

Tigers trio preach virtues of reading

WASIM BIN HABIB and ANISUR RAHMAN

They could not believe their eyes: the national cricket team heroes are here playing with them!

"Am I dreaming?" Ismat Ara Shyama asked herself, stopping for a while as she and her classmates surrounded Bangladeshi players Junaed Siddique, Mahmudullah Riyad and Shahriar Nafees.

The three national cricketers yesterday went to the Kishalay Girls' School and College in Mohammadpur to attend the closing event of the 'Reading Festival' organised by Room to Read, an educational partner of the International Cricket Council (ICC).

The girls said that it was a pleasantly surprising end to their two-day wait when they finally came to know that three national cricketers would be coming to their school to take part in the festival at a time when the entire country is hot with World Cup cricket fever.

"We knew that three cricketers would be coming but we did not know their names. With excitement I passed two restless nights to see the national cricketers closely," said Shyama.

Shyama's game partner Rubayat Islam said, "I never thought that I would be able to play with Junaed."

"I thought that I would be able to see the players but actually playing with them was beyond my expectations," she said, her eyes glittering with joy.

"We cannot express how happy we are. It's a dream come true," she added.

Like Shyama and Rubayat, it was a day of extreme joy and gaiety for some 200 students of the school who kept on screaming and cheering during the hour-long stay of the cricketers.

Most of the students expected Bangladeshi captain Shakib Al Hasan and vice captain Tamim Iqbal to attend the programme. But even though they did not attend, it did not have any impact on their zeal as they were seen busy taking photographs and

autographs of the players amid tight security.

Room to Read chose the school for the closing ceremony because of time and security issues of the players. Every year, the organisation holds the function, which comprises of some language games and reading, writing and drawing activities, at their programme areas.

Currently, the organisation is working in two districts -- Sirajganj and Brahampur -- since 2009 and are supporting 269 government or registered primary and six secondary schools to promote the skill and habit of reading.

Yesterday, Junaed, Mahmudullah and Nafees took part in a reading-based game called 'Read and Run' with the three separate teams. Junaed's team won.

"It was a great game which taught us a lot," said Rubayat, whose team Junaed played in.

However, the scenario was a bit less exciting for 13 girls who came from remote Chars of Sirajganj under Room to Read's education assistance programme for girls.

Even though a number of them are not accustomed to cricket or national cricketers they still enjoyed the event yesterday.

