

## Sex talk stumps Clarke

AFP, Sydney

Australia captain Michael Clarke was momentarily stumped by a bungled question which appeared to be about his sex life as he celebrated Thursday's World Cup semi-final win over India.

Clarke, who had just led the co-hosts to a crushing 95-run win against the defending champions, was facing the media at the post-match press conference at the Sydney Cricket Ground, when he was asked to comment on "the tremendous sex" he had enjoyed since taking over as captain.

The embarrassed reporter quickly corrected himself, telling Clarke he had meant to say "the tremendous success".

"How well do you know me?" Clarke asked the journalist as man-of-the-match Steve Smith, who was sitting next to him, laughed.

"It's a question for my wife," said the skipper.

Australia will face trans-Tasman rivals New Zealand in Sunday's final at the Melbourne Cricket Ground.

## SL blames fitness

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan cricketing authorities blamed a lack of fitness and the poor form of the side's top order batsmen for failing to progress beyond the quarterfinals of the World Cup in Australia and New Zealand.

Chief Selector Sanath Jayasuriya -- a member of Sri Lanka's 1996 World Cup-winning team -- said officials will draw up new standards to ensure better fitness and take "hard decisions" about players who were below par.

# Hosts humbled by Syria Aussie renaissance leads to final



Two Bangladesh players are on both sides of the joyous Syrian huddle after the Syrians scored their third goal of their AFC U-23 Championship Qualifiers at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

SPORTS REPORTER



"David versus Goliath". That is what Lodewijk de Kruif, coach of the Bangladesh under-23 team, had to say after his charges were handed a 4-0 drubbing by Syria in their Group E fixture of the AFC U-23 Championship Qualifiers at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

"It was a game of big boys versus school boys. They (Syria) are light-years ahead of us. We can't compete with teams like these and win in 100 years in our current condition if we continue this way," said de Kruif during the post match press conference.

The gulf of difference between the two sides was apparent from the very first minute of the match as the strongly-built Syrians imposed their game on the hosts. The Syrian youths, who came here on the back of a couple of big wins against Indonesia and Kuwait, powered to a two-goal lead inside the first 14 minutes, thanks to two wonderful set-pieces.

Bangladesh, playing with a four-man backline and two midfielders in

deep positions just ahead of the defence, struggled to stop the Syrian attackers and conceded three fouls outside the danger zone within the first 15 minutes.

The first goal came in the sixth minute after Omar Kharbin's mazy run was snapped outside the box by defender Yeasin Khan. The Syrian forward himself stepped up to take the free-kick and curled it over the wall, to the left side of Rasel Mahmud Liton, to give the 152nd ranked

**BANGLADESH 0 - 4 SYRIA**  
(KHARBIN 6, 45; ALBAHER 14, ALMAWAS 81)

nation the lead.

Four minutes later, Syria defender Mouaiad Al Ajjan rattled the post from a 30-yard free kick before Mahmood Albaher nodded Ajjan's free-kick home to double the lead in the 14th minute.

De Kruif immediately sent on defender Shakil Ahmed in place of winger Yousuf Sifat to bolster the backline but it hardly helped in getting Syria out of the Bangladesh half.

The woodwork denied Syria once

more in the 45th minute before defender Nahidul Islam handled the ball inside the box to concede a penalty right at the stroke of half time. Kharbin made no mistake from the spot as the West Asian side went with a comfortable 3-0 for the breather.

The visitors took the feet off the gas in the second half, yet managed to find a fourth goal in the 81st minute as substitute Mahmoud Almaswaw drew home from inside the box.

De Kruif felt his players had better organization in the second half than the first. "The players were very nervous in the first half and made mistakes which made the difference but they played well in the second half and the organisation was good," opined the 45-year-old coach.

Syrian coach Muhammad Al Fakir was happy with three points in the bag. "We knew the strong and weak points of Bangladesh and exploited their weak points to come out successfully," said Fakir.

Bangladesh will play their second match against Uzbekistan tomorrow while top-of-the-table Syria will take on India.

REUTERS, Melbourne

Australia's trip to a seventh World Cup final on Sunday may seem standard fare for a nation that has already won cricket's ultimate prize four times, but the achievement marks a stunning turnaround from the depths of two years ago.

Battling mediocrity in all formats, Michael Clarke's side lurched from crisis to crisis in the annus horribilis of 2013, as reports of in-fighting, sackings and bar-room assaults dominated newspaper headlines.

Pundits debate the exact moment of Australia's nadir, but few would have tipped the team's spectacular implosion during a 4-0 Test series white-wash in India.

The second loss of that series made Australia the first team to lose a Test match after declaring their first innings closed and was to be the catalyst for the infamous "Homework-gate" scandal.

With the support of captain Clarke, four players were stood down for the next Test for failing to provide then-coach Mickey Arthur ideas on how the team could turn around their fortunes.

Shane Watson, vice-captain at the time and one of the four offenders, threatened to quit international cricket after returning home from tour to be with his pregnant wife.

Branded a much-needed "line in the sand" by South African Arthur, the punishment was intended to whip an ill-disciplined team in to shape but two further Test defeats followed and Australia entered the defence of their Champions Trophy title in England with morale at rock-bottom.

Their batsmen were skittled for 65 in a 243-run warm-up loss to India in Cardiff and the one-day international tournament was a debacle, with hot-headed opening batsman David Warner stood down for punching England's Joe Root at a Birmingham night-spot.

News that Australian players were out drinking rather than stewing in their hotel rooms over a loss to England reinforced perceptions of a team in disarray, and management acted swiftly by sacking Arthur and replacing him with former Australia batsman Darren Lehmann less than three weeks before the Ashes.

Australia would go on to lose the series 3-0 after squandering dominant positions in a number of matches but under

Lehmann's calm direction and the renaissance of fast bowler Mitchell Johnson, turned the tables spectacularly in the return Ashes series on home soil.

Completing a 5-0 series whitewash of the tourists to kick off 2014, Australia's success would filter down to the one-day team, who trounced England 4-1 in the subsequent series and would finish the year with a 13-5 winning record.

The year was not without its challenges, however, with a stunning one-day loss away to minnows Zimbabwe and Clarke's leadership questioned amid a series of injuries.

Such concerns appeared trivial on Nov. 25 when batsman Phillip Hughes collapsed at the Sydney Cricket Ground when struck by a short ball in a domestic match.

The youngest player to score two centuries in a Test, Hughes' death in hospital at the age of 25 cast a pall over the World Cup co-hosts less than three months before the tournament.

His ability to put their grief aside and complete a 2-0 test series defeat over India in the leadup underlined Australia's



resolve in the face of adversity.

"We've come from the depths of depression, I suppose, from where we were in November," Cricket Australia boss James Sutherland told the Australian Associated Press on Friday.

"It was a very difficult time and every credit to the players and the way that they've responded and gotten on with their job, without in any way forgetting their grief."

"So we're here and congratulations on the great effort they've put in -- all that hard work."

Ahead of Sunday's World Cup final against fellow co-hosts New Zealand, captain Clarke's team may reflect on the two roller-coaster years when they walk out onto the Melbourne Cricket Ground turf.

Recollections of the dark days and their ability to overcome them should stand the hosts in good stead during the clutch moments when the roar of nearly 100,000 fans rings out from the terraces.

## Uzbeks scrape past India



Uzbekistan striker Igor Sergeev takes off in celebration after giving his side the lead against India in the opening match of the AFC U-23 Championship Qualifiers at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

SPORTS REPORTER



Uzbekistan under-23 team scraped to an unconvincing 2-0 victory against India as the AFC U-23 Championship (Group-E) Qualifiers kicked off at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday. The Uzbeks, who came here as the highest-ranked side among the teams in these qualifiers -- thanks to the 72nd position in the latest FIFA rankings -- were kept at bay till the 87th minute by a spirited India side. The Uzbeks though profited from two mistakes by the Indians in the last few minutes to eke out a hard-fought victory.

With a 3:00pm kick-off and the sun bearing down on the big bowl, most of the stands remained largely empty. There was one Uzbekistan supporter who kept beating his drums to the cheer of a few local fans. But the drummer's enthusiasm failed to egg on their players as the Central Asian powerhouse struggled to get the better of the South Asian "sleeping giants". On the contrary, it was the Indians,

sitting 101 places below the Uzbeks in the FIFA rankings, who made most of the threatening forays in the first half. They mustered a few powerful attempts from outside the box, but the Uzbekistan goalie was up to the task. Uzbekistan could have taken the lead in the 44th minute when Igor Sergeev, their most potent striker, was through on goal, but he was denied by a last-ditch tackle from India national team's right-back Pritam Kotal.

