

## SOGGY NAPIER GROUND STRIPPED OF SOUTH AFRICA ONE-DAYER

**WELLINGTON:** New Zealand has moved the fourth one-day international against South Africa away from Napier's McLean Park after an investigation into an abandoned match against Australia found problems with drainage and irrigation at the venue.

New Zealand's cricket board was embarrassed two weeks ago when a one-dayer between the hosts and Australia was called off without a single ball bowled after the outfield failed to drain enough despite dry conditions that following morning rain.

An urgent investigation into the ground had found there was "an unacceptable risk of a repeat drainage failure" and the March 1 match had been switched to Hamilton's Seddon Park, New Zealand Cricket (NZC) said in a statement on Tuesday.

"An investigation into the circumstances surrounding the recently abandoned ODI against Australia at McLean Park has highlighted a need for urgent remedial work on the venue's turf, drainage, and irrigation system," NZC said. NZC said, due to drought conditions, the ground had been given "significant watering" before the match against Australia and the match-day rain had resulted in a "worst-case scenario".

McLean Park, which was dropped from the test roster five years ago, has long been renowned for its poor drainage.

In 2013, a one-day international against West Indies was called off in bright sunshine due to a water-logged outfield, which triggered a review and repairs to drainage ahead of the 2015 World Cup.

NZC added that the city council would now spend NZ\$900,000 (\$646,000) on a complete replacement of the playing surface, drainage and irrigation system in the latest upgrade.

"By doing this, we can look forward with confidence to McLean Park hosting next summer's ODIs between the Black Caps and England, and the Black Caps and Pakistan," NZC chief operating officer Anthony Crummy said.

"This has been a difficult time for those involved with staging cricket at McLean Park and, not least, the cricket-loving public within the Hawke's Bay."

The five-match series against South Africa starts at Seddon Park on Sunday, before heading to Christchurch, Wellington, back to Hamilton and finally Auckland.

South Africa will also play a one-off Twenty20 international in Auckland on Friday and a three-match test series after the ODIs. —Reuters

### CRICKET



Mumbai: Australia's Test cricket captain Steven Smith (L) and head coach Darren Lehmann listen to a question during a press conference in Mumbai yesterday. Australia will play a four-match Test series against India, with the first Test scheduled to start in Pune from February 23.—AFP

## SLEDGING? GO FOR IT, SAYS AUSTRALIA'S SMITH

**MUMBAI:** Australian captain Steve Smith raised the temperature yesterday ahead of the first Test against India, calling on his players to "go for it" with the verbal volleys and on-field aggression. India-Australia series are notoriously feisty affairs—the 2008 contest Down Under was almost called off following the infamous "Monkeygate" incident as animosity between the old foes threatened to boil over. There was then further bad blood during India's Test and one-day series in Australia prior to the 2015 World Cup when heated on-field exchanges led to several players being penalised.

But the day after his team landed, Smith urged his players to do whatever it takes for Australia to win their first Test match in India since 2004 when the sides clash on February 23 in Pune.

"I think each of our individuals play the way they play and if they want to get into a battle verbally then, if that gets the best out of them, go for it," he told reporters in Mumbai.

"It's all about us making sure that as individuals we're in the right mindset to go out and succeed and if guys want to get in those kind of battles then go for it."

"But in the end it's about us playing on skill and making sure that our skills are in the best place for us to succeed in these conditions," added the 27-year-old.

Relations between the old foes neared breaking point nine years ago when Indian spinner Harbhajan Singh was suspended for three matches for allegedly calling Australian all-rounder Andrew Symonds a "monkey" during the New Year's Test in Sydney.

The ban was overturned when India threatened to quit the tour, claiming Singh had been wrongly accused.

### INDIA UNCHANGED

The hostility between the sides extended into India's 2014-15 tour of Australia which saw India's Virat Kohli, Ishant Sharma and Shikhar Dhawan, and the hosts' Mitchell Starc, charged with breaching the

International Cricket Council's Code of Conduct.

