



KHALED MASHUD

'We will fight neck-and-neck'

It's definitely going to rekindle Khaled Mashud's memories when he walks onto the field along with Stephen Fleming for the toss of the first Test between Bangladesh and New Zealand at the Bangabandhu National Stadium today.

The Bangladesh wicketkeeper who was forced out of the captaincy after a miserable World Cup in South Africa, was handed the pleasant surprise when it was finally confirmed that skipper Habibul Bashar would need more time to heal his injured thumb.

It was a personal victory for the man from Rajshahi but he is aware of the fact that it would be a great challenge for him to lead a team without the country's number one batsman.

Mashud, however, was not at all afraid of the formidable task ahead, taking on the Black Caps who have a leader like Fleming.

"No doubt we will miss him (Bashar) because he is not only the captain but also the best batsman in the squad. But we should have the courage to face the challenge and I believe our young guys will not disappoint," said Mashud who is hopeful about Bashar's return for the second Test in Chittagong.

Bashar himself was also disappointed at missing a Test for the first time.

"I am really upset but I wish the best of luck to my teammates. I hope the team will not feel my absence," said an utterly frustrated Bangladesh captain.

The 28-year old Mashud, however, said that he would try to inspire his colleagues to come out of their poor home record.

"Yes, we have played poorly at home compared to our away record but it doesn't mean it will go on. I am confident of proving the critics wrong. The team is now in a good shape and everybody is eager to put behind the team's frustrating show in two recent tournaments. So, who knows, this can be the time to turn it around," said the stumper.

Mashud, who made his debut as a Test captain against the same opponents back in 2001, did not want to be considered as minnows.

"This team is much better than the one I was leading. We had an impressive performance in the last Test series in the West Indies and we cannot be considered underdogs. If we can stick to our plans, I believe we will fight neck-and-neck," said Mashud, who made his maiden Test ton against the West Indies at St Lucia.

Replying to a question, Mashud said that he had left behind the bitter memories of the past. "I don't want to recall them. I am rather interested to look forward to the task that lies ahead."

Recipe for success!

RABEED IMAM

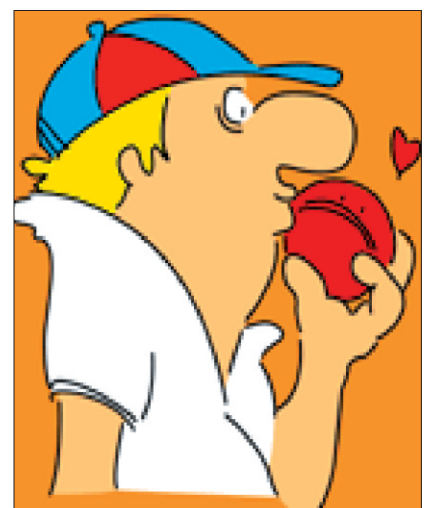
A secret meeting was held in Dhaka recently the exact date and location of which cannot be revealed for obvious reasons.

According to sources (reliable of course!), it was an emergency gathering of a 50-strong group of hardcore Tiger fans who have seen their never-say-die spirit time and again bruised, battered, deceived and even abused to a certain extent by the team they revere over the last couple of months.

So how did all these angry men and women and children (there were a couple of 10-year olds), most of whom have never seen each other before, assemble at that secret address?

Well, it was due to a hate-campaign launched by Topic Elahi, the opportunist moderator of website www.banglarcric.net (please don't log on) who invited foul-worded views on Bangladesh's recent performances in the Asia Cup and the ICC Champions Trophy at BDT 500 a comment promising a live audience with Rajin Saleh and Co. to the first 50 persons who would register.

Indeed the 'lucky' bunch did receive e-mails congratulating them on their heroic efforts and were rewarded with a date, time and address of a supposed 'bungalow' where they would meet the Tigers. By the time the



unsuspecting fans reached the location, which was nothing more than a dirty Aedes mosquito-infested swamp, the website moderator was already half way to Bali thanks to the millions he had made on them.

Nevertheless, the Tigers fanatics were determined to make the best out of this unexpected opportunity. They were all basically on the same wavelength and all wanted to do something for the rot to end for Bangladesh. All acknowledged that the Bangladesh team was a better bet to scale Everest than winning the Test series against the Black Caps on their current form. So it was unanimously agreed that some drastic steps were needed so that a win was ensured.

But things have to be done in an unsuspecting manner and Kinam Ahmed, the wily old fox was given the responsibility of preparing the blueprint of the mission titled 'Operation Nirupay'.

Now, Kinam was a veteran in this line of work and his team of five had a plan up in no time. They made three suggestions with 99 per cent guarantee that the Black Caps will be toppled. The Daily Star Sport can now reveal the plot in its entirety (thanks to a double-crosser):

PLAN A: RAMADAN DROUGHT

New Zealand captain Stephen Fleming has already said that heat, not the little tigers, was their main concern in the series. Well, the idea is to delay the RC Cola lorry from getting to the Bangabandhu National Stadium (BNS) during the first two days at least and also interrupting the water-supply of the BNS by bribing the people concerned. The first task will be easy as a couple of fanatics led by the imposing Morshed Kuli Khan will be assigned to strike up a heated exchange with the driver on whatever pretext and you know how time conscious we Bangladeshis are when it comes to fights!