The Uzbeks were in the ascendancy as the match went on and were denied by Indian 'keeper Arminder Singh and then the right post in the 67th minute. India were confined to their box in the last twenty minutes, under pressure from the Uzbeks, and conceded the opening goal in the 87th minute when Arminder spilled a regulation corner kick from Jamshid Iskandrov to leave Sergeev with the simplest of nod-ins. Five minutes later, Sergeev, regarded as the best striker from Uzbekistan since the days of legendary Maksim Shatskiikh, turned provider for the second goal assisting his skipper Vladimir Kozak, after Kotal was dispossessed in front of the box.

Savio Medeira, the India coach, tried put on a brave face at the post-match press conference, saying his team put on a performance to be proud of.

"Mistakes happen in football matches. We will learn through mistakes and get better. My boys worked hard, they missed chances and they gave their best. So I'm really proud of them," observed the India coach.

"In every tournament, the first match is always difficult. On a given day, if you cannot perform the other team will take chances. We just could not take our chances," added the former India International.

Bakhtiyor Ashurmatov, the Uzbekistan coach who has been in this position only a month and a half, felt that his side kept fighting till the end despite struggling somewhat in the oppressive heat. "After first half I told my players to fight till the last minute and keep their concentration. I thank my players because they did that and I also thank the people of Bangladesh who supported us," said the Uzbekistan coach.

## Old-time master carves 'Stradivarius in willow'

AFP, Waipawa

Few cricket fans have heard of James Laver, even though the master craftsman's bats -- likened to "Stradivarius in willow" -- have graced the innings of legends such as Sachin Tendulkar, Brian Lara and Ricky Ponting.

Laver works in relative anonymity in the hamlet of Waipawa on New Zealand's North Island, hand-carving bats for his boutique Laver & Wood label while also supplying some of the world's top players.

But elite batsmen inevitably have lucrative endorsement contracts with major manufacturers, so the bats he makes for the stars appear with the sponsor's name on, rather than Laver's.

Laver explained he has an understanding with major manufacturers that he can talk about retired players who have used his blades, but not those who are still playing.

The result is polite evasiveness when trying to determine the level of Laver's involvement in Sunday's Cricket World Cup final between New Zealand and Australia.

Can he confirm his bats will be used in the decider at the Melbourne Cricket Ground? "Yes"

Can he say who will be using them? "No," he replies with a twinkle in his eye. "But they'll be on both sides."

"People often ask if I get frustrated that my name's not on there but it's not like that," he said.

"I know my bats will be used in a World Cup final regardless, and that's quite cool, in a way."

Drifts of wood shavings reach knee high in the corners of Laver's factory, where bats of every kind line walls and shelves -- from rough-hewn "clefs" of imported English willow, to split, battle-scarred blades sent by clients around the world to be replaced.

After one half-formed bat has gone

through a mechanical press -- two tonnes of pressure to compress the wood and harden the face -- Laver administers a quick "thwack, thwack, thwack" with a mallet.

"You're listening to the bat, every bat has a different pitch," he says. "A close grain might have one sound if it's a good bat, but if it's not so good it'll be different. Also, you're getting a feel for how well the blade bounces and what it's going to do."

Laver originally trained as a construction engineer in his native England but wound up serving an apprenticeship with batmakers Millichamp & Hall.

After marrying a Kiwi, the 44-year-old moved to New Zealand and set up Laver & Wood in 1999, keeping alive century-old practices that have disappeared elsewhere in the face of mass production.

"We're the only company worldwide now that would make a bat through the all phases from the cleft to the finished product in whatever shape

you want it," he said.

Each bat is handmade after customers provide details such as height, batting style, favourite shot, most common dismissal method, type of wicket played on.

The factory produces about 1,800 bats a year, compared to 700 a day from major manufacturers, with prices ranging from NZ\$400-1,000 (\$305-760).

Laver said about 60 percent of his customers were Indian, mostly expatriates, who were looking for a bat that was individually tailored to improve performance and also carried exclusive cachet.

Each bat takes about four hours of labour and goes through a week-long process of curing, shaping, sanding and polishing.

One of the bats being worked this week was a four pound (1.8 kg) monster. Laver says there is no doubt blades are getting bigger and he believes administrators will eventually have to impose limits.



Working from a small town in Waipawa, James Laver has shaped the bats of many cricketing legends and both teams stars in the World Cup final will likely have bats carved by his hands.

PHOTO: AFP