

5 facts

Australia have won 11 of their 16 one-day internationals against New Zealand at Eden Park, including four of the last five

Brendon McCullum needs 47 runs to become the fourth New Zealander to hit 1,000 ODI runs against Australia

New Zealand spinner Daniel Vettori needs two wickets to become the fourth player to take 50 wickets in ODIs between these teams

Vettori has conceded just two boundaries in the 152 balls he has delivered in the tournament so far. He has sent down 90 dot balls

Tim Southee has bowled 75 balls to Shane Watson in ODIs but never taken his wicket, conceding 75 runs in the process



Australia captain Michael Clarke wraps up his practice session at Eden Park yesterday. He is all set to make his first appearance in the World Cup against New Zealand today.

PHOTO: AFP

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NEW ZEALAND V AUSTRALIA

Co-hosts set for fireworks

AFP, Auckland

One of the World Cup's biggest games pits high-flying New Zealand against four-time champions Australia at Auckland's Eden Park on Saturday in a match that could well be a dress rehearsal for the final.

New Zealand are the team to beat in the tournament so far, with their eight-wicket thrashing of England last week their third win in as many pool matches after they defeated Sri Lanka and outlasted Scotland.

Co-hosts Australia and New Zealand, staging the World Cup for only the second-time in the tournament's 40-year history, are both eyeing top position in Pool A so that they face a relatively weaker team in the quarterfinals.

Having endured the disappointment of losing the semifinal to eventual winners Pakistan when the World Cup was last co-hosted by the trans-Tasman rivals in 1992, New Zealand look better-equipped to win the tournament this time around.

In Brendon McCullum, New Zealand have an explosive batsman at the top of the order who can change the game as he proved during his whirlwind 25-ball 77 against England in Wellington.

But Australia coach Darren Lehmann was confident his battery of fast bowlers could contain the New Zealand captain.

"He does hit them a long way, doesn't he?" Lehmann said. "He took the game on and he certainly does that, he plays a high-risk game, but there's a bit of a difference between 135km/h and 145 to 150km/h coming at him."

"It'll be a great challenge for both sides, he's going to certainly come at us and we've got some plans for him."

"It's going to be exciting -- New Zealand have been very impressive. It's going to be interesting to see how they play against us, I'm sure they'll be really aggressive, so it's going to be a cracker of a game."

Australia are slightly under-prepared, as, after they too thrashed England, by 111 runs, their second pool match against Bangladesh was washed out without a ball bowled last weekend.

However, both sides also have plenty of bowling firepower to call upon.

New Zealand hope Tim Southee, who recorded his country's best-ever ODI figures of seven for against England, recovers in time from a minor shoulder injury.

New Zealand coach Mike Hesson tried to downplay the importance of Saturday's match by saying: "It's just another one of the round robin games and obviously it's going to be a good one."

A sell-out 40,000 crowd is expected to watch the game, which will also see the winner take away the Chappell-Hadlee trophy that is contested when Australia and New Zealand meet in ODI cricket.

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Brendon promises no let-up

AFP, Auckland

New Zealand captain Brendon McCullum vowed Friday his side will stick with their aggressive approach as they look to maintain their perfect record at this World Cup when they face arch-rivals Australia.

The Black Caps are top of Pool A with three wins out of three, including an eight-wicket thrashing of England, heading into their showdown with fellow co-hosts Australia in Auckland in front of what is set to be a capacity 40,000 crowd at Eden Park on Saturday.

New Zealand are set to field an unchanged side with swing bowler Tim Southee, who took a stunning seven for 33 against England -- the third-best World Cup return -- fit following a minor shoulder injury.

"It's an aggressive confident style where we are as positive as we can be, trying to endear ourselves to a public with the manner in which we play," said McCullum, who did exactly that with the fastest World Cup fifty, off 18 balls, against England.

Australia's former World Cup-winning captain Steve Waugh has tipped New Zealand as the favourites for Saturday's match but McCullum wasn't interested in such talk.

"Look, I have said all along, favourites or underdogs, it's irrelevant once the game gets under way," McCullum insisted.

"Our focus is very much on how we try and execute the game that has served us so well over the last little while. If we do that, we will be hard to beat."

"It doesn't mean we are going to win but we are going to be hard to beat if we perform to the standards we know how."

"Both teams are desperate to win tomorrow."

McCullum added his team, bidding to give New Zealand their first World Cup title, were in confident mood because of their recent record.

"The fanfare and anticipation is big but the guys are in a good space because of what we've done previously."

Big crowds for New Zealand home matches are rare but McCullum said the Black Caps would not be over-awed by the magnitude of Saturday's match.

"There's no real nerves, we've been playing some good cricket of late, living the dream really and getting the opportunity to play for your country in a World Cup at home and tomorrow is going to be a great event, 40,000 people and playing against Australia."

"It doesn't really get better than that, so the guys are excited."

Rain following Australia

AFP, Auckland

Heavy rain drenched Auckland on Friday, dampening Australia's mood just 24 hours before their crucial World Cup showdown against New Zealand and a week after torrential downpours wiped out their clash with Bangladesh in Brisbane.