Australia opener David Warner, who had heated on-field exchanges with India batsman Rohit Sharma with the Australian telling him to "speak English" was reported in both the Test and one-day series.

The Australians, who are coming in off a convincing Test series win against Pakistan, have not won a Test match on Indian soil in nearly 13 years but Smith urged his players to go out and achieve a career-defining victory. "I think all of the guys are really excited about what's to come in the next six weeks. It's a great challenge to play here in India. "We know that if we can pull something off and win a series here we'll look back in 10-20 years and it will be some of the best time of our lives," he said. One of the key duels of the series will be between Smith and Indian skipper Kohli who is in the form of his life after scoring four double centuries since July.

Kohli is second only to Smith in the Test batting rankings and the Australian captain

said he had the utmost respect for his counterpart. "We're trying to form a game plan but I'm not going to tell you what it is," he said. "He's obviously a world class player. He's been batting extremely well. He's scored four double centuries in his last four series so he's obviously a big player for India along with a lot of their other batters." India, on a high after defeating Bangladesh this week to go 20 Test matches undefeated at home, on Tuesday named an unchanged squad for the first two Australia Tests from the one that beat their neighbours by 208 runs in Hyderabad.

Bangalore, Ranchi and Dharamsala will host the other matches in the four-Test series in March. India squad: Virat Kohli (captain), Murali Vijay, Lokesh Rahul, Cheteshwar Pujara, Ajinkya Rahane, Wriddhiman Saha, Ravichandran Ashwin, Ravindra Jadeja, Ishant Sharma, Bhuvneshwar Kumar, Umesh Yadav, Karun Nair, Jayant Yadav, Kuldeep Yadav, Abhinav Mukund, Hardik Pandya. —AFP



The team is made up of Indian and Pakistani expats, who share a strong bond.—Photos by Finn McHugh



Members of the Kuwait Swedish Cricket Club watch their teammates during the first innings.

## CRICKET FLOURISHES IN KUWAITI DESERT

By Finn McHugh

**KUWAIT:** Despite its name, the Kuwait Swedish Cricket Club is not made up of eleven sunscreen-covered Swedes and Bjorns, protecting their fair skin from the Gulf sun. Swedes don't play cricket.

The team's captain, Ali Busheri, laughs at the thought as he speeds through traffic. The club's unique name comes from its sponsor, the Kuwait Swedish Cleaning Services Company, he explains.

In fact, the situation could hardly be less Scandinavian: A team of Indian and Pakistani expats playing a Commonwealth sport in the Arab desert.

Ali, an Indian who has lived in Kuwait his whole life, has played for the Swedes for the past 18 years. "Most [of the players] come up to the veterans' leagues when age hits and we can't keep up with the younger ones," he explains. "Some of the guys have been playing together for fifteen years. We might be getting older, but we've stuck together as a team."

Next to him, Neville D'Souza nods in agreement. As the warm-up begins, he is rugged-up in a beanie to protect himself from the desert chill. He is hardly unique in this respect; the rest of the team is wearing jackets and jumpers, shivering as they wait for a practice catch. The hard ball might be stinging their palms, but this is nothing; last week was much colder, Neville says. They are used to braving harsh conditions, Ali remembering games in the summer which began at around 4am, the only way to avoid temperatures which climb into the mid-50s. Today is a big match, the semi-final. Their opponents, Shaheen, beat them in the regular season but there is an air of confidence that a good per-

formance will see them through to the final. The championship match will be played in Doha on a turf pitch and grass outfield, quite the contrast to today's setting: a hard, arid desert broken only by a concrete pitch.

### RIVALRY

There's something oddly fitting about a team named after a third country hoping to bridge a political divide. Their kit bears the Pakistani and Indian crest on its sleeves, the rivalry between the two countries non-existent in the Kuwaiti desert. Instead, it's a brotherly bond that transcends anything else. "That's the beauty of playing here," says Munawar, a right-arm spinner. "India and Pakistan have always had diplomatic problems, but here we're all together."

Zahir Mahmood, from Pakistan, agrees. "Ali's my brother," he says. "We've been playing together for fifteen years... It's never a problem with the people, it's all created by the politicians." This unity is never more evident than during the lunch-break, the team huddled together against the freezing wind, most clutching a cup of sweet tea. A bag of parathas - a flatbread found in both countries - is passed around alongside a tin of mint yogurt and a semolina cake. The teams are generous, chatting happily in Urdu before switching to English. "Please, you're our guest. Eat more." Having finished their meal, the Swedes go out to defend 166 in 20 overs, a total Neville and Ali agree is slightly too small on this wicket. Quite what distinguishes this wicket from the six nearby, each outfield hard as rock with a coat of dust, is unclear.

As his teammates walk out, Zahir takes a seat in the front of his Toyota. For him, the weekend game is a ritual in a country that does not pro-

vide "much entertainment for the expats." He has been playing cricket since 1982, and despite not being required for the semi-final, came down to enjoy the company of his teammates wearing his full kit. "I knew I wasn't playing today, Ali told me. My body may not be made for cricket anymore," he laughs, patting his belly. "But it's a chance to get out, see my friends and joke around."

"Cricket is in my blood," he adds simply.

If anyone can make that claim, it's Zahir. His brother, Azhar, played 21 Tests for Pakistan and is now a bowling coach for the national team. Zahir would love to open a cricket academy in Australia, but works in Kuwait to provide for his parents. He has seen the growth of the sport in Kuwait over the years, but concedes "only outsiders play here." You might be able to find pick-up games in every nook and cranny across Kuwait City, there might be 250 clubs here, but it's still a sport for expats. The locals prefer soccer, with European leagues televised across the country.

### DANGERMAN

Zahir is erudite and expansive, conversation drifting at will between Pakistani politics, the Kashmir conflict, the correct technique for a cover-drive, the difficulties of child rearing, a blow-by-blow-account of Pakistan's World Cup semi-final victory in 1993, and back to politics. He knows what he is talking about, adding a gentle touch on the knee for emphasis, but rarely takes his eyes off the on-field proceedings as he speaks. Neville strikes in the first over, Shaheen's opener - a dangerman, apparently - out to a loose shot. "They're not playing cricket. I am 100% sure we will win this match," Zahir says in his succinct, assured way. It's a claim he tempers

with every boundary his opponents strike, but reiterates with total conviction at the fall of each wicket. On the field, Neville continues to rip through Shaheen's top-order, but once he's out of the attack, the batsmen steady the ship and score with ease. In the warmth of the car, Zahir's cricket brain is simmering away, cooking up another tactical plot. "Ali, brother," he says, winding the window down as his captain jogs past to retrieve the ball. "Time for a spinner." He nods approvingly as his plan bears fruit next over. "See? With the fast bowlers they use the pace, but now they're -"

The sentence ends abruptly as he slams his car-horn, adding a flourish to the team's on-field appeal. "Out! Out!" he yells, his head of out the window. Zahir may not be playing, but he'll do whatever he can to get his teammates over the

line. They need it, too. The game comes down, implausibly, to the final ball. Shaheen have a wicket in hand and need two runs to win. One run would tie the match, sending it to a super-over. Clipping the ball through the leg-side, the batsmen are comfortably through for the first but, in the confusion over a second, both end up at the bowler's end. It's the simplest of chances, but somehow an errant throw allows them to scamper through for the win.

For the Swedish Cricket Club, it's a bitter end; Shaheen has won by the narrowest possible margin. Amidst the normal teammate bickering that follows such a tight loss, Ali is the calm head. "Mistakes are part of the game," he tells his dejected teammates. "You win some, you lose some." In the car home, he soothes the still-despondent Neville. "It was their destiny to win today."



An outfielder for the Kuwait Swedish Cricket Club watches from the boundary.