

# Test time down under

## India's fitness worry; Aussies look new

### Cricket

ANS, Melbourne

India captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni has shrugged off fitness concerns in his team ahead of the first Test against Australia, beginning here Monday, and stressed the importance of starting the Boxing Day match well.

The fitness of India's premier fast bowlers Zaheer Khan and Ishant Sharma has been under doubt after their showing in the warm-up games in Canberra. Zaheer is returning to big time cricket after recovering from a hamstring injury while Sharma decided to have an ankle surgery at the end of the Australia tour.

Dhoni said the team management has taken all possible precautions to keep the pace duo injury-free and hoped that they don't break down in the middle of the tour.

"We have missed Zaheer quite a few times in the past. We gave them [Ishant and Zaheer] some time off. They bowled in the practice game as well as in the net sessions. They are shaping up well. There are two more days and we

know a lot can happen in that time frame. Hopefully, they would all be available for selection," Dhoni said at the pre-match press conference at the Melbourne Cricket Ground on Saturday.

Dhoni said the whole squad is fit and the two practice games have helped them prepare well for the crunch series. He went on to say that they must start well in the first Test.

"How we start in the first Test is important. We want to be in the moment, break the match into sessions, try to win more sessions than the opposition. If we win enough sessions, then we will win the match. We want to do the small things right and not think where we want to be at the end of the fourth Test."

On the other hand, Australia look set to present India with a revamped top-order for the Boxing Day Test, with opener Ed Cowan Saturday named to the team alongside big-hitter David Warner and Shaun Marsh.

In-form newcomer Cowan was one of three additions to a 13-man Australian squad named last week for the match, after batsmen Phillip Hughes and Usman Khawaja were dumped.

The two other additions -- Marsh and bowler Ben Hilfenhaus -- also made the eleven but all-rounder Dan Christian failed to make the cut.

Australia, fresh from a humiliating defeat to lowly New Zealand in Hobart this month, will be missing all-rounder Shane Watson who is injured (hamstring & calf) while fast bowler Ryan Harris was not named in the squad.

Coach Mickey Arthur said Harris and Christian would "stay around the group" until their Twenty20 Big Bash League commitments took them away later in the week.

"And Shane Watson will also be with the group in Melbourne in order to build workloads and hopefully be fit for consideration for selection for upcoming Test matches," Arthur said.

India, ranked two places above Australia at second in Test cricket, are aiming to win their first series down under after failing in nine previous tours over 64 years.

Their batting line-up boasts two of Test cricket's greatest run scorers -- Sachin Tendulkar (15,183) and Rahul Dravid (13,094), with Tendulkar bidding for his 100th international century on the Australian tour.

### MSC women win again

OUR CORRESPONDENT,  
Thakurgoan

Eiti scored a hattrick as Mohammedan SC's women booters claimed their third successive victory in their tour of northern districts beating Thakurgoan District women's team by 5-0 in a friendly match at the Thakurgoan Stadium yesterday.

Apart from Eiti's treble, Aditi and Lina Chakma scored one each for the visiting side.

Mohammedan had earlier beaten Panchagarh and Rangpur in their first two matches.

### Dravid dislikes comparison

ANI, Melbourne

Veteran India batsman Rahul Dravid has rejected comparisons with opening batsman Virender Sehwag.

"I'm never going to be a [Virender] Sehwag. That's not me, but when I'm playing well and things are flowing for me, my scoring rate does improve. I feel in good position, I feel balanced, I am able to get fully forward, get fully back. I create more opportunities to score runs," the Sydney Morning Herald quoted Dravid, as saying.

"Then when I struggle, I can get into my shell and get really tight. Part of my nature is to fight through things. A lot of guys will hit their way out of trouble but my defence mechanism, my fallback, is to fight through the difficult times," he added.

Dravid, who has scored five centuries this year, said he was inspired by Indian legend Sachin Tendulkar who made a comeback after undergoing a slump in his career.

"He went through a tough period and he came out of that. That was an inspiration to me. Being in the same dressing room as him, he was having a golden run while I was going through one of my worst times," Dravid said.

Recalling the 2003 Test series against Australia, Dravid said he believed that he was playing his last Test match and described it as his tough time.

"As much as you try to remain calm on the outside and try to not let it affect you, or the people around you or the team, you are always very conscious that you're playing a team game. But in the quiet of your room, it is tough," Dravid said.

