Dream is to play World Cup alongside Hardik: Krunal Pandya

NEW DELHI, JUN 29 /--/ Krunal Pandya has just inched a bit closer towards his "dream" with a maiden India A call-up but the "ultimate goal" is to play the 2019 World Cup in England alongside younger brother Hardik.

"The aim is not just to represent India for a couple of matches here and there but to play for as long as possible. It would be a dream come true if I and Hardik can together play for India in the 2019 World Cup. But right now, focus will be on doing well for India A," Krunal told PTI after his selection in the A squad for a limited-overs series in South Africa. In fact, Hardik called him from Antigua after getting the news of his 'A' team selection. "Hardik was ecstatic. He called me and said that 'You are getting there'. Having already played for India, he has an insight about top flight cricket and I always discuss with him to pick finer points. There can't be a closer buddy than your own brother," says Krunal. While he has been one of the vital component for the Mumbai Indians in their IPL triumph, he attributes his success to the hard work he had put in to counter the 'Second Season Syndrome' that affects many cricketers. "I knew opposition teams would study my game during this edition of the IPL after a reasonably good first season. I had to work on my weaknesses as the second season becomes the very key in an international level tournament like IPL. I worked on both aspects of my game and it paid off," said Krunal, who scored 243 runs and took 10 wickets in 13 IPL games. For the older among Pandya siblings, his performance in the Vijay Hazare Trophy also helped him make a case for himself in the 50-over format.

"It was a tough first few months as I had undergone surgery for quadriceps muscle injury. I was out of action for four to five months. The Vijay Hazare Trophy was like my comeback tournament for Baroda. "We played the semi-finals and I had the highest runs (366) and highest wickets (11) for our team. I had a couple of 30s in the Deodhar Trophy. All these performances helped my confidence," said 26-year-old Krunal, who has played 14 List A and 40 T20 matches, said. His slow left-arm orthodox bowling has been restrictive but Krunal backs his style.

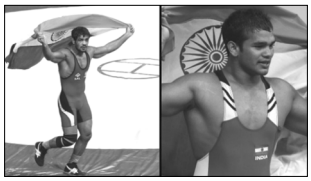
"My thinking is simple. When you are batting, think like a bowler to stay one step ahead and vice versa while bowling. Reading the mind of an opposition player is very important," he said. His skill set is pretty similar to Ravindra Jadeja, who is an established India player, and Axar Patel, who will be with him on the flight to South Africa but the Baroda lad wants to focus on his own game. "I would only like to focus on things which are in my control. I can't perform thinking about who are my competitors. My job is to maximise my potential and perform to the best of my abilities. I will strive doing that," he concluded.

ISL gets recognition from AFC, two national leagues now

NEW DELHI, JUN 29 /--/ The cash-rich Indian Super League has been finally granted official recognition by the Asian Football Confederation (AFC), meaning there will be two national leagues in the country from 2017-18.

The franchise-based league didn't have AFC recognition in its first three editions, and has been trying for it for a while now. The AFC gave its consent to the All India Football Federation's proposal through a letter signed by general secretary Dato Windsor John, a top AIFF official told PTI today. So, as of now, the winner of the I-league will participate in the AFC Champions League qualifiers, while the next ISL champion will be eligible for an AFC Cup qualifying slot. If the 2017-18 I-League winners fail to qualify -- no Indian club has so far -- they will get an automatic berth in the AFC Cup, the continent's second-tier tournament. The AFC however specified that the arrangement was a temporary one and required the stakeholders to come up with a long-term plan. The development comes as a good news for Bengaluru FC, who have so far been the only Indian club serious about the AFC Cup competition. Having emerged runners-up last year, Bengaluru FC have made the semi-finals this time and will play North Korea's 4.25 SC in home and away league in August and September respectively. The champions of the 10-team ISL that will run for five months beginning November will get an AFC Cup qualifying slot. Till 2016-17, it was given to the winners of the Federation Cup. (PTI)

Sports Ministry rejects Narsingh Yadav's conflict of interest charge against Sushil Kumar



NEW DELHI, JUN 29 /--/ Rejecting allegations of conflict of interest against Sushil Kumar, the Sports Ministry today defended the star grappler's appointment as a national observer for wrestling.

