

Eng underdogs: Prior

AFP, Colombo

Matt Prior admitted England have not played their best cricket in the World Cup and will be underdogs in their quarterfinal against Sri Lanka on Saturday.

England, who have never won the tournament, endured a rocky ride in the first round, losing to Ireland and Bangladesh but beating South Africa and battling to a tie against India.

They now face the 1996 champions Sri Lanka, and Prior admitted England have yet to hit top gear.

"We haven't played our best cricket by a long way, but we are still in the quarters," he said.

"We have not even got anywhere near what we can do so there will be no pressure and we go into the match as underdogs against a very strong Sri Lanka team."

But Prior believes that if England do well in all three departments, they will be tough to beat.

"If we do come out and play as a team and get all our three disciplines right, we are going to be very hard to beat. As a team we are in a fantastic place," said Prior.

The wicketkeeper added that the win over the West Indies at Chennai last week, which

saved them from elimination, was a morale-booster.

"That win gave us a huge amount of belief and a huge amount of confidence," said Prior of the narrow 18-run victory.

"It showed that we will not be beaten easily. We have a huge amount of resilience, and a huge amount of fire in this group."

Prior said adding the World Cup to their Ashes triumph in Australia would cap a triumphant season for England.

"We came to win the World Cup, and if you leave this World Cup having not won it, you will be disappointed. You haven't achieved your goal. The thing I would say is that we fought very, very hard as a unit."

"Every one knows that we haven't played well, but we are in a quarter-final, and anything can happen. We have got three games to win and we'll be world champions."

"To win the Ashes and the World Cup in a winter is something quite phenomenal."

Prior said he was enjoying opening the innings with skipper Andrew Strauss, a role he was handed when Kevin Pietersen was forced out of the tournament through injury.

"I am absolutely bewildered by it. When I was told I would be opening when KP went down, it wasn't a done decision for the whole tournament," said Prior who has just 56 runs in five innings so far.



England batsman Paul Collingwood looks on during the team's practice session at the R. Premadasa Stadium in Colombo yesterday, ahead of Saturday's quarterfinal against Sri Lanka.

PHOTO: AFP

'We're ready for exams'

AFP, Dhaka

It will be yet another test of nerves when South Africa take on New Zealand in the World Cup quarterfinal on Friday but all-rounder Jacques Kallis says his team is not nervous ahead of the big day.

"I've always seen this part of the tournament as an exam," Kallis was quoted as saying by cricinfo website on Wednesday.

"If you've prepared well and done the hard work, you just have to go and write the test. If you're underprepared, that's when you start getting nervous."

Kallis said his team no longer relied on individuals to win matches unlike in the past when there was too much dependence on players like Lance Klusener and Shaun Pollock.

"Everyone has contributed, whereas in the past we've had to rely on one or two players," he said.

"Everyone in the squad seems to be in good form. It also hasn't only been eleven guys that have played their part, as we've seen in the last few games."

SL bank on Murali

AFP, Colombo



Sri Lanka coach Trevor Bayliss believes spin king Muttiah Muralidaran will be fit to face England in Saturday's World Cup quarterfinals.

The 38-year-old off-spinner -- who has a world record 530 one-day wickets -- pulled his hamstring in the Group A match against New Zealand and had shortened nets on Wednesday.

But Bayliss said Muralidaran will play on Saturday.

"Murali did bowl for some 20 minutes today. We are very confident that he will play and I think he's pretty confident too he will play because he is a guy who's played through niggles in the past," said Bayliss.

Bayliss, who is due to step down after this World Cup following four years in charge, said Muralidaran is a vital cog in Sri Lankan plans.

"He's certainly an important part of the team," said Bayliss of Muralidaran, who has taken 11 wickets in the tournament so far, with a best of 4-25 against the Black Caps in Sri Lanka's 112-run win in Mumbai.

The coach added that he expected a tough challenge from England despite Andrew Strauss's team having endured a roller-coaster tournament which saw them beat West Indies and South Africa but lose to Ireland and Bangladesh.

"English teams always have strong back-ups, they've obviously lost a few players due to injury, but there back-up strength is usually deep and they are professionals, so it will be a tough game on Saturday," said Bayliss.

Since the start of the tournament England have lost key batsman Kevin Pietersen and frontline bowlers in Stuart Broad and Ajmal Shahzad, all to injury.

Colly to go for knee op after WC

AFP, Colombo

England all-rounder Paul Collingwood will undergo knee surgery after the World Cup, but his injury will not affect his participation in Saturday's quarterfinal against Sri Lanka.

England and Wales Cricket Board chief medical officer Nick Peirce said Collingwood is expected to make a full recovery.

"Paul felt some discomfort in his left knee during the group stages of the World Cup and a precautionary scan ahead of England's match against South Africa showed no significant damage," said Peirce.

"However, further assessment suggests a loose piece of cartilage floating in his knee that will require surgical removal.

"We'll be able to establish a definitive rehabilitation timescale following surgery but we expect Paul to make a full recovery in due course."

More than Kiwis on Proteas' way

AFP, Dhaka



South Africa will start as firm favourites to win Friday's World Cup quarterfinal against New Zealand -- provided they can overcome their trademark knock-out blues.

In five previous tournaments, the Proteas crashed out three times in the semifinals, once in the quarterfinal and another time in the first round, earning them the unwanted tag of cricket's perennial chokers.

It was not the defeats, but the manner in which they happened, that left their fans dumbfounded and wondering if the nation will ever win the showpiece event.