Especially if you have been someone who has contributed a lot for your team over the years, then to get the feeling that the team is carrying you is something that is not easy to get used to... It was a difficult period for me," he said.

### Clarke's caution

#### Cricket

IANS, Melbourne

Australia captain Michael Clarke has asked his teammates to play fair against India in the four-Test series starting Monday with the Boxing Day Test here, and warned of punishment if they don't.

Clarke said he wanted to avoid any bad blood between the two teams.

"Both teams understand where we are at, the relationship between the Australia team and the India team could not be stronger. We all understand there is a line you can go to but there is a line you can't cross," Clarke told reporters in the pre-match press conference here at the Melbourne Cricket Ground.

"I can guarantee you that nobody in the Australian team will cross that and if they do, there will be punishments from the International Cricket Council but also from Cricket Australia," he sternly added.

"We will be doing everything in our power to play some really competitive, tough cricket. But we understand and acknowledge that we won't cross that line."

India's previous tour down under four years ago was marred by controversies with

the 'monkeygate' fiasco between Harbhajan Singh and Andrew Symonds taking the centre stage.

Symonds and Singh have since happily played alongside each other in the Indian Premier League. Symonds has retired from international cricket and Singh wasn't selected for the current series.

"The relationship between the Australian players and the Indian players is very good and will continue to be that way," Clarke said.

"Both teams have a lot to play for. It has always been very competitive on the field but off the field both teams get on very well."

Talking about the great Sachin Tendulkar, Clarke hoped that the master blaster scores his much-awaited 100th hundred in his next series.

"Tendulkar scoring his 100th international ton is certainly a prospect. I hope that doesn't happen. I hope he scores it in his next series," said Clarke.

"He has been an unbelievable player for such a long period of time. I really enjoy watching him bat. If he does score the 100th century, he deserves every bit of credit and applause," he added.

### 'Tough task for India'

#### Cricket

PTI, New Delhi

Despite the absence of pace sensation Pat Cummins and all-rounder Shane Watson from the Australian squad, Indian batsmen will have their task cut out in the Test series starting on Monday, feels former Pakistan skipper Wasim Akram.

"Australia will not give flat decks for Indian batsmen to thrive. Their fast bowlers bowl at 145 kmph and above. If all three of them bowl at an average speed of 147-148 consistently then Indians will definitely find it tough. How they cope against it will be riveting to see," Akram said.

"Australia will not give flat decks for Indian batsmen to thrive," says the former Pakistan captain.

Victoria speedster Peter Siddle, rookie James Pattinson and recalled pacer Ben Hilfenhaus have been selected in the playing XI for the first Test in Melbourne.

At the receiving end of some harsh criticism from the Australian media and former players, the struggling Australian duo of Ricky Ponting and Michael Hussey found

support from Akram who felt they are still dangerous players.

"I understand Ponting is short of runs. I understand he is 37, but so is Sachin (Tendulkar). If Ponting and Hussey stick around in the middle for 45 minutes or one hour, they will get back to form straightaway. Both are physically fit and mentally very tough, they just need one good innings," Akram said.

Ponting has recorded only one hundred in the last 20 Tests while Hussey is averaging a mere 11.85 in his last seven Test innings.

The recent seven-run loss to New Zealand in Hobart only made matters worse for the two batsmen. "One of the old boys will go, I think Hussey or Ponting will go," said 1987 World Cup-winning skipper Allan Border a week ago.

Another former skipper Mark Taylor raised doubts over Ponting and Hussey's selection for the first Test. "I reckon Shaun Marsh and Daniel Christian could play in place of one of the two old blokes. Which one? I leave that to the selectors," Taylor had said.

### First-class not BCB's

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players succour without the assurance.

If the same cricketers are found wanting in another Test series, most of them would be dumped, and the money from such tournaments in the future wouldn't be as forthcoming as it is at present.

The weather conditions in the country is the last resort when it comes to giving excuses. There is no doubt that the Bangladesh cricket season could start from October and end in May but the start and end of the season would be hampered by rain. But instead of working around the problem, what happened this time has exposed those who have the power in the cricket board. The NCL could have been finished at one stretch and then the two other tournaments held, despite either one taking place during an international series.

But the Dhaka clubs wield the invisible hand of power in Bangladesh cricket and they have the final say. If they want the Premier League to take place from December 28 and only take a break for the BPL, the decision is cast in stone.

Whether such a decision hurts the country's cricket and image, it is up to the BCB to decide and the last time one checked, they too remain unmoved.

