

Will India smile again?

ATIQUÉ ANAM

India will be looking to maintain their supremacy in major tournaments over Sri Lanka when the teams meet in the final of the Idea Cup at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur today.

The two teams have played against each other more than anyone else in the last one and half years and out of the 22 meetings during this period, India beat their southern neighbours 13 times and lost only seven times.

However in the tournament so far, both teams have won once against each other. So it would not be easy to predict the outcome.

India's batting line-up has clicked on most occasions and they have won their last two games without even playing their most potent batsman Virender Sehwag. They will be welcoming the master-blaster from Nazafgarh upfront to partner Gautam Gambhir. The dashing opener is looking forward to the challenge. "After two days of rest, I'm feeling fresh and looking for the challenge. I am a good batsman and I'm backing myself to play well in the final," said a confident Sehwag.

Another one to be in supreme form for India is their 21-year-old batsman Virat Kohli who has scored one century and two near ones in the four matches so far. As a senior player Sehwag was very satisfied to see the young ones like Kohli and Raina taking up the challenge.

"The youngsters are doing very well. It shows our batting strength. Having players like Kohli, Suresh Raina, Rohit Sharma gives us options."

India's top-order batting has been doing so well that there is no apparent place for either Dinesh Karthik or Rohit.

There is cause for concern in the bowling department though who have leaked too many runs both in the beginning and at the death. Sudeep Tyagi, the inexperienced seamer has impressed, and so has Yuvraj Singh with his part time spin. Shanthakumar Sreesanth has been wayward and expensive and while Zaheer Khan and Ashish Nehra have only come good of late. But Sehwag still thinks that their bowlers won't be under pressure against a side they have played so many times over the last one and half years.

"I don't think they will be under pressure. We have been playing SL a lot of

times in the last year or so. I am expecting we will bowl well and win."

All the six matches of the competition have followed a definite pattern; the team batting second have chased down whatever total was put on board, under favourable conditions. So, what sort of total would be enough to win the final?

"It's hard to tell. With the advent of Twenty20 cricket, mindset has changed, style of batting has changed. No score is safe now. Even 400 is not a safe total these days, as the Lankans almost proved that in Rajkot," was Sehwag's realisation before the all-important final.

One thing that has played the deciding role so far in the tournament is the toss, so will the toss prove crucial in determining the outcome of the final as well?

Sehwag downplayed the impact and concentrated on the need for doing well in all departments. "True toss is a factor. But if you do well in all three departments, you will win no matter you win or lose the toss."

That is what India will need, performance in all three departments, to prove their supremacy over their southern neighbours in the final.



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Sri Lanka's chances of winning the Idea Cup will rest on the broad shoulders of their super-trio of Kumar Sangakkara (2nd from L), Mahela Jayawardene (C) and Tillakaratne Dilshan.

Will Kumar call the coin correctly once more?

BISHWAJIT ROY



Who are the favourites in today's final of the Idea Cup tri-nation tournament?

The answer will be: 'Win the toss and win the match'. It has been the case so far in the tournament where the team winning the toss and opting to chase under lights took full advantage of the dew factor to chase down any target.

Bangladesh's Australian coach Jamie Siddons might be a mere spectator when India and Sri Lanka lock horns in the mouth-watering final, he too observed that there was nothing to separate between the two teams except for the toss that would play a big factor in deciding the winner.

Sri Lanka skipper Kumar Sangakkara has every reason to be excited since he called the coin correctly four out of four times in the league matches. He chose to chase on three occasions and won those games comfortably. His one venture to bat first against India only after confirming the final backfired badly.

So, definitely this time Sangakkara will not take any risk as the dew factor remained as a threat for the bowlers to grip the ball firmly.

But what will happen if ultimately the Lady Luck makes a mockery with the Lankan skipper in the final?

Sangakkara however looked not too much worried about the toss factor.

Rather he came up with a formula on how to win even if the toss is lost.

"I am sure you can, nothing is impossible [if needed to field second]. If you get a good total on the board and then bowl a disciplined line and length in the evening even with the dew you should be able to pull off a win. Dew is a problem, that's given, if you have watched the series you would have known by this time. But once you know the problem you try and overcome it," said the confident Lankan skipper.

Then the obvious question was in that case what would be a defendable total.

"I don't know, anything over 270, 280 is a good total on this track," was the response of the islander.

But the fact was that 296 runs were even not good enough for the Tigers to defend against India.

Sangakkara's men lost the last series in India as well as the last league game in the tournament but he said that they would go into the final with a fresh mind to win the game.

"We always try and do our best that we can and make sure we prepare as well as we can. We just want to play and see, then I am not going to make any prediction about what's going to happen. We just will go with a fresh mindset and try and win it," he said.

"It was a bad performance for us in the second game against India with the bat and ball and even in the field with our catching. So that's a game we have got to

try and forget but also learn from the mistakes," he added.

