

India different altogether

SPORTS REPORTER

Indian cricket team were all smiles when they arrived in Dhaka on Saturday. Off-spinner Harbhajan Singh was seen accepting the traditional hospitality with enthusiasm at the airport while vice-captain Virender Sehwag talked a lot about the bright side of a happy year that has just passed by.

They looked really vibrant which incidentally was not the case when they last visited Dhaka. It was rather a sombre sojourn in July of 2008 hot on the heels of a stunning defeat against the Tigers in the West Indies World Cup. The defeat that meant India's early exit from the competition was hard to accept for them and one can still recall the famously infamous outburst of the then interim coach Ravi Shastri who went on record by saying: "We will take no prisoners".

One and a half years have gone by and during this time India have reached a height in terms of success under the bold leadership of Mahendra Singh Dhoni that others can only envy. And who doesn't know success makes a man modest. Dhoni is no exception and so are the other members of his team ahead of the tri-nation Idea Cup that kicks off today.

India will definitely start as favourites in the tournament but it was Sehwag who set aside the label first while talking with reporters upon arrival at the Zia International Airport on Saturday.

Dhoni at the official press conference at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday also echoed the same sentiment.

"It is important to play good cricket to carry on the form and execute the plans in the middle. It's a long-term process," said Dhoni when asked about his team's target in the tournament.

"You have to give your best and it doesn't matter who is your opponents because every opponent is tough in the international level and you know the opponents got the talents," he added in response to a question that Sri Lanka came here without some key players.

The Indian captain however has concerns with a twin headache -- poor bowling and the sluggish fielding. The inconsistency

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PHOTO: STAR
WHOSE WILL IT BE? Captains (L-R) of Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and India Kumar Sangakkara, Shakib Al Hasan and Mahendra Singh Dhoni respectively hold the Idea Cup during an official photoshoot at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday.

SL's faith in youth

SPORTS REPORTER

Sri Lanka coach Trevor Bayliss is optimistic with their young crop of current players and thinks that the players, who have played in most of the games of the just-concluded one-day series with India, have the talent in them to do whatever it takes to become champions in the tri-nation series.

"We are in a rebuilding phase for the last one or two years. We won the second ODI with a number of these players, and came pretty close in two of the last three games with these players against India. They showed a lot of talent, but lack a bit of experience. But we are confident that if we play good cricket we have a good chance of winning the tournament."

The Australian is aware of the imminent challenge in their opening against hosts Bangladesh who have enjoyed a successful year and have upset their bigger opponents more than once in the past.

"Bangladesh have had some good results over the past twelve months since we were here last. We had a couple of close games, we know they can beat any team on their day, so we are not taking them lightly."

Bangladesh, in the past, have been too inept in handling Sri Lankan spin as they fell to the spin maze of Muttiah Muralidaran, Ajantha Mendis, Sanath Jayasuriya and the likes. But this time there is no Murali, Mendis or Jayasuriya. This will surely weaken Sri Lanka's spin attack and Trevor did nothing to hide the fact.

"Our spin attack is a little inexperienced. There is no spinner in the team like Murali. But still there are others like Suraj Randiv who was probably the best spinner in the last series. Malinga Bandara gets another opportunity to prove his worth. Pushpakumara is a good spinning all-rounder. We are banking on them to deliver."

It is perhaps the reason behind the absence of explosive batsman and spinner Sanath Jayasuriya and his future in cricket was the most talked about issue.

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Enamul on fire

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Striker Enamul Haque struck a brace as defending champions Abahani came from behind to post a 3-1 win over Rahmatganj Muslim Friends Society in the Citycell Bangladesh League at the Birshreshtha Shaheed Sepoy Mostafa Kamal Stadium in Kamalapur yesterday.

The holders, unbeaten in 18 games in the League including 11 matches last season, got goosebumps as early as in the eighth minute when Rahmatganj's Nigerian midfielder Onyokoro Felix send the ball home thanks to some sloppy goalkeeping from Biplob who let loose a beefy shot despite grabbing it by both hands.

The goal sounded a warning for Abahani, who lost their opening game against the Old Town outfit 1-2 last season. But with Enamul in sublime touch the Sky Blues bounced back in ruthless fashion, making sure they took the lead even before both teams set off for the lemon break.

