



GO FORTH AND CONQUER: A Sri Lankan Buddhist monk ties a blessed white thread around Sri Lanka captain Kumar Sangakkara's (C) wrist, while batsman Tilakaratne Dilshan waits his turn during a Buddhist ceremony in Colombo yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

Media laud Kiwi effort

AFP, Wellington

New Zealand media bemoaned the Black Caps' World Cup 'jinx' Tuesday after yet another semifinal exit, but praised the unheralded team for exceeding expectations in reaching the final four. "It was deja vu all over again," national news agency NZPA said after Sri Lanka sent New Zealand packing at the semifinal stage for the sixth time in 10 World Cups. The team has never reached a tournament decider.

The New Zealand Herald said the Black Caps "almost broke the jinx" only to fall short against a powerful Sri Lankan outfit, going down by five wickets but giving their opponents some nervous moments on the way.

"They deserve suitable plaudits for a gallant effort," it said.

Fairfax Media described New Zealand's loss as "agonising" but conceded it had an air of inevitability after the batting line-up managed a meagre total of 217 runs, giving the bowlers little to defend.

"They talked a brave game and genuinely believed they could beat the odds again -- as they did four days earlier by

upsetting South Africa in Dhaka," it said. "But after posting such a small total from their 50 overs, the New Zealanders would have known they hadn't done enough."

NZPA singled out the "brilliant" quarterfinal win over South Africa, when the Black Caps' aggression and tight fielding rattled the Proteas, as a tournament highlight.

The NZ Herald praised coach John Wright for turning around one of the worst slumps in form in the New Zealand team's history since his appointment last December, saying some of his grit had rubbed off on his charges.

"Wright's appointment as coach can only go so far by way of explanation for the team's resurgence of late... but this demonstration of heart was foremost generated by the players," it said.

While crediting the Black Caps' fighting spirit and tenacity, NZPA was not overenthusiastic about a side with a sometimes patchy bowling attack that remains prone to batting collapses.

"The harsh reality is they won two matches, against Pakistan and South Africa, and lost three, to Sri Lanka twice and Australia, against recognised teams -- not the sort of strike rate that can be labelled successful," it said.

SL savours final entry

AFP, Colombo



Sri Lanka's national press showed rare unity Wednesday in hailing the national team's qualification for the World Cup final after beating New Zealand in a tense last-four encounter.

"Sri Lanka in ICC final again," said Colombo's Daily Mirror in a front page splash. The same theme was repeated in the main Sinhala, Tamil and English language national dailies.

"Lankans stuff the Kiwis to enter finals," said the Daily News. Despite making the final, the Mirror doubted whether or not the home team would be able to defeat either India or Pakistan, who were playing later Wednesday, in the title match in Mumbai on Saturday.

The Mirror said a quick fall of Sri Lankan wickets on Tuesday had raised fears that New Zealand could stage a spectacular upset.

Sri Lanka batting "raised questions about their ability to provide a genuine challenge to Pakistan or India in the final in Mumbai on Saturday," the Mirror said.

Sri Lanka has not played India in the ongoing World Cup, but lost to Pakistan by 11 runs in a group game.

The press paid tribute to Muttiah Muralidaran, the star spinner, who played his last home game before retirement. His final lap of honour around the Premadasa Stadium after the semifinal win also made it to the front pages.

The local media complained of a huge black market for tickets.

As the game progressed Tuesday, a 300 rupee (3 dollar) ticket was going for 10 times its value, the Lakbima newspaper said while warning readers not to fall victim for ticket scams for the finals.

Man cleared of WC terror plot

AFP, Colombo

A Maldivian man arrested with the help of Interpol and initially linked to an alleged terror plot against the ongoing cricket World Cup has been cleared, an official said Wednesday.

Iqbal Mohamed, 42, was arrested on March 10 at the Male International airport after arriving from Pakistan and was later freed as there was no evidence against him.