Indian dashing opener Virender Sehwag is in rich vein of form and the right-hander is all set to come back to the side after being rested in the last two games.

"I don't know [whether Sehwag play the final]. It depends on how he performs on the day. If he performs well it will be crucial for India, if he doesn't it will be good for us," Sangakkara responded adding that they were also not too much concerned with the form of young Indian batsman Virat Kohli.

Sangakkara also heaped praises on his young brigade.

"I think it's really great opportunity to give young guys some games for not just because they are young, because they are good. It's nice to see these newcomers coming in and really performing. In the year going forward from here we hope that many of these guys will push for a permanent place and give every one a run for their money," he hoped.

Among the young players spinner Suraj Randiv hogged the spotlight with his bowling and the question was raised whether his impressive performance will keep spin wizard Muttiah Muralidaran out of the one-day side for long.

"I think you know he [Randiv] is pushing for a permanent place in the one-day side without a doubt. Murali is Murali, you know, no one is to be compared with

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PHOTO: STAR

India will be relying heavily on the rich form of Virat Kohli along with the big names in their batting lineup to guide them to Idea Cup triumph.

Boxers happy at home

SPORTS REPORTER



The success of Bangladesh boxers has been few and far between in the South Asian Games. They have won only two gold medals in the regional sporting extravaganza and that too on home soil. And this might be a good reason for Bangladesh Amateur Boxing Federation to dream of winning gold when the 11th edition of SA Games begins here on January 29.

Boxer Musharaf Hossain, having beaten his Pakistani rival Muhammed Yousef in 91kg category, won the first-ever gold for Bangladesh when the country staged the second edition of the regional competition in 1985. In that year they finished with one gold, four silver and five bronze medals.

But there were no boxing gold in the next three meets for Bangladesh, who

again hit the gold when it hosted the Games in 1993.

That time Mozammal Haque won the 51kg category gold medal defeating another Pakistani Ali Muhammad Qamrani and Bangladesh finished with one gold, three silvers and five bronzes.

Since then the trend of drought in gold continued for the Bangladeshi boxers. Now the Games returns to their own den and the boxers are excited about the hope that it would end the drought.

Although the fact that the performance of the boxers in the last 16 years was not satisfactory, they have lost their regional position having secured just three bronzes in the last SA Games and finished sixth out of eight participants, the officials of boxing federation initially set an highly ambitious target of winning six gold medals out of seven up for grabs.

However, they finally set a more realistic target of clinching two gold medals in 54kg and 64kg categories respectively.

"The boxers have been training since

January last year and some of them have received advanced training in Italy and Thailand and they did well in both trainings. That's why we are expecting gold medals from Nadim Hossain (54kg) and Abdur Rahim (64kg)," said coach Kazi Abdul Mannan adding that they were also expecting to do well in 48kg category (Moshiur Rahman Kazol) and 81kg category (Zahiruddin Rubel) though the latter event has yet to be confirmed.

Mannan also informed that Nadim and Rahim had trained in Italy for one month before taking part in the World Championship and later seven boxers including the duo and two coaches were sent to Thailand for two months training and the boxers have been following the schedules prepared by a Cuban coach and a Thai coach, who trained the Bangladeshi boxers in Thailand.

There is another reason for expecting gold medals because the Bangladesh boxers would avoid rivals from Pakistan

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Sachin comes here today

SPORTS REPORTER

Master India batsman Sachin Tendulkar arrives here today to join the team for the two-match Test series against Bangladesh.

Rahul Dravid, VVS Laxman, Ishant Sharma, Pragyan Ojha and Murali Vijay will accompany the batting maestro.

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BTV & NEO Cricket
Sri Lanka v India
Final, Idea Cup
Live from 2:00pm
ESPN
SportsCenter India
Sports News
Live from 8:30pm
Australia v Pakistan
Third Test, Day One
Live from 5:30am (Thursday)

The unsung hero

SPORTS REPORTER



The Idea Cup tri-nation was a tournament for Mahmudullah Riyad to provide a glimpse of how reliable he could be as a batsman for the team. He looked average with his ordinary spin as well as in the late order batting since he made his one-day international debut against Sri Lanka in Colombo in July 2007 and his few sporadic innings could hardly catch the eyes of the fans or the cricket pundits. But with the performances in the tri-nation tournament the stylish cricketer gave an impression that he has improved a lot to cement his place in the team; if it is not as an all-rounder then definitely as a batsman.

It was fantastic to watch the way this right-hander batted in the tournament to finish with a staggering average of 193 as he remained not out in

last three innings (60, 24 and 64) after making 45 in the first game against Sri Lanka. The 23-year-old batsman from Mymensingh showed a rare quality of milking the singles and smashing the ball hard when needed.

And it was none other than Bangladesh coach Jamie Siddons showered praises on Mahmudullah.



MAHMUDULLAH RIYAD

"He was great and it was fantastic to watch the way he finished the innings. He has improved a lot after making some adjustment in his stance," said Siddons, who expressed his satisfaction over his team's batting performance. But bowling and fielding concerned the coach.

