

Cruciani's dream is to win

AL MUSABBIR SADI from Karachi

Diego Cruciani might have hurt Indian coach Syed Nayeemuddin's pride when the Argentine used his inexperienced reserve bench to hold their soccer rivals to a 1-1 draw in the group stage.

But the Bangladesh coach knows that his opponent, who possesses a shrewd mind, would be ready to pay back in today's SAFF Championship final.

After two months of hard work, Cruciani has brought the national

make any mistakes. We have to defend strongly, mark the opposition in midfield and control the ball. We need more possession. These are the elements of dominating your opposition," the 41-year master strategist said.

"If our players concentrate on these for 90 minutes, we will win tomorrow. I hope the boys will be at their peak tomorrow to get the reward for their hard work in the tournament.

"I am happy that everybody has been consistent and senior players like Alfaz and Arman were on top in the semifinal. They have improved from the first two matches. Rajani and Hassan Al Mamun at the back have been outstanding and also, the

reserves have proved their worth.

"India play good football. The players are skilled but I am happy that they won't be playing the Pakistan-style long-ball game. Pakistan created problems for us in the semifinal and it was a tough game. But the Indians are going to be tougher in the final. The way we survived constant Pakistani pressure, I think we can stand it tomorrow as well."

Cruciani identified Baichung Bhutia as a danger but said the Indian striker would be under zonal-marking.

"I won't man-mark Baichung but the instruction should be not to give him space. So someone has to be close to him all the time.

"They will miss Mehtab in the midfield. It is important but they must have a good substitute for him. We should respect everybody.

"I ask players to start match with patience and not to consume energy in the starting minutes because it might go into extra time.

"I know today is Victory Day in Bangladesh and the whole nation is expecting us to win tomorrow. It is everybody's dream and also of mine.

Bangladesh will field the same eleven that started in the first two games and the semifinal, but Nayeemuddin was the ever mysterious man who didn't even hint at

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PHOTO: STAR

WILL YOU DO IT AGAIN? Bangladesh captain Arif Khan Joy (in the foreground) leads the team's final preparations ahead of the SAFF Championship final at the Gymkhana ground in Karachi on Friday.



DIEGO CRUCIANI

team on the verge of retaining their title but there was no nervousness in him on the eve of the most important game so far in his brief stint with Bangladesh.

"I am not nervous, neither are the players. They go into the game with relaxed mind but not about the task they have in hand. They would be concentrating on the game," Cruciani told yesterday at the lobby of Hotel Mehran after having an online chat with his friends.

"Tomorrow the difference would be who plays better football. All I have told to my players is to not

Outrage across India

Moves are on to 'rehabilitate' Ganguly



CRICINFO, undated

Less than twenty-four hours after the national selectors decided to wield the axe on Sourav Ganguly, the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) is desperately pursuing damage control.

What has triggered the panic button is not the extent or intensity of mass protests, which were predictable, but outrage expressed across India's diverse political spectrum.

Sharad Pawar, the BCCI president, who categorically claimed that he was not party to the decision, told the Times of India, "As a cricket lover, I am hurt and shocked over the exclusion of Ganguly. In the Delhi Test his performance was satisfactory. Also, he was a victorious captain and we feel proud of him".

Already, moves are apparently on behind the scenes to review the issue and to, if possible, provide Ganguly with a more dignified exit. Pawar has let it be known that it is "my prerogative" to sit with the selectors in the next "two or three days" to "understand" what actually happened. The scheduled selection committee meeting on December 22 and 23 thus assumes considerable significance.

Principal among the various 'rehabilitation' measures being discussed is the one whereby Ganguly will be included for the upcoming tour of Pakistan as one final appearance for the national side. This is to enable him a "Steve Waugh-like exit" and even if he were to score two consecutive hundreds there it would make no difference.

After the defeat of the Jagmohan Dalmeida camp -- believed to have solidly stood behind Ganguly on all occasions -- in the recent board elections the latest selectorial decision is being widely seen as vindictive on the part of the new incumbents.



SOURAV GANGULY

"Extraneous factors are deciding all these things, and a dirty game is on," said Mohammad Salim, the Marxist member of parliament, whose party is an ally of the central government, in which Pawar is a prominent minister. Gurudas Dasgupta, the Communist Party of India MP, said, "Throwing out Sourav is the worst kind of politics". He has also shot off a letter to the board president on the issue.

The opposition Bharatiya Janata Party's Arun Jaitley, the Samajwadi Party's Amar Singh and the Rashtriya Janata Dal's Laloo Prasad Yadav too complained in parliament about the "unfair" treatment meted out to Ganguly. Somnath Chatterjee, the parliament speaker, has reportedly spoken to Praful Patel, a Pawar confidante and central government minister, on the issue and the need to make amends for Ganguly.

