

BEYOND THE BOUNDARY

Of Tigers and Leprechauns

SHAKIL KASEM

The hour has come for Bangladesh to open up its cricketing soul to the rest of the world. In its own backyard, in the presence of multitudes who do not necessarily know one end of the bat from another, and who are certainly giving jingoism a whole new name. The first big game that is meant to matter the most beckons the Tigers. It is crunchcrunchcrunch time and more besides. Far from prying eyes across the seas the Tigers had succumbed to the Irish once before on the big stage. On home soil such a result again must surely be anathema. Pressure, did I hear someone say? You bet your reverse sweep in the Powerplay it is! Irrespective of all the politically correct statements from the skipper and the coach.

One bothersome aspect of this team has been the fact that it has gone into this competition without any definite indications of which is its effective fighting eleven. The squad had in its ranks one Mohammad Ashraf, whose lifespan in the team had been cut short for more than once and yet persisted with because of his stellar deeds in the previous two editions of the World Cup. If that indeed was his only criteria for fame and his inclusion in the squad and his only unique selling point, it begs the question then why he was not picked against India. Was the match against India a big one for the Tigers? Rest assured, the one today is an even bigger one. For the sake of the team and for his own, this is the match that should hopefully turn the tide for Ash. One of the saddest happenings in international cricket has been that of one of the most talented of modern day young batsmen to give away to far lesser mortals. Wrapped in a cloak, euphemistically referred to by many as that of an enigma, Ash may have been biding his time for one last blinding flash of his undisputed brilliance. If not, the world of cricket would be poorer with his departure from the big stage. The knives have been out for sometime now, and sadly for him, there are too many of them.

It would be an interesting eleven that the Tigers would be fielding today. Shafiq, mauled badly the last time around and with a shoulder not quite up to it is likely to be replaced by Nazmul, himself enjoying an uneasy relationship with fitness previously, but a trier nevertheless. The studious but out of sorts Riyad may have to sit this one out, to let the old master in for one final bite of the big apple. Any demons in the wicket likely to have been there must surely have been rolled conclusively beneath the surface by now. Spin, forte of the Tigers and the supposed Achilles heel of the Irish should be very much in evidence. The Irish have not played as yet but they have been making the right noises. Surprises could be in store because the luck of the Irish is known to travel long distances.

PS. Irish support will be there from an unexpected quarter too. Ishtiaq Hossain Hidi and his Irish wife Sheila are by all accounts well and truly geared to be there. Hidi with his Bangladesh flag and Sheila with her Irish. What ever the outcome, one of them is going to return home a very happy bunny.



Ireland ready to handle spinners

ANISUR RAHMAN

As Bangladesh appeared to be under a lot of pressure before their match against Ireland today, their opponents looked upbeat to challenge the co-hosts' spin attack at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium.

Ireland captain William Porterfield termed Bangladesh favourites for the day-night affair, but dismissed Bangladesh captain Shakib Al Hasan's warning that the Irish would struggle against spinners.

"We knew that spin was going to play a part even before coming here and Bangladesh's game is built around spinners as sometimes they play two and sometimes three, but we feel we are ready for it. We are looking forward to the match," said Porterfield at a pre-match briefing yesterday.

Smarting under an 87-run defeat to India in the opening game, Bangladesh go into the game with a must-win situation if they are to qualify for quarterfinals while Ireland will start their campaign as the last team from Group B.

The Irish captain is also well aware of the fact that not only in Bangladesh but anywhere on the subcontinent, spin is going to be a big part of this World Cup and they are fully prepared for it.

"We have prepared really well over the last

couple of years. And with the fact that we would be coming to India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, we worked really hard for the last few months. Now we've got to go out there and perform in the middle," said Porterfield, who struck 85 and 108 in Ireland's two significant wins against Bangladesh.

To cope with the subcontinent conditions, Ireland had toured Indian city Pune for one month in November last year and then had a two-week conditioning camp in Dubai before heading for India to play two World Cup practice matches. The Irish side also arrived in Dhaka eight days before their World Cup opener.

The leading Associate Member nation of the ICC stunned the cricketing world in the 2007 World Cup when they crushed Pakistan in the first round and then beat Bangladesh in the Super Eights, but the Irish captain doesn't want to recall much of that success and even doesn't want to take their 3-0 rout at the hands of the Tigers in 2008 into account.

"It was a while ago [World Cup], that was in the West Indies. Now they are playing in their home conditions in front of their home crowd and it is going to be a different.

"The last time we played in Bangladesh, we were taken by surprise by the heat, the humidity and the spinners, but this time we will not be found wanting," said the 26-year-

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Simmons gives the players their due

SAKEB SUBHAN

The name Phil Simmons, for older fans of the game, will conjure up images of a fierce West Indian competitor who was part of the great West

Indian side of the late 80s and early 90s. Since his last international game in 1999, Simmons devoted his considerable experience to being an international coach, and led a plummeting Zimbabwe till 2005. His prowess as a coach came to the fore, however, when he took over the reins of Ireland for the 2007 World Cup and guided them to the Super Eights stage in their first global tournament.

Four years on, he is still Ireland's coach as they embark on their second World Cup. Since 2007 Ireland have consolidated their position as the best of the Associate nations, winning 11 out of 17 matches since the start of 2010, including matches against Bangladesh and Zimbabwe last year, albeit in home conditions.

Credit should go to Phil Simmons for their consistent showing in international cricket but the former West Indies allrounder, speaking after Ireland's practice at Mirpur's Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium yesterday, said that the credit should go to his players.

"I think the secret is the amount of hard

work that the guys have put in. I think they've worked very hard on their games, and they always want to learn more and improve," Simmons said, and went on to identify the Associate nation's greatest strength. "I think, in general, our greatest strength is our unwillingness to die; unwillingness to say it's over, our enthusiasm and our team spirit. We work hard for each other."

