



Nothing left to discuss

SAMAMA RAHMAN



Barcelona's board of directors sat for an emergency meeting late on Wednesday and were perhaps momentarily interrupted as fans attempted to storm the club offices and force club president Josep Maria Bartomeu out.

The manic scenes, complete with chants of 'Bartomeu out' and 'Invasion, invasion', played out just days after Lionel Messi, whose first contract with the club was signed on a paper napkin at the tender age of 13, signaled his intention to quit with a bombshell 'burofax' -- now a word in every sports journalist's lexicon.

After 20 years, Messi wants to leave the club that he has given every ounce of devotion to. The fact that he had inserted an exit clause into his contract in 2017, a

clause that allows him the option to leave the club for free at the end of each season if he so chooses, had raised no eyebrows. He was never going to leave. Barcelona took that for granted, as did every other club in the world. Approaches for the six-time Ballon d'Or winner were laughed off.

Despite grumbling about how the current team were not up to the mark, Messi had to endure humiliation in the Champions League. Against Roma, against Liverpool and finally, utter humiliation in Lisbon at the hands of Bayern Munich. He had to quietly endure allegations that Bartomeu had paid off companies to badmouth players on social media. He had to go toe-to-toe with the board to protect his teammates.

In response to comments by sporting director and former teammate Eric Abidal that the team was not working hard

enough, Messi said: "The players [are responsible for] what happens on the pitch, and we have been the first to recognise when we were not good. The people in the directorate should also assume responsibility and above all take ownership of the decisions they make."

Messi's words could not be ignored, and Eric Abidal made way. One day into a new job, his replacement Ramon Planes, was left fielding questions about Messi's 'burofax'.

The main villain, according to fans and players, is Bartomeu. His meeting with the directors yielded nothing as Messi did not respond.

The same night of the meeting -- as rumours swirled about contact with Pep Guardiola, impending meetings with Manchester City and Paris Saint-Germain exiting then entering the race for his signature -- Messi dined with Luis

Suarez, who has been told he is no longer required at the Camp Nou.

If reports are to be believed, the Argentine has no intention to meet Bartomeu, nor to stay even if he resigns. He has no intention to stay at Barcelona. His decision is 'irrevocable', and most of Catalonia has already said goodbye. A fan threw himself at the fences of the Camp Nou and wept. "It should have never ended like this," he exclaimed, clad in the famous No. 10 jersey.

It hasn't ended, not quite yet, not by a long shot. There is a lot that is yet to unravel. For now, we know one thing for certain: Messi wants to leave Barcelona. That in itself could be the most shocking news of 2020. And until Messi speaks out publicly, which he is reportedly set to do, the world must endure. As Messi has for far too long.



TIGERS' TEST TRIALS

Continuity key for a potent pace attack

The Bangladesh national team is gearing up to return to international cricket with their three-Test tour of Sri Lanka in October, which will end around six months of down time in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. Before the Tigers return to cricket in their weakest format, The Daily Star attempts to analyse all aspects of their Test cricket, with the pace department being today's focus.

BANGLADESH IN LAST 5 TESTS	OPPONENT	TOTAL WICKETS	WICKETS TAKEN BY PACERS	PERCENTAGE
	Afghanistan	20	0	0.00
	India	6	5	83.33
	India	9	8	88.88
	Pakistan	10	7	70.00
	Zimbabwe	20	4	20.00

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI



That Bangladesh's Test future ultimately rests on how they can develop a pace attack that can be relied upon, cannot be stressed enough.

Test cricket is a game that is dominated by pace prowess but Bangladesh have never been able to establish the pace lineup to a degree which would lead to progress and since they were conferred Test status in 2000, there has been something lacking in that particular department, especially in the context of the longest format of the game.

The very idea of what can be considered a pace lineup has been a trifling one when put into Bangladesh's context. Plenty of pacers had appeared on the team sheets for the past few years but tellingly, none have cemented their positions in the side.

In the last five Tests Bangladesh have played, four different pacers had been called up and only Abu Jayed and Ebadot Hossain have appeared in four of them. Rubel Hossain, who played his last Test in July 2018, had been called up against Pakistan for the Rawalpindi Test this year and Al-Amin Hossain had made his return to the format after an absence of five years during the second Test against India last year in Kolkata. It shows that the team has been searching for what is ideal but are not sure about the structure that needs to be followed.

A pace attack, built primarily from scratch -- as is the case for the Tigers -- needs consistency in selection decisions while a framework of solid reference is needed to give it structure. A pace attack cannot be developed based on the idea of throwing in names in every Test and seeing what works. Names such as Taskin Ahmed, Rubel, Al-Amin, Mustafizur Rahman along with new crop like Jayed, Ebadot and Khaled Ahmed have come up during team selections.

However, for a foundation to be built, the players need to know what is being asked of them. That there has been no stable solution is no mystery given that Bangladesh have found results, albeit in home conditions, by using spinners. However, in away conditions more conducive to pacers, Tigers have had to work on the idea of building a pace attack. In

away Tests, such as the ones in New Zealand last year, the inexperienced Jayed, Ebadot and Khaled were thrown into the deep end. On the other hand, no pacers were played in the one-off home Test against Afghanistan.

In Tests, it has been seen that the most successful pace attacks have bowlers who complement each other. The variation factor cannot be ignored either as different pitches ask for different skills -- on a given day the team may need someone who bangs the ball in while on another day you would need someone who swings the ball. In short, a capable and varied artillery to pick from is what is required.