Soon the Kiwis will be huffing and puffing in the intense heat and the late drinks breaks will drain their energy. They won't be able to make a big issue out of it in fear of hurting religious sentiments in this month of Ramadan and suffer in silence. The Bangladesh players are used to fasting during matches so they are a good bet to get

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RHYTHMIC CRICKET! New Zealand players do catching practice as part of their training session at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday. Bangladesh take on New Zealand in the first Test at the Big Bowl from today.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

MOMENT TO FEEL AT HOME

LENIN GANI

Success is seen in different ways. Either in terms of achieving or accomplishing a certain goal or it can be used as a means by which people are judged.

Bangladesh has been a Test-nation for more than four years now and has played 30 matches to date since the ICC bestowed its highest honour. In that time, however, the Tigers, as they have come to be known, predictably have been mostly on the receiving end.

With only three draws to their credit, it is easy to understand why the task of impressing the world at large has been difficult to say the least. As Bangladesh struggles to gain acceptability, the job at hand has been made all the more arduous with the appointment of a number of let's say under-qualified experts as national coaches.

So, Dav Whatmore's arrival on the scene in June 2003 was heralded as nothing short of a masterpiece by established cricket commentators around the world. But even the Sri Lankan born tactician would have to admit his first mission -- the tour of Australia in July -- was going to be an acid test.

Put in simple terms playing down under is considered the cricketing equivalent of scaling the Mount Everest. Little wonder Bangladesh's anti-lobbyists set about calling the two Tests as perhaps the greatest mismatch in the game's history.

But to their credit Whatmore's boys despite losing both Tests against Australia by an innings did their reputation plenty of good. They fielded and bowled with enthusiasm at the drop-in Darwin pitch, while the batsmen put up a much-improved show at Cairns.

Leading the admiration was none other than Steve Waugh. The former Australia captain was quoted as saying: "I thought their batting was a lot better than a lot of efforts by the West Indies in recent years and Pakistan. They left the balls a lot better, their body language was good. They took balls on the body and didn't flinch, so I think they are well on the way."

Waugh's observation was absolutely correct because the highlight of the tour for the fledgling South Asian nation was how their two openers brilliantly withstood the

playing at home?

Even if you want to criticise, you still have to admit that under Dav Whatmore, Bangladesh have taken strides in the longer version of the game and they are a much improved side than they were in 2001. But at the same time, one also has to remember that New Zealand have become a better team too in that time, so much so that they now rank in the top half of the Test echelon.

So is there an iota of a prospect for the Tigers in the series? Surely there is. After all not so long ago they did dominate a Test match and drew it against the West Indies under pretty similar playing conditions.

The pitch for today's game at the Bangabandhu National Stadium is just as devoid of grass as it was at the Beausejour Stadium in St Lucia and Bangladesh batted their way into control.

Something in line with that performance is very much possible especially if they bat first on what is expected to be a perfect batting track for the first two days at least.

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STEPHEN FLEMING

'We'll take as long as it takes to win'

New Zealand's two Test wins at home against Bangladesh were pretty comprehensive in 2001. But captain Stephen Fleming thinks repeating the same feats would be difficult in contrasting conditions.

"We'll take as long as it takes to win," said a diplomatic Fleming on the eve of the first Test starting at the Bangabandhu National Stadium today.

"If we finish it early that's great but we have to take guard against complacency. We respect Bangladesh as a side and we have to stop making mistakes. We are very aware that they can push the game very hard."

"The pitches here are different, our seamers will not get the same response as home and of course Bangladesh will be playing in their own backyard. It would still take us some time to get used to these tough conditions," said the elegant left-handed batsman who warmed-up with an undefeated 129 in their tour opener.

"But I think we did it well in the practice match, batters got good bat, bowlers took the workload."

"Our first chance to play a Test match in Bangladesh will keep us back on track as we played the last half a dozen Tests pretty poorly. We are in no position to take any chances," he added.

Fleming mentioned that the wicket looked pretty flat to him. It might inspire him to take an extra bowler.

"We have enough batting with all-round ability. I am looking forward to take an extra bowler for more variation as our spinners are bowling well."

About his recent role as a Test opener, the Black Caps leader said that coach John Bracewell was eager to develop an opener for their series against Australia as Michael Papps was still uncertain and Matthew Sinclair's talents have yet to be tested.

Fleming sympathised for Habibul Bashar, who is going to miss the first Test, saying, "I believe when you lose your captain who is also arguably your best batter, it's disappointing. But it doesn't change what we do or our game plans."

When asked about missing Chris Cairns, Fleming was optimistic. "Without doubt he is a world class cricketer. He has done some great job in the past and he would continue to do it in the one-dayers. Now it's time for the new ones to come through, in particular Jacob Oram and Franklin step up and fill the gap."

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