Prominent people from other walks of life have also joined the chorus against Ganguly's ouster.

Soumitra Chatterjee, legendary hero of many a Satyajit Ray film, claimed that, "It's an act of treachery to cricket that has polluted the sport's atmosphere".

Ganguly had scored 40 and 39 in the second Test against Sri Lanka at Delhi. After the match the selection committee met and announced the squad for the final Test at Ahmedabad. The selectors explained Ganguly's exclusion on the grounds of retaining the in-form Yuvraj Singh in the playing XI as part of the team's nurturing of younger talents and its build up to the 2007 World Cup. But, according to critics, this position contradicted the selectors' earlier promise not to tamper with winning combinations.

The selectors, on their part, have said that the decision was "not motivated or made in a hurry". Kiran More, the chairman of selectors, also said that "our decision is final. We will not change it".



Did U Know?

Badminton reached the Olympic stage as a demonstration sport at the 1972 Munich Games. It returned as an exhibition sport in Seoul in 1988, then was accepted to full medal status at Barcelona in 1992.



Shoab Akhtar

(Pakistan fast bowler)
"Every captain learns the ropes with time. I would now rate Inzamam in the top three captains of Pakistan cricket after Imran Khan and Wasim Akram."

'It's our responsibility'

AL MUSABBIR SADI from Karachi

While the whole nation awaits the national team to bring laurel from Pakistan, Bangladesh football captain Arif Khan Joy feels that it is him and his mates who hold the responsibility of doing it.

"I have led the team in a final in Myanmar a month ago, but this is my first final as captain in a full international. Like every man, leading the team in the final would be a magic moment for me. It's a mix of anxiousness and emotion. I want to write another chapter in my book of achievements tomorrow," Joy told reporters at the team hotel here yesterday.

The defensive midfielder, who has been in tremendous form despite nursing a knee injury, was dismissive of the result of the group match between the two finalists -- Bangladesh and India.

"That was a league game with little importance. The final will be totally different. We will be at full strength unlike that match when we fielded only two of the regular eleven and drew. It is positive for us but the final would be anybody's game," Joy predicted.

Like the coach, he also thinks that the team that will dominate 90 minutes would be the winners.

"India are a big opposition and has the tradition. With full respect to them, I am saying that we are the best motivated team in the tournament. We are highly inspired as defending champions and I believe it will drive us to win the trophy.

"If we get the bit of luck, we will have our hands on the trophy. They also have good players in all positions but maybe, they lack a good striker to support Baichung Bhutia. Their international exposure is better than us. So they will be a great opposition. But we are also ready to fight for 120 minutes even if the match goes into extra time.

He was not ready to accept Baichung as a 'major factor' in the final. "He is a superstar in this region and has a lot of experience. But I don't think about him alone. We are concentrating on the whole Indian team.

"Winning control in the midfield would be the key. We have the strongest midfield in the tournament but they also have experienced guys like Venkatesh and Climax Lawrence. It would be my responsibility to stamp our authority first in the middle.

PK BANNERJEE

On the other hand, India coach

Syed Nayeemuddin imposed an embargo on his players to talk to press and instead manager and former Indian great PK Bannerjee came out to share his views.

"Bangladesh are holding aloft the tradition of Bengal, which is to possess the ball and control the game," said Bannerjee, who was talking highly of Bangladesh's style and form.

"The advantage of Bangladesh is all players are Bangalees. They can do whatever they like and tell proudly about their identity. We are Indians first, then Bangalee. If we call ourselves Bangalee, then people blame us for dividing the team.

"It's going to be a good and interesting game. Bangladesh have prepared better than us. We only got seven days to play together. And on top of that two important players from East Bengal joined only two days before the flight to Pakistan because the club didn't release them. In Bangladesh, the footballers were free for two months for national camp.

SHARIDA'S VIEWS

Looking at the final from a neutral

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Afro-Asian A team cricket meet in Ctg

CRICINFO, undated

Details of the Afro-Asian A-team tournament hosted by Bangladesh in January have finally been announced.

The five-team event -- which features sides from India, Sri Lanka, Zimbabwe, Bangladesh and Kenya -- is based in Chittagong and starts on January 18. All the sides will play each other once, with the top two meeting in the final at the MA Aziz Stadium on January 28.

There is some concern over whether Zimbabwe, who have named their side, will actually participate as most of their squad have said they will refuse to play under the current board. It is likely that they will hold a meeting shortly before they are due to depart to make a final decision.

There is also some unease with the criteria for what constitutes an A side, with the Zimbabwe team containing six of their most recent Test side and only three of their squad have not played Tests or ODIs.