Maldivian National Security Adviser Ameen Faisal said an Interpol team based in Sri Lanka to monitor airline passenger lists during the World Cup had spotted Mohamed and raised the alarm.

However, Faisal said there was no evidence to suggest that Mohamed was involved in any plot to disrupt games even though there was an Interpol notice against him for suspected involvement in a 2007 bomb attack in Male.

"We have no knowledge of Iqbal's involvement in any planned attack on the ICC cricket World Cup, which has been alluded to in the press over the last few days," Faisal said in a statement.

Breaking the Aussie mould

Cricket

AFP, Sydney

Michael Clarke is not your archetypal Australian cricket captain: he's fresh-faced, tattooed, and loves Twitter and the high life, traits which have not endeared him to a distrustful public.

Known as "Pup" for his youthful precociousness, he can frequently be seen on advertising hoardings posing in his briefs, but there are questions over his ability to manage relationships within the team, and his variable form.

The 29-year-old from Sydney's gritty west was a celebrity even before his Test debut, his flashy shot-making and future promise earning him Australian cricket's then record sponsorship deal in 2004.

He has not strayed far from the tabloids since, largely because of his high-profile relationship with blonde model Lara Bingle, the face of Australia's unpopular "So where the bloody hell are you?" tourism campaign.

Their messy break-up, prompted by a nude photo scandal involving Bingle, culminated in Clarke controversially leaving a tour of New Zealand to end their engagement, as gleeful media camped outside their Bondi Beach penthouse.

But the episode also demonstrated Clarke's steely side. Returning to New Zealand, he immediately hammered a century, providing the best possible riposte to his detractors.

Michael John Clarke was born on April 2, 1981, in Liverpool in suburban Sydney, and honed his clipped technique at an indoor cricket centre run by his father, Les.

The right-hander captained Australia's under-19s and signed for New South Wales at 18, quickly earning a reputation as a superstar-to-be.

Clarke made his one-day international debut in 2003 and

played his first Test a year later.

He was immediately Australia's golden boy, earning early man-of-the-match awards -- helped by his slow left-arm bowling -- and top-scoring with a vital 151 on his Test debut against India.

Clarke collected the first of two Allan Border Medals, Australian cricket's highest honour, in 2005, but suffered his first serious setback the same year, when he was dropped from the Test team following poor form in the Ashes.

But he returned to prominence during the 2006/2007 Ashes series, helping Australia to a 5-0 whitewash of England. He captained Australia for the first time in a 2007 Twenty20 game, and took charge of his first series in 2008.

Clarke's resurgence earned him the 2009 Allan Border Medal, raising his standing as captain Ricky Ponting's probable successor. But revelations of a dressing-room bust-up with Simon Katich raised concerns over relations with his fellow players.

A similar split was also reported after a stinging one-day defeat to Sri Lanka in Melbourne last November, when Clarke was stand-in captain.

A long-standing back problem affected Clarke during Australia's heavy Ashes defeat this season, when he was one of a number of batsmen to fail as the hosts slumped to their worst ever Test series loss.

His image was not helped by news that he attended a celebrity breakfast on the opening morning of the Melbourne Ashes Test, before Australia were embarrassingly skittled out to effectively hand the series to England.

According to the Sydney Morning Herald, only 26 percent of 21,000 respondents in an online poll backed him as Australia's 43rd Test captain.

But once-mighty Australia's ranks are low on possible skippers, with opener Shane Watson and the veteran Michael Hussey seen as the only other viable contenders.



MICHAEL CLARKE

Emotional night for Sri Lanka

MOHAMMAD ISAM from Colombo



The last time the media in Sri Lanka met a player in this World Cup, thankfully, was a happy occasion. Sri Lanka captain Kumar Sangakkara was almost late by half an hour but that didn't dampen the spirit. It was also touching how gracious the skipper was in his praise to the retiring legend, the country, the team and the opposition.

