



PHOTO: STAR

TIME TO CATCH UP: Bangladesh captain Mohammad Ashraful tries to gain possession from paceman Mashrafe Bin Mortaza (L) while they play a game of football during their practice session at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday.

A virtual final

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh batsmen have taken the blame for the team's woes in the recent one-day internationals against Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe at home but one department got all the praises for their indefatigable effort.

The Tigers' bowling was perhaps the most consistent as far as memory goes and having taken 45 wickets out of maximum 50 in five matches, there can be no criticism about the attack.

And to the fore of it is Mashrafe Bin Mortaza, the team's vice-captain and pace spearhead, who has not given anything to the opposition.

Although the hosts' poor batting has been harshly rebuked, one must remember that the last five matches have not produced a single 200-run total for any of the three teams.

Even the much-vaunted Lankan lineup struggled but Bangladesh at least put on display a great performance when they rattled the much needed 151 runs inside 24 overs against the islanders in the last match of tri-nation series to make the final.

Since then, batting has not proved the strongest side of the Tigers who however, maintained their impressive run with the ball.

And Mashrafe feels that the Tigers will have to play their natural game in today's series finale to down Zimbabwe and take the series 2-1.

"Our game plan is pretty much the same as yesterday, we just need to play our natural game. In the last match, the players did what they do best. Tamim played his own game and gave us a good start. Mehraab handled the new ball well and got good support from Shakib and

Rokibul in the end, which saw us through," the Bangladesh vice-captain said after yesterday's light training at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur.

"Tomorrow, if we bat first then we will try to make at least 240-250 runs which should be a good total on this wicket and if we bowl first, we must restrict them below 200," said the Narail Express confessing that there was little pressure on the team before the second ODI.

"Actually the pressure was due to the first match. There is always pressure before every international game and its very natural. We had no option yesterday but to win and we did it. Tomorrow we definitely want to win and have to play our natural game."

Mashrafe denied there was change in the team in the perspective of morale.

"Honestly, I don't think there was a change. We were as spirited yesterday as we had been before every game. We just need to perform as a team and as professional players we must be able to do so in

any given situation and in every match. Yes, we played well yesterday and if there was any change you could see it must be a good one."

Mashrafe also did not want to draw comparisons between the strength of Bangladesh and Zimbabwe.

"Because of the first match, people are making comparisons but I feel the Tigers are a much-improved side and definitely a better team (than Zimbabwe)."

He also defended the batsmen and said he was happy that some key batsmen are getting runs, which is a good sign.

"Tomorrow we are not going to be negative at all; just want to be positive and play our best cricket. It is a final for us and I don't even want to think about a defeat," added Mashrafe who admitted that no rest during the past few months due to international cricket has made him a bit tired.

"It has been a busy season for all of us since the start of the New Zealand visit. So I am a bit tired and that's why I didn't bowl today in the nets. But I will be ready for tomorrow."

Zimbabwean record-breaking opening batsman Hamilton Masakadza, on the other hand, expected his side to come back in a virtual final for both.

"Everyone knows Bangladesh are fighters but we need to be prepared to fight it out and bounce back," Masakadza told before their training session in the afternoon.

"We are a bit concerned about our top order batsmen, who have not getting runs since the home series against Sri Lanka last November," Masakadza said adding that the toss or wicket will not play much role in the series decider as the wicket looked even and better than the previous ones.

"I also want to play my aggressive game, but we have learnt to come through first and need someone to put his hands up."

Rahmatganj ride on Hanif

SPORTS REPORTER

Hanif Pradhan scored his first goal of the season to give Rahmatganj a 1-0 win over Arambagh in yesterday's Citycell B League match at the Bangabandhu National Stadium.

The midfielder fired home an angular shot just from the top of the area after Ugandan forward Idris Kaseryi helped on a long pass by Hirok Joarder in the 36th minute.

In a rather action-packed first half, Arambagh got the first real chance in on the half hour but their new foreign import Lamine Soumah fluffed a twin chance. Soumah's first effort came off the chest of Mohammed Ali at the Rahmatganj goal and the second one went straight to the goalkeeper.

Rahmatganj, who now have 20 points after 15 matches, should have won bigger but for the woodwork.

Francis headed a corner against the crosspiece after Felix's corner in the 39 minutes while two minutes later, another Francis flagkick went in vain as Kabir's effort came off the sidebar after Arambagh keeper Piru managed to palm it away.

With the ninth defeat, Arambagh's hopes to make a top-8 finish for the Super Cup all but vanished as they stuck to 11 points after 16 encounters, still six behind eighth-placed Chittagong Abahani.

Numero uno Shakib

SPORTS REPORTER

Shakib Al Hasan became the first Bangladeshi player to top the ICC Reliance Championship all-rounder rankings after overtaking New Zealand's Jacob Oram and England's Andrew Flintoff yesterday.

"It feels great to be ranked number one. My one and only goal is to keep performing and winning matches for the Bangladesh team and I feel more inspired and motivated to give my all in the field," said Shakib after being informed of the news.

Shakib topped the charts with 380 rating ahead of Oram on 368 points, and Flintoff followed closely behind on 366.

The lad from Magura becomes only the second Bangladeshi to crack the ICC top ten rankings after left-arm spinner Abdur Razzak made it into

number eight of the ODI bowling rankings in November 2007.

Shakib's rise to the top ten comes on the back of some brilliant performances in the tag end of last year and early this year.

In 2009 he has already taken 8 wickets and scored two half-centuries (including a match-winning unbeaten 92 against Sri Lanka) in 5 matches, while last year his return of 22 wickets in 19 ODIs made him a force to be reckoned with.

This series of fine performances has also seen him move to number twelve in the ODI bowling rankings and number ten in the Test all-rounder rankings.

But the string of rating successes is not going to his head and Shakib remains level-headed about the challenges facing him.

"I know that retaining the number one spot will be even tougher and it will require lots of sacrifices, consistency, hard work and dedication."

TOP TEN

Position	Player	Rating Points
1.	Shakib Al Hasan (Bangladesh)	380
2.	Jacob Oram (New Zealand)	368
3.	Andrew Flintoff (England)	366
4.	Shoaib Malik (Pakistan)	342
4.	Jacques Kallis (South Africa)	342
6.	Chris Gayle (West Indies)	336
7.	Shahid Afridi (Pakistan)	323
8.	Yuvraj Singh (India)	310
9.	Sanath Jayasuriya (Sri Lanka)	293
10.	Paul Collingwood (England)	280

Venus dumped

AFP, Melbourne



australian open

Seven-time Grand Slam champion Venus Williams was dumped from the Australian Open on Thursday but it was a different story for Rafael Nadal and Andy Murray who barged into the third round.

Venus lost the plot against Spain's unseeded Carla Suarez Navarro, crashing 2-6, 6-3, 7-5 for the upset of the tournament so far and continuing her unhappy association with the event which she has never won.

Her sister Serena lived to fight another day, but she too struggled.

The three-time champion needed to mount a second-set recovery after Gisela Dulko took a 5-2 lead. The American finally woke up to reel off five games in a row and tame the Argentinean 6-3, 7-5.

"When you go out on court you have got to expect anything," said Venus, the sixth seed.

"I'm not surprised at how well she played. I haven't quite figured out the areas of my game that went wrong, but I have to credit her."

In hot and blustery conditions, Nadal crushed Roko Karanusic of Croatia 6-2, 6-3, 6-2 to stay on track for his first hardcourt Grand Slam title.

The world number one wrapped up his one-sided match in 97 minutes to set up a clash with 79th-ranked German Tommy Haas.

"He played aggressively, it's not easy to play against someone who plays inside the court and hits big shots with the forehand," Nadal said.

"But I feel very comfortable here and I'm very happy with the victory." Joining him in the next round was Britain's fourth seed Murray, who wasted little energy in disposing of Spain's Marcel Granollers 6-4, 6-2, 6-2.

"I've been playing really well for the last six or seven months and it's probably the best I have felt coming into a Grand Slam," said the Scot, adding that he was confident he could go "deep" into the tournament.

Serena, who next plays

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PHOTO: AFP

Venus Williams of the US is dumbfounded after her stunning defeat to Carla Suarez Navarro of Spain during their Australian Open second round match in Melbourne on Thursday.

