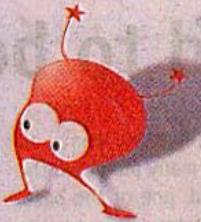




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WINNING A SERIES

By Quazi Zulquarnain Islam

On a cold January evening eighteen days and five years into the new millennium the Bangladesh cricket team finally made its nation proud. Under fading light and intense pressure from the Zimbabwean bowlers, ex-captain & wicketkeeper Khaled Al Masud, affectionately known as 'Pilot' and young stalwart Rajin Saleh held off the opposition bravely and piloted Bangladesh to a draw in the second test, thereby allowing them to win a Test series for the first time in history.

2005 may not even be a month old, but as far as Bangladesh cricket is concerned it is a year that will go down in history, regardless of what happens in the next eleven months. So huge are the implications of the result in this Test series.

Miracles came thick and fast for Bangladesh in these early January days. Only a week before, in the early hours of the 10th of January, Enamul Haque Jr, an eighteen year old left arm bowler had Zimbabwean last man Christopher Mpofu caught by starlet Mohammed Ashraful at silly point and earned Bangladesh their maiden Test match victory. As significant as the event of the next week would be, the maiden Test victory is something that all the cricketers savored. Even if they had lost the second Test, I think many would not have minded. Because what they had set out to do was win a Test match and thankfully they managed that at the MA Aziz Stadium in Chittagong.

The seeds of this victory were however sown a long time ago. Bangladesh won full ODI status nearly eight years back in 1997. They gained the ODI status due to a remarkable victory in the preceding ICC cup final over Kenya. And whatever

the BCB may have said, I think most fans were in silent agreement that the victory was due to one Gordon Greenidge.

The West Indian great was however, acrimoniously sacked from the team and after that Bangladesh's performance dropped, alarmingly. Too often we found ourselves in the end of three figure defeats or ten wicket thrashings. True, we had that occasional victory, but the cricket crazy public was far from satisfied.

The BCB took charge and the guillotine came down on many a head. They made many choices, some good many bad. One good choice they did make though was the appointment of Mr. Eddie Barlow. The South African incorporated typical Proteas belief into our side showing us how much fun it could be to dive around the field, something we found very hard to learn. However Barlow left and Bangladesh cricket fell into the doldrums yet again.

Bangladesh earned full Test match status on the back of a good showing in the World Cup 1999 in England where we managed to defeat our perennial rivals Pakistan. But whom were we kidding? All of us knew in our hearts that the Test status was not due to any sort of consistent performance or current spectacular showing. The ICC took a gamble. They saw that ten years on Bangladesh cricket could be special based on the current infrastructure and crowd interest. And giving us the Test Status would only make it more so. So they gave their nod and the rest as they say is history.

Bangladesh's first Test was a mighty exciting affair. Paired with natural rivals India, Bangladesh performed admirably against a star studded Indian

team. Even though they lost, they did so with their heads held high. After that however, everything went quite terribly downhill.

Defeat after heavy defeat followed. The public became furious. Newspaper columns flowed and swelled with comments, suggestions, banter, jokes and what not. Players were ridiculed and abused openly. Many remained supportive. Others lost all hope. Some even went as far as to suggest that the Test Status should be taken away from us. The people were divided, the players without motivation. The early years of the new century were dark days for Bangladeshi cricket.

Then the BCB made an inspired choice. Brilliant tactician Dav Whatmore who is widely credited for Sri Lanka's 1996 World Cup victory was appointed the coach. Immediately one could see a change in the players. They seemed more determined and more willing to apply themselves. Pulling on the country's cap seemed to be a matter of honor at stake rather than something done by rote.

Losses still continued but the people noticed a change. Many stopped and took notice. The boys were playing well or at least trying to, something that was sorely missing before. They rarely got intimidated. The turning point as far as I, and many others I am sure, am concerned was the tour of West Indies. Although Bangladesh lost the series, they fought hard and to their last breath albeit against a very mediocre Caribbean side. They came very close to victory in both the ODI and Test's but somehow managed to grab defeat from the jaws of victory. But Whatmore had done what he set out to do. Instilled confidence. There was little more the Australian could do. Now was

the time to sit back and hope that the boys delivered.

And deliver they did and although it took considerable time, when it came, victory was oh so sweet.

Bangladesh cricket looks to be on a rise. They have players with considerable talent. Starlet Mohammed Ashraful is the most talented player in the side by a country mile but as wonderful as his flashes of brilliance are (case in example a stunning 150 odd against the Indians), he is at times infuriatingly fickle with his shot making. And injury prone he may be, but the 'Narail Express' Mashrafee Bin Mortaza has the ability and more importantly the attitude to trouble any player in the world. Nafees Iqbal has all the shots in the book and Rajin Saleh and Tapash Baisya are workhorses who will work themselves to the ground for the team. Young Enamul continues the legacy of left arm bowlers and looks to carry on from where Rafiq will leave off. These young men carry on their shoulders the hopes of a nation who looks up to them to bring a smile to the faces of nearly 140 million poverty-ridden people. These young guns are ably guided by Captain fantastic, Habibul Bashar and the highly resilient Khaled Masud. Let us hope Coach Whatmore can continue to integrate the squad with a mixture of youth and experience and bring the desired results.

However, whatever else may happen from here onwards, the Bangladeshi people can rest easy knowing that with the end of this series against the Zimbabweans, nearly seven years of blood, sweat, toil and tears in international cricket are slowly but surely starting to bear fruit.

Here is to a bright future for the Bangladeshi Cricket Team.