

A rare moment, but also one for introspection

NABID YEASIN

 Bangladesh stand on the brink of a rare moment going into today's encounter against Zimbabwe in the second and the final T20I of the two-match series at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur.

The Tigers, who hammered the visitors in the lone Test last month and also won the following three-match ODI series convincingly before taking the lead in the T20I series with a 48-run win on Monday, will have the chance to complete a clean series sweep -- winning all the matches in all three formats in a series.

High-flying Bangladesh are undoubtedly favourites to ensure this feat barring any mishaps today. It would be no surprise to see the Tigers win today. Instead, it would be shocking to see them fail to win given their recent performances against a side ranked 11th in the world in T20I cricket.

However, such a momentous occasion also begs the question: how much does this incredible feat mean? How much of an impact will this feat have in Bangladesh's current context?

Just before the start of the Zimbabwe series, Bangladesh's condition -- in all three formats -- was in tatters. The Tigers had just recorded their sixth consecutive Test defeat after losing to Pakistan in the Rawalpindi Test by an innings and 44 runs after losing the three-match T20I series 2-0 after the final game was washed out.

Those fortunes only changed when the Tigers met Zimbabwe at home. Even through the dramatic change of ODI captaincy -- Mashrafe Bin Mortaza announcing his retirement as ODI captain before the final ODI in Sylhet and Tamim Iqbal being handed the baton soon after -- Bangladesh seemed unfazed and continued to dominate.

The Tigers' sheer dominance in the series can be gauged from the fact that the same team which had flailed miserably with the bat in Pakistan, even on batting-friendly wickets, suddenly began re-writing the record books against a toothless Zimbabwe bowling line-up.



LITON DAS



TAMIM IQBAL



MUSTAFIZUR RAHMAN

Tamim and Liton notched Bangladesh' highest ODI partnership (292) and highest opening partnership in T20Is (92) in this very series. The records and supremacy are always commendable as they always provide the players with confidence, something that the Tigers have long been missing.

It is true that the Tigers have been served a much-needed mental boost through this Zimbabwe series, but it can still be argued if such a boost can act as a false assurance of form for players.

Even Soumya Sarkar, who had smashed a brilliant unbeaten fifty in the first T20I, admitted that the quality of bowling was not the same they would be up against in Pakistan when they visit the country for the third phase of their tour to play a lone ODI and their second World Test Championship fixture next month.

Tamim went to play the second-phase of the Pakistan tour on the back of a brilliant unbeaten 300 in the domestic circuit, but the southpaw failed when he faced the likes of Shaheen Shah Afridi and Naseem Shah in the Rawalpindi Test.

Even mathematically, the clean series sweep against Zimbabwe would not count for much.

The innings and 106-run victory against Zimbabwe in the lone Test will not be added to the Test Championship, a competition where Bangladesh are yet to register a single point. Meanwhile if the Tigers are even able to play out a draw in their second World Test Championship against Pakistan next month, they would get 20 points. A win would account for 60 points from the allocated 120 points for each Test series according to ICC. And if Bangladesh do get a win today, their rating in T20Is would be increased by just one point, from 226 to 227, without any change in their position.

However, regardless of the calculations and opposition's team strength, any series win provides the team with confidence. The wise thing for the Tigers would be to carry all these achievements and such brilliant performances when they face challenges from higher-ranked sides in the future.



Bashundhara Kings coach Oscar Bruzon (C) watches his new recruit Hernan Barcos (R) closely in training at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday ahead of today's AFC Cup fixture against TC Sports Club of Maldives.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Bashundhara Kings make continental debut today

SPORTS REPORTER



Bangladesh Premier League champions Bashundhara Kings are looking forward to making their maiden AFC Cup campaign a memorable one as they take on TC Sports Club of Maldives in Group E opener at the Bangabandhu National Stadium today.

The match will kick off at 3:30pm.

Bashundhara Kings are the fifth Bangladeshi outfit to play in the second-tier club competition of Asia, with six-time champions Abahani making the farthest by reaching the knockout stages last season in their third appearance. Three-time league champions Sheikh Jamal finished bottom of their group in 2016 while Sheikh Russel KC were twice knocked out of the pre-qualifying stage in 2015 and 2017 and Saif SC suffered the same fate in 2018.

