



Bangladesh captain Habibul Bashar (R) in conversation with his deputy Mohammad Ashraful during a press conference at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

Time to prove Century appearance for Ashraful

BISHWAJIT ROY



The much-talked Bangladesh-India series starts today in Mirpur with one team basking in the warm afterglow of success and another grudging in defeat.

It would be suffice to say that it will be an altogether different battle when a joyful Habibul Bashar enters into the ground in the morning for the toss with his wounded counterpart Rahul Dravid; the conditions and atmosphere poles apart from Port-of-Spain, where the sides last met.

There is hardly any doubt that the Indians will try to get revenge for their five-wicket mauling against the Tigers in the World Cup in their first chance but there is also exists an equal opportunity for the home team to prove that their March 17 success in Trinidad was not just a flash in the pan.

For Bashar the challenge has taken a new dimension, as one of main weapons -- Mashrafe Bin Mortaza, the hero of the World Cup success, looks set to miss the first game because of a back injury. The bold-faced Bangladesh

skipper however was not ready to be bogged down by the last moment uncertainty, rather he gave the impression that their main strength lies in their togetherness as a unit.

"Mashrafe is a special player and that's why his presence is always important. He had couple of great performances against India as well. So it is a worry for us if he cannot make in the final eleven tomorrow because of injury. But our backup players are also capable and this is one of the reasons of our recent success. We actually play as a unit," said a confident Bashar.

This feeling was also evident in the team during the practice session yesterday. Their spirits seemed hardly dented by the last moment injury of Mashrafe, who tore apart the formidable India batting line-up in the World Cup with a four-wicket burst.

The 34-year old skipper also dismissed the idea that the Tigers were under pressure after their World Cup success.

"We are aware that the expectations will be much higher this time. We are preparing ourselves according to that. I would love this pressure because the people are thinking that we are capable of beating India. We do not set any particular target before this series. We want to play our natural game

and enjoy that. But definitely I would love to win the series," said Bashar.

The most successful Tigers skipper was also not ready to think about how his opponents were taking the series after their disastrous World Cup, seeming more interested to draw emphasis on their own brand of cricket.

"It is really up to them how they take this series. We are not concerned about that. We want to play our own brand of cricket. The most important thing for us is what we want to do," he opined.

The focus will not only be on what Bashar can do as captain in the series but how well he performs as a batsman. The right-hander has come under scanner following his poor showing in the showpiece event.

"The team always comes first to me. But at the same time I am aware that I did not perform well in the World Cup. So I would love to get back amongst the runs in this series. In that case the team will also be benefited," he responded adding that he has every chance to bat at number three in the series.

One man however can make his captain most happy in his special day and it is none other than ace batsman Mohammad Ashraful

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A cricketing haven

MOHAMMAD ISAM

Today when the Tigers take on India, Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium will complete a full circle by becoming the home of cricket from a football and athletics ground.

A wall of honour comprising of all the captains who led Bangladesh through history and the trophies that the country have won adorn the main entrance of the arena that is aptly named after one of the greatest leaders of the sub-continent AK Fazlul Haq.

Portraits of past captains Shamim Kabir, Shafiqul Haq, Roquibul Hasan, Gazi Ashraf Hossain, Faruque Ahmed, Minhazul Abedin, Akram Khan, Aminul Islam, Naimur Rahman, Khaled Mashud, Khaled Mahmud, Rajin Saleh and present captain Habibul Bashar are lined above cupboards with trophies that Bangladesh won against Zimbabwe, Kenya as well as a plaque from the ICC after Bangladesh became the tenth Test playing nation.

Apart from the entrance passage, the small media conference area was finished in good taste with stylish lighting and bright wallpapers. But with a packed house of sports journalists, photographers and television crew, the room was too cramped.

But the media centre on the third floor, to be named after renowned journalists soon, is quite spacious and is equipped with almost everything that a media person requires.

Panning down to the ground, the brilliant outfield supersedes the rest of the arena which boasts a grandstand on the west and a unique viewing area for the players. A giant screen on the northeast corner will fulfill the absence of an electronic scorecard.

Outside the ground, there is a fully-functional indoor practice area. Beside the indoor, there is another practice facility, making it

three areas in all where a team can work out before a match. Talking of workouts, a gym is also in place which is being used regularly by the Bangladesh Academy players.

The ground hosted two one-day internationals late last year but this game will be the marquee event for

a ground that has gone through several trials and tribulations over the years.

A walk from the main road into the premises of the stadium will surely give a very negative perception but to judge this book, one has to get past the cover.



PHOTO: STAR

Bangladesh cricket's chief selector Faruque Ahmed (R) showing his concern over injured paceman Mashrafe Bin Mortaza on the eve of the first ODI against India on Wednesday.



Did U Know?

Australia's Margaret Court holds the record for the most singles titles won in Grand Slam tournaments, with a total of 24 (11 Australian, five US, five French and three Wimbledon) won between 1960 and 1973.



David Beckham

(Real Madrid's English superstar)
"He is a great player, and any great player is very important for any team."

Dav gets emotional

Cricket

SPORTS REPORTER

He hardly showed any emotion over the last four years, but Dav Whatmore still lost his composure for a little while yesterday during a press conference at the Mirpur Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium. The reason was simple. The Sri Lankan-born Australian is going to make his last appearance with the Tigers.

With the completion of the India series that gets underway here today, the Whatmore era will come to an end and that's why it was an altogether different feeling for the burly coach.

"I think, yeah, because I can't stop thinking about it. Yeah, I worked with a group of boys for the last four years and this is the last month so there are fond memories which pour greatly over the bad ones. So there is little bit (emotion), yeah," was the response from a steely Whatmore, under whom Bangladesh won a number of matches including some big ones.

But as a professional all his focus will be only on the coming task and undoubtedly it would be a great farewell for him if his boys

rise to the occasion in the three-match one-day and two-match Test series.

"Motivation has never been a problem for the Bangladesh team. Every game is very, very important for us whether it is a World Cup tournament or not. We have been progressing very well and managed to go one place up in the rankings and every game is an opportunity for the team to go higher in the ranking," said Whatmore when asked what would be his team's motivation in the series after the World Cup success.

Although there was a debate on the home pressure after the Tigers' World Cup success, the Bangladesh coach however took it as an advantage.

"Slightly, slightly (there is an advantage) because people will come to Mirpur tomorrow. I am sure, to support us and not India although the visitors have strong following here. I think there is a slight advantage," he observed.

Bangladesh will need a good start like their World Cup match if they want to repeat the feat but the problem is that this is the area which remains the most vulnerable but Whatmore looked quiet on this.

"In the World Cup we had only two combinations. Shahriar

(Nafees) opened with Tamim (Iqbal) and when Shahriar was dropped, Javed Omar came in," he defended his position.

He said that they would wait till today morning to decide on pace spearhead Mashrafe Bin Mortaza who has been complaining of back pain from Tuesday.

"And now we are not in a position to give you the twelve because of the situation. We are not able to decide the eleven and unfortunately we have to give you the eleven at the toss. Mashrafe is having a small problem but I am not sure. He will be given every chance to prove his fitness in the morning and this is the reason why we are not naming the playing eleven now," he said.

And although India are without their two big name players -- Sachin Tendulkar and Sourav Ganguly -- the Bangladesh coach rated his opponents highly.

"The Indian team is different but that happens time to time. It's a representative eleven with lot of cricketers who aspire to play for their country. Whoever is in the team got some ability I am sure. They will be keen to do well also. I think it's a pretty good team," he said adding that the pitch is quite satisfactory.

'Greg was a schoolmaster'

Cricket

AFP, New Delhi

Indian cricket was plunged into fresh controversy Wednesday after a TV sting caught national selectors blaming ex-coach Greg Chappell and senior players for a disastrous World Cup campaign.

Private broadcaster Headlines Today showed selectors accusing the Australian of running a divide-and-rule policy.

Chappell quit as coach of India after the World Cup debacle that saw them exit in the first round after losses to Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

The four national selectors -- Ranjib Biswal, Bhupinder Singh Senior, Venkatapathy Raju and Sanjay Jagdale -- squarely blamed Chappell and his star cricketers for the humiliation.

"Greg wanted to show everybody he was the boss. He was not happy with anybody," said Bhupinder Singh.

"There were instances when Chappell was not talking to senior players for four to five days. He was not on talking terms with Sachin Tendulkar, Virender Sehwag and Harbhajan Singh," the North Zone selector said.

Asked if reports of factionalism in the team were correct, Singh replied, "not 100 per cent, but by and large correct. And Greg

Chappell is to blame for it."

Biswal said Chappell could not understand the psyche of Indian cricketers.

"He was more like a schoolmaster than a friend," he said.

Tendulkar and Ganguly were blamed for nurturing their own captaincy ambitions over incumbent Rahul Dravid.

"They were not supporting Dravid, some players were backing Tendulkar, some Ganguly. I won't call it factionalism but there were some personal problems," said Sanjay Jagdale, who was team manager during the World Cup.

Bhupinder Singh said if five players had ego problems, Chappell was the sixth problem.

"Chappell would say Dravid is required, Sachin is not required, Sourav is not required. This was his policy."

An official from the Board of Control For Cricket in India refused to comment on the sting, dubbed Operation Clean Bowled, saying he had not seen the programme, which contained undercover footage recorded in a car.

"We will have to see whether the tape is authentic or not," he told AFP.

The revelations came as India prepare to take on their World Cup nemesis Bangladesh in the first of a three-match one-day series starting Thursday in Dhaka.

Dravid, meanwhile, appeared

unconcerned by the controversy.

"I am not going to react on these sting operations," he told reporters in Dhaka. "I haven't seen anything and I cannot comment on everything that somebody says."

But the Indian captain went out of his way to rubbish suggestions that he did not receive support from Ganguly and Tendulkar.

"To be honest with you, I felt I had as much support as I needed," he said.

"I was very happy with the team that I had and the support that I had. Other than that I really don't know what it is and what it is all about."

MCC stands by Gilchrist

BBC ONLINE, undated

Cricket's lawmakers have rejected Sri Lanka's complaints about Adam Gilchrist using a squash ball as a batting aid during the World Cup final.

Gilchrist had the ball inside his left glove to improve his grip on the bat as he smashed 149 off 104 balls to help Australia to victory against Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka Cricket said he had broken the "spirit and tradition of

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BTV & NEO Sports
Bangladesh v India
First ODI
Live from 9:30 am
ESPN
English Premier Football League
Tottenham v Blackburn
Live at 12:55 am (Friday)

DAY'S EVENT
B.League
Rahmatganj v Brothers Union (4:00 pm)
Venue: Bangabandhu National Stadium
Exhibition Football
BFF U-23 v Oldham Athletic (4:00 pm)
Venue: Sylhet Stadium

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