



LOOKING BEYOND 50: Bangladesh's premier batsman Habibul Bashar bats during a net practice session at the Sinhalese Sports Club ground in Colombo yesterday.



PHOTO: AFP

TIGERS' TORMENTOR: Sri Lanka's champion off-spinner working out his strategy during a net practice session at the Sinhalese Sports Club ground in Colombo on Sunday, ahead of today's first Test against Bangladesh.

New journey for Ashfarul

Cricket

BISHWAJIT ROY from Colombo

In September 2001, a wiry little boy had hogged the spotlight by making a sparkling Test hundred on his debut at the Sinhalese Sports Club (SSC) ground becoming in the process, the youngest batsman in the world to do so.

The boy since grown into a man is none other than the current Bangladesh captain, Mohammad Ashraful, who is all set to start a new journey at the same venue today.

So there was a reason to think that the 22-year old Tigers new skipper is obviously thrilled with the fact that he is going to the middle to toss with his Sri Lankan counterpart Mahela Jayawardene, which is a dream for any cricketer.

But the man himself was not too excited as many might have thought. "It is as usual. This is nothing special to me," was the smiling response of the country's most talented batsman on the eve of the first Test of the three-match series.

He even didn't feel any pressure as a captain after spending six years at the highest level of the game. "No pressure at all because I want to enjoy the new job and I know I have to bat well first which is key to become a good captain," he observed.

But the new Bangladesh captain was aware of the fact that he is going to face a tough challenge in his first assignment as a captain because the record shows how badly his side's lost the all seven matches against the Sri Lankans.

"It is always tough to perform well against Sri Lankan in their home soil, so definitely it is a big challenge not only for me but also as a team. I will be the happiest man in the world if we could play all five days but it's not an easy task," said Ashraful.

But as a captain what he believes is that the present squad is much more confident than the previous one which played in the island last in 2005.

"I think everybody is confident although we all know we are going to face a world class batting and bowling line-up. They have tremendous variation in their bowling with spinner like Muralidaran and pacer Malinda but if we can play according to our plan it would not be impossible to show our improvement against them," said the confident new Tigers skipper.

In an otherwise gloomy picture Ashraful himself has a very good record against the Sri Lankans with two hundreds under his belt.

"It is really encouraging for me that I had a hundred and 75-run innings at the same venue (SSC) and my overall record against them is also not too bad. I think it was mainly because I always watched Muralidaran on the screen whenever he played. I always think about his wrong one. Bashar bhai (Habibul Bashar) also has a very good record against them," he said.

"We have discussed about Murali because he destroyed us on most of the occasions. Just think about it -- he took 50 wickets in six matches but still I believe that there is no scope to be extra cautious against him for survival," he added.

Ashraful firmly believes that they have taken a different kind of preparation this time, which will play a part in this series.

"It was an altogether diverse batting session under Shaun's (Williams) guidance. What was encouraging is that the batsmen looked almost perfect in shot selection in the nets and now we have to carry it onto the main field," he said.

Yes, there has been much talk about batting practice under the new team management but now the time has come to show the results.

PHOTO: AFP

Third seamer dilemma

Cricket

SPORTS REPORTER from Colombo

humid conditions it could be dangerous to use two pacers in his long spell but the Bangladesh think-tank favoured too many spin bowlers as they suddenly felt that they have a lack of a genuine third seamer.

"Yes, it might have been better if we have a genuine third seamer. Considering the conditions we have picked up our best side. Raj (Abdur Razzak) bowled very well in the practice game and I believe that he will be useful in the match," explained selector Akram Khan.

Bangladesh team has two genuine left-arm spinners in ace Mohammad Rafique and Razzak and they have also two other spin options in left-arm spinner Shakib Al Hasan and leg-spinner Ashraful.

It was really encouraging for Mohammad Ashraful that he has got his best new ball pairing fit for his first assignment as captain, as Shahadat Hossain will share the new ball with the Narail Express who had failed to play any match in the last tour in 2005.

However the question has been raised on whether the new captain has got the right bowling attack, with the fact that they are going to play the match with only two seamers after left-arm spinner Abdur Razzak has been given the chance for his impressive bowling in the three-day warm-up match against Sri Lanka A.

Many thought that under such

batting. They have a very solid batting line-up and everybody has the capability to make a big score, so if you don't get proper service from the bowlers it will also effect your batting," observed the right-hander.

"Sri Lanka is not like the other subcontinent teams because they have their own brand of cricket which I think is very attacking. You have to be good in both batting and bowling if you want to do something against them," said Bashar, who is going to start a new mission to revive his reputation as a batsman.

He expressed his satisfaction over the fact that Mashrafe is going to play the match today.

"Last time we missed him which was a great loss. His presence is very important for the team. This time we are lucky to have him fully fit for the match," said an excited Bashar.

Mashrafe was also looking forward to erase his painful memory of the last time.

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B.League resumes today

UNB, Dhaka

The 16th round of the B.League begins today with Arambagh taking on Khulna Abahani at the Bangabandhu National Stadium.

Dhaka Abahani enjoy slight advantage in the title race as they have played 13 matches, one less than joint leaders Mohammad, Sheikh Russel and Muktijoddha.

Brothers Union are lying currently in 5th position with 22 points from 13 matches, followed by Chittagong Mohammad and Farashganj with 17, Arambagh with 16, and Khulna Abahani and Chittagong Abahani with 11 each.

Rahmatganj are at the bottom of the table with eight points from 14 matches.

SL targets Rhodes

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka have short-listed South African Jonty Rhodes and Australia's Greg Blewett to assist newly appointed head coach Trevor Bayliss, an official said on Sunday.

The search for an assistant coach arose after former Sri Lankan fast bowler Rumesh Rathnayake turned down a Sri Lanka Cricket (SLC) offer last week citing personal reasons.

"We were looking up to Rumesh with the future in mind, but now that he is unavailable we have to weigh our options," SLC spokesman Samantha Algama told AFP.

"Rhodes and Blewett are two names that will be approached because we want someone whose speciality was fielding."

Rhodes, 37, was regarded as one of the world's best fielders during his 11-year career that ended in 2003 after 52 Tests and 245 one-day internationals.

Blewett, 35, played 46 Tests and 32 one-dayers for Australia from 1995 to 2000 before retiring from first-class cricket last month.

Australian Tom Moody coached Sri Lanka to the World Cup final in the Caribbean before quitting to return home to Western Australia.

Trevor Penney, who served as Moody's assistant for the last two years, will also join Western Australia after Sri Lanka's Test and one-day series against Bangladesh starting on Monday.

Bayliss, the New South Wales coach who was selected as Moody's replacement, takes over the Sri Lankan team in August.

Mahela serious

Cricket

SPORTS REPORTER from Colombo

"They do show lot of weaknesses in Test cricket. But you'll never know. They keep on improving and there could be a surprise package. So you shouldn't leave any room for them to come back," he observed.

But he warned that his team would come on hard without any doubt.

"I think attitude and the way we go about things will be the same. Attitude, the enthusiasm and the aggression, all will be the same. That's why I say no difference between Australia and Bangladesh."

Mahela said that they always love to play on home grounds.

"There are a number of very good memories at SSC. It's been a long time, but it's

nice to come back and play at your home ground and Test cricket," he said.

"As a team we've been competing really well, at home and away. So we just get back to things well and we have to do all the right things properly. Guys have been making lot of effort to switch back to the longer version and it will be a challenge for us," he informed.

Trescothick on comeback trail

AFP, London

Marcus Trescothick believes he is "getting closer" to playing for England again but added he wouldn't hurry his return to the international arena until he was assured of his fitness.

Opening batsman Trescothick hasn't played for England since quitting the Ashes tour of Australia in November with a stress-related illness.

Instead the 31-year-old left-hander has concentrated on his career with Somerset.

In Trescothick's absence Alastair Cook has cemented his place as an England opening batsman. But Andrew Strauss's recent run of poor form led some to ask if Trescothick was ready for a return to England duty.

"Of course I'd love to play for England again and watching them this summer has sometimes been painful for me," Trescothick told the Mail on Sunday.

"I'm not ready yet, but I have made strides since the start of the

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'India fine sans a coach'

Cricket

AFP, Belfast

India fielding chief Robin Singh has said the team is coping just fine without a coach.

India, who saw Greg Chappell quit his post as coach after the team's failure to reach the second round of the World Cup, were left without a successor after South African Graham Ford, a former Proteas chief, rejected an offer to replace the Australia batting great.

The Board of Control for Cricket in India, in the absence of a coach, appointed former player Chandu Borde, 73 next month, as manager for the tour of Ireland, Scotland and England.

India's tour opener saw them beat Ireland by nine wickets in a one-day international at Stormont here Saturday and afterwards Singh said senior players such as former captain Sourav Ganguly and Sachin Tendulkar were compensating for the lack of a coach.

Teenage leg-spinner Piyush Chawla took a career-best three for 29 as Ireland were bowled out for 193.

"They had a young spinner but a good spinner and that's been our major problem, spin bowling," said Ireland captain Trent Johnston.

And left-arm quick Rudra Pratap Singh, 21, took two for 36.

India, set a revised target of 171 in 39 overs to win after rain delayed the start of their reply, saw Tendulkar out for the sixth ball of the innings when he was bowled by Roger Whelan.

But 25-year-old No 3 Gautam

Cricket

AFP, Colombo

Gambhir responded to the situation by making a composed 80 not out in an unbroken stand of 162 with fellow left-hander Ganguly, unbeaten on 73.

Gambhir, who would have been expecting to open the innings, coped well with his 'demotion' and, after being named man-of-the-match, said: "It will be a long tour so it's important to start well. I'm pleased I got the runs. I'm happy to bat whenever the management say."

"It's not like in India where you can just go out there and play through the line of the ball. Sometimes you have to be a bit more patient and work the ball into the gaps in these conditions."

"At this level it's all about being consistent and that's what I was lacking in the past and it's very important for me."

"I toured England with India A so I know something about batting on these types of tracks."

India's tour continues with three more one-day internationals, all against South Africa, in Belfast on Tuesday, Friday and a week Sunday. They then play arch-rivals Pakistan in a one-dayer in Glasgow on July 3.

But the bulk of their trip sees them playing three Tests and seven one-dayers against England from July 19 to September 8.

Several younger players starred against Ireland.

"We're planned pretty well. There is a good team and we have decided what we want to work on. We have experienced players like Sourav and Sachin who will provide help, especially with the batting, but whatever we have to make the most of it."

India, who fielded well in patches today (Saturday), some didn't do so well, but overall some very good catches were taken. As long as the senior guys keep themselves fit they know what to do, but the emphasis is on the younger guys."

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PHOTO: STAR