### Whatmore next Pak coach?

ANI, Islamabad

The Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) has invited Kolkata Knight Riders coach Dav Whatmore for a meeting to discuss terms for becoming the head cricket coach of the national cricket team.

Whatmore will visit Pakistan in the second week of January, the Daily Times reports.

The Pakistan cricket team presently does not have a coach, with Mohsin Khan serving as the interim coach for the England series

### Nadim takes Air Pistol gold

SPORTS REPORTER

Nadimul Islam of Army Shooting Association clinched the gold in the men's 10m Air Pistol event of the IFIC Bank 4th National Airgun Shooting Championship at the National Shooting Complex in Gulshan yesterday. Nadim scored 650.3 points to grab the gold, ahead of teammate Moksedur Rahman (646.6) and Ershad Hossain of BKSP Shooting Club (631.6).

Three events will be taking place on the closing day today. Those are: men's 10m Air Rifle, women's 10m Air Rifle and women's 10m Air Rifle.



PHOTO: COURTESY  
Officials of the basketball federation and the sponsors inaugurate the Citycell 3 on 3 Basketball Tournament at the Dhanmondi Indoor Basketball Gymnasium yesterday.

### Wins bring confidence

#### Cricket

REUTERS, Karachi

Test series wins over Sri Lanka and Bangladesh have whetted Pakistan's appetite for success and they are capable of beating world number one Test side England next month, coach Mohsin Khan said.

However, interim coach Mohsin, who was retained after guiding his team to series victories over the sub-continent teams, said that England would pose a far bigger challenge for Pakistan.

"England is the number one Test team in the world and their recent performances have been outstanding," Mohsin told Reuters on Saturday.

"We are expecting a very tough contest and the good thing is our players are already talking about the series and its significance to Pakistan cricket."

"It is true that Sri Lanka and Bangladesh are not as strong a challenge as England will be. But the good thing is that our team has developed a taste for success and every player is contributing in some way so we can win."

Pakistan will play three Tests, four one-dayers and three Twenty20 matches against

England in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, starting next month.

Mohsin, who was the chief selector until he was appointed coach last September, denied that the hosts will have any advantage from the low and slow pitches in the Gulf nation.

"England is a thorough professional side and has been stable under the guidance of [coach] Andy Flower and [captain] Andrew Strauss so what will matter is how you play session by session," Mohsin said. "Conditions will be same for both sides."

Mohsin, who played 48 Test matches for his country, denied that Pakistan will rely heavily on their spinners during the three-Test series.

"We are fortunate to be blessed with both quality pacers and spinners so we are not going to rely on anyone in particular," the 56-year-old said.

"Our recent mantra has been to focus and plan things on a match-to-match basis and we will continue with that against England as well."

The Pakistani selectors are due to name the Test squad for the series on Monday. Pakistan are playing "home" series in the Gulf region due to security concerns in their own country.

### Nothing's in a coach!

#### Cricket

PTI, Karachi

Pakistan's former captain Javed Miandad does not believe there is any role for a coach in cricket but has insisted that a "planner" is needed to be associated with teams.

"I don't think there is a role for a coach in cricket but you can say a team needs a planner. Someone who can plan out strategies for each match and provide feedback to the players and motivate them," Miandad told reporters.

Miandad, who himself remained coach of the national team thrice, said he didn't believe that specialist coaches for every department of the game was the solution.

"I believe that in cricket it is eventually up to the player who he performs or delivers. No matter how much you coach or advise a player but once he is out there in the middle it is entirely up to him how he responds and performs," he said.

Miandad said if players required any coaching after graduating into the Pakistan team, they didn't deserve to be playing international cricket at all.

"At this level what can you coach a player. But yes if you have a planner he can define a clear role for players and for every match," he said.

Miandad, who played 124 Tests for Pakistan over a span of nearly 21 years, said cricket was not like football or hockey.

"There is a role for a coach in these sports because he has total authority and say in selection of teams. But in cricket the final authority at the end of the day lies with the captain and he has to extract the best out of his players."

The former Test great pointed out that only those players became successful who individually worked hard on their game and learnt with each passing day and match.

Miandad also took a pot shot at the officials in the Cricket Board insisting that cricket in Pakistan was because of the players and not because of officials who had no experience of running cricket affairs.

"The new Chairman, Zaka Ashraf appears to be taking the right decisions and his reliance on former players is a good sign rather than on officials with no experience of cricket," he said.

### CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

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