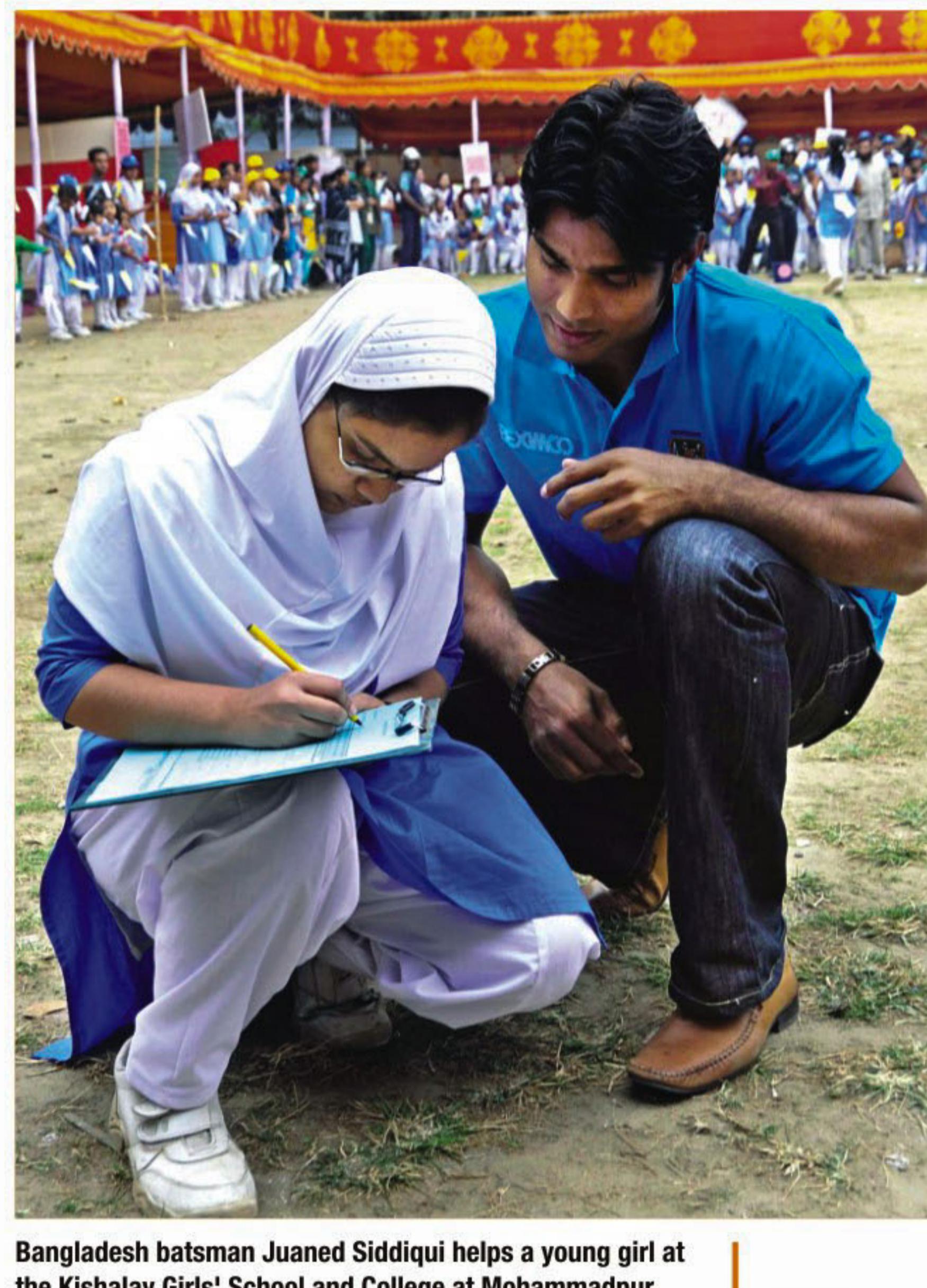
Hawa Khatun, student of class VIII of Sholoshat Jangolia High School in Sirajganj, said that since they have no electricity they watch the World Cup through battery-operated televisions.

These 13 girls were awarded for their outstanding result in the terminal exams in their respective classes despite staying in the remote chars.

The cricketers handed over a crest to the 13 girls and prizes to the winners of several games took place at the school yesterday.

Speaking on behalf of the players at the event, Shahriar Nafees urged the students to read more to acquire knowledge.

"We practice hard to attain perfection in the game. Similarly, you need to practice more for the perfection of your brain and the practice is reading," he said.



Bangladesh batsman Junaed Siddique helps a young girl at the Kishalay Girls' School and College at Mohammadpur during the closing event of the Reading Festival organised by non-profit organisation Room to Read.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Sachin's MRI found clear

AFP, Mumbai

Batting superstar Sachin Tendulkar handed India a World Cup injury scare when he underwent scans of his left knee, barely two days after the start of the tournament.

Tendulkar, 37, had only recently recovered from a hamstring strain which forced him to miss three games of the recent five-match one-day series against South Africa.

He made 28 in India's opening World Cup match against Bangladesh in Dhaka on Saturday which the visitors went on to win by 87 runs.

"The MRI scan is clear. There is no problem," the Press Trust of India quoted sources at the hospital as saying.

The scan was done as a precautionary measure after the batsman complained of discomfort in the knee.

Tendulkar is slated to fly to Bangalore Monday evening to join the rest of the squad ahead of their Group B clash against England on February 27.

The opening batsman is the leading run-getter in both Test (14,692) and one-dayers (17,657).

Scarcity of tickets kicks up a fuss

AFP, Mumbai

Cricket fans lashed out on Monday when it was revealed that just 4,000 tickets will go on sale for the World Cup final at Mumbai's historic but capacity-squeezed Wankhede Stadium.

The venue for the title match, which has already been criticised for failing to meet fire safety regulations, has undergone major renovations for the tournament which led to a reduction in seating from 38,000 to 33,000.

Tournament director Ratnakar Shetty said obligations, which require 20,000 tickets to be provided to clubs linked to the Mumbai Cricket Association and 8,500 to the International Cricket Council, have slashed the selling options.

