

Will it be Sachin or Murali?

AFP, Mumbai

Legends Sachin Tendulkar and Muttiah Muralidaran face-off in a mouth-watering duel for the last time when India and Sri Lanka clash in the World Cup final on Saturday.

The contest between the world's leading batsman and highest wicket-taker in their final appearance in cricket's showpiece event will add spice to the big game at the Wankhede Stadium.

Muralidaran, who turns 39 next month, will leave international cricket after the World Cup with more Test (800) and one-day (534 so far) wickets than any bowler in history.

Tendulkar's batting skills have not diminished even as he celebrates his 38th birthday next month, but he is unlikely to make a record seventh World Cup appearance in 2011.

A World Cup title has eluded the Indian star despite being the sport's most successful batsman with a record 32,785 runs and 99 centuries in Test and one-day cricket.

Muralidaran tasted World Cup glory in his maiden appearance in 1996 when Arjuna Ranatunga's men stunned Australia in the final in the Pakistani city of Lahore.

The ageing superstars have led from the front in this tournament to carry their teams into the final.



THE CUP OF TWO LEGENDS: (L) India batting colossus Sachin Tendulkar walks off with his man-of-the-match award after Wednesday's semifinal victory over Pakistan in Mohali, and (R) Sri Lanka spin supremo Muttiah Muralidaran has a cup of tea during a breather from practice at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai yesterday. Both these all-time greats will have another sort of cup in their minds, as they face off to claim the World Cup in their final tournament at The Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai tomorrow.

Tendulkar's 464 runs in eight matches are just three behind Sri Lanka's record tally of 467, while the wily



Muralidaran has claimed 15 wickets despite battling injuries. Muralidaran has soldiered on bravely over the past six weeks despite

being afflicted by hamstring and groin injuries, a side strain and a troublesome knee.

An appreciative Sri Lankan captain Kumar Sangakkara said winning the World Cup for Muralidaran has motivated his team.

"Murali is a legend to bowl virtually on one leg and still get wickets," the captain said.

"He is the icon of Sri Lanka, on and off the field, a fantastic human being and a great team man."

The off-spinner is the only player from either side to enjoy a World Cup triumph.

Tendulkar was 10 years old when India won the tournament under Kapil Dev in 1983, while five of his current teammates -- Ravichandran Ashwin, Virat Kohli, Suresh Raina, Piyush Chawla and Munaf Patel -- were not even born.

India's South African coach Gary Kirsten, who played against Tendulkar in the 1990, regards the batting star as his hero and the "backbone" of the team.

"It has been an absolute honour and privilege to share the same dressing room as Sachin," said Kirsten, who will step down as coach after the final to spend more time with his family.

"There is nothing to teach Sachin. In fact, I have learnt a lot myself just watching him prepare for a game. He is my hero."

PHOTOS: AFP

Kirsten, Bayliss seek last hurrah

AFP, New Delhi

India coach Gary Kirsten and Sri Lankan counterpart Trevor Bayliss may have earned lavish praises for their invaluable inputs, but unfortunately only one will be smiling on Saturday night.

With both the coaches stepping down after the World Cup, they will be expecting something special from their respective teams in the day-night final in Mumbai.

Consistency has so far marked the performances of their sides in the high-pressure tournament, with Sri Lanka and India each having won six of their eight matches.

Australia-born Bayliss, 48, may not have played any international cricket, but has acquitted himself remarkably well as coach as Sri Lanka improved their rankings in both Tests and one-dayers during his stint.

Kirsten, 43, figured in 101 Tests and 185 one-day internationals for South Africa before proving his coaching credentials in cricket-crazy India.

Both coaches faced dif-

ferent challenges when they took over in 2007.

Expectations were high when Bayliss replaced compatriot Tom Moody, who



GARY KIRSTEN

guided Sri Lanka to the 2007 World Cup final in the Caribbean, and he saw to it that the team remained a highly competitive unit in the international arena.

Can he go one step ahead and do a Dav Whatmore, a former Australian player and coach of the 1996 World Cup-winning Sri Lankan squad?

Indian cricket was passing through difficult times when Kirsten took over after a turbulent era under Australian coach Greg Chappell.

Fans had begun to lose faith in the team, especially after a first-round exit from the 2007 World Cup under Chappell, but Kirsten put Indian cricket back on the right track during



TREVOR BAYLISS

his four years.

India not only secured the number-one ranking in Tests and number two in one-day internationals under Kirsten, but also became a potent force both at home and away.

All the Indian players have praised the coach's role in improving the dressing-room atmosphere.

"Since Gary started, the team unity, the way we practice and believe in each other, it's like a family," said Indian all-rounder Yuvraj Singh.

India captain Mahendra

Singh Dhoni said the coach had done a fantastic job.

"The way he (Kirsten) has managed each and every individual and I think he has done a fantastic job. It reflects as to how we have done well on the field. I think he is a fantastic gentleman to be associated with," said Dhoni.

Indian batting superstar Sachin Tendulkar said the team owed their successes to the coach.

"He (Kirsten) has been an important member of the Indian squad along with the other support staff. I have enjoyed my game under him. He is really putting in a lot of effort," said Tendulkar.

Bayliss said ahead of the tournament that winning the World Cup had always been the aim.

"That's been the goal for the last four years since I came in. The World Cup success is a very big thing in Sri Lanka," he said.

"It's obviously been the focus since the last World Cup, where being runners-up was a great effort. Everyone involved in cricket would like to copy what happened in 1996."