Bashundhara Kings, who will play directly in the group stage as Bangladesh Premier League champions, clinched the Federation Cup earlier this year but their league performance has not been the best as they suffered a 1-0 defeat against Mohammedan in their last match on Saturday.

They are, however, looking forward

to making a good start against TC Sports Club, a club that beat Saif SC twice in 2018 apart from lifting the title of Sheikh Kamal International Club tournament in Chattogram in 2017.

"Our mentality is to win every match we play; our mentality is to win every tournament we participate in, and our mentality is also same here in AFC Cup," Bashundhara Kings coach Oscar Bruzon told reporters at a pre-match conference yesterday.

Brazilian marksman Marcos Vinicius and local forward Matin Mia made a deadly attacking pair last season, sharing 30 goals in the league. However, in absence of Vinicius, who has been released by the club, and Matin, out with injury, Bashundhara Kings are struggling to score despite creating chances.

"(If you call) Winning the Federation Cup and losing one game only in 2020 tough time, it shows the expectation surrounding our team. You can't expect a team win week after week. Last year, Marcos and Matin scored 30 goals and we are missing them inside the box. Daniel Colindres is an excellent player but he is not a pure No. 9. We have very good players up front but we need to improve our finishing skills," said Bruzon.

However, the big motivation for

Bashundhara Kings is having former Argentina international Hernan Barcos, who is set to make his debut in this match. The veteran striker, according to the coach, has been doing well in training sessions.

"We are not on our best in the league but it is AFC Cup and the team is absolutely balanced. We will see big difference tomorrow. The problem of converting chances we are having recently will be solved. Hopefully we have our best team tomorrow," said an optimistic Bruzon, who has four foreign players -- Colindres, Barcos, Bakhtiyar Duyshobekov and Nicolas Delmonte at his disposal.

TC Sports Club coach Mohamed Shazly feels his side have an equal chance to win the fixture.

"We know Bashundhara Kings are very strong and they have an advantage of having good foreign players. We know about him (Barcos) and we love to play against good and great players. Not only Barcos, Bashundhara have other good players too," Shazly said.

"TC Sports have a team with experienced players including five national players and also have good foreign players. Even though Ali Ashfaq is a local player, I rate him as a foreign player. For me, my team is good," warned Shazly, whose side came to Dhaka following preparation in Qatar.

Soumya in, but list still too short

SPORTS REPORTER



It took almost 48 hours for the Bangladesh Cricket Board to rectify the mistake of not including A-plus category player Soumya Sarkar in the list of centrally-contracted cricketers for the year 2020.

In a press release yesterday, the board drafted Soumya into the A-plus category for white-ball formats and released a revised list of 17 cricketers with new central contracts.

After its meeting on Sunday, the BCB had disclosed the names of 16 players for new central contracts. But many eyebrows were raised as Soumya was left off the list.

After chief selector Minhajul Abedin admitted to it being a mistake, the BCB moved to include him. However, during the players' revolt last year, the board had pledged to include at least 30 players under central contracts. It remains to be seen if including just half that number was a mistake too. And if so, then will it be rectified as well?



SALARY STRUCTURE

Category: A plus (Monthly salary Tk 4 lakh)

Red Ball: Mushfiqur Rahim, Tamim Iqbal

White Ball: Mushfiqur Rahim, Tamim Iqbal, Mahmudullah Riyad, Soumya Sarkar

Category: A (Monthly salary Tk 3 lakh)

Red Ball: Mominul Haque

White Ball: None

Category: B (Monthly salary Tk 2 lakh)

Red Ball: Liton Das, Mehedi Hasan Miraz, Tajul Islam

White Ball: Liton Das, Mehedi Hasan Miraz, Mustafizur Rahman

Category: C (Monthly salary 1.5 lakh)

Red Ball: None

White Ball: Mohammad Mithun, Mohammad Saifuddin

Category: D (Monthly salary Tk 1 lakh)

Red Ball: Mohammad Mithun, Nazmul Hossain Shanto, Nayeem Hasan, Abu Jayed, Ebadot Hossain

White Ball: Tajul Islam, Nazmul Hossain Shanto, Afif Hossain, Mohammad Naim

* Players to feature in both red and white-ball formats will draw full amount of their salary in one format and half of the other format.

Ireland clinch a super-over victory

AFF, Greater Noida

Kevin O'Brien hit a last-ball six as Ireland clinched a consolation super-over win against Afghanistan in the third Twenty20 international in India on Tuesday.

With three runs needed for victory off the final ball of the super over, O'Brien cleared the long-off fence to end his team's 12-match losing streak in T20s against the Afghans.

O'Brien made 26 off 21 balls in Ireland's 142 for eight after electing to bat first.

Afghanistan, who won the series 2-1, replied with 142 for seven.

"Luckily that last hit came off," a relieved O'Brien said after receiving the man of the match award.

"We have learnt from game one to game three, about specific plans for each player. You have to adjust quickly and I think we did."

Afghanistan needed 16 to win off the final six deliveries of normal play, and paceman Craig Young claimed Asghar Afghan for 32 before Rashid hit a boundary off the last ball, taking the game into a deciding over.

Young then bowled a disciplined line and length to keep Afghanistan to just eight runs in six balls.

Gareth Delany also played a key part in Ireland's win after top-scoring with 37 and then taking two wickets with his leg-spin.

Injury woes add to Imrul's misery

SPORTS REPORTER



Things went from bad to worse for Imrul Kayes as the left-hander, who was not included under the new central contract for 2020 by the Bangladesh Cricket Board, is now facing at least three weeks on the sidelines due to injury.

The 33-year-old hurt the little toe on his left foot while fielding during a training session for his club, Sheikh Jamal, ahead of the upcoming Dhaka Premier League campaign.

"Normally it takes two weeks to recover from such an injury but the doctor advised me to rest for three weeks because I am a

sportsman. Obviously, I am disappointed as I had taken very good preparation and was looking to do well. It will be difficult for me to recover from this injury and gain rhythm again," Imrul told The Daily Star yesterday.

Imrul was in good form in the Bangabandhu Bangladesh Premier League where he represented Chattogram Challengers and finished among the top six run-getters with 442 runs in 13 games at an average of 49.11, including four fifties.

The upcoming edition of the Bangabandhu Dhaka Premier League will begin from March 15. The first three rounds will be played in Chattogram and Cox's Bazar due to a shortage of grounds in Dhaka.



Ireland opener Kevin O'Brien (L) and teammate Harry Tector celebrate after a Super-Over win in the third T20I against Afghanistan in Greater Noida yesterday.

Need Bevan or Dhoni type of finisher: Langer

PTI, Melbourne



Australia head coach Justin Langer says his team is desperately looking for a finisher in the mould of Mahendra Singh Dhoni or Michael Bevan in limited overs cricket.

Their three-match ODI series against New Zealand, beginning on March 13, provides Australia an opportunity to test the depth in their middle order, and potentially hone in on batsmen who could fill the 'finisher' role.

"We've been fortunate in the past with a Mike Hussey or a Michael Bevan who are masters at it. MS Dhoni is a master of it, Jos Buttler has been brilliant at it for England," Langer was quoted as saying by ICC.

"What I've learned is everyone in the world is looking for it," he added.

Dhoni has won India innumerable matches from seemingly hopeless positions, and so did the likes of Bevan and Hussey.

South Africa crushed Australia 3-0 in the recently-concluded ODI series where Mitchell Marsh played at number 6 in the second and third games and scored 32 and 36 runs respectively.

Langer feels it is the right time for the potential candidates to seal the spot. The challenge starts with the upcoming ODIs against New Zealand.

"So it's a role that's there for someone to grab hold of," said Langer.

"No one at this stage has absolutely secured it, have they? But there are good opportunities there for someone to do that," he added.

Over the last year, as many as 13 batsmen have occupied positions 4-7 for Australia in ODIs, with nine different batsmen tried out at No.6.

Glenn Maxwell and Marcus Stoinis occupied the spot in five matches each, but Stoinis, particularly, misfired in the role, scoring just 27 runs in four innings.



PHOTO: AFP