What to WATCH

BTV
Bangladesh v Zimbabwe
Third ODI
Live from 9:00am
STAR Cricket
Australia v South Africa
Third ODI
Live from 9:15am
STAR Sports
Australian Open
Live from 6:00am
ESPN
Sportscenter India
Sports News
Live at 8:30pm

DAY'S EVENT

Bangladesh v Zimbabwe
Third ODI
Venue: Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium
Citycell B League
Muktijoddha v Sheikh Russel
Venue: Bangabandhu National Stadium
Time: 4:00pm

Eng arrive in Windies

Cricket

AFP, Basseterre, St. Kitts

England, under new captain Andrew Strauss, touched down in the Caribbean on Wednesday confident that they can continue their dominance over West Indies.

The visitors were greeted at the Robert Bradshaw International Airport by a delegation of government and cricket officials led by St. Kitts and Nevis Prime Minister Denzil Douglas.

There was no news conference on arrival. Only a brief photo session before the team members boarded the bus for their hotel.

England plan to waste little time getting into high gear for the series against West Indies and have scheduled a training session for Thursday at Warner Park.

England will also take on the St. Kitts national team in a three-day match at Warner Park starting on Sunday, and will also meet a West Indies A-team in a similar fixture starting two days later at the same venue.

They face West Indies at Sabina Park in the Jamaica capital of Kingston in the first of four Tests on February 4.

This will be followed by

Tests in Antigua (February 13-17), Barbados (February 26-March 2) and Trinidad (March 6-10) before the two sides play a Twenty20 International, and five One-day Internationals

between March 15 and April 3. England have not lost to the West Indies in a Test series since Michael Atherton's side lost 3-1 in the Caribbean 11 years ago.



PHOTO: INTERNET

Former England captain Kevin Pietersen obliges an autograph hunter upon arrival in St Kitts on Wednesday.

GM Niaz starts well

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladeshi Grandmaster Niaz Murshed got off to a fine start in the 1st Gurgaon Open International Chess Tournament in Haryana, India.

Niaz defeated Amin Ismail Khadri of India in the opening round and Rupankar Nath in yesterday's second round to collect maximum two points.

The other four Bangladeshi players, FM Mohammad Javed, Debaraj Chatterjee, Monir Hossain and Mohammad Ali have one point each after two rounds. All four lost their second round matches after winning in the first round.

A total of 298 players including 16 GMs and 23 International Masters from 12 countries are participating in the event at Gurgaon.

CORRECTION

A caption published in the Sport section on January 22 mistakenly printed the name and rank of Major General Shafiqul Islam, ndc, psc as Brigadier General (ret'd) Shafiquzzaman. Shafiqul Islam holds the post of Senior Vice-President of the Bangladesh Golf Federation and is not the chairman of the body as mentioned in the caption. We regret the mistakes.

--Sports Editor

BFF rejects MSC pleas

Football

SPORTS REPORTER

The Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) yesterday rejected 'strange' Mohammedan's demands to punish a referee, forfeit the result of a B. League match and revise the fixture of the same competition.

The Mohammedan fans held a rowdy demonstration at the BFF Bhaban after their 1-1 draw against Sheikh Russel on Tuesday and later, the club officials submitted a memorandum to the BFF demanding the punishment of 'biased' referee Azad Rahman who had allegedly awarded a penalty to Russel, declare Mohammedan winners of the game and also reschedule tomorrow's Abahani-Mohammedan match at the end of the league.

The B. League committee headed by BFF senior vice-president Abdus Salam Murshed found the demands illogical and hence refused to endorse any of them.

"We did not find any reason to penalise the referee and it's impossible to change a result of the match after it is finished according to international law," said B. League committee chair-

man Salam after yesterday's meeting.

"We also cannot change the fixture according to demand of one team because it will hurt others' feelings and also the harmony of the league. In fact, every team had agreed to play on this fixture before the start of the league. There have been many delays and we don't want to delay it further," said Salam.

Salam did not mind about the protests by the clubs' fans and thought it was positive.

"It proves that the passion for football has returned. We were used to these in the past days," said Salam who excelled as a Mohammedan striker during his heydays.

"Both the Abahani and Mohammedan fans came to us and we hope they would take everything sportingly and give us a good match on Saturday."

"I feel that Mohammedan would consider the BFF's decisions for the greater sake of the game," he added.

League committee vice-chairman Kazi Nabil and members Anwarul Hoque Helal, Fazlur Rahman Babul and Abu Hassan Prince were also present in the meeting.

Abahani and Mohammedan fans also came to the BFF premises yesterday to request

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