



Tigers to leave for Pakistan today



RUSSELL DOMINGO
Preparation not ideal

According to Bangladesh head coach Domingo, the preparations for the first Test in Rawalpindi have not been ideal. Although cricketers took part in the first round of the Bangladesh Cricket League -- a domestic first-class competition -- just before the tour, according to Domingo it would have been ideal to reach Pakistan at least seven or eight days before the Test match. Bangladesh will reach on Wednesday and take part in the Test from Friday. He also added that it would have been good if the visitors played a couple of practice games.

Adapting to the pitch will be challenging
With Rawalpindi known to offer a pace-friendly pitch, Domingo admitted that it would be a challenge for the Bangladeshi batsmen, but also added that the Tigers' batting consultant Neil McKenzie had

worked on some technical aspects with the cricketers. Domingo said the batsmen needed to show more commitment after the dismal show in India.

Winning Tests away from home

The 45-year-old has emphasised on the importance of winning a Test series away from home to gain confidence and he is eyeing the series in Pakistan as the start towards that target.

Setting up a batting order

It was possibly the first time that a Bangladesh coach gave a clear indication about the batting order before a Test. According to Domingo, Tamim Iqbal is set to open the innings with young Saif Hasan while Nazmul Hossain Shanto will bat at number three. Skipper Mominul will bat at four, followed by Mohammad Mithun, Mahmudullah Riyad and Liton Das at five, six and seven respectively.

Just eight days after Bangladesh's three-T20I series against Pakistan ended in a 2-0 defeat, the Tigers will once again travel to Pakistan today for the second phase of the tour to take part in the first match of a two-Test series starting from February 7 in Rawalpindi. Skipper Mominul Haque and coach Russell Domingo shared common insights into what the team management would want to improve in Pakistan. Both coach and captain were eager to have a settled squad in order to have player continuity for the coming days. However, there was a slight difference in opinion, with Mominul thinking that preparations have been good enough while Domingo said the preparation was not enough for the longest format. Bangladesh would also want to make an impact after the 2-0 Test series defeat against India to begin their ICC Test Championship campaign last year.

The following are some of the pertinent points from the pre-tour press conferences of Mominul and Domingo at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday.



MOMINUL HAQUE

Preparation is good

Although coach Domingo was not happy with the preparation, according to skipper Mominul the preparation for the Tigers has been good. Mominul informed that all the players of the Test side had a good outing in the first round of the BCL, which will help them in the first Test against Pakistan.

Don't want frequent changes in the squad

Frequent changes have often plagued the Tigers' team combination in the past and according to Mominul it is important to have a settled side in the longest format of the game. Mominul informed that as a captain he was always in favour of giving enough opportunities to players to get the

best out of them.

Improve as a captain

According to Mominul there are quite a few aspects in which he would want to improve as a captain of the Test side, having just led the team in two tough Tests in India. Mominul's mantra as a captain is to lead the side from the front through performance and also to improve few aspects both on and off the field.

Don't want to repeat mistakes

The recent performance from the Tigers, especially in the longest format of the game, has been disastrous, whether it was the defeat against Afghanistan or the thrashing in the two-match Test series against India last year. Mominul said that it would be important for the Tigers not to repeat the same mistakes, and he also hoped to win a Test match away from home.

Why is Mushy's place uncertain?

SPORTS REPORTER



"I think that goes without saying... the whole of Bangladesh and the rest of the cricket world knows that not having a batsman like Mushfiqur [Rahim] Bhai in your team is a big thing, and everyone will miss [him]. It is a big loss for a captain, and there is no question about whether he will play or not against Zimbabwe. As the match is in Bangladesh, of course he will play."

Those were the words of Bangladesh Test captain Mominul Haque yesterday, when out of the blue the place of arguably Bangladesh's best batsman over the last two years had been called into question.

Because of security fears and his family's concern about conditions in Pakistan, Mushfiqur had withdrawn from the three-stage tour of the country on January 17. After much uncertainty and diplomatic back-and-forth, the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) agreed on January 14 to tour the country in three phases. The Tigers departed for Pakistan on January 22.