Enamul struck his first goal in the 40th minute. After receiving a long ball from Ghanaian Awudu Ibrahim, the long-haired poacher let fly a spectacular volley giving no chance for Rahmatganj custodian Arifuzzaman Himel to react.

Awudu, who marshalled the midfield, gave Abahani the lead at the stroke of the breather heading home a Mehdi Hasan Ujjal minus.

Two minutes into the second half, Enamul struck his sixth league goal to surpass his teammate Sherif Din Mohammad and rivals Mohammedan striker Zahid Hasan Emily as the leading scorer. Latching on a defence splitting pass from Awudu, Enamul slipped past his marker before placing the ball past an advancing Rahmatganj custodian.

It was a satisfying result for an injury-hit Abahani, who started the match without key defenders Rajani Kanta Barman, Ibnul Siraji and in-form striker Sherif.

Awudu also came close to widening the margin in the first-paced game when he headed a Zahed Parvez freekick wide in the 52nd minute while Rahmatganj substitute goalkeeper Nehal tipped over a Sujjan header in the 80th minute.

Rahmatganj were deprived of a goal nine minutes from time when a powerful drive from Felix came off the crossbar much to the relief of Abahani goalkeeper Biplob.

Abahani coach Amalesh Sen made three changes in the second half with Rajani playing the last 10 minutes as a midfielder just to assess his fitness status.

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A stern New Year test for Tigers

SPORTS REPORTER

The country has been going through a cold wave but it is expected that there will be no short of fireworks out in the middle at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur when the tri-nation one-day tournament kicks off today with a match between hosts Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

The run riots in the recently concluded India-Sri Lanka series gave the clear indication that a similar batting extravaganza awaits on a similar surface at Mirpur from the two in-form sides. The Tigers will also play the tournament on the back of a remarkable year where they won 14 ODIs out of 19 but the opponents were not as tough as they are going to face in the tournament in their first assignment of the New Year.

So, the obvious question is whether Shakib Al Hasan's men can keep the momentum against the two mighty opponents?

Spinners were the key behind the success against the teams like West Indies and Zimbabwe but it will not be the same case when they face the Sri Lankan batsmen in today's match because the Lankans have the ability to handle the slow bowlers much better than the two opponents especially with a batsman like Tillakaratne Dilshan, who is in prime form.

Shakib will also rely on an inexperienced pace attack in the absence of injured Mashrafe Bin Mortaza and Nazmul Hossain as Rubel Hossain will

operate the new ball along with debutant Shaiful Islam. Left-arm seamer Syed Rasel and Shahadat Hossain were left out from the team along with two ICL-returnees Shahrir Nafees and Aftab Ahmed.

But despite all the deficiency, Bangladesh captain Shakib believes that his team have got the ability to beat any team while coach Jamie Siddons said it's a good opportunity for them to do something against this Sri Lankan side, which missed some key players for the tournament.

"We can beat any team but in that case we have to play our best cricket. We are really excited to play the tournament," said Shakib, the world's number one all-rounder in ODI rankings who along with Shahrir Nafees also made the preliminary IPL auction list.

The Bangladesh team will definitely rely on the slow bowlers but the young Tigers skipper was also optimistic about his two new ball bowlers including Shaiful, the 20-year Bogra lad who was the highest wicket-taker in the recently concluded Premier League with 30 scalps. Like many, Shakib also praised the newcomer who can move the ball both ways and has stock balls in his arsenal.

"We tried many combinations but we are yet to get the right one. True, Shaiful (Islam) is inexperienced but he has got the quality to perform well and we have all faith on this young bowler. On the other hand we are yet to get the best from Rubel (Hossain)," said a confident Shakib.

The selectors have tried so many pace bowlers in the last one and a half year and none is yet to cement their place, so it

would be interesting to see how Shaiful takes the challenge.

Sri Lanka has also a lack of bite in their bowling attack but can Bangladesh grab the opportunity?

"We had 12 months against Zimbabwe and a 'West Indies A' team, but last month's Premier League was a great competition and the players have played very good cricket. And the training over the last few weeks was fantastic," said Siddons.