Taufel & Dar to umpire WC final

CRICINFO

Simon Taufel and Aleem Dar have been named as the on-field umpires for the World Cup final between India and Sri Lanka on Saturday. Ian Gould and Steve Davis will be third and fourth umpires, respectively, while Jeff Crowe will perform match referee duties for the game.

The DRS has played a strong role in this World Cup - sometimes controversially - but both Taufel and Dar have had largely flawless tournaments, while Gould and Davis have also been generally accurate in their decisions.

Two of the younger umpires on the ICC's elite panel, Taufel and Dar's umpiring careers have run almost concurrently. Taufel officiated in his first one-day international in January 1999, while Dar's first international came just over a year later, and since then both have earned reputations for consistently accurate decision-making.

Taufel was named Umpire-of-the-Year for five consecutive years from 2004 to 2008, and when he finally lost the title it was to Dar, who won the award in both 2009 and 2010.

Mumbai ready for Tendulkar fairytale

AFP, Mumbai

A billion hearts will beat for Sachin Tendulkar as India bid for their second World Cup title in the all-Asian final against buoyant Sri Lanka on Saturday.

Tendulkar returns to his home turf at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai determined to add the only silverware missing from the collection of the most celebrated cricketer of the modern era.

The Indian star, who turns 38 next month, holds almost all coveted batting records, but not even his individual brilliance could win the ultimate prize in a team sport like cricket.

In five previous appearances in cricket's showpiece event, Tendulkar helped India reach the semifinal at home in 1996 and finish runners-up to Australia in 2003 in South Africa.

When India won the World Cup under Kapil Dev in 1983, Tendulkar was 10 years old, but five of his current teammates -- Ravichandran Ashwin, Virat Kohli, Suresh Raina, Piyush Chawla and Munaf Patel -- were not even born.

Playing in his sixth and possibly last World Cup, a record he shares with Pakistan

great Javed Miandad, Tendulkar has led from the front to lift India into the final.

His 464 runs in the tournament are just three behind Sri Lankan Tillakaratne Dilshan's 467, and he goes into the title clash one ton away from recording an unprecedented 100 international centuries.

Tendulkar's lucky 85 in Wednesday's semifinal against Pakistan, when he was dropped four times and survived close leg-before and stumping decisions, suggests he was destined to play the final.

"It will be a fantastic occasion," Tendulkar said of the match in his home city. "We will focus on the job in hand and try to get the job done."

Even the International Cricket Council will be delighted how the tournament has panned out.

"Can you imagine a fairytale ending with Tendulkar getting a hundred in the final and India wins at Wankhede which is his home ground?" ICC CEO Haroon Lorgat had said last week.

The task ahead will not be easy against a supremely confident Sri Lanka, who have marched into their second successive final after losing just one match out of eight in the tournament.

Rajapakse looks for Murali tribute

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse has urged the national team to win the World Cup final as a fitting finale to the brilliant career of spin bowler Muttiah Muralidaran.

Rajapakse, who will fly to Mumbai to watch Saturday's match against India, congratulated the side on making it through to the last game and said he hoped the trophy that Sri Lanka won in 1996 would soon return to Colombo.

Dhoni staying cool

AFP, Mohali

India captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni warned his team to ignore the hype and national hysteria that will dominate the frenetic build-up to Saturday's World Cup final against Sri Lanka.

India, riding a wave of patriotic emotion, swept past arch-rivals Pakistan by 29 runs in Wednesday's highly-charged semifinal and will aim for a second world title in Mumbai to add to their 1983 triumph.

"There'll be plenty of things happening around us, like in this game, but what's important is not to get distracted. We all know what our jobs are as professional cricketers so we'll stick to that," insisted Dhoni.

"Sri Lanka are a very good side and they have done really well so far in the tournament.

"The format's really helped us. We had quite a few close games where the youngsters were really tested at the crease. I think slowly they're getting into the groove."

India made 260 for nine against

Pakistan after Dhoni won the toss, a total that owed much to man-of-the-match Sachin Tendulkar's fortuitous 85 with the superstar batsman dropped four times.

But the India bowling attack, seen by some as the team's weak link, then proved its worth with all five members taking two wickets apiece.

Recalled left-arm quick Ashish Nehra led the way with two for 33 as Pakistan were dismissed for 231.

"I felt after the end of the first innings 260 was a good score, I wouldn't say it was a safe score because it was important not to give away too many runs with the new ball," added the captain.

Turning to Tendulkar, who will have a chance to score his hundredth international century on his home ground in the final, Dhoni said: "I think he batted really well and when he's there he makes it really easy for the others to score because he guides them really well."

"If you bat with Sachin for 15 games you have the kind of experience you'd have after 50 games."

But what really filled Dhoni with confidence was the India squad's

spirit. "The team unity, the way we are backing each other and not criticising any player. If somebody is having a bad time on the field we are making sure he is wanted and everybody is helping each other," he explained.

"I'm proud of the side that I've got. You can see a definite difference between the fielding we did back in a few series and now.

"They're giving more than 100 percent for the World Cup. You can't always control the result but you can always control the amount of effort you put in so that's what's in our hands and that's what we're doing."

One concern for Dhoni is his own batting form.

He managed just 25 against Pakistan and so far this World Cup has scored a modest 150 runs at an average of 30.

"I've not scored too many runs, but at the same time more often than not when you walk into bat you're under considerable pressure with four or five batsmen down," said India's number six.

"Hopefully the final will be better," said Dhoni.



India batsman Virender Sehwag celebrates with his son after overcoming Pakistan in the World Cup semifinal at the Punjab Cricket Association Stadium in Mohali on Wednesday.

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
Follow The Daily Star Sport on twitter
www.twitter.com/dssport