

Sports

Photo of the day



Horacio Llorens trains in El Hierro, Canary Islands. —Photo taken from www.redbullcontentpool.com

Cricket's underarm row turns 40

WELLINGTON: After 40 years, New Zealand Cricket boss Martin Snedden is ready to laugh at the underarm bowling row that plunged Kiwi-Australian sporting relations to an all-time low. On February 1, 1981, Australia were desperate to prevent New Zealand scoring a six off the final ball to tie a one-day match at the Melbourne Cricket Ground.

Aussie skipper Greg Chappell conferred with younger brother Trevor and what followed was the most infamous delivery in cricketing history. Chappell junior trundled up to his mark and gently rolled the ball underarm along the wicket, ensuring it never left the ground and giving batsman Brian McKechnie no chance of clubbing it over the boundary for the necessary run.

McKechnie threw his bat to the ground in disgust and many Australian players, including wicketkeeper Rod Marsh, looked distinctly sheepish at the unconventional tactics. While the underarm delivery was legal — a situation the International Cricket Council swiftly rectified — even the then Australian prime minister Malcolm Fraser admitted it was against the spirit of the game. His New Zealand counterpart Robert Muldoon went even further, declaring: "It was an act of true cowardice and I consider it appropriate that the Australian team were wearing yellow."

Martin Snedden was a young bowler with the New Zealanders at the time and said there was fury in the Kiwi dressing room, including from batsman Mark Burgess. "Burgess was sitting there, he'd been drinking a cup of tea and had an enamel cup in his hand, he stood up and threw it full force at the wall," Snedden told Radio Hauraki. "This cup disintegrated, not into two or three bits, but into two or three thousand bits." Snedden, now New Zealand Cricket chairman, said Greg Chappell was "in a dark place" when he ordered his sibling to deliver the controversial ball. "The itinerary that the Australian Cricket Board (now Cricket Australia) had pieced together was utterly ridiculous," he said. —AFP

'Our history': Modest Doha stadium far cry from World Cup venues

News in brief

Neymar wants to stay

PARIS: Neymar said on Sunday that he hopes to stay at Paris Saint-Germain beyond this season and wants Kylian Mbappe to also commit his future to the French champions. Brazilian star Neymar is in discussions with PSG over a possible new contract, as his current deal is set to end in June 2022. "I am very happy at the moment, things have changed a lot," the 28-year-old told French television channel TF1. "I can't really say why. I feel good, I have adapted, I'm calmer. I'm very happy here. I want to stay at PSG." —AFP

Al-Nasr beat Qadsiya

KUWAIT: Al-Nasr beat Qadsiya 1-0 in a match held on Sunday as part of the second round of Kuwait premier league. General atmosphere of the game was largely lackluster with the players' movements largely confined to the middle of the pitch. The match heated up in the second half, when Al-Nasr managed to score the single goal by its Bahraini player Sayed Diyaa, in the 86th minute. With this win, Al-Nasr raised its points' total to six, while Qadsiya remained with three points. —KUNA

Dhafeeri completes rally triumph

DOHA: Meshari Al-Dhafeeri of Kuwait and his co-driver Qatari Nasser Al-Kawari won the MERC 2 or Group N category of Qatar International Rally on Sunday, finishing the race in a total time of two hours, 17 minutes and 10 seconds. In comments after the win, Dhafeeri cited the world-class quality of the competition, promising not to rest on his laurels and strive for greater achievements to show how far motorsport has come in Kuwait. Dating back nearly four decades, the three-day racing event marked the 41st edition of the Qatar International Rally. —KUNA

Morocco cruise past Zambia

DOUALA: Soufiane Rahimi and Mohammed Ali Bemammer scored within eight minutes of the kickoff to set up African Nations Championship title-holders Morocco for a 3-1 quarter-final triumph over Zambia Sunday. By winning, Morocco became the first title-holders in a competition reserved for home-based players to reach the semi-finals of the following edition. They will face Cameroon in Limbe tomorrow in a potential blockbuster being labeled "the final before the final" by the local media. —AFP

DOHA: Away from the lavish air conditioning and hand-manicured turf of Qatar's World Cup Stadiums, two of which will host the world's best clubs from Thursday, sits Doha Sports Stadium. The modest ground, the first in the Gulf with a grass pitch, nestles in the heart of the old city flanked by low-slung concrete villas, Doha's modest inventory of dive bars, and a bus station.

Despite its deceptively simple exterior of low walls it has hosted footballing titans including Pele as well as boxer Muhammad Ali, known as Cassius Clay until 1964, since opening its doors in 1962. "This stadium means a lot to me. I grew up in this stadium. My start was on this stadium with the big stars," said retired Qatar and Al-Sadd star Hassan Mattar. "It started here very beautifully at that time."

Four floodlights tower above the modest neighborhood which is a far cry from the skyscraper hotels and office blocks clustered together on the opposite side of the West Bay. A vintage yellow post box speaks to the district's history, a stone's throw from the coast and a dhow harbor as well as the Bidda area which has served as the ruling Al-Thani dynasty's seat of power. The venue is open-air except for a small pavilion containing the VVIP toilets reserved for the great and the good of the emirate and beyond.

'A huge difference'

By contrast, 60,000-capacity Al-Bayt stadium which will host World Cup matches in 2022 features hotel suites with views of the pitch and balconies in the stands. "This was the main stadium in Qatar, and in those days the fans filled the stands," Mattar said of Old Doha Stadium's 4,000 capacity. "I have fond memories. This stadium was the only grass planted in the Gulf countries."