"It means a lot to us. We have planned two years for this. I missed a great opportunity in 2007. To be here was very special for us and important as well," said Sangakkara during the press conference at the media centre on Tuesday after their 5-wicket win over New Zealand.

"I think it means a great deal to the country, especially in a new future that is envisioned for Sri Lanka. For us to be host the World Cup and for the team to be in the final, I think it bodes very well for the future of our country," he added, describing how important the sport has been in trying times.

"Cricket has always been the panacea that healed all wounds in SL. Whenever cricket was played it seemed it was back to normal. We carry that responsibility and we are privileged to be in this position, playing for Sri Lanka," he said.

The day was momentous for Sangakkara's favourite spinner in the world as well. It was obviously Muttiah Muralidaran's last game in Sri Lanka and Sangakkara said that he did become emotional when it hit him that he won't be keeping wickets to Muralidaran after April 2.

"Dilshan and I should have finished it or got us as close as possible. We let that opportunity go and put the team under pressure. I thought Dilshan was batting beautifully. We should have been clinical but in hindsight, it was good the middle-order showed what they were capable of."

"It was emotional because it was the last game we are playing in front of our home crowd. It was a very special moment for us and it was more so because it was the last time Murali would play a game on home soil."

"When the magnitude of that occasion hits you, it overwhelms you that you are going to play the last match with the world's best bowler," he said.

Muralidaran got a wicket off his last ball in ODI cricket at home, much like he got a wicket off his last ball in Test cricket. Sangakkara said that

because Muralidaran is such a kind soul, fairytale endings are bound to happen to him. "He talks a lot in the dressing-room. He is always predicting something, it has to do with cricket. He's always been that for us. Every time he's played, he's done wonders for us. He has no ego, a great team man. I think why he gets these fairytale endings is because he's a great human being. He's an honest, hard working guy who has no pretence. I think that's why good things happen to him," he said.

Amid all the bonhomie, Sangakkara warned his teammates not to get too complacent. "Everyone in the dressing room was happy. But we have to come off that high because once we get into that flight, the final is the game that counts," he said.



New Zealand captain Daniel Vettori walks off the ground after his team's defeat in the World Cup semifinal against Sri Lanka at the R Premadasa Cricket Stadium in Colombo on Tuesday. PHOTO: AFP

'Breakthrough came too late'

SPORTS REPORTER from Colombo



New Zealand captain Daniel Vettori felt that the Tilakaratne Dilshan-Kumar Sangakkara partnership went too far out of hand for his side in their 5-wicket defeat at the hands of Sri Lanka in the first semifinal of the World Cup at the R Premadasa Stadium on Tuesday.

"Our whole game plan was to try and get them to slow down and put pressure. The Dilshan-Sangakkara partnership went on for too long, they scored too many runs at that time. We broke that but it was too late," said Vettori in his last press conference as New Zealand skipper.

Vettori was however proud of the way the Black Caps fought back in the latter half of the game when they took out four late wickets to stir up the rest.

"I think we gave our all in that last quarter. We tried to keep as many people in the circle but when you're chasing under six an over, it becomes difficult for the bowling side."

"You have to keep taking wickets. We

couldn't break that sixth wicket partnership. If we could, we would have got into Murali, Herath and Malinga. We thought we could have got into that tail but Mathews came out and took the game from us," he said.

The left-arm spinner who took one wicket in the game said that he was disappointed at having lost the loss, but felt that the loss of quick wickets in the last ten overs while batting was where the game changed.

"It is obviously bitterly disappointing. The group fought so hard to stay in the tournament, but in the last game we've come up short. I think losing a number of wickets in the last 10 overs was the turning point."

"I was pleased with the fact that they fought with the ball and in the field to give us a second chance but in the end probably we were 20-30 runs short."

"I can only speak for this team and not for teams from yesteryears. Our top-order gave us a great platform, exactly how we wanted it. I think the Sri Lanka bowling attack was great. Each time we built a partnership, we lost a wicket. I think that's where we lost the game," said Vettori.