

# More than just a game

AFP, Mohali

Anyone who believes cricket is just a game is likely to have their opinion altered when India and Pakistan meet for a World Cup semifinal in the border state of Punjab on Wednesday.

Fixtures between the two nations always engender huge passion amongst both sets of supporters.

With the prize of a place in the World Cup final at stake, a fever-pitch mood is expected with the 30,000 capacity Punjab Cricket Association (PCA) Stadium sold out days ago for the crunch clash.

The match will be a clash between Pakistan's well-balanced bowling attack and India's star-studded top order, including opener Sachin Tendulkar who needs just one more century for a hundred international hundreds.

"We believe we have the strongest bowling attack in the world," said Pakistan opening batsman Mohammad Hafeez, who took the new ball with his off-spin in the quarterfinal win over the West Indies. "That's the key."

Pakistan's Umar Gul is arguably the best reverse-swing bowler at this tournament while Saeed Ajmal's off-spin a potent weapon.

And then there is the leg-spin of Pakistan captain Shahid Afridi who is the tournament's top bowler with 21

wickets at an average of just 10.71 apiece.

Meanwhile fast bowler Shoaib Akhtar, who will retire after the World Cup, waits in the wings.

Akhtar has played just three games at this tournament but the suspicion remains that India's batsmen can be troubled by high-class fast bowling.

India did manage to overcome champions Australia's three-pronged pace attack in a five-wicket quarterfinal win in Ahmedabad but that was on a pitch favouring spin.

Even then, India collapsed to 187 for five chasing 261 for victory, and it needed a composed 57 not out from the in-form Yuvraj Singh, now back on his home ground, to see the co-hosts to victory.

Traditionally, the Mohali pitch has always offered plenty of pace and bounce and that could yet see Pakistan give Akhtar one last shot at India.

"I always enjoy my bowling especially against India. I'm in my peak form. I hope that when Shoaib plays it will be very good for me," said Gul.

Pakistan's ability to make early inroads into a top order featuring Tendulkar, Virender Sehwag and Gautam Gambhir could be decisive.

"I think definitely the first three wickets are crucial, the top order. I'm looking for these three batsmen," added Gul.

India's bowlers, notably left-arm quick Zaheer Khan and off-spinner

Ravichandran Ashwin, did a good containing job against Australia.

India will look for similar results in a bid to book a place in the April 2 Mumbai final against either Sri Lanka or New Zealand.

The hosts were giving little away ahead of a match that has witnessed "cricket diplomacy" with Pakistan Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani accepting an invitation from India counterpart Manmohan Singh to attend the game.

India captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni is set to be the lone home player to address the media on Tuesday.

A jovial Yuvraj, speaking after his man-of-the-match effort against Australia, said: "I'm sure whatever plans we have for Pakistan, MS will tell you at the next press conference."

Pakistan, who've yet to register an individual hundred at this event, have lost all four of their World Cup matches against India but go into the semifinal buoyed by a 10-wicket mauling of West Indies in the quarterfinal.

But Hafeez countered: "Pakistan has not defeated India in the World Cup but in the last 12 years, Australia also had not lost a single World Cup game. But then they lost to us (by four wickets) and to India."

"There is no point thinking about the past. We think about the day; whoever the opponent is, we try to win the day."



India captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni (L) talks with teammate Yuvraj Singh during a practice session at the PCA Stadium in Mohali on Monday. India will face Pakistan in the semifinal at this venue tomorrow.

PHOTO: AFP

## 'Cricket to build bridges'

AFP, Colombo

ICC chief executive Haroon Lorgat on Monday hoped the high-profile World Cup semifinal between arch-rivals Pakistan and India will build a bridge between the two nations.

Title favourites India take on Pakistan at Mohali on Wednesday -- the first meeting between the two teams on Indian soil since the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks carried out by Pakistan-based militants.

Tickets have been sold out in advance and security ramped up with Pakistan Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani due to watch the match as a guest of Indian counterpart Manmohan Singh.

Lorgat believes the match could build a bridge between the two nations who have not played a bilateral series since 2008 attacks.

"Cricket is there to build bridges," said Lorgat. "If it does that it would be a just reward for the beautiful game of cricket."

Lorgat said India playing in Pakistan would be massive, irrespective of whether it overshadows the World Cup.

# Indo-Pak clash down the lane

AFP, New Delhi

Excitement and pressure will go hand in hand when Mahendra Singh Dhoni's Indians clash with Shahid Afridi's Pakistanis in Wednesday's high-voltage World Cup semifinal in Mohali.

There has never been a dull moment ever since the two countries played their first World Cup match in 1992 at Sydney.

Pakistan, playing impressive cricket in the ongoing tournament, will also be determined to overcome a jinx after having lost all of their four World Cup matches against their arch-rivals.

All-rounder Mohammad Hafeez, man of the match in Pakistan's quarterfinal win over the West Indies in Dhaka on Wednesday, has said he is keenly looking forward to playing in

Mohali.

"It will be really exciting to play India. The atmosphere will be really electrifying. Playing in front of an Indian crowd will be interesting," Hafeez recently told an Indian newspaper.

"I hope India and Pakistan play more matches in future."

It will be the third one-dayer between India and Pakistan in nearly three years as the cricketing ties between the two snapped following the 2008 attacks on India's financial hub Mumbai.

The World Cup matches between India and Pakistan have provided plenty of thrills.

Top Pakistani batsman Javed Miandad was a photographers' delight in 1992 when he jumped up and down, apparently in imitation of Indian wicket-keeper Kiran More who had been repeatedly appealing.

The 43-run defeat at Sydney did not affect Pakistan's chances as they rallied from the brink to win the World Cup under Imran Khan's inspirational leadership.

But the next defeat in the 1996 World Cup did.

Pakistan's 39-run defeat came in the quarterfinal at Bangalore where many believed they had lost half the battle before the first ball had been bowled.

Their captain and quality paceman, Wasim Akram, withdrew from the game due to an injury -- a decision the fans found hard to swallow. He was later widely criticised for pulling out of a big match.

Pakistan lost the remaining half of the battle when well-set opener Aamer Sohail lost his cool and wicket after being involved in a verbal duel with Indian seamer Venkatesh Prasad.

## 'India visit in national interest'

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani said on Monday his visit to India to watch the World Cup cricket semifinal between the two arch-rivals was in the "national interest".

Gilani accepted an invitation from his Indian counterpart Manmohan Singh to attend the match after a meeting with President Asif Ali Zardari on Saturday.

"I have decided to avail of this opportunity in national interest," an official statement quoted Gilani as telling a meeting of the federal cabinet in Islamabad.

# Mohali to open doors to fans

AFP, Mohali

Residents of Mohali, the venue for the World Cup semifinal between India and Pakistan, were Monday urged to throw open their homes to fans from both sides of the border.

The sleepy northern town, located on the outskirts of Chandigarh, the capital of the states of Punjab and Haryana, is being swamped by fans, journalists, celebrities and politicians.

The pressure on hotel space will become more acute with at least 250 VIP guests expected to come from Pakistan, on top of the 100-member delegation that will accompany Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani.

"It is a big moment for Punjab. The excitement for the match is more than what would be seen at the final," Punjab's deputy chief minister Sukhbir Singh Badal told reporters.

"I have personally reviewed the arrangements, and accommodation is a problem. We appeal to the people to spare at least one room in their houses for the guests."

"We have set up a special control room, anyone who wants to give away a room can register themselves."

"Officers of the Punjab government are taking the lead and have already offered rooms as a starting point. We expect our people to come forward and show their warmth."

Punjab Cricket Association chief Inderjit Singh Bindra said the board was going out of its way to accommodate fans from across the border by issuing complimentary passes.

# Gul wants Akhtar by his side

AFP, Mohali

Pakistan fast bowler Umar Gul hopes Shoaib Akhtar is given one last chance to show what he can do against India in Wednesday's World Cup semifinal.

Akhtar, who will retire from international cricket after the World Cup, has featured in just three matches during Pakistan's run to the semifinals.

And it seemed his last outing at this level would be a wretched return of one for 70 in a 110-run group stage thrashing by New Zealand in Pallekelle three weeks ago.

However, Akhtar's return -- and the result itself -- might have been decidedly different had not erratic wicketkeeper Kamran Akmal dropped the simplest of catches off the express quick when New Zealand's Ross Taylor, who made a match-winning century, was still in single figures.

A clearly irate Akhtar never recovered his composure and a tournament return of three wickets at more than 40 apiece tells its own story.

Nevertheless Gul, who has taken 14 wickets at an impressive average of 14.50 at this World Cup, said Monday he would welcome the return of the 35-year-old Akhtar for the winner-takes-all clash.

"Shoaib Akhtar is an experienced bowler who has performed well against India. If he plays, it will take some of the pressure off me. When he was not there, there was a lot of pressure on me."

And he insisted Akhtar had not been sidelined.

"The team management is not angry with Shoaib Akhtar. He has been rested for a few games to find fitness and form but has been practising now for two to three days."

However, the 26-year-old Gul -- one of the world's best reverse-swing bowlers -- said he'd been getting used to open the bowling at the urging of Pakistan coach Waqar Younis, himself once an outstanding fast bowler.

"For the last two to three years, Waqar Younis has been telling me to get prepared to use the new ball in the World Cup. I have returned to my best form by bowling with the new ball again," Gul explained.

Gul could well have been the 'third seamer' if Pakistan had come into the World Cup with the new-ball duo of Mohammad Asif and Mohammad Aamer.

But the pair, along with former Test captain Salman Butt, were banned for their roles in last year's 'spot-fixing' scandal in England.

"The past five to six months have seen a lot of pressures and scandals," said Gul.

"We have done well against South Africa and winning both the Tests and one-dayers in New Zealand was a creditable effort."

"In the dressing room, players are supporting each other and there is a lot of unity."

Wednesday's match will be the first between the two Asian cricket giants on Indian soil since the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks and Gul said: "In both countries people want to see the teams play each other."



Pakistan fast bowler Shoaib Akhtar bowls during a training session at the PCA Stadium in Mohali yesterday, ahead of their semifinal clash against India on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

## Divisions far beyond cricket

AFP, New Delhi

India's Rohan Bopanna and his Pakistani tennis doubles partner Aisamul Haq Qureshi insisted on Monday that the World Cup semifinal between their two nations will not shatter their friendship.

Bopanna and Qureshi, who have used their on-court careers to also promote their "Stop War Start Tennis" campaign, hope the clash in Mohali won't spill over into their ongoing tournament commitments in Miami.

"It's easy to play tennis with him, but I hope we don't play a match on the same day as the cricket match," Bopanna told AFP.

"It will be an interesting match. All of India will stop working to watch it. I'm backing India and I hope they go through to final in Mumbai."

Qureshi, whose friendship with Bopanna stretches back 16 years, said that if they could watch the game on TV in the US, then they would sit together and watch it.

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