

BEYOND THE BOUNDARY

Was the Tiger in the Tank?

SHAKIL KASEM

Yours truly is now in a state of monumental depression. Back to back debacles have induced a fear psychosis in oneself. Is the immediate future as dark and foreboding as I am making it out to be? Or is it just a passing cloud likely to drift away and normal business resume to the relief of a tortured mind straining to come to grips with existing reality? A total of 58 has sprouted a host of unsavoury possibilities, all of which are pregnant with morbid implications. England winning by 6 runs have further complicated an existing scenario already rife with the tensions so typical of the fear of the unknown. Add the fact that the Barclays Premier League is now thrown open to the vultures waiting for the kill. Man United forgot to turn up at Anfield the other night and gifted another three points. To LIVERPOOL! Has this crazy world gone crazier all of a sudden?

But let's get back to England. A performance quite out of the ordinary. Only 170 odd to the good, yet packing enough firepower, grit and resolve to make a statement. A loud message sent out to all and sundry that there is still a long long way to Tipperary, before this group of teams can call it a day. For Bangladesh, this result must be a shock rude to the extreme. The Tigers are presently in Chittagong, seeking some respite and finding much needed time to lick their wounds inflicted by the Windies to both body and ego. The wary and tactical retreat from Dhaka, the scene of the most horrendous crime committed on a cricket field this side of the Suez in recent times could not have served the purpose of the team, as news of the English victory filtered in slowly but surely.

Choking is an ability rare to many, yet perfected to a fine art by the South Africans. Against England SA proved to the world they are past masters of this craft. There is little to deny them the tag of having the most potent bowling attack in this group; a battery of quick men complemented by a duo of spinners, one of whom has brought the dying art of leg-spin back in fashion. A robust batting order capable of scoring runs at will somehow managed to crumble at the most inappropriate stage of the match, thus nullifying all that the bowlers had achieved earlier in the day. All of which enabled England to rise from the ashes of what has been a dismal competition for them so far. Food for scary thoughts for the Tigers?

From a purely cricketing point of view, there is reason for concern in the Tigers' camp. Suddenly the English quickies are found to be running in with purpose and the rhythm seems to be back. The batsmen are no strangers to the subcontinent and least of all the Tigers' bowling attack. Chittagong too has been a happy hunting ground for them not too long ago. Although the Tigers' batting boasts of a tail supposedly marginally longer than that of a dachshound's, the team has a proliferation of left handed batsmen. And England have Graeme Swann arguably the best off-spinner against these kind of batsmen. Life unfortunately is not showing much signs of getting any easier.

The onus however lies elsewhere, after the events of a certain Friday not too long ago. Priorities are piling up for the Tigers, not just to perform in the manner they are capable of; but also to prove that there is enough still left in them to keep the dream alive. A modest dream perhaps, but shared by millions. Therein lies the pressure. Can it be handled? Only if we can answer the metaphysical question, do we have the tiger in the tank?

Smith has faith in his team

AFP, Nagpur

Defiant South Africa captain Graeme Smith backed his team to succeed at the World Cup despite the capitulation against England which had his critics dusting off their 'chokers' accusations.

"I believe in this team...we have the opportunity to shape today and tomorrow and we will be there when it counts. Thank to our loyal supporters," said Smith on Twitter on Monday. "One thing is for sure...I'm not gonna admit to people's agendas...this team has something."

On Sunday, Smith hit back at claims his side had 'choked' after a dramatic six-run loss to England in Chennai.

Needing just 172 to win, they were cruising at 63 without loss. But they then lost three wickets for 19 runs and three more in the middle of their innings for no runs with the score on 124.

"That's not predictable at all, is it?" said a sarcastic Smith, when questioned about South Africa's composure under stress.



Pakistan paceman Shoaib Akhtar sends down a delivery as captain Shahid Afridi looks on during a training session at the Pallekele Stadium in Pallekele yesterday, ahead of their World Cup match against New Zealand today.

PHOTO: AFP

PAKISTAN V NEW ZEALAND: PALLEKELE

Mystery pitch in focus

AFP, Pallekele

In-form Pakistan batsman Misbahul Haq said his team was ready for the double challenge of facing New Zealand as well as a mystery World Cup pitch on Tuesday.

The Group A rivals meet at the newly-built Pallekele Stadium in the first-ever one-day match at the venue, a factor which vice-captain Misbah believes will give both teams plenty to think about.

"Of course, it adds to the challenge because we don't know how the pitch will behave but that's the same for both teams, and as far as we are concerned we are up to the challenge," Misbah said Monday.

The 36-year-old has anchored the Pakistan team in the World Cup with two half-centuries against Kenya and Sri Lanka and a hard-fought 37 in the last match against Canada.

Pakistan sit top of Group A with six points after three matches, followed by co-hosts Sri Lanka (five points in four) and defending champions Australia (five after three), with New Zealand fourth with four in three matches.

Misbah said Pakistan's recent one-day series win over New Zealand will count for nothing.

"We have done well against them in World Cups and in the recent series there but that win will count for nothing as it's a new game at a new place," said Misbah, of Pakistan's 3-2 win in New Zealand last month.

Pakistan will bring in paceman Shoaib Akhtar after resting him in the last match against Canada, while left-arm spinner Abdur Rehman will also be available after missing the last match due to a leg muscle injury.

Led by skipper Shahid Afridi's leg-spin, which has garnered a tournament-leading 14 wickets, Pakistan possess variety in their bowling with off-spinners Saeed Ajmal and Mohammad Hafeez, coupled with a strong new-ball attack of Akhtar, Umar Gul and Wahab Riaz.