Showers hit Eden Park as soon as the Australians arrived for practice, but skipper Michael Clarke said he was hopeful the game would go ahead uninterrupted on Saturday.

The forecast for match-day is fine with morning cloud and the odd afternoon shower.

Australia are third in the group with three points, three behind leaders New Zealand.

Clarke 'sick' of injury, sledging talk

AFP, Auckland

Australian captain Michael Clarke admitted Friday he is sick of discussing his hamstring injury and weary of the relentless spotlight on sledging ahead of the World Cup showdown against New Zealand.

Australia go into the Eden Park clash on Saturday, in front of 40,000 people, trailing their trans-Tasman rivals by three points in Pool A with speculation that trash-talking -- be it between players or from the crowd -- is set to play a part at some stage.

But Clarke, who will return to the team having missed the opening win over England two weeks ago, snapped when pressed on the sledging.

"Again, sledging. My God, I'm sick of talking about it," he said. "For me, personally, it's never impacted my game."

Clarke is on the comeback trail after playing just two one-day internationals last year and has not played international cricket since injuring his hamstring during the Adelaide Test against India in December.

Clarke, whose verbal clashes with South African paceman Dale Steyn last year made headlines as did his infamous clash with James Anderson in the last Ashes series, where he warned the Englishman "to get ready for a broken arm", insists that sledging has no bearing on the outcome of a game.

"So, me saying something to somebody, or somebody saying something to me, has never helped me have success or hindered me having success. I'm not a big believer in it. It comes down to the individual player. If it helps them, then go for it."

Clarke expects a vociferous home crowd to come down hard on the Australians inside the compact Eden Park venue.

"I'm sure we're going to get heckled, but that's a really good part of playing away from home, experiencing that," Clarke said.



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WORLD CUP COCKTAIL

Pakistan opener Ahmed Shehzad has been cleared to play in the team's third World Cup Pool B game against Zimbabwe on Sunday after suffering an ankle injury, an official said.

The 23-year-old right-hander was sent for an MRI scan after team practice in Brisbane, complaining of pain in his left ankle.

"Shehzad complained of acute pain in his Achilles tendon," said team physio Brad Robinson.

"On examination he had a mild limp and was tender in his Achilles tendon. Shehzad had an MRI in Brisbane this morning. The results showed a slight soreness. The Achilles tendon was intact and undamaged."

"I am confident he will be available to play against Zimbabwe."

India coach to miss UAE game

India coach Duncan Fletcher has flown to South Africa to attend the funeral of his father-in-law and will miss Saturday's World Cup match against the United Arab Emirates in Perth, a team official said.

"Duncan has left for Cape Town to attend the funeral of his father-in-law," the team's media manager R.N. Baba said.

A source said Fletcher was expected to rejoin the squad ahead of the match against the West Indies, also in Perth, on March 6.

In Fletcher's absence, India's training sessions will be handled by team director Ravi Shastri and the support staff of Sanjay Bangar, Bharat Arun and R Sridhar.

Scotland fined for slow over-rate

Scotland's misery over their one-wicket loss to Afghanistan at the World Cup was compounded on Friday when they were fined for a slow over rate, the International Cricket Council (ICC) announced.

Match referee David Boon imposed the fine after Preston Mommsen's side were ruled to be one over short of their target in Thursday's match at Dunedin's University Oval.

Mommsen was fined 20 per cent of his match fee, while his players received 10 per cent fines.

Afghans fired up by success

There were happier scenes in Afghanistan where fans took to the streets to celebrate after the war-torn nation's historic victory in the World Cup. Fans in Kandahar, once a Taliban heartland, danced and fired weapons, which is a traditional form of celebration in Afghanistan. There was similar jubilation in Jalalabad though six people were wounded by celebratory gunfire, a report said. Batsman Samiullah Shenwari, whose 96 rescued his team from what appeared a lost cause, said cricket had come a long way in the country in a short time. "You can look 10 or eight years ago, there was nothing in Afghanistan," Shenwari said. "But now you can say the streets, school, everything you go, it's just cricket and cricket."

McCullum warms up in boxing ring

It's not the most orthodox preparation for a big game but Brendon McCullum on Friday jumped in the ring with one of New Zealand's top boxers, Joseph Parker. The two had a sparring session after cricket training.



ing. The Black Caps captain is hoping to land a few more blows on Mitchell Johnson and co at Eden Park on Saturday. There were suggestions the Black Caps were unhappy with the session but a New Zealand Cricket spokesman said they were aware of it and had no drama. --COMPILED



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IMRAN TAHIR

Spinners haven't been enjoying the World Cup as much this year and that's what makes Imran Tahir's five-wicket haul against the West Indies all the more special yesterday. The bowler, whose quick bowling action and dramatic follow-through often makes him seem like a pacer, ran through West Indies's crucial middle order in quick time. The Caribbean openers haven't been in form lately and it has been the likes of Darren Sammy, Andre Russell and Lendl Simmons who have been saving their blushes. However, yesterday they were bedazzled by Tahir's turners.