

COLOMBO CURRY

SPORTS REPORTER from Colombo

Romanian sensation Edward Maya rocked Colombo on Friday night, but it was at the wrong place as far as the England team were concerned.



For weeks the Sri Lankan capital had billboards of the impending March 25 show at the Taj Samudra which also happens to be the team hotel of Andrew Strauss's men.

Maya shot to fame across the world with his single Stereo Love but England off-spinner Graeme Swann liked nothing of the concert probably, tweeting about it well past his bedtime.

"If you happen to be in the nightclub of our hotel, could you possibly pull the plug from the socket..." wrote Swann a few minutes short of midnight.

An hour later, his good buddy Jimmy Anderson tweeted: "The rave across the street has finished and my windows have stopped shaking but it seems they have moved the party into our hotel! If it's still going in a couple of hours I might stick a pair of jeans on and hit the dance floor."

The distraction is slightly similar to the early-morning fire drill at their Leeds hotel before the first day's play in the 2009 Ashes Test at Headingley.

Swann broke that news through his Twitter account that day; England were all out for 102 and lost the Test by an innings and 80 runs.

SPOTTING VAUGHAN

The second floor of the media centre at the R Premadasa Stadium is the dining area, press conference room, officials' working area and a seating area for some of the journalists who could not be accommodated inside the plush press box, all in one big room.

Amid all the cacophony, you'd be hard-



Two England fans sport the Union Jack on their chest in a show of support, while also sporting the Sri Lankan traditional headgear during the England-Sri Lanka quarterfinal at the R Premadasa Stadium yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP



pressed to find a very well-known face but England great Michael Vaughan was there, doing commentary for BBC Radio.

It turned out to be quite a refreshing sight; the former captain doing his 30-minute stunts and then running off to attend other media

commitments (and Tweeting).

There were also the likes of Mike Atherton, Nasser Hussain, Sir Ian Botham and Tony Greig, all England captains but all commenting for ESPN and in a different floor altogether.

It would be hard to imagine any other former international captain in that mix of journalists, volunteers, lunch attendees, strewn chairs, camera decks, etc., but Vaughan seemed as calm as he was when facing Shane Warne with lots of close-in fielders.

Oram wins back critics

AFP, Wellington



New Zealand awoke Saturday in stunned disbelief to news the Black Caps had knocked South Africa out of the World Cup with the much-criticised Jacob Oram the match hero.

The quarterfinal in Dhaka was played only hours after the injury-prone Oram had told journalists he deliberately avoided listening to talk radio in New Zealand because he was aware he was the target of vehement criticism.

"I don't need the negativity around me," the 32-year-old said.

"If I have a bad innings or a bad stretch of games I know what's going wrong and I don't need to be reminded from people who don't actually know me."

But, after months of criticism, Oram was hailed as a hero after his match-winning four for 39 and sensational pair of catches as New Zealand pulled off a dramatic 49-run win over South Africa to qualify for the semifinals.

Radio Sport host Doug Gollightly led the praise for the man he had constantly referred to as "Jake the fake," acknowledging the tall all-rounder's performance was pivotal to the outcome.

As South Africa cruised towards New Zealand's unimpressive 221, the turning point came when Oram took an athletic catch on the boundary to dismiss Jacques Kallis and the Proteas folded from there.

"I gave up and went to sleep when SA only needed about 120 runs to win and we still needed 8 wickets. I've only just woken up to this brilliant news," one poster

named Steve wrote on the Fairfax News website.

The veteran Oram has played 150 ODI matches for New Zealand over the past 10 years, and Eddie admitted he was one of many who criticised the tall all-rounder's inclusion in the World Cup side but was "happy to eat my words and well done Oram."

It was a sentiment echoed by many with Corey S writing: "Finally, Oram lives up to the hype, and delivers on the world stage. Well done to the team and to him in particular."

"Sorry Oram for not believing," Margaret said on the Yahoo-Xtra website where Shaun added: "Miracles do happen."

The New Zealand team had been largely written off at home before the World Cup, arriving in the subconti-

nent having won just two of 16 one-day internationals in the previous six months.

"New Zealand had muddled along for the last few months, building up a horrible losing record and arriving at the World Cup seemingly without a prayer," cricket writer David Leggat wrote in the New Zealand Herald.

But after enduring a miserable summer not everyone was convinced they had turned the corner by beating the highly rated South Africans in the World Cup.

"The worst team to leave New Zealand fluked a win and club player Oram did something he is paid for and has not done for the last 30 games," Dylan wrote on Yahoo.

"This match should be investigated ... very suspicious," added Craig D on Fairfax.

Bowling gives Hafeez the confidence

AFP, Mohali

Mohammad Hafeez is confident Pakistan can overcome India when the arch-rivals meet in the World Cup semi-finals on Wednesday thanks to the "strongest bowling attack in the world".

"We believe that we have the strongest bowling attack in the world at the moment," said Hafeez on Saturday.

"That is the key. Our bowling is our strength and our batsmen are just supporting them in whatever way is required."

Umar Gul is arguably the most skilled exponent of reverse-swing at this tournament while Hafeez is a more than handy off-spinner.

Ricky leaves it to selectors

AFP, Melbourne



Captain Ricky Ponting said Saturday his fate was in the hands of the selectors after Australia's shattering early exit from the World Cup.

Ponting, whose captaincy has been under attack since Australia's Ashes series debacle against England in January, scored a fighting 104 but it was not enough to prevent India from knocking the champions out in Wednesday's quarterfinal in Ahmedabad.

Australia's greatest Test run-scorer has endured a torrid time and a majority of cricket fans, according to newspaper polls, want him to step down as team leader in a rebuilding phase.