"As I said it wasn't ideal preparation for this tournament but you can't always play the best team I guess. Others teams were busy. We had Zimbabwe to beat, West Indies to beat and we did it really well. I think the way we played was pleasing. The wins are wins, I mean I love winning. But the way the boys have played, the way they have handled people like Kemar Roach in the West Indies bowling at 150km...no problem and people like (Raymond) Price of Zimbabwe who is one of the top 10 bowlers in the world," he added.

In response of a question on meeting Sri Lanka again at the beginning of the New Year after playing them in January 2009 in India he said, "I think the wicket had a bit of seam then. We should have won that final had Murali not played some pretty good cricket at the end. We have got no fears with Sri Lanka but we will have to play really good cricket to compete against both the sides," he said.

"It's a fantastic opportunity to see where we are and to see how much we have improved and to see how matured the boys have become."

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Straight Drive

SUNIL GAVASKAR

Follow Gavaskar in Star Sport

Dear readers, Indian batting legend Sunil Gavaskar is writing exclusively for The Daily Star Sport. He will be giving his pre-views and reviews as well as expert opinion on the tri-nation Idea Cup and the subsequent two-Test series between Bangladesh and India. In all he will write 13 articles first of which has already appeared yesterday. And his next write-ups are coming up on January 5, 7, 10, 13 and 15 for the tri-series while for the Tests the dates are January 18, 20, 22, 25, 27, 29 and 30. So stay tuned to the Star Sport.

BCCI readies Kotla reply

Cricket

PTI, Mumbai

The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) top brass met here yesterday to draft their reply to the International Cricket Council (ICC) showcase notice on the December 27 pitch fiasco at Feroz Shah Kotla so that the venue evades an international ban and gets away with a fine.

Top BCCI officials, including Board president Shashank Manohar and Delhi and District Cricket Association chief Arun Jaitley, met here to draft the Cricket Board's reply to the ICC showcase notice on the episode.

According to sources, BCCI, in its response, would stress on the point that while the pitch may have been "poor", it was not "unfit" altogether.

"If the pitch is deemed just 'poor', you can pay the fine and get away with it."

End of Ntini?

Cricket

AFP, Cape Town

Makhaya Ntini was dropped from the South African team on Sunday in a move which could hasten the end of a notable Test career.

Ntini, 32, did not travel to the ground after being told that he was not in the team for the third Test at Newlands, the ground where he started his 101-Test career against Sri Lanka 12 seasons ago.

Although the team was not announced publicly until shortly before the toss, the players were informed of the selection on Saturday and Ntini was given the option of returning home, according to team spokesman Michael Owen-Smith.

Ntini's axing had been widely anticipated after he performed poorly in the first two Tests against England.

In the 2008 calendar year he took only 13 wickets in six Tests at an average of 57.00. Experts believed that a loss of pace had reduced his effectiveness.

Speculation about the future of a man described by both captain Graeme Smith and coach Mickey Arthur as one of South Africa's iconic cricketers was fuelled by a report in the London Sunday Telegraph which claimed Ntini was set to join English county Middlesex as a Kolpak player, which would preclude him from playing international cricket.

The Sunday Telegraph claimed Ntini intended to announce his retirement from international cricket and that he had signed a pre-contract agreement with Middlesex.

Owen-Smith said he was unaware of Ntini reaching an agreement with Middlesex.

"He is contracted to Cricket South Africa which means he cannot sign any contracts without CSA's agreement," he said.

Ntini has had a special status in South African sport as the first black African to play Test cricket for the country. Although three others have also won Test caps, Ntini remains the only black African to hold down a long-term place in the team.

At his best, Ntini was able to bowl tirelessly at high pace. He

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What to WATCH

BTV & NEO Cricket

Bangladesh v Sri Lanka
First ODI, Idea Cup
Live from 2:30pm

TEN Sports

South Africa v England
Third Test, Day Two
Live from 2:30pm

STAR Cricket

Australia v Pakistan
Second Test, Day Three
Live from 5:30am (Tuesday)

DAY'S EVENT

Idea Cup

Bangladesh v Sri Lanka
Venue: Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium, Mirpur
Time: 2:30pm

Bangladesh League

Mohammedan v Farashganj
Venue: Kamalapur Stadium
Time: 2:45pm



PHOTO: STAR
BATS-CROSSED! Bangladesh opener Tamim Iqbal (L) and captain Shakib Al Hasan discuss strategy as they leave the field after an indoor practice session at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday.