

'SCG could spin today'

AFP, Sydney

Michael Clarke expects spin to play a role in Australia's World Cup showdown with Sri Lanka on a dry Sydney Cricket Ground pitch on Sunday.

The SCG is Australia captain Clarke's home ground and he believes Sunday's pitch will play differently to the one on which South Africa smashed 408 for five against the West Indies on February 27.

"It looks like spin is going to play a part. It looks quite dry and certainly hasn't got as much grass on it as I've seen in past one-day matches at the SCG," Clarke told reporters on Saturday.

The Australians may call up designated spinner Xavier Doherty for his first match of the tournament and can also call on Glenn Maxwell, Steve Smith and Clarke to share the spin duties.

'Rhythm's back, not the blues'

AFP, Sydney

Sri Lanka pacer Lasith Malinga believes his bowling rhythm is returning at the World Cup after undergoing ankle surgery in September.

The sling-arm fast bowler has relied on pain killing injections to make it through his matches at the tournament but says he is feeling more comfortable on the field.

The 31-year-old said he doesn't expect to play pain-free but wants to be a part of Sri Lanka's bid to win a second World Cup after losing in the last two finals.

"I really struggled after my surgery," Malinga said. "There's still pain in my ankle, but I had to get used to it. Because I wanted to play in this World Cup, whether that meant injections or whatever."



Can Kumar Sangakkara hit his third century in a row? The champion Sri Lanka left-handed batsman will look for that small piece of history against Australia in Sydney today.

PHOTO: AFP



NEW ZEALAND V AFGHANISTAN

From frying pan into fire

AFP, Napier

After being flattened by an Australian "freight train" this week, Afghanistan face the unenviable task of picking themselves up to face New Zealand's World Cup juggernaut at McLean Park on Sunday.

Black Caps pacer Tim Southee said the New Zealanders were intent on maintaining momentum against Afghanistan, who slumped to a tournament record 275-0 defeat against Australia in Perth on Wednesday.

He said the Afghans should expect no mercy as New Zealand seek to extend their perfect 4-0 winning record at this year's tournament.

"The minnows have performed strongly at times in this tournament and you can't afford to ease off because they're not a more recognised opponent," Southee told reporters.

"We've still got to stick to our game plan and our brand of cricket, so nothing changes from our point of view."

New Zealand have already qualified for the quarterfinals and wrap up their Pool A matches against Afghanistan and then Bangladesh (in Hamilton on March 13).

The Export Leader



"These two games are important to try to win because it takes us to the top of the pool to give ourselves, hopefully, a better run into the final," all rounder Corey Anderson said.

Anderson has likened New Zealand's campaign to a juggernaut, while Afghanistan coach Andy Moles said his side "ran into a freight train" against Australia.

"I'll be doing my best to make sure they don't go into their shells," said Englishman Moles, who is familiar with New Zealand conditions after a brief stint coaching the Black Caps in 2008-09.

"I'll keep telling them to express themselves and play with the freedom Afghanistan cricket has been known for."

Afghanistan may have stumbled against Australia, but the non-Test playing nation has enjoyed a successful debut at the World Cup after just six years playing one-day internationals.

They defeated fellow minnows Scotland and came close to an upset against Sri Lanka before a Mahela Jayawardene century spared the former world champions' blushes.

New Zealand and Afghanistan have never played an ODI and Black Caps coach Mike Hesson said he would not be underestimating Moles' team.

It's repeated every time a Test-nation plays an Associate but has a ring of truth coming from Hesson, who saw Afghanistan's pace attack first-hand.

"They have three guys who bowl over 140km/h and they can swing it," he said of quicks Shapoor Zadran, Dawlat Zadran and Hamid Hassan.

AUSTRALIA V SRI LANKA

The game of calculations

AFP, Sydney

Australia and Sri Lanka will be angling to avoid a potential World Cup quarterfinal collision with South Africa as they face off in a crucial Pool A showdown on Sunday.

The 1996 winners Sri Lanka lead the Aussies by one point in the group standings and a win would clinch second spot in the pool behind leaders New Zealand.

But a defeat for either nation at the Sydney Cricket Ground would increase the possibility of finishing third in the group and thereby the likelihood of encountering the AB de Villiers-charged Proteas in the knockout round.

The heat is on Michael Clarke's Australians to defuse Sri Lanka's batting arsenal after going down by one wicket to New Zealand last weekend.

"A side that has won every one of their games, maybe they don't have to worry too much," Sri

Lanka's batting leviathan Kumar Sangakkara said.

"But when you're not in that situation, you might start thinking about who you'll face in the quarterfinals and whether these wins have any bearing on what happens there."

"For us as well as Australia, it'll be a very important game."

Australia, coming off a record 275-run thrashing of Afghanistan in Perth on Wednesday, will be favourites at the SCG to extend their World Cup dominance over Sri Lanka.

The Australians have beaten Sri Lanka six times in eight matches, including victory in the 2007 final in Barbados, while the Sri Lankans beat them in the 1996 tournament decider in Lahore.