Mattar said that seeing the likes of Pele on his home turf had inspired him and many other Qataris, leading to the country's modern day infatuation with football. Maintaining grass pitches is an arduous, water-heavy challenge in the country where summer temperatures routinely exceed 50 degrees Celsius (122 degrees Fahrenheit).

At the Khalifa Stadium 15 kilometers (10 miles) west, which opened in 1976 and will host World Cup games in 2022, groundsmen would "touch up" the turf with green paint to help overcome the brutally hot Gulf summers. "Switching from this stadium to the new stadiums, yes, there is a huge difference," said Mattar.

Now Doha Sports Stadium wants for nothing and

Serena calls Aussie Open delay a 'blessing' for injury recovery

MELBOURNE: Serena Williams admitted yesterday that she might have been forced to skip the Australian Open if it hadn't been delayed over the coronavirus, saying she needed extra time to shake off the achilles injury which cut short her 2020 season.

Williams, who beat Daria Gavrilova in her Yarra Valley Classic opener in Melbourne, suffered the injury at last year's US Open then withdrew from the French Open before the second round, ending her 2020 campaign.

But the 39-year-old, who will launch her latest attempt for a record-equalling 24th Grand Slam title next week, got extra time to recover when the Open was postponed for three weeks over coronavirus complications.

"I couldn't practice because of my achilles," she told reporters. "I needed time. I don't think I would have been here if it was during the regular season. (The delay) was an unwanted blessing. I definitely was pushing the limits, but I'm here."

An aggressive Williams showed no outward sign of injury as she beat home hope Gavrilova 6-1, 6-4 in the build-up tournament yesterday. The seven-time Australian Open champion started sluggishly, losing the first three points on serve, before quickly overpowering the Australian. Gavrilova, ranked 451, was overmatched against her idol but used her



DOHA: Qatari sports historian and journalist Sultan Jassem, holds a picture of US boxing legend Muhammad Ali, at Doha Stadium, on December 29, 2020. —AFP

has received the support of Qatar's former ruler, the Father Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani according to those involved in the venue. Its lush green surface is nowadays used to train Qatari FIFA-level referees as well as hosting smaller youth and exhibition matches. But its vintage appeal and understated heritage value have been eclipsed by Qatar's seven new-build stadiums in recent years.

Sporting ambition

Criticisms of worker welfare on those projects and the environmental cost of air conditioning each of the open-roof stadiums which will host 2022 matches have dogged the jewels in Qatar's World Cup crown. Another criticism of Qatar's hosting of the global soccer spectacle next year is that the country has limited footballing history and even more limited

competition credentials.

A clutch of faded but proudly displayed photographs in the Doha Sports Stadium's pavilion speaks to a modest but distinct footballing tradition which pre-dates the glitz and glamour of Qatar's petrodollar-fuelled international sporting ambitions.

"We used to go up to the stadium fence and put stones under our feet to watch matches," said local sports historian and journalist Sultan Jassem. "As children, we didn't have money. When big stars like Pele, Clay and (Michel) Platini came along we were dreaming and in awe," he added, thumbing a black and white photograph of Ali at the venue where a ring was erected on the pitch, a stop on The Greatest's tour of the Middle East before fighting Joe Frazier. "Clay's show match in Qatar in 1971 brought a special sporting flavor and improved Qatar's reputation. It's our history." —AFP

speed around the court to make Williams work harder in a more competitive second set.

The American, though, had all the answers and it was a sharp performance from Williams, who lifted the intensity in her second match back after defeating world number three Naomi Osaka in an exhibition in Adelaide on Friday. Williams, looking to get matches under her belt before the Australian Open, will next play Tsvetana Pironkova of Bulgaria in the round of 16.

In the night match, world number two Simona Halep wore down Anastasia Potapova from Russia with a 6-4, 6-4 victory in the Gippsland Trophy. The two-time Grand Slam champion was pushed but claimed her second straight scalp having beaten top-ranked Ashleigh Barty in Adelaide. "I knew it was going to be a difficult match because she hits very strongly and I'm happy to get through," she said. Halep next plays the winner of Australia's Destanee Aiava and Laura Siegemund of Germany.

'Three tough sets'

Earlier, teenage sensation Coco Gauff showed only glimpses of the form that fuelled her dazzling run at last year's Australian Open during a gruelling three-sets victory over Jil Teichmann at the Gippsland Trophy.

The 16-year-old overcame a mid-match stutter to win 6-3, 6-7 (6/8), 7-6 (7/5) in two hours and 45 minutes. "All the training I did in the off-season meant I was able to go through three tough sets and not get tired," she said. The American was one of the stories of Melbourne last year, where she upset reigning champion Osaka in straight sets in



MELBOURNE: Serena Williams of the US hits a return against Australia's Daria Gavrilova during their Yarra Valley Classic women's singles match in Melbourne yesterday. —AFP

the third round. World number five Elina Svitolina also moved through with a comfortable 6-1, 6-4 victory over former top-10 player Andrea Petkovic of Germany.

The 26-year-old Ukrainian, who has never reached the final of a Grand Slam, played her first match in Melbourne since emerging from the 14-day mandatory quarantine. She fell in the quarter-finals to Russia's Veronika Kudermetova in Abu Dhabi last month. "I think a few matches in Abu Dhabi helped me get straight into the match, and I started strong," she said. The two WTA events are being played concurrently at Melbourne Park as players prepare for the Australian Open starting on February 8. —AFP