One Step Forward and Half a Step Back

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SOUTH Africa's tour to the sub-continent started with a bang, in more ways than one. Even before they selected a side to tour Bangladesh there was a tremendous amount of friction within the upper echelons of their cricketing establishment. There was a highly charged and public spat between South African coach Mickey Arthur and Cricket South Africa chairman Norman Arendse over team selection and while it never really threatened the tour; it did put the players and coach under immense pressure. Not what one would expect after a wonderful few months for South African cricket. Their golden run started in Pakistan with a series victory and followed it up at home when they demolished New Zealand. The West Indies were next in line and while they did test them, their resistance only lasted a few matches. The South Africans won the test series 2-1 and steamrolled them 5-0 in the ODI series.



Shahadat celebrates one of his nine wickets in the match.

Bangladesh on the other hand did not have much form behind them leading into the series. The real news to come out of the Bangladeshi camp was that the home series would be the last assignment for the long serving left armer Mohammad Rafique. With only six test wickets needed for him to become the first Bangladeshi to 100 he was looking forward to the series in more ways than one. Along the same lines the out of favour Khaled Mashud also wished to end his international career with a game at home. A wish that the Bangladesh Cricket Board seemed reluctant to fulfil. Aside from retirements there were also a few other issues to be taken care of. The team for the first test still had to be settled and there were a few whispered words spoken when the test specialist Enamul Haque Jnr was left out of the final 14 for Abdur Razzak. At the end of the day it was the best decision to take, as Enamul had not impressed for some time and Razzak also known as an ODI specialist kept up his consistent performances even if they were in the shorter form of the game.

The South Africans landed on Valentines Day something which must have peeved Graeme Smith as he was recently quoted saying, "It's kind of hard to go on one date, have a nice dinner and then say: 'That was nice - what are you doing in six weeks' time? I'm going to Chittagong'", when talking about why he was still single. With a lonely valentines day behind them the South Africans went into the three-day game with the Bangladesh Cricket Board XI at Fatullah needing some match practise. Against some uninspired bowling they racked up a decent 397 in their first innings with centuries coming from Hashim Amla and Mark Boucher. In reply the BCB XI performed quite outstandingly as they eased to first innings lead tackling the bowling of Ntini, Steyn and Morkel with consummate ease.

The flat pitch provided an ideal warm up to the first test as the BCB XI which included five batsmen who would play in the first test all got some practise. Junaid Siddique followed up his impressive tour of New Zealand with a fine century as Shakib and Aftab also got some much needed time in the middle against the bowling attack they would face only a few days later. The game was a rude awakening for the tourists who expected to ease through the match without much fuss. In the end they conceded over 400 runs at four runs an over with their full strength bowling line up. The first test was not going to be as easy as they expected.

Before the first test at Mirpur all the focus was on the