South Africa can hardly be blamed for the semifinal loss in their maiden Cup appearance in 1992 -- a crazy rain-rule left them needing 21 runs off one ball -- but what followed was their own undoing.

South Africa went into the quarterfinals in 1996 unbeaten in the league, only to find West Indies' star batsman Brian Lara smash 111 off 94

balls to cause a 19-run defeat in Karachi.

In 1999, a disastrous run-out involving Lance Klusener and Allan Donald when just one run was needed to win resulted in a tie, allowing Australia to scrape through to the final on superior netrun-rate.

A comedy of errors followed at home in Durban in 2003 as Mark Boucher defended the final ball when South Africa needed one more run to win the rain-affected match against Sri Lanka.

Boucher, who thought the Duckworth-Lewis target had already been surpassed when only the par score had been reached, was heartbroken as the hosts were knocked out in the first round.

South Africa surrendered once more in the 2007 semifinal against Australia in St Lucia when they were shot out for 149 in 43.5 overs to allow Ricky Ponting's men an easy seven-wicket win.

Graeme Smith's men have been one of the most dominant sides in the current tournament, winning five of their six league matches to top the tough Group B.

But the six-run loss to England chasing a modest 172 was another example of South Africa's brain freeze, even though the demons were exorcised by surpassing India's 296 with three wickets in hand.

Smith was delighted to ram the 'chokers' word down the throats of his critics after the India win, saying: "I'm happy that our guys challenged the perception."

South Africa know New Zealand are no pushovers -- the Kiwis have won three of their five World Cup meetings against them, including a five-wicket success in the Super Eights round of the 2007 edition.

New Zealand's four wins in Group A included a sensational 110-run victory over Pakistan in Pallekele following a Ross Taylor blitz on his 27th birthday.

Taylor smashed an unbeaten 131 off 124 with eight boundaries and seven sixes as the Kiwis hammered 100 runs in the last five overs.

The spectacular assault not only convinced Shoaib Akhtar to retire after the World Cup, but also gave New Zealand renewed confidence that they can beat any team on their day.



Two Pakistan fans leap for delight as another West Indian wicket falls during Pakistan's 10-wicket quarterfinal win at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Dhaka yesterday.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Punter snubs retirement talk

AFP, New Delhi



From overcoming a drink problem to facing reports of quitting the captaincy on the eve of a crucial World Cup match, Australian Ricky Ponting's illustrious career has never been short on drama.

The under-fire skipper should be forgiven for believing that the stars are against him as he attempts to become the first captain to win a third successive World Cup.

Amid his current poor run with the bat -- no half-century in five matches -- came reports that he was set to quit the captaincy at the end of the World Cup.

Britain's Daily Mail reported that Ponting planned to retire from international cricket altogether and finish his career at an English county.

The Australian captain was quick to deny the reports.

"There's been some stuff written about me retiring after the World Cup. That's completely false," Ponting said on the eve of Thursday's quarterfinal against India.

"I've never even thought about or contemplated retiring at the end of this World Cup. I'm enjoying my cricket as much as ever. Whatever you've read, don't worry too much about that."

Ponting's batting credentials have never been in doubt ever since he made his international debut in 1995 which saw him complete 10,000 runs in both one-day and Test cricket.

But he has ruffled quite a few feathers during his career. In the late 1990s, he admitted to having a drink problem after being axed for a one-dayer following an incident in a Sydney nightclub.

The coming decade saw a more disciplined and determined Ponting, especially after being named as captain. He became

the most successful Australian skipper in Tests when he surpassed Steve Waugh's record of 41 wins in 2009.

Little has gone right for a gritty Ponting at the ongoing world Cup.

The Australian captain has been in the news more for his temperament than runs, having already been reprimanded by the ICC for smashing a dressing-room TV in a fit of fury after being run out during his side's win over Zimbabwe.

Mumbai preps please ICC

AFP, Ahmedabad



ICC chief executive Haroon Lorgat has defended Mumbai's Wankhede Stadium as the venue for the World Cup final, saying it could provide the perfect setting for a Sachin Tendulkar "fairytale".

The climax to world cricket's showpiece takes place on April 2 at the 33,000 capacity Wankhede rather than at Eden Gardens in Kolkata, which can seat 63,000.

India great Tendulkar has 99 international hundreds heading into the co-hosts' quarterfinal with Australia on Thursday.

But Lorgat appears to want him to delay the landmark 100th century.

"Can you imagine a fairytale ending with Sachin Tendulkar getting a hundred in the final and India wins at Wankhede which is his home ground?," said Lorgat on Wednesday.

"And the fact of the matter is, no matter what the number, we haven't got sufficient tickets."

Lorgat quashes 'match-fix' claims

AFP, Ahmedabad



International Cricket Council chief Haroon Lorgat on Wednesday blasted media allegations that the World Cup match between Australia and Zimbabwe was under investigation for match-fixing.

The Times of India claimed on Tuesday that the February 21 match in Ahmedabad was being probed by the ICC's anti-corruption body.

"The article...can only be described as fictional," said Lorgat.

"We do not comment on the activities of the ICC's Anti-Corruption and Security Unit (ACSU) and for good reason."

"However, after several misleading and downright false stories appearing in recent weeks it is time for us to show our displeasure and expose those responsible for affecting the integrity of the media."

"It is also patently false of the reporter to claim that the ICC ever suggested to it that the match was corrupted. The ICC confirms that, in terms of its policy, at no stage did anyone from the ICC speak to the journalist on this topic."

"To uphold the integrity of the media I expect the Times of India to retract such baseless stories." Australia had already dismissed as "laughable" claims that the ICC was investigating the match.



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