Ponting, 36, confirmed in his column in the Australian newspaper Saturday that he has played in his last World Cup and that his immediate playing future was up to the discretion of the national selectors.

"I was asked before the quarterfinal and at the media conference immediately after if I was retiring. I am not," Ponting wrote in his column.

"It is my intention to keep playing cricket, I might not be the best judge of what my contribution to Australian cricket is.

"There are a panel of selectors who have that job and I am happy to accept their judgment."

Ponting said his focus now was on what was best for Australian cricket.

"We need to rally together to review all aspects that have contributed to our performances over the past six months," he said.

"There will be casualties and change come out of this (Cricket Australia) review but I am also confident it will highlight a number of programs, structures and people that remain the best or very close to the best in the world.

"Building on our strengths while working hard on our weaknesses will ensure that we are in the best possible shape to win back the World Cup in 2015 as well as the Ashes and other major trophies in the years ahead."

Ponting said he was "shattered" at Australia's earliest exit from the World Cup since 1992.

"In some ways we performed to expectations in this World Cup. People did not expect us to win and we didn't," he said.

"It is fair to say that we need to examine our performances in depth and begin to plan for the future.

"A clear-the-decks policy is fraught with danger. Young players need to be nurtured and the best way for that to be done is with senior guys around them.

"It's been a difficult six months for us with the disappointing result in the Ashes and now this early exit from the World Cup."

Spain, Dutch stay perfect

AFP, Paris



France, World Cup finalists Holland and Italy all picked up away wins in Friday qualifying matches for the 2012 European Championships - while David Villa's predatory qualities rescued world champions Spain as they beat the Czech Republic.

France beat tiny Luxembourg 2-0 to continue their resurrection under new boss Laurent Blanc after a catastrophic World Cup under predecessor Raymond Domenech.

Philippe Mexes and Yoann Gourcuff were the men on target in either half and the win means France now lead opening day Group D conquerors Belarus by four points - having played a game more - after posting a sixth win on the trot to all but erase the traumas of the World Cup.

Italy meanwhile thanked Brazilian-born Thiago Motta for a typically gritty 1-0 win in Slovenia while Villa became Spain's all-time top marksman with a late brace - one from the penalty spot - to floor the Czechs 2-1 in Grenada after Jaroslav Plasil had broken the deadlock.

Spain roared back and Villa claimed his 45th and 46th goals for La Furia Roja in quick succession to surpass Raul in the goalscoring charts.

Raul scored his 44 goals in 102 matches but Villa has outdone him in just 72 appearances.

Spain, for whom Villa's Barcelona teammate Xavi won his

100th cap, are romping through Group I with four wins in as many matches for a six-point cushion over the Czechs.

Motta, in only his second game for the Italians, netted with 17 minutes remaining in Ljubljana, ensuring the Azzurri took charge of Group C.

Slovenia managed few attempts on goal and much of the hosts' passion could be seen not on the pitch but in the stands as supporters of rival outfits Maribor and Olimpia Ljubljana fought amongst themselves before kick-off.

With Serbia coming from behind to edge out battling Northern Ireland 2-1 in Belgrade, unbeaten Italy are now six points

RESULTS

Austria 0 Belgium 2 (Axel 6, 60)
Slovenia 0 Italy 1 (Motta 73)

Serbia 2 (Pantelic 65, Tosic 74) Northern Ireland 1 (McAuley 40)
Luxembourg 0 France 2 (Mexes 28, Gourcuff 72)

Hungary 0 Netherlands 4 (van der Vaart 8, Afellay 45, Kuyt 54, van Persie 62)

Spain 2 (Villa 69, 73-pen) Czech Republic 1

clear with half the qualification campaign behind them.

Northern Ireland looked set to cause a stir at the Serbs' expense when Gareth McAuley headed the visitors into the lead from Chris Brunt's free-kick in the 15th minute for his second international goal.

But Marko Pantelic levelled 20 minutes after the break and Zoran Tosic then scored a neat winner after a surging run by Milos Ninkovic with 16 minutes remaining at a practically empty Red Star Stadium.

Serbia had to play the match behind closed doors after crowd trouble marred their match against Italy last year.

World Cup finalists Holland are going well in Group E, and made it five wins out of five in outclassing second-placed Hungary 4-0 in Budapest.

Rafael van der Vaart bagged the opener after just eight minutes and Ibrahim Afellay made it 2-0 on the stroke of half-time before Dirk Kuyt and Robin van Persie

wrapped up a one-sided affair.

Belgium were another side who pulled out a win on their travels with a 2-0 success at Austria in Group A, where Germany are five points clear ahead of Saturday's home banker against Kazakhstan.

Axel Witsel scored both the Red Devils' goals as the Belgians went joint second with the Austrians.

World champions Spain - three wins out of three and ten goals scored to date to lead Group I - were hosting the Czech Republic in Friday's late match in Granada.

Joining Germany in action Saturday are Fabio Capello's England, who travel to Wales looking to overhaul Montenegro in Group G.



Netherlands midfielder Raphael van der Vaart (C) is about to score the opening goal against Hungary during their Euro 2012 qualifier at the Puskas Stadium in Budapest on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

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
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www.twitter.com/dssport

What to WATCH
STAR Sports
F1 World Championship
Australian Grand Prix

BOMBAY SWEETS
To know it... You have to eat it!!
WHICH NON-TEST PLAYING NATION PLAYED IN A WORLD CUP SEMI-FINAL?
Potato Crackers
BOMBAY FRIES
SCRATCH AND WIN ATTRACTIVE BOMBAY CRICKET CARDS
For answer... see tomorrow's newspaper
Yesterday's answer... Australia and Sri Lanka