue.

"You are playing a World Cup quarter-final for your country -- you have to give 100 percent. It's the moment of our lives, the moment you live for as a cricketer."



India's form player Yuvraj Singh took aim at Australia captain Ricky Ponting and said that India will be targeting Australia's weaknesses in their World Cup quarterfinal at Ahmedabad on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

It's a numbers game

AFP, New Delhi



Rival bowlers desperate to see the back of India's flamboyant opener Virender Sehwag early at the World Cup can now blame the back of his shirt when they are being smashed to all corners of the ground.

The dashing opener, who used to have the number 44 on his back, is now sporting a numberless jersey at the tournament after advice from numerologists.

It seems to work with Sehwag in top form at the World Cup where he has 327 runs from five games at an average of 65.40.

Sehwag is not alone in his quirks and superstitions as most of the players in the Indian team are known to consult astrologers and numerologists while adhering to set routines in the hope of success.

Captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni sports number seven, since his birth date is July 7, while Yuvraj Singh has a 12 to match his birthday of December 12.

Yuvraj also sports a black thread - believed to ward off evil spirits - on his wrist on advice from his mother.

Promising Indian batsman Virat Kohli has no qualms in admitting he is superstitious.

"Earlier, I used to wear the same pair of gloves with which I'd been scoring," he told the Kolkata Telegraph.

"That phase has gone as now I look for comfort. Now the superstition revolves around wearing black wristbands."

Paceman Zaheer Khan attributes at least some of his success to his lucky charm -- a yellow handkerchief that he keeps with him in every crucial match.

kerchief with him.

Sachin Tendulkar is known to put on his left pad first and is fussy about his favourite bats. He would rather use a battered, taped-up bat than trust a new one.

His family doesn't watch TV when he is batting, fearing that he will get out early if they do.

Even fans try to do their bit to help their teams.

A radio station in New Delhi is running a campaign which urges listeners to do the same thing routinely on each day that India play.

So there are fans drinking milk before the start of a match or sitting on the left side of the sofa all through the game.

"I only eat non-vegetarian stuff while watching India play," said Pritam Sinha who works as a research associate in Delhi.

"Be it fish, chicken or mutton. It brings India good luck and wards off evil forces."

Former India captain and opener Krish Srikkanth recalled how members of the 1983 World Cup winning squad were asked not to move from their positions when Kapil Dev was batting to glory in a key match against Zimbabwe.

"The point was I was standing outside the dressing room on a cold, windy day, with a cup of coffee in my hand. And I didn't move for the next two hours or so! I wanted to go to the toilet, but Man Singh (the manager) said 'no'," recalled Srikkanth of the match at Tunbridge Wells in England.

"To tell you the truth it wasn't easy. Actually, it was tougher than battling it out there in the middle.

"Believe me, it stayed that way till Kapil walked back with a triumphant 175 not out. Not just me but the entire team stood at the same spots.

"It was one of the greatest knocks in any form of cricket, but I would like to think that I had, in my own little way, made a small contribution."