Questions had arisen about Mushfiqur after chief selector Minhajul Abedin said that the squad picked for the first Test against Pakistan would also play the one-off home Test against Zimbabwe from February 22 and the second Test against Pakistan from April 5. Mushfiqur is the only player not part of the squad for the Pakistan Tests who would slot in for the home Test against Zimbabwe. Head coach Russell Domingo also seemed to be leaning towards Mushfiqur not playing the Test in between.

"I am under the impression that this is the squad for this one Test match. We will re-evaluate once we get back. You have to remember that Mushfiqur got runs in the last Test, but we also need to consider the fact that it is hard to pick a batting line-up, change it for one Test, and then change it again for the third Test. I want to give guys a run, but we also need to consider that Mushfiqur was our best player in India," Domingo said in a press conference today.

Continuity has been a buzz word for Domingo, but Bangladesh making changes



Bangladesh wicketkeeper-batsman Mushfiqur Rahim heads to the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium's indoor facilities for some batting practice yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

to their Test lineup from one match to the next is not new. Moreover, after a tough assignment in the first Test in Rawalpindi, one would think that the Tigers would want their best on the field for a home Test they are expected to win and then go into the second Test in Pakistan with a confidence boost.

If it does not make sense, BCB President Nazmul Hassan's words in this regard may shed some light, however murky. Before the tour was confirmed, Hassan had said that it will be up to individual players to decide whether or not to go. After the first phase where Bangladesh were thrashed in the two completed T20Is, Hassan seemed to be a little indignant about Mushfiqur's choice.

"When Tamim came back, we had to change the opening pair [Imrul Kayes and Shadman Islam] that we used in previous series [in India]. Now Mushfiqur didn't go [to Pakistan]. So, we have a problem with number four. If we had known some things from before, we could plan forward," Hassan said on January 29.

There is a ring of disingenuity when Hassan talks about knowing things from before when the uncertainty about the tour,

never mind the length or nature, prevailed till the BCB decided to go ahead around eight days before the team's eventual departure.

"If you tell me to take a rest from any Bangladesh series, it is like a sin for me," Mushfiqur had said on January 17. "As my family did not give me permission to go there, I can't go against that."

It was learned that Hassan, who has publicly said that he 'cannot abide losing', was annoyed by Mushfiqur's absence. There are also rumours that not picking him for the Zimbabwe Test would be a form of punishment.

If indeed true, it raises serious questions about the board's relationship with players and also suggests that players should not take the president's words seriously. As Mushfiqur -- possibly the hardest-working cricketer in Bangladesh -- said, not touring felt like a sin. Whether or not Mushfiqur plays against Zimbabwe will reveal much about the priorities of the board -- for which players' safety and security should be paramount -- as it will actually prove whether it thinks that it is a sin for a player to choose security over cricket.

Liton joins ton train; East thump Central

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The first round of the Bangladesh Cricket League (BCL), which was considered as preparation for the national players ahead of their Pakistan tour, saw some morale boosting performances from members of the 14-man squad for the upcoming Rawalpindi Test.

On the final day of the first round, Liton Das smashed an unbeaten century for North Zone that helped his side draw their game against fellow BCB-run team South Zone at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chattogram yesterday.

Other national players to hit tons in the first round were Bangladesh and East Zone skipper Mominul Haque, South Zone's Mahmudullah

HIGHLIGHTS

Tamim Iqbal, Mahmudullah Riyad, Liton Das and Mominul Haque -- all part of the 14-member squad for the first Pakistan Test, smashed tons in the first round. Shamsur Rahman, Fazle Mahmud and Shahriar Nafees are the other players who also scored centuries.

Tamim recorded the highest-ever score in first-class cricket in Bangladesh when the stalwart smashed an unbeaten 334 playing for East Zone against Central Zone on Day 3.

Liton was the latest one to score a century as his unbeaten 103 saw North Zone draw their match against South Zone yesterday.

