



New Zealand batsman Jesse Ryder rocks on the back foot to play a trademark square cut during his 83-run innings in the quarterfinal against South Africa at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium yesterday.

PHOTO:
ANISUR RAHMAN

The clash for the romantics

AFP, New Delhi

The clash between India and Pakistan in the World Cup semifinals will showcase one of the world's most intense sporting rivalries fuelled by nationalism, bloodshed and a shared history.

The two countries have had a fraught relationship since Pakistan was carved out of India to establish a Muslim homeland when British rule of the sub-continent ended in 1947.

They have fought two wars over the disputed region of Kashmir, another over the creation of Bangladesh, and they last came to the brink of warfare as recently as 2002.

On the cricket field, a knock-out World Cup match on Indian soil is the biggest fixture between the two rivals for decades, and the excitement across the region is already sky-high ahead of Wednesday's clash in Mohali.

After Thursday's victory over defending champions Australia, India captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni said Pakistan were the ultimate opponents.

"India v Pakistan in the semifinals -- it doesn't get better," he said. "A World Cup hosted by the sub-continental nations and India and Pakistan making it to the semis."

Pakistan coach Waqar Younis said that "there is no bigger rivalry in the game", while captain Shahid Afridi even expressed hope that a Pakistan-India match "could improve relations".

The two countries had broken off cricket ties -- except for a couple of volatile Test matches in India -- for 15 years before India's

historic tour of Pakistan in 2004.

Fierce competitiveness, even hatred, is evident whenever India and Pakistan play, but recent games have also been marked by a sense of cross-border comradeship.

The conflicting emotions reflect the complex state of relations, which are often compared to those within an estranged family.

Pakistani flags have occasionally been raised in the Muslim slums of Hindu-majority India during games -- causing predictable outrage.

More strikingly though, the matches in 2004 when the India side returned to Pakistan prompted an outburst of affection.

Thousands of Indians were granted special visas to attend the fixtures, and many said that they had been greeted like long-lost brothers as taxi-drivers gave them free lifts and hotels refused to charge them for rooms.

At the first game of the tour, in Karachi, the local crowd cheered both sides and even gave a standing ovation when India won by just five runs.

The contrast between political and sporting links was again on display at the Commonwealth Games in New Delhi last year, when many outsiders were surprised to hear the Pakistan team given a huge cheer at the opening ceremony.

Newspaper front-pages on Friday set the tone for the coming days. "Bring on Pakistan!" screamed the Mail Today in Delhi, as the Hindustan Times warned "Pakistan next test of nerves for India".

In Islamabad, the Express Tribune looked forward to the occasion with "Rekindling rivalries: it is India v Pakistan," while the Daily Times predicted a "blockbuster" game.



India fired up for Pak battle

AFP, Ahmedabad

India skipper Mahendra Singh Dhoni said his team was ready to take on bitter rivals Pakistan after surviving a high-pressure game against Australia in the World Cup quarterfinals.

Chasing a target of 261, Dhoni's men appeared to be in trouble at 187-5 in the 38th over but Yuvraj Singh and Suresh Raina carried the team to a five-wicket win with 14 balls to spare at the packed Sardar Patel Stadium.

"We needed 70-odd runs and our last batting pair was at the crease," said Dhoni. "It basically meant if we played 50 overs with Yuvraj and Raina, we would

make it. "There was pressure but more than the technical or skill part, it was about managing the pressure."

With India running into Pakistan in the last-four, Dhoni said the pressure will only go up by several notches on his team.

"India v Pakistan in semifinals -- it doesn't get better. A World Cup hosted by the sub-continental nations and India and Pakistan making it to the semis."

"There will be more pressure on the Indian side and it will be from outside. People will say 'win the semis, we don't care about the final'."

"But the reality is every game is the same for us irrespective of whether it is Australia or Pakistan. It is a big part and parcel of the

game in India. It is a tough job but Indian cricketers have been managing this quite well."

Dhoni said the team opted to go for Raina ahead of the dropped Yusuf Pathan because he was technically more sound.

"Yusuf at number seven was going for runs, but Raina is technically more sound and we were keen on batting 50 overs. That's why we went with Raina, but we know Yusuf can be really dangerous."

Australian skipper Ricky Ponting, who made 104, credited Yuvraj and Raina for the win.

"We needed more wickets in the middle of the innings," he said. "With 15 overs to go, it was tough and go, but Yuvraj and Raina played really well. It's disappointing to bow out, we are a better team than

we have played."

Yuvraj, named man-of-the-match for the fourth time in the tournament, said he concentrated on playing the balls on merit rather than go for flashy shots.

"When Dhoni got out, I knew we still had Raina to come, and thought if we can add 40 odd runs it would be good," said the burly left-hander.

"I was hitting the ball down the ground. I was batting on instinct. I knew that I have to stay till the end and win the match for the country."

"I have gone through a tough year, but coming into the World Cup, getting that 50 against England, it was good."

"As for today's game, 260 was a good score, Ponting batted outstandingly but we chased well."

Pak president, PM invited to watch match

AFP, New Delhi

India's prime minister invited Pakistan's president and prime minister on Friday to watch the clash between the two arch-rivals in the Cricket World Cup semifinals, Indian media reported.

Indian Premier Manmohan Singh said he intended to attend the match, to be held in Mohali in northern India next Wednesday, and has invited Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari and Yousuf Raza Gilani to also watch the game, the Press Trust of India news agency and other media reported.

MATCH-FIX CLAIM Times of India apologises

AFP, New Delhi

India's leading newspaper apologised on Thursday for suggesting that a World Cup match between Australia and Zimbabwe was under investigation for match-fixing.

The Times of India had claimed that the February 21 game in Ahmedabad was being probed by the International Cricket Council's anti-corruption body.

"We apologise to Australia, Cricket Australia and the ICC for any embarrassment caused by this," the newspaper posted on its website.

"We also accept that at no stage has the ICC ever confirmed or suggested the match was fixed."

International Cricket Council chief executive Haroon Lorgat, who had been furious at the allegations, said he welcomed the apology.

"The story was not only fictional but was also damaging to the image of cricket. I am pleased that the Times of India, took a responsible step and corrected the facts at its earliest opportunity," he said.

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Loyalty test for Sania

AFP, New Delhi

A mini-battle of loyalty is simmering between star couple Sania Mirza and Shoaib Malik as India gear to take on Pakistan in a high-voltage World Cup semifinal clash next week.

Mirza, India's top-ranked women's tennis player, will be rooting for her country despite her marriage to former Pakistan cricket captain Shoaib Malik.

"I support India and Shoaib will support Pakistan as usual! The war is on," Mirza wrote on her Twitter account from Miami where she is taking part in a WTA event.

India booked a last-four World Cup berth against their arch-rivals after beating defending champions Australia by five wickets in the quarterfinal in Ahmedabad on Thursday.

Pakistan made the semifinals with a 10-wicket mauling on West Indies the day before.

Mirza, 24, married Malik in Hyderabad in April last year amid a lot of hype surrounding the love-struck cross-border sport stars.

Mirza said she would have loved to catch the semifinal action in Mohali next Wednesday but for her professional commitments.

"The last time they played in Mohali I watched the match live. What a semifinal on the line. Wish I could be there," read another tweet from the tennis star.

What to WATCH

SPORTS POLL WEEKLY QUESTION

Who has been the best performer in the World Cup's first round?

Visit the sports page of www.thedailystar.net to cast vote

Follow The Daily Star Sport on **twitter**

www.twitter.com/dssport

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