

Star SPORT

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'I'm no Pele'

Star Brazilian striker Neymar said on Friday that he would never be better than Pele and insisted he was not interested in impressing his many European suitors at the Club World Cup.

The much-coveted Santos player, 19, has been touted as one of the planet's finest prospects and linked with a host of top European clubs, with Spanish giants Real Madrid understood to be leading the charge for his signature.

"He's the one and only, he's the king of football," said Neymar, sporting his trademark blond bouffant hairdo.



ANOTHER FAILURE: Bangladesh opener Tamim Iqbal (R) makes his way to the pavilion after being dismissed for only nine runs by Pakistan pacer Aizaz Cheema (L) on the first day of the first Test at the Zohur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chittagong yesterday.

PHOTO: ANURUP KANTI DAS

Batting in freefall

BISHWAJIT ROY from Chittagong

Bangladesh's batting has slipped deeper into crisis as Pakistan continued their dominance on tour, tightening their grip on the home side on the opening day of the first Test at the Zohur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium yesterday. The manner in which the batsmen handled the world-class bowling attack by giving away their wickets made them look like mere novices and it has allowed critics to raise questions again about their credentials in the highest level of the game.

On a good batting track, the Pakistan captain Misbah-ul Haq took the surprising decision of bowling first but he didn't need to feel any remorse at the end of the day. Bangladesh's continued senseless batting approach in the series saw them bundled out for 135 runs in 51.2 overs, just ten minutes before the tea break. The fate of this match is almost written on the wall as Pakistan are well set to take a big first innings lead. They finished the day at

132 for no loss, and only a miracle can change the course of the match.

The two not out batsmen, Mohammad Hafeez (74) and Taufeeq Umar (53), batted brilliantly to ensure Pakistan's best opening partnership this year, though the latter offered few chances. Otherwise, Bangladesh's bowling was helpless against them.

But all talk will circle around the batsmen who made a lot of promises before the Test series. But nothing has changed in their approach and it is evident order is still in a panic against the formidable attack. Nasir Hossain once again proved that it's not impossible to handle this attack if someone has the guts and determination, while debutant Nazimuddin was another exception.

The hometown batsman tried to transfer his domestic form into the Test arena during his 79-ball 31 that featured five boundaries before he was suspiciously caught at slip by Hafeez off Umar Gul. Nasir made sure his side cross the three-figure mark in the first innings through his 68-ball 41 with seven fours and a six.

Spinners have been the main threat in the series so far, but this time pacers Aizaz Cheema and Gul initiated the damage before the tweakers took over. Saeed Ajmal and Abdur Rehman took three wickets each.

The under-pressure opener Tamim Iqbal however looked in fine touch initially to turn his fortunes around as the left-hander even whacked Hafeez, who became the first spinner to open the bowling for Pakistan (and the first spinner in 42 overs to do so in Tests), over long-off but ultimately he failed to give a start, edging Cheema to reach to the wicketkeeper Adnan Akmal. His dismissal simply opened the floodgates as Shahriar Nafees, Mohammad Ashraful and captain Mushfiqur Rahim followed him quickly showing poor technique.

Bangladesh went for lunch on 52-5 when Shakib Al Hasan unnecessarily tried to play a sweep against left-arm spinner Rehman to put a premature end to his partnership with Nazimuddin. The left-hander's dismissal was, like his attempted scoop against West Indies in the Tigers' last Test, the ugliest in the rally.

In the end, the word "disappointing" might not be enough to describe the batting effort of the Tigers.

Walking over into final

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Rehana Parvin and Nigar Sultana can consider themselves very lucky, since they did not need to play a single match, yet found themselves ending up in the final of the women's doubles event of the Bangladesh International Series Badminton Competition. The scenario occurred as two other Bangladeshi pair (Konika & Nabila and Dola & Tumpa), out of the original five, gave walkover to their opponents.

However, the fortunate pair knows that their job in the final will not be an easy one as they will be up against favourites Achininimeshika Rathnasir and Upuli Samanthika of Sri Lanka, who dispatched the remaining Bangladeshi pair Dulali halder and Rozina Akter by 21-7, 21-10 points at the Tajuddin Ahmed Indoor Stadium on Thursday. The final will take place today, the closing day of the competition.

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Different routes to the top

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It has been a rousing comeback for one fallen star of Bangladesh cricket while another has taken his first step. Asif Ahmed and Enamul Haque Jr are leading the run-scorers' and wicket-takers' list at the end of the first phase of the National Cricket League.

Both have the chance to better their collections as both Sylhet and Dhaka Metropolis are among the four teams to have qualified to the second phase. In fact, the two will go head-to-head at the Sylhet Divisional Stadium from tomorrow.

Asif, the Dhaka Metropolis batsman, struck a century and three fifties in his 613 runs from the seven games of the first phase. After making 71, 76 not out and 57 not out in the first three games, the middle-order bat had two quiet games against Sylhet and Chittagong in November. Against Rangpur however, his 152 was quite remarkable; hitting 22 boundaries and a six, the right-hander took just over three overs to notch up an almost run-a-ball effort. It was quite the innings as Asif, nicknamed Ratul, dominated a 225-run second wicket stand with Mohammad Ashraful, the Dhaka Metro skipper.

The good form in the first-class competition was exactly what was planned at the GP-BCB National Cricket Academy

when it was headed by Ross Turner. When Allan Campbell visited for a month, the target was to make the players under the programme to be the best in the domestic competitions first. Asif has certainly lived up to that promise while also earning a man-of-the-match award in a one-dayer against the South African Academy when it visited earlier this year. His excellent form this season is a far cry from his maiden first-class stint last season when he played for Barisal.



ENAMUL HAQUE



ASIF AHMED

A stint in England this year put him in a positive frame of mind, according to those close to him and this season has been tremendously rewarding. Starting off with four wickets against Khulna, Enamul had two quiet games before picking up his first ten-wicket haul after four years, taking 10 for 77 against Dhaka Metro. After another six-for against Rajshahi, Enamul picked up a seven-wicket haul against Barisal in a

Though promising, Asif only scored a single half-century in four games.

Unlike Asif's pedestrian to top form journey, Enamul's route to the top of the table (with 41 wickets) has been a lot more convoluted. After falling out of favour with the Tigers in 2009 when he last played a Test match, the left-arm spinner played just four first-class games in 2010 before an Achilles injury ruled him out for the rest of the 2010-11 season after just one game.

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'I can't really explain it'

SPORTS REPORTER from Chittagong



After their latest batting debacle, everybody was searching for an answer to this question: what actually happened to the Bangladesh batsmen yesterday at the Zohur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium?

It's really hard to understand what has been going through their minds. True, Pakistan has a formidable bowling attack but one can't simply accept the performance of the batsmen. The approach on the opening day track is bewildering and it is not easy for anybody to explain the real reasons behind this poor batting show. That's why it was not easy for Bangladesh coach Stuart Law to find the exact reasons behind this debacle. The Australian however talked of a "mental block" that could validate the shameful batting.

The grim face of Law in the press conference told the story of his frustrations. His charges squandered a chance to put up an impressive total on the board after Pakistan captain Misbah-ul Haq gave them a gift by deciding to bowl first in a very good batting surface, he said.

"We are not doing any basics. It may be a mental block somewhere along the line. Sometimes the best way to defend is to attack but we are doing neither at the moment. Two bright points were the debu-

tant Nazimuddin who looked very good and he looked very comfortable and Nasir Hossain continued to score runs. He has put his hands up to probably go up the order at some stage," said Law when asked to sum up the day's proceedings.

"The most disappointing thing is that we were not letting Pakistan to get us out rather we just gave up our wickets easily. It's happening over and over again, that is disappointing for anybody. It's not through lack of talking or lack of practicing. Whether it is a mental block, we worked that out. I can't really explain it. The condition was ideal for batting, the wicket may have been a little slow, but if you prepare to bat a long time you get it easy and easier," he added.

The batting on the first day showed that the self-confidence of the Bangladesh batsmen has been completely dented and Law also admitted it, but the Australian still kept faith in his charges.

"We are lacking a lot of confidence. At the moment it is a bit of a mismatch. We have very talented cricketers, we just have a mental block somewhere, we can't hit the ball, we can't defend the ball. We have got to stick to what we are doing in practice, keep believing what we are doing is right and I am sure we will turn it around at some stage," said Law.

It might be too early to say anything about the match after the first day's play but Bangladesh has to do something special if

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India, Afghanistan reach final

SPORTS REPORTER from Delhi



It will be India against Afghanistan in the final of the 7th SAFF Championship after both sides emerged victorious in their respective semifinals at the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium yesterday.

A brace from hitman Sunil Chhetri powered holders India to a 3-1 win over last year's runners-up Maldives to put them in the final for the sixth time out of seventh tournaments.

And in the late game, Afghanistan defeated Nepal 1-0 in extra-time, thanks to a 111th minute strike from Norway-based striker Belal Arezo to reach their first ever final on Sunday.

Dense fog threatened to affect the semifinals as even the journalists found viewing extremely hard. A timely intervention from the floodlights though ensured that the game could go off without a hitch.

But if viewing was hard, containing Sunil

Chhetri was harder still as the ace marksman proved the difference between the Indians and the island nation with two goals that took him top of the goalscorers list with six.

India took the lead through a set-piece that was bundled home by Rahim Nabi, but Maldives equalized early in the second half through a fine long-range effort from Shamweel Qasim.

But just as the island nation looked to get a foothold in the game, Chhetri restored India's lead, first converting a penalty that was softly awarded and then finally scoring deep into injury time to make the game safe for the hosts and put the icing on the cake.

India will now be odds-on favourites in the final against an Afghanistan side who made hard work of a spirited Nepal in the day's second game.

Nepal dominated the encounter but a resolute defensive performance from the foreign based Afghani players ensured that the speedy forwards from the hilly nation

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PHOTO: COURTESY

Thi Lu of Vietnam returns backhanded against Sri Lanka's Upuli Samanthika at the Bangladesh International Series badminton competition. Le eased her way into a 21-5, 21-15 win at the Tajuddin Ahmed Indoor Stadium yesterday.

INT'L SERIES BADMINTON

Flair meets poise today

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