The Ireland captain, William Porterfield had said that they want to qualify for the quarterfinals. To do that, the men from the Emerald Isle will look to put one over Bangladesh in today's game, a game that is a must-win for both teams to further their ambitions of going far in this tournament.

"Their cricket is improving, as it must. A lot of players have been playing for a while, so it must improve," said Simmons when asked about Bangladesh's progress. He is well placed to judge as he had led Zimbabwean as well as Irish tours to the country in the past.

"Especially at home they have improved. They've beaten New Zealand and Zimbabwe recently, and they played well against England. So everything is moving forward. From our point of view, we are moving up, and it will be good to play against them

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'Eng spin has tooth'

AFP, Bangalore

Ashes-winning England have spinners who can cause a headache for India if Sunday's World Cup match is played on a turning track, batsman Ravi Bopara said on Thursday.

"If it is a spinning deck we have got our own spinners who can cause problems. A pitch that spins is going to cause trouble for any team. It is going to cause problems for India as well," said Bopara.

"A lot is going to depend on the conditions. If the conditions don't suit spin we don't have to worry about it. It is going to be a good game."

India are expected to include a second specialist spinner against England, especially after the success of their slow men against defending champions Australia in a warm-up game at the same venue.

England, who meet India in the day-night match in Bangalore on Sunday, are seeking their second successive victory after having defeated the Netherlands in Nagpur on Tuesday.

Off-spinner Graeme Swann was England's most successful bowler with 2-35 off 10 tight overs, but their overall bowling performance was below par as they conceded 292 against the non-Test-playing nation.

"We were not our usual self the other day. But there are a lot of positives from that game, particularly the chase," said Bopara.

"A total of 293 is a big score against any side, especially in India where the wickets get slower and lower. It is harder to bat. We batted brilliantly especially at the top."

Bopara also played a key role in England's big chase, smashing a 20-ball 30 with one six and two fours.

"It [the knock against the Netherlands] does help the confidence. I felt a bit relaxed when I went in the other night. We always

knew we were going to win the game, but I had to ensure I was there till the end to finish it off."

India boast of exciting stroke-players in Virender Sehwag, Sachin Tendulkar and skipper Mahendra Singh Dhoni, but Bopara said his team had plans to keep pressure on the hosts' batting line-up.

"This is one of our toughest challenges in this tournament. We know what the Indian batsman are capable of, but we do have our plans to keep them quiet," said Bopara, who has so far scored 1,170 runs in 55 one-day internationals.

"Every match is big for us. Even the game the other night was big. Playing India in India is going to be huge. It's going to be massive for the fans. All the boys are looking forward to it."

"We have plans against each bowler and batsman but it is how the batsmen feel on the day. We generally play aggressive cricket. We know in places like Bangalore, there can be high totals like 270-300."

Bopara said he was looking forward to playing a big match before a sizeable holiday crowd.

"I have played in this atmosphere before in the IPL [Indian Premier League]. It is very, very noisy. You struggle to have a conversation with a player on the field but it is fun," he said.

"The crowd are enjoying it. At the end of the day you are an entertainer and you want them to enjoy. When you set yourself high standards you don't drift away. The crowd does pump you up."

Bopara, who replaced injured Eoin Morgan at the last moment for a place in the World Cup squad, said he was keen to make the most of the opportunity.

"It is a big opportunity to get back into the side. I have got two opportunities so far, one in the warm-up game and then in the opening match," Bopara said, adding his Indian idol was Tendulkar.

Send Murali off with Cup

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka want to win the World Cup as a farewell trophy for legendary spinner and world record holder Muttiah Muralidaran who will retire from international cricket after the tournament.

The spinner, who holds the records for Test (800) and one-day wickets (521), is playing his fourth and final World Cup. He retired from Tests in July last year.

"He is a special person, a legend," teammate Chamara Kapugedera said of the wily 38-year-old on Thursday.

"Everyone in the team wants to give him [Murali] a good send off. We want to win the cup for Murali. It will be a great tribute," added Kapugedera, during team practice at Colombo's renovated R. Premadasa Stadium.

Sri Lanka, the 1996 World Cup winners and 2007 runners-up, are also keen to lift the trophy for the legions of home fans who treat the sport like a religion.

"The Sri Lankan crowd have been very supportive of us, even in bad times. So we are working hard to bring the Cup home again for our supporters too," the right-handed batsman said.

Knicknamed "Kapu", the middle-order batsman managed only two runs in Sri Lanka's first game in their opening Group A match against Canada on Sunday.

A tougher test awaits on Saturday when Sri Lanka meet South Asian rivals Pakistan in Colombo.

Pakistan, the 1992 winners, won Tuesday's opening game against Kenya comfortably and have never lost a World Cup match against Sri Lanka in six previous meetings.

Kapugedera said Sri Lanka are ready to meet the "fiery Pakistanis" on home soil in front of a supportive home crowd.

"I think our top order is prepared for the challenge," he said, referring to facing key bowlers Shoaib Akhtar and Shahid Afridi.

"Our top-order has faced good fast bowlers before. We have had a very good stint in Australia too [last year]. The guys are up for the challenge and we are looking forward to delivering the goods," Kapugedera said.

"Pakistan are a good team. A good combination of bowlers and batsmen. Yes the pressure is there when we play them. But then again, we are also a good team with a good combination. Saturday's game should be good," he said.



DECKED UP: A South African supporter has spared no effort to let her allegiance be known as she waits for their World Cup match against West Indies to start at the the Feroz Shah Kotla Stadium in New Delhi yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP