

A clear picture for resumption

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI

“Don’t know when we will be able to play Test match again,” star batsman Mushfiqur Rahim tweeted alongside a picture of the second Test between England and the West Indies on Monday night. There is the first international series to be staged following the outbreak of coronavirus. The agony was discernible and akin to Soumya Sarkar’s -- who had pondered something similar while watching the same match.

Bangladesh cricket has been at a standstill during the pandemic and the Tigers have had to contend with five bilateral series postponements. Cricket activities have been on hold since mid-March since the postponement of the Dhaka Premier League. With the 2020 T20 World Cup deferred to 2021 on Monday, and the Asia Cup also postponed, the frustration of the country’s cricketers has only grown.

However, a ray of hope is now beginning to appear with the chance to get back to competitive cricket sooner rather than later.

The latest ICC meeting saw clear dates set for major cricketing events till 2023 and it allows the BCB to finally focus on restarting on their



PHOTO: BCB

own terms. Cricket Australia’s (CA’s) acting chief executive Nick Hockley said it allowed them “to focus with real clarity on the summer ahead,” and the BCB too can finally get their priorities straight.

The BCB is seeing the T20 World Cup postponement as an opportunity; a blessing in disguise.

“This postponement has given us a clearer picture. The dates for the events for 2021 till 2023 were not clear but it’s clear now and it makes our planning much easier. As I said before, no team has a chance to be deprived as per the current FTP (Future Tours Program) structure. After the meeting, the windows for the big events have been settled,” BCB CEO Nizamuddin Chowdhury told The Daily Star yesterday.

With the country’s coronavirus situation still not showing improvement, BCB will be prioritising away tours. The three away tours which were earlier postponed will be focused on and the Sri Lanka series will be given the highest priority as the platform to return to competitive cricket. The domestic setup will also feature in their plans as bilateral series plans can be hampered by the pandemic. But with the major events already scheduled, the BCB will be able to plan accordingly for bilateral series.

“We feel that if we can begin playing away series, it will be the best option. For resumption, our main priority is to reschedule the Sri Lanka tour which was postponed,” Chowdhury said of the Sri Lanka

tour, originally planned for July-August before being deferred to a ‘mutually planned later date’.

“Work is being undertaken and we have started communication with Sri Lanka board,” he added.

“The Ireland series can be another option but their financial reality will have to be considered. The third option is the Pakistan tour where we have one Test left. In our consideration, Pakistan isn’t in a position to host cricket at this moment but we will observe how we can go forward.

“On top of all that, we have to prioritise domestic cricket and how we can start as soon as possible. If we speak about the order of priority, the Sri Lanka tour is first. Next is the DPL, with the BPL our third priority. The Ireland series comes fourth on our list.

“The domestic structure will be challenging since the coronavirus situation is not yet favourable but we have started communicating with the clubs. We will also hold talks with franchises regarding BPL. This postponement has made our path clearer,” Chowdhury concluded.

If the BCB can enact their plans, cricketers who have already begun individual training at BCB facilities across the country will be able to continue preparations with a set target in mind.

‘Sky is the limit’

STAR SPORT DESK



Ben Stokes was in sensational form and, with clear thinking, determination and phenomenal ability, fashioned England’s series-levelling victory against West Indies in the second Test at Old Trafford on Monday.

Stokes’ match haul of 254 runs and three wickets earned him the player-of-the-match award and he has also outdone West Indies captain Jason Holder to become the world’s top-ranked Test all-rounder while also attaining a career-best third position among batsmen in the Men’s Test Player Rankings.

The all-rounder’s Manchester masterclass convinced captain Joe Root that the team are “in the presence of greatness” and that sky was the limit for “Mr Incredible”.

“He’s Mr Incredible, I suppose,” Root said, comparing Stokes to the muscular cartoon superhero. “He looks a bit like him, and will probably end up the same shape too. I think the sky’s the limit for him really, when you watch how he goes about things, there’s no reason why he can’t keep performing this consistently.”



TEST ALL-ROUNDER RANKINGS (TOP FIVE)

No	Player	Country	Rating Point
1.	Ben Stokes	England	497
2.	Jason Holder	West Indies	459
3.	Rivindra Jadeja	India	397
4.	Mitchell Starc	Australia	298
5.	R. Ashwin	India	281

As for Stokes’s man-of-the-match effort, Root said it “doesn’t surprise me”. “He seems to want to keep getting better and better and we’re seeing those results out on the field.”

It is one thing to identify the time to up the tempo but another to do that as smoothly as Stokes did, with the 29-year-old’s natural talent now coupled with heightened tactical awareness.

“To have such a complete game, and so many different gears at your disposal, allows you the ability to keep getting better,” said Root.

The past year has seen Stokes play a key role in England’s World Cup final win over his native New Zealand at Lord’s before his staggering 135 not out secured a one-wicket victory over Australia in the third Ashes Test at Headingley.

And Root, back skipping England after missing West Indies’ four-wicket win in the first Test -- where Stokes deputised as captain -- to attend the birth of his second child, forecast more of the same

from the team’s talisman.

“If he continues to read situations the way he is, and keeps the confidence that he’s playing with at the moment, there’s no reason why we can’t continue to see such brilliant performances as we have done this week, and over the last 12 months really.”

Even in their four-wicket defeat in the series opener at Southampton Stokes managed 89 runs and six wickets.

“I think everyone understands that we are watching a player at the peak of his powers, at the peak of world cricket, delivering time and time again,” Root said.

“We have to savour that, we have to appreciate that and understand that we are -- without trying to pump his tyres too much -- in the presence of greatness.”

Stokes’s relentlessness was encapsulated when he dived to stop a boundary off his bowling, leading former England captain Mike Atherton to write in his column in The Times: “There will be many moments of match-turning magnificence that we remember when Ben Stokes’s career is done. The World Cup final, the Headingley Ashes Test and, no doubt, many more to come. There are also minor vignettes that will be forgotten; smaller, more insignificant pieces of action that of themselves have had little impact upon the game, but which demonstrate what an inspirational cricketer he is to those around him.”

Stokes played down his contribution, telling the BBC: “Everyone has put their hands up and contributed to a great win.”



Cristiano Ronaldo goes airborne celebrating one of his two goals in a 2-1 win over Lazio on Monday, an effort which saw the Portuguese become the first player to score 50 goals in the three top leagues -- Serie A, La Liga and Premier League.

PHOTO: JUVENTUS FC

‘We’re almost there’

AGENCIES

Cristiano Ronaldo scored twice to give Juventus a 2-1 win over Lazio which put them on the brink of a ninth successive Serie A title on Monday.

“A very important victory! We’re almost there guys! Let’s go,” Ronaldo tweeted after the win.

“Ronaldo’s an amazing player because he has an impressive ability to recover between games,” said Juventus coach Maurizio Sarri. “I’m not so much talking about the physical aspect but the mental aspect as well.”

“We need to get another four points, every point is difficult at the moment when we’re playing every three days, so we’ve got to keep focused.”

Ronaldo broke the deadlock in the 51st minute and added a second three minutes later.

CRICKET IN MYMENSINGH

Pandemic widening the chasms that already existed

AMINUL ISLAM AND NABID YEASIN

Is cricket in Bangladesh as glamorous as it seems? Those who harbour the notion that a career in cricket will always offer a glorious life will be dumbfounded when they dig deeper into the matter. While cricket in Dhaka has flourished over the years -- especially due to the board’s efforts in organising tournaments and leagues that offer decent financial stability to players and other stakeholders -- the most loved game of the country is in the death throes in some other districts.

Mymensingh is such a place where once the craze about cricket knew no bounds. The Circuit House Playground in Mymensingh was the place where all of Mymensingh’s cricket lovers used to gather -- some were even crazy enough to climb treetops adjacent to the field -- just to witness a local cricket match, a source of major entertainment back in the day. From thousands flocking to the ground to see a local match to cricket fanatics engaging in lively debates over which team played better in tea stalls, the whole of Mymensingh would be spellbound.

Unfortunately, Mymensingh, from where players like Ram Chand Goala -- a legendary name in the country’s domestic circuit -- and current stars like Mahmudullah Riyad and Mosaddek Hossain emerged, has over the years seen the slow death of the sport.

According to Jahirul Hasan, a former cricketer who played local cricket for 21 years and was a first-hand witness to the glory days of the district’s cricket, the blame for such a plight of Mymensingh’s cricket mostly lies with local organisers, who usually back away at the very last moment. Jahirul said Mymensingh’s local league has been cancelled a number of times in the last 15 years mostly because

of the organisers’ unwillingness and their dirty politics.