Rather oddly, it appears that the organisers were hoping for an African Representative XI, based around Kenya and Uganda, to take the fifth slot but it seems that the Kenyans refused, arguing that as they had recently whitewashed Zimbabwe A in Zimbabwe, they deserved a place on their own merits.

Div I cricket

SPORTS REPORTER

Al-Mamun and Sumon Barua blasted tons to guide Gazi Tank to an easy 62-run victory against Dhaka Wanderers Club in the First Division Cricket League at BKSP yesterday.

Mamun smashed 103 and Sumon was unbeat on 101 as the winners piled up a mammoth 291 for 4 in stipulated 50 overs.

Wanderers in reply reached 229-5 before running out of overs.

At the Fatullah Cricket Stadium, Partex Sporting Club (239-9) also cruised to a comfortable seven-wicket victory over Bangladesh Boys (232-8).

In the day's other matches, Uttara Sports Club (169-4) defeated Eskaton Sabuj Sangha (165-10) by six wickets at the Dhaka University ground while Young Pegasus (261-9) scored a 68-run win against Kathalagan (193-10) at BKSP.



PHOTO: STAR

Nadif Chowdhury, who hammered an unbeaten 110, of Shaheed Jewel XI follows through on a full-blooded cover-drive in the Victory Day exhibition match against Shaheed Mushtaque XI at the Dhanmondi Cricket Stadium on Friday.



PHOTO: AFP

WRECKER-IN-CHIEF: South Africa paceman Makhaya Ntini, who took 5 for 64, in full flight on the first day of the first Test against Australia at the WACA ground in Perth on Friday.

Ntini tears Aus apart



AFP, Perth

South Africa dismissed Australia for just 258 on Friday to seize the initiative on the opening day of the first Test.

Captain Ricky Ponting top-scored with 71 as Makhaya Ntini scythed through the Australian line-up with figures of 5-64, exposing the middle-order vulnerability which South Africa had predicted before the match.

The visitors were 38 without loss in reply with AB de Villiers on 14 and captain Graeme Smith on 18.

"To take five wickets against Australia is a huge achievement," said a beaming Ntini.

"It has been a good day for South Africa overall. This is one of the things that we wanted to happen.

"From a bowling point of view it's been an amazing day -- taking five for the first time I come and play at the WACA -- it's a great opportunity."

Australia coach John Buchanan admitted his side had felt under heavy pressure to perform.

"It would be nice if we could live up to everybody's expectations every time we bat and every time we bowl,"

he said.

"The reality is it's international sport, it's very competitive. We're just not superhuman I suppose."

He said Australia had suffered when South Africa began to tidy up their bowling after lunch.

"Up until lunch I thought from South Africa's point of view they were a little bit lacking in the disciplines of line and length and we took advantage of that," he said.

"Come the second part of the day, almost vice versa -- they tied their discipline up and obviously we didn't."

"I think the South African bowlers probably adjusted their lengths more than anything else in the last two sessions."

Apart from Ponting's punchy innings it was a dour day for the Australians who won the toss and elected to bat on a wicket which played fairly true.

They got off to a terrible start with Matthew Hayden pulling an Ntini delivery skyward and into the hands of Jacques Rudolph before a run had been scored.

Ponting, who blasted a dozen fours in his 71, and Justin Langer gave the home side something to cheer about as they reached lunch at 96-1.

Ntini brought the partnership to an

end as he dismissed Langer for 37 through another botched pull to Smith at mid-off.

Shaun Pollock then trapped Ponting lbw for 71 with a ball which nipped back from the off side.

Australia were still in command at 173-3 at tea but endured a horrendous evening session.

One-day specialist Andrew Symonds made 13, wicketkeeper Adam Gilchrist six and hometown hopeful Michael Hussey 23 as the middle order folded.

Only Brad Hodge offered serious resistance with 41 before he was caught behind by Mark Boucher off Ntini.

Andre Nel cleaned up the tail, having Nathan Bracken caught behind for 10 and Glenn McGrath for a duck.

It could have been worse for the hosts if South Africa had held a series of dropped catches. Boucher was the main culprit, missing a top edge from Hodge when he was on three.

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What to WATCH

BTv & PTV Nat'l

SAFF C'ship Final
Bangladesh vs India
Live at 7:00 pm

ESPN

English Premier Football League
Aston Villa vs Man United
Live at 6:40 pm

Everton vs Bolton
Live at 8:55 pm

Man City vs Birmingham
Live at 11:10 pm

STAR Sports

Australia vs South Africa
First Test, Day Two
Live at 8:30 am

English Premier Football League
West Ham vs Newcastle
Live at 8:55 pm