Even the brightest speck of light in Bangladesh cricket's pace battery in Mustafizur cannot now make the side because of deficiencies, namely his inability to bring the ball back into the right-hander. One may argue that the side is picked based on form. The very idea of shuffling based on form may have however negated the growth of the individuals being tried.

As Bangladesh now embark on their tour of Sri Lanka, at least eight pacers are at their disposal for the initial 20 or 22-member squad. It was learned that young paceman Hasan Mahmud too will be in BCB's consideration. While it is encouraging that young pacemen are coming through, without a solid idea to build on, he will be just another name added to the list. It is also a good thing that Jayed and Ebadot have been banking on in recent Tests. Jayed, for instance, has grown from that stability provided the best output among the Tigers' bowlers during the tour of India. For his partnership with Ebadot to thrive, the latter needs to keep things tight at other end when the former is going for wickets. Such matters can however only develop meaningfully when the team's think tank has an overarching idea about the pace department and implements that concept by giving the bowlers continuing opportunity to develop.

A look at neighbouring India would suggest that the long road to a pace attack fit for Tests needs patience. To be competitive in the format, work has to go into not only the academies but also those who come into the national team. Continuity, as far as the upcoming Sri Lanka tour is concerned, remains key to growth.

'Time to feel the charm of football again'

SPORTS REPORTER



Amid apprehension over the further postponement of the AFC Cup, Bashundhara Kings started an assessment training with fit-again players on Tuesday which Spanish coach Oscar Bruzon sees as an opportunity for players to enjoy the great charm of football again.

Bangladesh Premier League champions Bashundhara Kings are scheduled to resume their maiden AFC Cup campaign from October 23 in Maldives along with three others Group E clubs -- Maziya SRC and TC Sports Club of Maldives and Chennai FC of India.

But the cancellation of today's draw for the AFC Cup's inter-zonal semifinals date raised questions over the resumption of the tournament's group matches and whether the AFC is going to postpone it further.

The answer may come next week, but Bashundhara do not want to waste time and are preparing with the aim of creating history in their maiden journey in Asia's second-tier club tournament.

The club has already confirmed the services of two young Brazilians. Winger Robson Azevedo da Silva, commonly known as Robinho, was loaned from Fluminense and midfielder Jonathan da Silveria Fernandes Reis comes from Botafogo. The duo will join forces with Argentine striker Hernan Barcos.

These players can perhaps fill the vacuum left by inspirational Costa Rican forward Daniel Colindres, Kyrgyz midfielder Bakhtiyar Duyshobekov and Argentine defender Nicolas Delmonte.

"Robinho and Fernandes match the characteristics of the players



Robson Azevedo da Silva



Jonathan Fernandes Reis

we wanted for their respective positions. The addition of these two will be positive results. They are young, hungry and have played at an elite level. Both of them play important positions and their style is tailor-made for the model we use," head coach Oscar Bruzon told The Daily Star. Robinho and Jonathan will get four to five weeks to forge an understanding with local players as well as Bashundhara's spearhead Barcos, who hit a hat-trick against Maldives' TC Sports Club in an emphatic 5-1 win in Dhaka in March.

"We have the best set of Bangladeshi players. Many of them (12) joined our team only 11 months back. It always takes time to get to know each other, to collectively understand the team game, to grow an affinity for the club's idea. My feeling is that now we are mature and we are ready to have a "word" on the international arena," Bruzon said, adding that he was looking at the enforced break as a positive because it allowed some key players to return from injury.

"This five-month break has turned out as an opportunity for us to rebuild our team," said Bruzon. "We are starting the trainings focused on basics, emphasising on individual technical work and under a common context of fun. We have

missed football for many months. Now it's the time for the players to feel the charm of the game again."

Although Bashundhara started the assessment training with the fit-again players from Tuesday, the number of players is increasing day-by-day as players are joining camp after going through Covid-19 tests. The official training will start in the first week of September and foreign recruits are also expected to join the squad in either the first or second week of September.

"Players are gradually joining the camp after being tested. We are taking these first practices to adjust and set our common ideas again in a positive environment and on a great condition training pitch. After some days, we will focus more deeply on physical work, facts and competition-oriented practice," informed Bruzon, who has guided Bashundhara to glory in the BPL, Independence Cup and Federation Cup.

Media manager Ahmed Shaek informed that 15 players had already been tested and seven more will undergo the test today. He added that the club is likely to confirm players from the Asia quota by next week and that they are planning to fly for Maldives on September 16, seven days before the competition starts.



'A source of inspiration in trying times'

Yesterday, on the 112th birth anniversary of Don Bradman, Sachin Tendulkar took to Twitter to share a famous picture of him with former Australia captain. The said picture was taken when he met Bradman, who had invited Tendulkar along with legendary spinner Shane Warne, at his home in Adelaide for his 90th birthday in the year 1998. Tendulkar wrote: "Sir Don Bradman was away from Cricket bat and ball for several years due to World War II, yet has the highest Test batting average. Today, with concerns about athletes' form due to uncertainties & long breaks, his career stands even taller as a source of inspiration. Happy birthday Sir Don."



10-year-old Ahon, a fifth-grader of a local primary school and a member of Bogura's Young Tigers Cricket Academy, bowled like a classic leg-spinner and spun it perfectly against premier Bangladesh batsman Mushfiqur Rahim during a practice session at the Shaheed Chandu Stadium in Bogura yesterday. The wicketkeeper-batsman visited his hometown before leaving for the Sri Lanka tour next month. PHOTO: MOSTAFA SHABU