"I think Sri Lanka are going to be a really tough team to beat," Clarke said.

"They like the SCG and they're playing some really good cricket. They've got experience and I think that's always an important part of a

good team in major tournaments."

Sri Lanka smashed the third-highest run chase in tournament history to clinch a nine-wicket win over England in Wellington last Sunday.

Centuries by Sangakkara and Lahiru Thirimanne ensured Sri Lanka reeled in the 310-run target, scoring 312-1 with 16 balls to spare.

Sangakkara's 117 was his second successive century and his 23rd in 401 one-day internationals. He will bid farewell to limited-overs cricket after the World Cup.

Australia, vying to win their fifth World Cup, dropped out-of-form veteran Shane Watson for returning all-rounder James Faulkner, promoted Steve Smith to No.3 and hit the highest World Cup score of 417-6 against the hapless Afghans.

"They're one of the top teams in the tournament... we will play as the

underdogs," Sangakkara admitted.

"They had a poor game against New Zealand, but bounced back strongly. Every side has got weaknesses and strengths, but Australia are a very strong side."

Australia have a strong record at the SCG, but Sri Lanka have beaten them four times in 13 encounters at the famous ground and possess the formidable batting of Sangakkara, Mahela Jayawardene, Tillakaratne Dilshan, Angelo Mathews and Thirimanne to trouble any bowling attack.

Sri Lanka have confirmed spinner Rangana Herath will miss the game with a finger injury while batsman Dimuth Karunaratne suffered a tournament-ending broken finger batting in the nets.

Legendary spinner Muttiah Muralidaran, who worked as a spin consultant for Australia last year, said Sri Lanka have nothing to fear from Australia.



MR. EFFICIENT



RAHAT ALI

Pakistan's pacers did what many reckoned was improbable in this World Cup; defend a low total. Even better; they defended 222 against a side that posted 400-plus scores in their last two matches. It was something that not many predicted, but then again with a team like Pakistan those predictions seldom come true. Of all the pacers Rahat Ali's performance was perhaps the most inspiring. Brought in as a late replacement for Junaid Khan, Rahat had played just three ODIs before yesterday's game. Despite the inexperience he bowled with great composure and rattled the batsmen. His 3 for 40 got the crucial wickets Faff du Plessis and the dangerous David Miller to turn the game.

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WORLD CUP COCKTAIL

AB de Villiers completed 1,000 runs in World Cups when he reached a score of 34 off 33 balls, with South Africa reaching a score of 128 for the loss of six wickets during their ICC Cricket World Cup 2015 Pool B match against Pakistan at the Eden Park in Auckland on Saturday. De Villiers, who was the last source of hope for a South African victory, became the joint-fastest to the milestone along with Sachin Tendulkar, taking 20 innings to reach the mark.

Most successful Indian captain

India skipper, MS Dhoni, became the most successful Indian captain in the history of ODI cricket to register most number of wins, overseas. He went past former Indian skipper, Sourav Ganguly, who had 58 wins from 111 games. Overall, Dhoni is third in the world after Ricky Ponting of Australia and Hansie Cronje of South Africa.

He achieved the feat after India registered their fourth consecutive victory by beating the West Indies by four wickets in their ICC Cricket World Cup 2015 clash at WACA, Perth. Batting first, West Indies were bowled out for 182. India huffed and puffed but got their way with four wickets in hand with over 10 overs to spare.

Black Caps treat for Auckland yachtie

A yachtsman who narrowly missed out seeing the Black Caps' spectacular win over Australia has been invited to the cricket team's next World Cup match.

Dave Swete of Auckland, racing with Team Alvimedica in the Volvo Ocean Race, arrived in Auckland just over three hours after Kane Williamson's six won the match for New Zealand at Eden Park last weekend.

When the Black Caps heard about Swete's efforts to support them in the cup, they offered him tickets for their next match against Afghanistan in Napier on Sunday.

"I had resigned myself to thinking I wouldn't have the chance to see any of the cricket," Mr Swete said. "Now I get to bring my mate to the cricket," he added.

Helmets for umpires

Former leading umpire Simon Taufel says he can see a day when umpires will wear helmets or other protective gear to combat the danger posed by the proliferation of more powerful bats and hard-hitting batsmen.

The subject of umpire safety has not received a great deal of attention despite an incident last November in former Israel captain Hillel Oscar was killed while umpiring after a ball ricocheted off the stumps at the bowler's end and struck him in the neck.

It remains at the back of many umpires' minds, however, as they watch the likes of David Warner and Chris Gayle blaze away at close quarters, both at matches and during



training. Sydney umpire Karl Wentzel has for years worn a helmet in the first-grade competition after having five teeth knocked out when hit at the bowler's end in 2001.

Taufel, who now coaches the Emirates Elite Panel of ICC Umpires, says similar measures could well be adopted at international level at some point.

Taufel, who was judged ICC umpire of the year for five straight years between 2004 and 2008. "But that's an individual call they have to make."

--COMPILED