Riyad also admitted that his coach's instruction in making the adjustment to his stance helped him a lot to bat with ease.

"I have had some problem with my stance and I followed my coach instruction to correct it and got the result in the tournament. Actually the last few series gave me the confidence to play better in this tri-nation tournament but I know consistency is the most important thing to keep the place in the team," said Riyad.

"I'm getting support from my family and Sujon vai [Khaled Mahmud] also helps me to get tougher in the international cricket. I think mental

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India and Sri Lanka will continue their battle for one-day supremacy when they clash in the finals of the Tri-nations Trophy in Dhaka. Having already played against each other twice in this event as well as faced off for nearly two months before that there are no secrets between the two teams. They know each other's strengths and weaknesses inside out and so will be prepared for any eventuality.

What the one-day series in India showed was that there is very little to choose between the two teams and the team that keeps its head on the day will end up holding the trophy. Yes, the fielding will be crucial and over here the Lankans have certainly showed a lot more commitment than the Indians have. In Kohli, Jadeja, Raina and Yuvraj India have some of the finest fielders in the world and Dhoni's keeping is top class. Gambhir, Harbhajan and Sehwag have safe and good throwing arms but it's in the extra effort or rather the lack of it at the boundary in the final overs of the innings that India give away some runs which can be decisive in a close game. If India can plug this, then it will be a truly formidable team since its batting and bowling is top class. Amit Mishra has certainly made a case for inclusion the team after his crafty bowling in the two games he has played and Dhoni and his tour selectors will have to think hard about having him in the eleven for the finals. A leg-spinner can be a match turner in limited overs matches and it is a gamble worth taking for Dhoni.

The only worry for him is the form of Yuvraj Singh who has strangely played down the wrong line in the two dismissals that he has had in the tournament. He is a world class act and players like him take very little time to get back to form. His bowling though has been useful again and it's an extra option for Dhoni and gives the team more flexibility.

What has been most pleasing is the form of Virat Kohli, who has grabbed his opportunities and made the most of them with batting of the highest calibre. Gambhir though not at his most fluent is working hard to regain his touch and his application is tremendous. India have few issues about its batting and with Zaheer back in the team for the finals the bowling also will be in good hands.

Of course with somebody like Dilshan, Sangakkara, Samaraweera, Jayawardene in the opposition ranks no bowling attack can feel safe. If these guys get going and if Tharanga gives himself some time out in the middle the Lankans, can get and chase a huge score. There is Perera too who can tear an attack in the final overs so it does promise to be a great finals.

Sri Lanka have a better recent record in a multi-nation tournament than India and the finals will finally decide after two months of skirmishes which is the better one-day team.

U-19s defeat Aussies too



SPORTS REPORTER

The young Tigers kept up their good form in New Zealand before the start of the International Cricket Council U-19 World Cup as they beat Australia by 20 runs in their second and last warm up match at the Elmwood Park in Christchurch yesterday.

It was their second win in two days after they had defeated hosts New Zealand by 36 runs in Duckworth Lewis method on Monday.

Bangladesh skipper Mahmudul Hasan won the toss and decided to bat first this time. The skipper scored an unbeaten 75 runs while leg-break bowler Shabbir Rahman took four wickets to register this victory over the young brigade from down under.

This too, as the previous one, was a curtailed match. Bangladesh team piled up 230 runs for the loss of seven wickets in their stipulated 39 overs. There were three more important knocks in the Bangladesh innings. Wicketkeeper-batsman Anamul Haque who missed out on the previous day, played an attacking 58-run knock from just 50 deliveries with three sixes and as many boundaries. Saikat Ali played a sensible knock of 61 runs while the skipper batted brilliantly for his 75 runs off just 65 deliveries with the help of five boundaries and two sixes and remained not out to put on this big total on board.

Then the Bangladesh bowlers

did a great job as they curtailed half of the Australian batting within 78 runs. Leg-break bowler Shabbir bowled an excellent spell of 4 for 34 in eight overs as the Australians were skittled out for 210 runs in 38.4 overs. There were two 40-something and a few mid-twenties knocks in the Australian innings, but none was good enough to take them home.

With these two successful warm-up games, Bangladesh will go into the tournament proper in a confident mood. They play their first match of the tournament against Papua New Guinea at the Fitzherbert Park in Napier on Saturday. The tournament gets underway on Friday.

BRIEF SCORES
BANGLADESH UNDER-19: 230 for 7 in 39 overs (Anamul Haque 58, Saikat Ali 61, Mahmudul Hasan 75 not out; Richardson 2-46)
AUSTRALIA UNDER-19: 210 all out in 38.4 overs (Jason Floros 46, Tim Armstrong 41; Shabbir Rahman 4-34)
Result: Bangladesh Under-19 won by 20 runs.



Idea Cup Final
Sri Lanka v India
Venue: Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium, Mirpur
Time: 2:00pm