



The last time Bangladesh played an ODI at the Sylhet International Cricket Stadium in 2018, Mashrafe led from the front, taking two wickets, as Bangladesh sealed a commanding eight-wicket win over the West Indies. Can he cap off this series against Zimbabwe with a similar performance in what appears to be his swansong as captain?

How it ends also matters

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI

Bangladesh go into the ODI series against Zimbabwe under the leadership of inspirational captain Mashrafe Bin Mortaza as firm favourites after the Tigers handed the visitors an innings-defeat in the one-off Test at Dhaka. The team landed in Sylhet yesterday where the ODI series is slated to begin from March 1, with Mashrafe set to join today.

While there has been nothing definitive on Mashrafe's future as both player and captain, this may very well be the last time that the skipper will lead his troops out to the field in a series, with Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) President Nazmul Hassan announcing that they are set to name a new captain following a board meeting inside a month or month and half. This may or may not be Mashrafe's last series but going by what the BCB

president said, it is a possibility that cannot be averted in the near future.

While Mashrafe's captaincy will be in the spotlight, it is the performance of the captain fantastic that will take centre stage in the upcoming series after he failed to live up to expectations in recent forays. It will be an opportunity to end on a high and indeed to motivate himself for a new challenge but above all, it is the indomitable spirit of Mashrafe the cricketer and what he stands for that deserves a crescendo to match his legacy.

His legacy has certainly come under question in recent times. The World Cup performances failed to inspire and he has not really made much of domestic league opportunities or indeed in the BPL last year. The BCB president insinuated that they were going to turn a blind eye towards Mashrafe's fitness if he continues. He however

made it clear that the captaincy of the side is a 'worry'.

"We are worried about the captain at the moment. If we name someone else as captain then he [Mashrafe] can get into the team as a player through performances and there are no problems with that," Hassan told reporters on February 19.

"The time has come for him to take a decision on how long he wants to continue," he had added.

That the BCB president can talk so brazenly on the issue of replacing the most decorated captain in Bangladesh's cricket history, hints heavily at the below-par performances of the lion-hearted cricketer. The BCB president had also previously said that Mashrafe plays in the side due to the captaincy quota. For a cricketer who has been the symbol of overcoming debilitating pain, it is a telling blow to his legacy in his career's closing chapter.

Without a doubt, he is the most

iconic captain of this country and his fans and Bangladesh cricket deserves to see him off with a bang; not a whimper. He had led Bangladesh from the front even through a host of surgeries which would have rendered almost anyone in world cricket unable to take the field and yet his end is attached to the honour of the nation itself, as one of their most celebrated over the years.

While rummaging through retirements of legends from the game, Sri Lanka's Lasith Malinga set a fine example in recent memory. In his last ODI series, he bowled a yorker so good, it made Tamim Iqbal lose his balance and tumble onto the ground only to see his leg stump rattled. Even without his pace of yesteryears, Malinga showed his venom at his end. Mashrafe needs to do something similar in order for a fitting end. The end matters, not only for himself but Bangladesh cricket as well.

A series to cherish for Afif, Naim

SPORTS REPORTER



The excitement level ahead of a Bangladesh-Zimbabwe series seldom reaches the level of hype that is generated when the Tigers take on most other teams. Apart from being a team that has fallen upon hard times in the last decade and a half, Zimbabwe have also played the highest ODIs in Bangladesh other than the hosts, so there is an element of familiarity breeding a lack of anticipation.

For Bangladesh players too, the excitement remains the usual or perhaps less. However, for two of the 15 players for the first two ODIs of the three-match series to begin from March 1 in Sylhet, this Zimbabwe carries greater than usual importance.

The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) included two new faces -- Afif Hossain and Mohammad Naim -- in the squad for the series. And for both youngsters, the excitement of featuring in an ODI for Bangladesh knew no bounds.

"I have been feeling the excitement for a while now. I played T20s for Bangladesh and I was waiting for my chance to play ODIs. My wish has been fulfilled and I will try to do something good for the country," said all-rounder Afif after arriving in Sylhet with the Bangladesh team yesterday.

Afif, who played a total of 10 T20Is,

had debuted in the shorter format back in February 2018. The 20-year-old, known for his quick run-scoring ability, had impressed in domestic leagues and age-level tournaments and has almost become a regular in the national T20 side.

Afif, who usually bats at the top in T20s, may however need to play a different role in the ODI format and the youngster seemed ready for that.

"I will try to perform my best if I get the chance. I will comply with the team tactics and try to play whatever role I am needed to for the team. If I bat at the top, I try to take time and build the innings and if I will try to bat just as the team requires if I bat down the order," said Afif.

Naim on the other hand has played five T20Is, the first being in November 2019. The left-hander was however more excited to be able to play a series under the leadership of inspirational captain Mashrafe Bin Mortaza. Mashrafe returned to lead the Tigers in ODIs after missing the Sri Lanka tour in July last year.

"I am lucky to be playing under the captaincy of Mashrafe bhai," said the opener.

The uncapped Naim was also not short of confidence and talked about how challenges get him excited.

"I like playing when there are challenges. I don't like when you achieve things with ease," concluded Naim.



The Bangladesh squad for the three ODIs against Zimbabwe includes Afif Hossain (R) and Mohammad Naim, both of whom will be hoping to make this series memorable.

PHOTO: STAR



After losing the one-off Test against Bangladesh by an innings and 106 runs in Mirpur last Monday, Zimbabwe yesterday reached Sylhet, which will play host to the three-match ODI series against the Tigers, starting from March 1.

PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR

Warner back as Sunrisers captain

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA from New Delhi

Australian batsman David Warner was reinstated as captain of the of IPL franchise Sunrisers Hyderabad yesterday for the upcoming season starting March 29, two years after he had to quit in the wake of ball-tampering row.

"I am thrilled to be given the captaincy for this coming IPL 2020. I'm extremely grateful for the opportunity to lead the side once again," Warner said in a video.

Warner, who led the Sunrisers to title win in 2016, takes over from New Zealand skipper Kane Williamson.

NZ eyeing series win

Second Test against India starts tomorrow

REUTERS, Wellington



The only selection issue facing New Zealand as they head into the second match against India at Christchurch is likely to be whether pace bowler Kyle Jamieson, so impressive on his Test debut at the Basin Reserve, bats higher in the order.

Jamieson made a big impression in the hosts' 10-wicket victory in the opener of the two-test series, capturing 4-39 in the first innings and then scoring 44 in a rearguard action.

The 25-year-old is almost certain to retain his place in the team for the match, starting on Saturday at Hagley Oval, despite the return of Neil Wagner, who missed the Wellington game due to the birth of his first child.

"What you saw with Kyle is that he has the capability to bat higher," coach Gary Stead said this week. "The way he played I thought was outstanding. He did a really good job for us."

With New Zealand only needing a draw to secure a sixth successive home series victory, Stead has moved to dampen expectations they would take four seamers into the match alongside all-rounder Colin de Grandhomme.

India's batsmen will have to adjust to what are expected to be pace-friendly conditions and tight New Zealand bowling, and vice-captain Ajinkya Rahane said they would be more positive in Christchurch.

"It's important to trust ourselves and not think about the last test match," Rahane said on Thursday. "We just have to have fresh mindsets and it's all about being in the present."

India were unbeaten in their seven previous matches in the International Cricket Council's World Test Championship and lead the standings on 360 points.

Rahane added it was imperative they won in Christchurch to continue their march to the final at Lord's in 2021.

Australia humble Tigresses

SPORTS REPORTER



Bangladesh suffered their largest T20I defeat, an 86-run thumping, at the hands of defending champions Australia during their ICC Women's T20 World Cup encounter at the Manuka Oval in Canberra yesterday.

There were records galore during the game, but none that showed the Tigresses in a favourable light. Alyssa Healy and Beth Mooney gave Australia a blazing start, stringing together Australia's highest partnership for any wicket with 151 for the opening stand.

Healy's return to form saw her make a carefree 83 to become the tournament's top run-getter, ably supported by Mooney who ended unbeaten on 81.

Courtesy of the blistering start, Australia took a step closer to ensuring back-to-back victories, ending with a mammoth 189 for one -- the highest total of the tournament so far and the third-highest in the tournament's history.

Australia did provide some chances, but the Tigresses were too clumsy in the field to oblige. The Salma Khatun-led side dropped as many as four chances.

Even Salma acknowledged that the target was too big for her side.

"Australia are a very good team. 190 was a very big total. Their bowlers had good length and line and my batters are not used to short balls," Salma said after the match.

However, Bangladesh, who were struggling to cope with Australia's pace attack, could have been restricted to much less than 103 for nine.

Bangladesh succumbed to an 86-run defeat -- their biggest ever loss in T20Is -- against Australia.

Alyssa Healy and Beth Mooney put on 151 for the first wicket, Australia's highest partnership for any wicket at the Women's T20 World Cup.

Australia's 189 for one is the highest total of the tournament so far.

A flurry of wickets early on saw the Tigresses reduced to three for 26 in 5.4 overs before a fifty-run partnership between Nigar Sulatana and Fargana Haque helped them avert utter humiliation.

Fargana hoped that the team could learn from such teams and said they would improve if they played matches against teams like Australia.

"It would be really helpful for us to learn and grow from within if we get the chance to play a few series with top teams like Australia," Fargana said.

SCORES IN BRIEF
AUSTRALIA: 189 for 1 in 20 overs (Healy 83, Mooney 81 not out, Gardner 22 not out; Salma 1-39)
BANGLADESH: 103 for 9 in 20 overs (Shamima 13, Nigar 19, Fargana 36, Rumana 13; Schutt 3-21, Jonassen 2-17)
Result: Australia women won by 86 runs.
Player-of-the-match: Alyssa Healy.



Australia's players celebrate the dismissal of Bangladesh's Fargana Haque during their ICC Women's T20 World Cup fixture in Canberra yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Shafali powers India to semis

AFP, Melbourne

A quickfire 46 from teenage prodigy Shafali Verma helped India earn a nail-biting four-run win over New Zealand as they reached the women's Twenty20 World Cup semifinals Thursday.

New Zealand skipper Sophie Devine won the toss at Melbourne's Junction Oval and opted to bowl with her team restricting India to 133 for eight after Verma gave them a strong start, with three sixes and four fours off her 34 balls.

But the New Zealand batswomen narrowly missed their target despite a swashbuckling late charge by Amelia Kerr leaving them at 129 for six.

"It's a great feeling when your team performs day in day out," said skipper Harmanpreet Kaur, after India become the first team into the last four.

"But we still made the same mistakes after a good first 10 overs -- we got a good start but couldn't carry the momentum. We can't make silly mistakes with harder games coming up."

After opening their campaign by upsetting four-time champions Australia, India beat Bangladesh and their New Zealand victory made it three from three to ensure a semi-final berth for the second successive tournament.

SCORES IN BRIEF
INDIA: 133 for 8 in 20 overs (Shafali 46, Bhatia 23, Yadav 14; Mair 2-27, Kerr 2-21)
NEW ZEALAND: 130 for 6 in 20 overs (Devine 14, Green 24, Martin 25, Kerr 34 not out; Pandey 1-21)
Result: India women won by 3 runs.
Player-of-the-match: Shafali Verma.