"I think we know how good their bowling can be," said New Zealand captain Daniel

Vettori.

"They can probably defend any score because of the nature of their bowlers. They bring a lot to the table."

Pakistan successfully defended a below par 185-run target against Canada and 278 against co-hosts Sri Lanka in the two of their three matches.

New Zealand, who lost to Australia by seven wickets but eased past Kenya and Zimbabwe by 10 wickets in each game, have four points after three matches.

"We know to win these big games it needs complete team performances and that's what we have done."

"It's a matter of stepping up against the harder teams," said Vettori, whose country has lost six World Cup matches against Pakistan since winning their first in 1983.

Unlike the bowling head-to-head, New Zealand hold the upper hand in batting, with openers Martin Guptill (86) and Brendon McCullum (76) chasing a 186-run target against Zimbabwe without being separated.

"I'm not sure you could ask for too much more, we wanted complete performances out of ourselves and that we gave in the last match," said Vettori, whose team have made the semifinals in the last three World Cups.

The hill town of Kandy has suffered from persistent rains and the only international match here, a Test between Sri Lanka and the West Indies in December, was drawn without a single innings completed in five days.

The warm-up matches before the World Cup were also moved because of bad weather.

PAKISTAN v NEW ZEALAND

Matches: 88
Pakistan win: 51
New Zealand win: 34
No result/Tied: 3
First meeting: Feb 11, 1973, Christchurch -- New Zealand won by 22 runs

'Take pressure off Afridi'

AFP, Pallekele



ICC Cricket World Cup 2011

Misbahul Haq on Monday urged his teammates to take the pressure off high-flying skipper Shahid Afridi who has single-handedly won matches for Pakistan in this World Cup.

Afridi took 5-16 -- the best bowling figures by any Pakistani in all World Cups -- against Kenya and followed that with 4-34 against Sri Lanka and 5-23 against Canada, giving him a tournament-high of 14 wickets.

His efforts have given Pakistan a perfect six points from three matches and top spot in Group A followed by co-hosts Sri Lanka (five from four) and defending champions Australia (five from three).

Pakistan face New Zealand here on Tuesday with Misbah telling

teammates to take the pressure off Afridi.

"It's really very good for a team that its captain is doing well, but other players are also required to play well, take responsibility and ease pressure off the captain," said Misbah.

Misbah said Afridi has led from the front in the tournament.

"I think in all conditions, especially here, Afridi is a difficult bowler to handle, he has got variation and doesn't give the batsmen time. With that kind of aggression he has led from the front," said Misbah, who is anchoring the batting.

The 36-year-old has been in good form since taking over as Test cap-

tain in October last year, and hit 203 in the recent one-day series win in New Zealand followed by two half-centuries in this World Cup.

That makes him one of the prime targets for New Zealand bowlers, but Misbah remains unconcerned.

"They can't target just me, because before me there are three or four batsmen who can get hundreds. They can't wait for me only," said Misbah.

"We are playing with six batsmen so every batsman is important. I think we will be looking for the top order to get some runs because they did well in New Zealand so we're

hoping they are going to do it again," said Misbah.

Pakistan's main batting worry has been the poor form of the openers, with Mohammad Hafeez and Ahmed Shehzad failing to get decent starts in the three matches.

"We have confidence in our openers. One or two games you see failures of the top order but it doesn't matter, it happens in cricket. That they are not making runs doesn't put pressure on us," said Misbah.

"Senior players have to handle the pressure and that's the advantage of the seniors, so there is no pressure," said Misbah, who was one of the contenders for World Cup captaincy before the tournament got underway.

"I am happy in my position and give my input whenever it is needed. Afridi has gelled this team very well."

It could be now: Hafeez

AFP, Pallekele

Pakistan batsman Mohammad Hafeez admitted on Monday that he and fellow struggling opener Ahmed Shehzad have let their team down, but a World Cup blitz could be just one innings away.

Hafeez and Shehzad have managed opening partnerships of 11, 28 and 16 in three matches so far, a performance which captain Shahid Afridi and coach Waqar Younis have already insisted must improve.

Despite the lack of good starts, Pakistan's middle order has fired to help the team win all three games at the World Cup, giving them

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New Zealand captain Daniel Vettori (R) listens as coach John Wright makes a point during a practice session at the Pallekele Stadium in Sri Lanka yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

'Do not worry about Pakistan'

AFP, Pallekele



ICC Cricket World Cup 2011

Skipper Daniel Vettori said Monday that New Zealand would focus on their own game and not worry about formidable Pakistan in their World Cup match on Tuesday.

Pakistan, inspired by captain Shahid Afridi, who has taken a tournament-best 14 wickets with his leg-spin, have won all three matches and top Group A with six points.

New Zealand, who beat Kenya and Zimbabwe by ten wickets apiece but lost to Australia by seven wickets, have four points from three matches.

"The game, like against most teams, is about yourself and trying to work out how you could actually get the best performance out of yourself because that's pretty much where we have let ourselves down in the past," said Vettori.

The captain, whose side lost a home one-day series to Pakistan that ended only last month, said he was aiming for consistency.

"We have not been able to put that consistent team performance together, so that's what we are asking," said Vettori, whose team were whitewashed in one-day series against Bangladesh and India last year.

"If we can get right in ourselves then we have more of a chance than if we worry about Pakistan," said Vettori, whose country has lost six of seven World Cup matches against their opponents.

The pitch at the Pallekele stadium is an unknown for both teams but Vettori expects a batsman-friendly surface.

"I think we are expecting it to be a little bit quicker than most grounds but still it will be a batter-friendly wicket," said Vettori, whose openers are in top form.