A week after the suspended Narsingh Yadav wrote to the Ministry, alleging conflict of interest, Sports Minister Vijay Goel termed as "baseless", the apprehensions raised by the grappler, who was embroiled in a pre-Olympic doping scandal last year. Narsingh had questioned how Sushil could become a national observer, given his involvement in grooming of young wrestlers at the Chhatrasal Stadium's akhada, which is run by his father-in-law Satpal. Sushil, India's lone double Olympic medallist, was among 14 Olympians appointed by the Sports Minister as national observers for their respective disciplines earlier this year. Goel redefined the role of those eminent sportspersons, who were appointed by the Ministry as national observers for the first time for the development of sports. "All these national observers have been performing their duties as per the guidelines and role assigned to them by the Ministry," Goel stated in a release. The Minister also pointed out that as per the responsibilities assigned to the national observers, their job is to observe selection of national teams and to suggest measures for further strengthening free and transparent selection.

"Assessing the existing sports infrastructure/ equipment, quality of scientific backup and medical facilities at the venues of the national coaching camps and report the critical gaps. "To observe, analyse, review and report on the performance of Indian and foreign coaches and the progress of performances of the campers," the Ministry said. Besides, the national observers are also supposed to maintain a database on the performance profile of individual athletes as well as coaches. "To assist the performance of national team in the international tournaments and suggest training needs of athletes including foreign training and competition exposure with special focus on sub junior and junior level athletes. "To examine complaints from players and other stakeholders by taking up the matter with the NSF (National Sports Federations) concerned for redressal and send a report to the Ministry. The Ministry said that their job was also to assist NSFs/ National Sports promotion Organisations/ SAI in preparation and finalisation of ACTC. "To accompany the national team for international exposure as may be required," Goel said.

Cricket Australia warns players as pay row deadline looms

SYDNEY, JUN 29 /--/ Cricket Australia has sent a formal letter to warring players officially informing them they will be unemployed if a deal is not reached this week in their protracted pay dispute.

Amid reports that Australia`s cricketers will decide this weekend whether their image rights are sold offshore, CA high performance manager Pat Howard has warned they must seek permission to play in other Twenty20 leagues. Months of bitter negotiations are coming to a head before the current Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) expires on Friday with players to be unemployed if there is no resolution. Coming tours to Bangladesh and India are also at risk along with England`s showpiece Ashes tour to Australia later in the year. With the increasing likelihood of no agreement, media are reporting that some players will seek employment in foreign T20 leagues if they are left without a contract. CA has warned players that if they sign with competing sponsors they will not be offered new contracts, The Australian newspaper said. The more than 200 players who will be out of contract were informed that they would not be expected to train or play and that they would not be paid for that period even when a new contract was signed, the CA email said. The correspondence is seen as a clear sign that CA intends to dig in if players do not agree to its proposal to modify the revenue-share arrangement from previous agreements. The Australian Cricketers` Association has been staunchly opposed to CA`s plan to modify the existing MOU that provides a flat share of revenue for the players. CA has offered international men`s and women`s players a share of surpluses up to Aus$20 million (US$15 million), while increases in domestic players` payments would be capped at 18 percent (men) and 150 percent (women). In the latest CA correspondence, Howard told the players: "If your contract expires on 30 June, you will not be an employee of CA, a State Association or a W/BBL Team from 1 July. "This means that you are not required to play, train, perform player appearances or media commitments, and you will not be paid a retainer until such time as a MOU is agreed and a player contract is agreed with you in writing." The players have established `The Cricketers Brand` in anticipation of a lockout but CA warned them they need to be careful about new sponsors. "All players will be provided with a list of protected sponsors for 2017/18," Howard wrote.