SCORES IN BRIEF

CENTRAL ZONE: First innings 213 and second innings 333 all out (Saif 33, Nazmul 54, Rakibul 29, Mithun 83, Taibur 62, Hom 35; Nayeem 6-85, Tajjul 2-82)

EAST ZONE: First innings 555/2d.

Result: East Zone won by an innings and 9 runs.

Player-of-the-match: Tamim Iqbal.

SOUTH ZONE: First innings 262 and second innings 398/3d

NORTH ZONE: First innings 207 and second innings 278 for 4 (Mizanur 29, Rony 37, Junaid 61, Liton 103 not out, Naeem 43; Razzak 2-66)

Result: Match drawn.

Player-of-the-match: Shafiqul Islam.

Riyad and East Zone's Tamim Iqbal, whose Bangladesh-record 334 not out set up a victory by an innings and nine runs over Central Zone yesterday.

North Zone, chasing a target of 454 runs, started the day on 22 for no loss. It would have been overly optimistic to try and score the 432

runs in a day and hence North Zone aimed to play through the day and settle for a draw. And, thanks to Liton's unbeaten 168-ball 103 that lasted for almost three hours, North Zone were able to see the day through.

Liton strung together a 125-run third-wicket stand with Junaid Siddique after North Zone were in a spot of bother, losing their openers in the first session. While Junaid was dismissed after a 127-ball 61, Liton built another crucial partnership with next batsman Naeem Islam. The Liton-Naeem duo accounted for a 79-run fourth wicket stand before Naeem fell in the final over. Liton, who also reached the 5000-run landmark in first-class cricket yesterday, powered his ton with nine fours and two sixes and persevered until the end as the match was drawn.

Meanwhile in Mirpur, off-spinner Nayeem Hasan, who will also leave with the national side for Pakistan today, bowled a match-winning spell for East Zone, scalping four of the seven Central Zone wickets that fell yesterday. Central Zone started the day on 115 for three trying to wipe out East's mammoth 342-run lead. However, Central were bundled out for 333 as Nayeem finished with figures of six for 85.

Just like playing against any other team: De Kock

South Africa-England first ODI today

REUTERS, Cape Town



New South Africa captain Quinton de Kock says facing world champions England will be just like playing any other team as they prepare for the three-match one-day international series starting at Newlands on Tuesday.

South Africa are seeking to rebuild after a disastrous World Cup in England last year in which the hosts claimed the trophy in thrilling fashion with victory over New Zealand in the final.

This will be England's first match since the decider at Lord's in July.

"It is just like playing any other team," De Kock told reporters on Monday. "Just because you have a World Cup doesn't

change anything. It is still the normal England team we will play against.

"I remember last time they came here (in 2016) we did pretty well and won the series. So it doesn't really matter if they are World Cup winners or not. It is the same as if we are playing Australia, India, Bangladesh, or whoever."

South Africa have struggled in both the ODI and test formats in the last 12 months, and while there could be a certain amount of experimentation as they begin a new cycle to the 2023 World Cup, De Kock says most important is to get a series win.

"We have new guys that have come in and they bring a lot of energy. We have guys who will potentially make their debut, so the team is very excited," he said.

"We are in a rebuilding phase and we

are looking forward to the next World Cup squad. We want to give the opportunities to youngsters and help them grow as cricketers.

"But for this series, we just want to win. There is a lot of time to give opportunities, but for us right now it is better to get a series win, just for the morale of the team."

England have rested Ben Stokes, arguably the world's best all-rounder, but De Kock says there is still much quality in the squad.

"It's always nice not to have to play against Ben Stokes, but they still have quality players," he said. "There are World Cup winners that are part of the squad and they have also got exciting young players."

"To start off with a win would be great for the team environment and the boys seem to be up for it."



A six-wicket haul from spinner Nayeem Hasan (C) propelled East Zone to an innings and nine-run win over Central Zone in their Bangladesh Cricket League match at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday. (Inset) An unbeaten 103 from Liton Das helped North Zone draw their BCL fixture against South Zone in Chattogram.