“100 per cent it [cancellation of local leagues] is due to the laid-back attitude of the organisers. The elections in the district sports association remain halted year after year. The ones who run the association usually come to power through political influence and it really does not bother them much if a cricket league is being organised or not. They do not even feel guilty about not holding the yearly

keep doing this till the rainy season arrives. Then it becomes impossible for a tournament to be arranged by the local sports association, which lacks the resources usually needed to arrange a tournament during the off season,” continued Jahirul.

With Mymensingh’s cricket already struggling for survival due to corruption at different levels over the years, the recent coronavirus outbreak has exposed the fault lines more vividly than before. Police



PHOTO: COLLECTED/ AMINUL ISLAM

tournaments,” said Jahirul, who has found ways to stay connected with the sport even after his playing days as he is now also a registered level-2 umpire under the BCB.

“Even the club directors and workers delay holding local leagues. Every year, the club officials are initially very pumped up about participating in the domestic leagues for some political benefit. However, when the time comes, the officials come up with excuses like not having the financial capability to pay the players’ fees or much time in hand to prepare for a tournament. They

Super Club Premier Division Cricket League, in which 13 teams take part, was successfully completed on March 21 after being arranged by the integrated efforts of a few cricket-loving local authorities. Since then no tournaments of any type have kicked off in Mymensingh.

First Division Cricket League, sponsored by the mayor of Mymensingh municipality was scheduled to start from April 1 this year but was suspended due to the coronavirus pandemic, leaving players who depended heavily on their income from such tournaments high and dry.

financial crisis due to the pandemic.

“The amount that the local coaches here get throughout the year is very negligible. This amount only helps them to barely get by. This can actually not be called a profession but still, there are a few people who make their living doing this and now even this limited source of income has been forced shut due to coronavirus,” Jahirul said.

Jahirul, who has also served as an age-level coach, also mentioned that the low remuneration of local coaches actually discourages any able individual to take up coaching as a profession, which immensely hinders

the growth of cricket in the locality.

The harsh reality of Mymensingh’s cricket -- a sport that is the most followed and deemed as a great choice for a flourishing career -- is that it can barely provide its stakeholders a decent lifestyle, prompting many former cricketers of the area to switch professions.

50-year-old former cricketer Santosh Sutrardhar, who once played for different clubs in Dhaka and Mymensingh and made a decent



living, now works as a carpenter, barely earning enough for the survival of a family of four.

“I played for different clubs in Dhaka, including Dhanmondi Kira Chakra, Dhanmondi Progate, Udichi, Victoria, Hatirpool, Bangladesh Railway from 1993 to 2001 and earned a handsome amount per year,” said Santosh.

But times had changed for Santosh in the ensuing years. Santosh, who started his crickering career playing for Mymensingh Mukul Fouj team, decided to become a carpenter 15 years ago when he felt the sport that

he played for over 22 years could not provide him financial security.

Unfortunately, the ongoing coronavirus pandemic has created more cases like Santosh’s. Tapon Chandra Das, a 22-year-old cricketer, was somehow able to support his family by playing cricket for different clubs but he too had to become a salesman as his only source of income was halted in the wake of the pandemic.

“My two younger brothers are in school and to support the family amid the pandemic, I started a new job as a salesman at a sweetmeat shop in the city,” said Tapon, who received an incentive of Tk 5,000 from Cricketers Welfare Association of Bangladesh (CWAB) and an Eid gift from District Sports Association (DSA).

Chandan Pal, a former cricketer and now director of Robi-Chand Cricket School in the city, said his academy has been closed since March 17, leaving him in serious financial strife.

“It is difficult to narrate how the days of a five-member family are passing and I also have to pay Tk 6,000 as rent and other bills,” said the 55-year-old Chandan, the former manager of Mymensingh district and divisional cricket team.

Perhaps, after witnessing the plight of the cricketers in Mymensingh as a local, Jahirul, who has been closely related to cricketing activities in Mymensingh for more than two decades, was left saying in agony that he is rather lucky to not have a son as there is nothing that would hurt more than having a son but not being able to give him the proper facilities to play cricket, a sport that is very close to the former cricketer’s heart.

It is however true that the decline in Mymensingh’s cricket came to the fore long ago, but the ongoing coronavirus pandemic has just widened the pre-existing cracks.