"Any player entering into unapproved endorsements during any uncontracted period puts at risk future endorsement arrangements with CA, State and W/BBL partners," and "puts you at risk of not being able to enter into a contract for the upcoming season with CA, the State or W/BBL Team." Fairfax Media said that with a resolution unlikely before Friday`s deadline suitors in India and England were ready to pounce. The players` union told Fairfax Media that they had had inquiries from India about sponsoring a collective of Australia`s most high-profile players should the pay dispute not be resolved by Friday. The likes of David Warner, Steve Smith, Mitchell Starc and Glenn Maxwell are huge names on the subcontinent and would be in big demand. "The negotiations have obviously created interest overseas and there has been genuine interest from the Indian market in regards to players` IP and taking that offshore," said ACA commercial manager Tim Cruickshank.

Mary Kom pep talk inspires Indian eves ahead of HWL semis

NEW DELHI, JUN 29 /--/ Battling against odds has been the hallmark of her illustrious career and that's precisely what MC Mary Kom told the members of the Indian women's hockey team as they embark on their journey to qualify for 2018 World Cup to be held in London. Five-time world champion and London Olympic bronze medallist Mary Kom had a surprise session with Indian eves on Wednesday ahead of their departure for the FIH Hockey World League Semi-Final to be held in Johannesburg from July 8 to 23. "We did everything in our capacity to prepare ourselves for the event. We even had an hour long inspirational session with Mary Kom yesterday. It was a surprise for the girls and they really liked it very much," Indian women's hockey team chief coach Marije Sjoerd told PTI. The Indian eves, who are clubbed in a tough Pool B along side world no. 3 Argentina, world no. 6 USA besides hosts South Africa and Chile, will have to finish in top five to qualify for the World Cup. The coach really liked how Mary interacted with the girls and inspired them with her life story. "During the session Mary told her story to the girls. She talked about all the hardships she overcame. She talked about how important is the mental preparation. It was really an inspirational session," he said. Marijne said the Indian girls are presently in a much better shape and he is confident of a positive result from the upcoming tournament. "Our goal is to qualify for the World Cup. Argentina and USA are two higher ranked teams in our pool but we are not at all bothered about our opponents. We are just focussing on our game," the Dutchman said. Just after taking charge of the team, he once said what Indian eves lack is self belief but Marijne is quite happy with the progress they have made on that front. "The self belief is getting much better. The better the results the higher will be the confidence of the girls. They have also improved their fitness a lot. They now can play harder," he said. Before the tournament starts, India will play two practice games against England and Ireland, which the coach feels will give him an idea about where his wards stand in front of their rivals.

Defending champion Advani to lead India's charge at Asian meet

BISHKEK (KYRGYZSTAN), JUN 29 /--/ Ace cueist Pankaj Advani is set to defend his 6-red snooker title with India fielding a strong team at the Asian 6-Red Snooker and Team Championships scheduled here over the next one week. The Indian contingent will be spearheaded by 16-time world champion Advani. He will accompanied by Kamal Chawla, Faisal Khan, Malkeet Singh besides former billiards player Ashok Shandilya, who will be here as a coach. In the 2016 edition in Abu Dhabi, Advani lifted the title to make it his first Asian snooker victory. "I am excited to play an Asian event in a different place (Kyrgyzstan) as well as am looking forward to defending my Asian 6-Red Snooker Title," said Advani. "This will be the final Continental Championship before the World events commence in August. Therefore, I'm looking to add another medal, preferably gold again, and maintain my good run for the season so far." When asked how the second half of the year is looking, Advani said, "Once this event is over, I'll be gearing up for the IBSF World 6-red Snooker Championship in Egypt in August, followed by another world event in Bangkok in September. "Then it'll be time for Billiards where I'll be defending the World Title in the point format in India. The final event of the year will be the IBSF World Snooker Championship (15-red) in Malta. Lots of cue sport action to look forward to," Advani won the Asian Billiards Championship earlier this year before losing in the final of Asian Snooker Championship.

Karun Nair, Pandey to lead India A teams in South Africa

NEW DELHI, JUN 29 /--/ Senior team players Karun Nair and Manish Pandey were today named skippers of India A's unofficial Test and one-day teams respectively, for the upcoming tour of South Africa.