But angry fans complained that supporters were being squeezed out and questioned

why Kolkata's Eden Gardens, with a 65,000-capacity, was not named as the venue for the April 2 showpiece.

"Disgusting... only 4,000 tickets... this is a big failure of management," wrote one fan on the cricinfo website.

Another added: "Are you kidding me? Why are we hosting the final on one of the smallest grounds in the country? Assuming Eden Gardens is ready by April 2, the final should be moved there."

"What's the purpose of hosting the final in India if only 4,000 out of the millions of spectators are able to watch it from the stands," said one more.

Shetty admitted his hands were tied by contractual duties, but said the fact that 20,000 tickets were going to clubs meant that the public was not missing out.

The ICC said that tickets for the final, as well as the two semifinals, would be available online from Monday.

Pakistan not haunted by corruption: Younis

AFP, Hambantota

Pakistan coach Waqar Younis said on Monday that the spot-fixing scandal, which sparked lengthy bans for three high-profile players, will not haunt his embattled team at the World Cup.

In fact, the controversy, said Waqar, is not even discussed in the dressing room.

Former Test captain Salman Butt and pace bowlers Mohammad Asif and Mohammad Aamer were banned on charges of corruption relating to last year's Lord's Test against England.

All three are facing criminal prosecution in Britain.

The punishments not only depleted the Pakistani team, but also affected their preparations for the World Cup.

"I don't think it will haunt Pakistan at all," said Waqar, ahead of Pakistan's opening match here on Wednesday against Kenya.

"We all know that we have been through tough times in the recent past but that does not mean that we don't have talent."

"Despite the problems we are a good enough team to beat anybody. Nobody is even talking of match-fixing or spot-fixing, whatever it was. It happened in the past and is beyond us now," said the 39-year-old former fast bowler.

Waqar said he and his players have learnt to deal with controversies.

"We have probably stopped reading the newspapers, and watching what is on TV," he said.

"At the moment we are just keeping our focus on the job. That's what we talk about and we cherish that we are part of a big tournament."

Waqar played down England paceman Stuart Broad's comments, who said he was keeping his distance from the Pakistan players in the aftermath of the controversy.

"I don't want to comment on what he (Broad) said. If he has said something which is not good, which is not fair to any individual or to any team, if he wants to keep doing that, well we will probably show it on the field."

"Pakistan are one of the top teams. I fully hope that we will get very good results in this tournament and we want to keep our focus on winning," said Waqar, who played 87 Tests and 232 one-dayers for Pakistan.



PHOTO: STAR

Gayle too wants 200

AFP, New Delhi

West Indies batting star Chris Gayle wants to emulate India's Sachin Tendulkar and notch up one-day cricket's second double-century at the

World Cup. Tendulkar rewrote the record books in February last year by hammering an unprecedented 200 not out against South Africa.

Tendulkar's teammate and opening partner Virender Sehwag came close to matching his feat in India's opening World Cup match against Bangladesh last week before being dismissed for 175.

Gayle, also an attacking opener, believes he can achieve the magical mark if he bats out the 50 overs.

"The master-blaster (Sachin Tendulkar) got it. A guy like Sehwag can get it. These are the guys who can get it once they get off to a good start. You bat through the 50 overs and it becomes a possibility."

"If I get a chance, I'll definitely chase it," said Gayle, whose highest score in one-day internationals is the 153 not out he scored against Zimbabwe in 2003.

The left-hander is also keen to polish his all-round skills and contribute to his team with his off-spinners, which have fetched him 156 wickets from 223 ODIs.

"I want to be the best all-rounder in the World Cup," said the 31-year-old. "I should be able to do bit of bowling and get a few wickets as well and also set up a good total for the team."

Gayle was realistic of his team's

chances at the showpiece tournament.

"The preparation has been good. We came from Sri Lanka, of course things didn't go according to our plan but at the same time it is a big occasion and we want to get a winning start."

"The key is to get a good start and in this new format, the top four get to the quarterfinals. That would be our objective and then anything is possible."

West Indies drew all the three rain-hit Tests in Sri Lanka before losing the following one-day series 2-0.

In the World Cup, West Indies have been drawn in Group B alongside Bangladesh, India, England, South Africa, the Netherlands and Ireland.

Their first match is against South Africa at the Feroz Shah Kotla Stadium in New Delhi on Thursday.

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