India A will play a one-day tri-series involving Australia A and South Africa A followed by two four-day matches against the hosts. The tour starts with the first one-dayer of the triangular series in Groenkloof on July 26 between India A and Australia A. Karun and Jayant Yadav, two current India players who are in both the squads, while Pandey needed to be checked after coming from an injury. The squad for the one-day series is packed with IPL and domestic limited-overs (Vijay Hazare Trophy) performers such as Krunal Pandya, Rishabh Pant, Basil Thampi, Mohammad Shiraj and Siddharth Kaul. On the other hand, the team for the four-day (first class) matches is full of Ranji Trophy performers such as Priyank Panchal, the top-scorer in the season gone by, Ishan Kishan, Sudeep Chatterjee, Ankit Bawne and Shahbaz Nadeem. Also part of the first class squad is senior India fringe player Abhinav Mukund. Since India's tour of Sri Lanka also starts on July 26, it is a given that Nair won't be a part of the senior squad for the Test series. Nair, who had started his Test career with a triple century on debut in the last home season, has since been going through a bad run of form, including in the Indian Premier League where he led Delhi Daredevils in some of the matches in the absence of regular skipper Zaheer Khan.

One-day squad: Mandeep Singh, Shreyas Iyer, Sanju Samson, Manish Pandey (captain), Deepak Hooda, Karun Nair, Krunal Pandya, Rishabh Pant (wk), Vijay Shankar, Axar Patel, Yuzvendra Chahal, Jayant Yadav, Basil Thampi, Mohammed Siraj, Shardul Thakur, Siddarth Kaul.

Sqaud for four-day matches: Priyank Panchal Abhinav Mukund, Shreyas Iyer, Ankit Bawne, Karun Nair (Captain) chance to stake claim for , Sudip Chatterjee, Ishan Kishan (wk), Hanuma Vihari, Jayant Yadav specialist, Shahbaz Nadeem, Navdeep Saini, Mohammed Siraj, Shardul Thakur, Aniket Choudhary, Ankit Rajpoot. (PTI)

Fixtures:

1st one-dayer - India A vs Australia A - July 26
2nd one-dayer - South Africa A vs India A - July 28
3rd one-dayer - South Africa A vs Australia A - July 30
4th one-dayer - India A vs Australia A - August 1
5th one-dayer - South Africa A vs India A - August 3
6th one-dayer - South Africa A vs Australia A - August 5
Final - August 8
1st four-day match - South Africa A vs India A - August 12-15
2nd four-day match - South Africa A vs India A - August 19-22.

Table tennis: China's men pull out of Australian Open

SHANGHAI, JUN 29 /--/ The powerful China men's table tennis team on Thursday pulled out of next week's Australian Open, deepening a crisis sparked by the removal of their head coach. The team's withdrawal from next week's event on the Gold Coast was announced by the governing International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF) in a statement issued Thursday.

It comes days after the world's top three players - Ma Long, Fan Zhendong and Xu Xina - failed to appear for their second-round singles matches at the prestigious China Open in a protest at the decision to relieve the highly respected Liu Guoliang of his duties as head coach. The Chinese Table Tennis Association (CTTA) launched an investigation into the embarrassing no-show. "It is unfortunate that the decision was made to withdraw the entire men's team," the ITTF said in the statement. It called the move "disappointing news for all table tennis fans around the world". The Chinese women's team will play, the ITTF said. Two Chinese coaches also pulled out of the event in Chengdu last week, triggering a furore in table tennis-mad China. The coaches and players were upset that Liu, a former Grand Slam champion, had lost his job as head coach in a reshuffle at the top of the CTTA. The Australian Open, an event on the sport's top-level Platinum World Tour, starts on July 4.

Football, showbiz stars set for Messi's wedding

ROSARIO, JUN 29 /--/ Football and showbiz stars gather in northern Argentina tomorrow for Latin America's celebrity wedding bash of the decade when Barcelona superstar Lionel Messi marries his childhood sweetheart Antonella Roccuzzo. Pop star Shakira and her husband, Messi's teammate Gerard Pique, are expected among the 260 guests, according to media and locals close to the event. They will join old friends of the couple and footballers such as his Barcelona strike partners Luis Suarez and Neymar.

The party at a casino in his hometown Rosario will be a respite for the players from his legal woes. A Spanish court last month rejected his appeal against a conviction for tax fraud. Brunette bride Roccuzzo, 29, will wear a dress by Spanish designer Rosa Clara, which has been flown over from Barcelona. The designer has dressed stars such as actresses Eva Longoria and Sofia Vergara as well as Spain's Queen Letizia. From 2200 GMT the guests will pack into the Hotel City-Center Casino, which stands right next to a crime-ridden slum run by drug gangs.

"Messi's wedding accentuates the sense of inequality that is symbolized by the casino in that neighborhood," said Carlos del Frade, author of several books on the drug trade in Rosario. This city of 1.2 million people is also a cradle of footballing talent, however. "Rosario lives and breathes football. That is another reason Lionel feels so comfortable here," the city's mayor, Monica Fein, told AFP. "I think he is excited that through his wedding his friends (from abroad) will be able to get to know the city he loves so much." The civil wedding ceremony and party will all take place inside the venue, and the guests will be lodged there too.

Messi, 30 -- considered a man of few words -- has reportedly asked chefs to cook local delicacies such as "locro" stew and "empanada" pasties for the feast. The star dish is a typical Argentine beef roast including chitterlings, gizzards and kidneys. Uruguayan pop bands Rombai and Marama plus singer Karina, wife of Argentina footballer Sergio Aguero, will perform at the dance. It is not known whether the guests will also get a song from Shakira, the Colombian diva famous for "Whenever, Wherever." Some 155 journalists have been accredited to cover the bash, but have been warned they will have no access to the guests. Security will be handled by a private team of Israeli specialists used by Messi for all his excursions.

"In Lionel Messi's case, he's widely accepted by the people at all levels," said Diego Manso, a local private security consultant. "All the same, the security systems will never overlook the probability of a lot of people wanting to approach him, wanting to touch him, take photos with him, from their risk analysis." Messi and Roccuzzo live in Barcelona where he plays, but still return regularly to Rosario on holiday. The couple had their two children baptized there last year: Thiago, 4 and one-year-old Mateo, both born in Barcelona.

"It's no surprise that he is coming back here to get married," one of the wedding guests, the player's old school friend Diego Vallejos, told AFP. "He is an ordinary person who just wants to be near his family and friends. He is a humble person. Money has not changed his personality." Messi and Roccuzzo met as children. He moved to Spain when he was 13 to join FC Barcelona. But they kept in touch. "They are the love of each other's lives," says Vallejos. (AFP)

Damning FIFA report nails England malpractices in 2018 World Cup bid

MOSCOW, JUN 29 /--/ Former UK Prime Minister David Cameron asked South Korean football officials to trade votes seeking to win the 2018 FIFA World Cup bid, in a violation of FIFA rules, a report by the game`s world governing body on the inquiry into the bidding process has said.

The Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) published a full report on Tuesday about the investigation into the organisation`s decisions to award the World Cups of 2018 and 2022 to Russia and Qatar, respectively, reports Sputnik news agency. The probe was carried out by the former chairman of the FIFA Ethics Committee Investigatory Chamber, US prosecutor Michael Garcia. According to the report, Geoff Thompson, the former Chairman of England`s 2018 bid team and FIFA vice-president, admitted agreeing to trade votes, with England`s bid team CEO Andy Anson confirming this information. "According to their statements, shortly before the vote they attended a meeting at the Bateau Lac hotel in Zurich with England`s Prince William, Prime Minister David Cameron, and FIFA Vice President Mong-Joon Chung of Korea, which was bidding to host the World Cup in 2022.

"The Prime Minister asked Chung to vote for England`s bid, and Chung responded that he would if Mr. Thompson voted for Korea. Thompson, who said he had been thinking about voting for Korea even before the meeting with Chung, agreed," the report said, adding that Chung denied the allegation. The report added that Thompson`s confession was a lot more trustworthy than Chung`s denial. Russia and Qatar were announced as hosting countries of the 2018 and 2022 FIFA World Cups respectively in the Swiss city of Zurich in December 2010. According to the FIFA report, there was no evidence that Russia or Qatar attempted to influence the bidding process.