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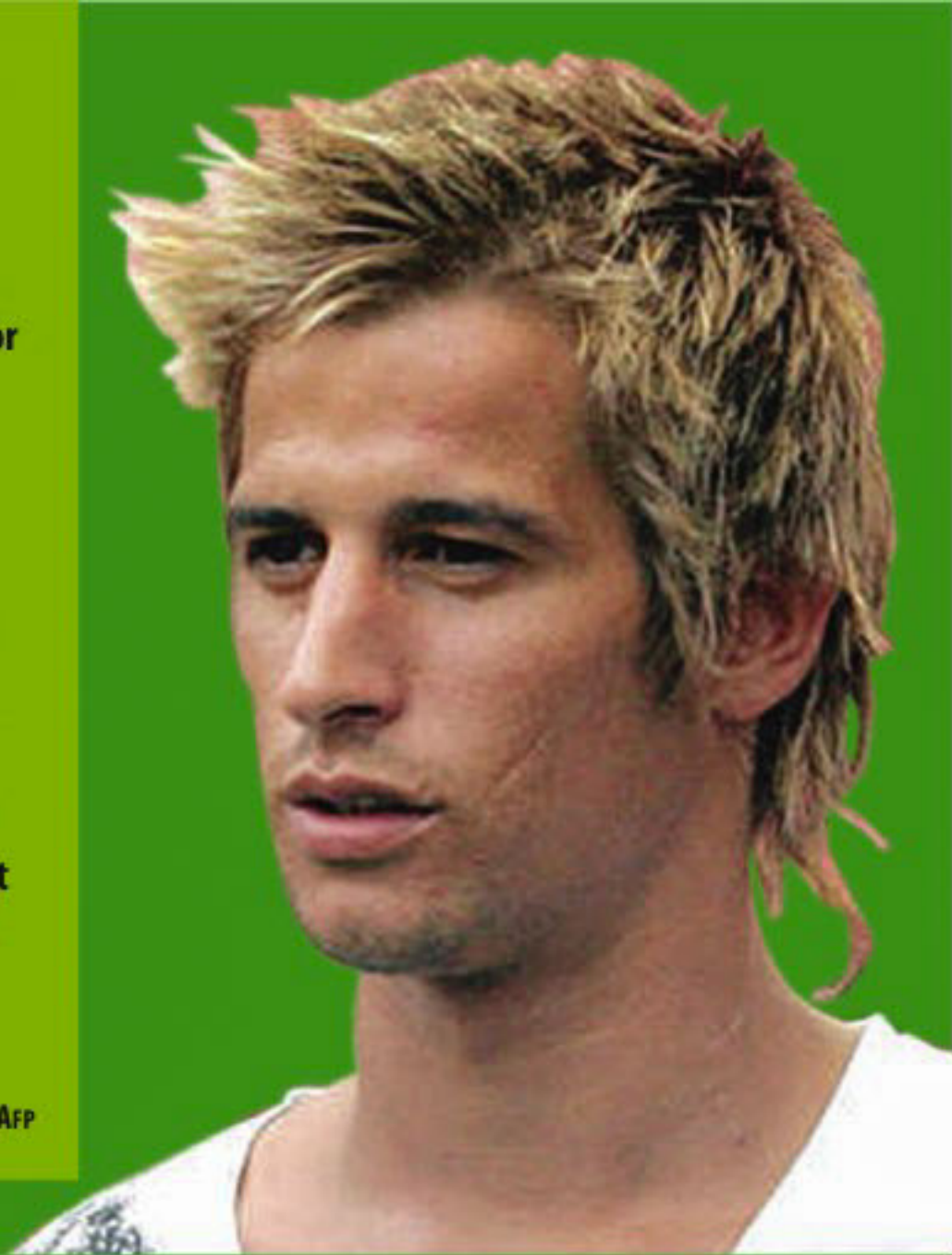
DHAKA THURSDAY MARCH 22, 2012, E-MAIL: sports@thedailystar.net

Real discipline Coentrao

Real Madrid have left Portuguese full-back Fabio Coentrao out of the squad for Wednesday's La Liga clash away to Villarreal days after he was photographed leaving a restaurant smoking.

The Liga leaders said the decision to leave out Coentrao, a summer signing who cost a reported 30 million euros (\$39.7m) from Benfica, was officially a technical one.

However, it seems Coentrao - who also played no part in Sunday's draw against Malaga - has been punished following the publication by various media of a photo showing him smoking while leaving a restaurant on his birthday.



DOING A SHAKIB? Bangladesh all-rounder Mahmudullah Riyad (2nd from R) imitates Shakib Al Hasan's bowling action to amuse teammates during their practice session at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium yesterday. The Bangladesh team will be greatly served if Mahmudullah can emulate his more illustrious teammate in the Asia Cup final against Pakistan today.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Can Tigers keep the momentum going?

BISHWAJIT ROY



Bangladesh have already made history in the Asia Cup. But the heroic Tigers will not be sitting on the laurels; they will want something more tangible, more lasting. Mushfiqur Rahim's men have one bigger challenge left -- a meeting with cricketing behemoths Pakistan in the final of the biggest regional competition which will be held at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur today.

If someone looks at broader perspective then the win or loss will not be a major issue rather the expectation is that Bangladesh has to turn the corner. The question is whether Bangladesh can show the same sort of maturity and intensity in their performance in the final as they did in their matches against Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka in the league phase.

Bangladesh's cricket will take a step forward if the Tigers can win the final, which in no way is dreaming the impossible; clinch the title as well as put an end to their thirteen-year drought against Pakistan. On the other hand, much will not change even if

they lose the match, if they can play some good cricket and continue with the consistency that is rare for them.

The positive thing was that the boys were not worn out by the celebration after victory against Sri Lanka, rather one would be encouraged and hopeful hearing the words of Bangladesh skipper Mushfiqur Rahim, who made it clear that they were looking forward to putting up their consistent improvement in world cricket. It's not only the captain rather the belief of everybody that the Tigers don't think that the mission is complete yet for them after reaching the final. They were focusing on the bigger achievement.

"The celebration was very good. After winning back to back matches like the ones we did was a moment to celebrate. But everyone knows that more than the celebration, we have a huge game ahead of us, the final, and we are all prepared. We hope that we will win that match and then hopefully we will celebrate again," said a confident Mushfiqur.

"Before the tournament we said in the press conference that we have not yet reached the level where we can beat teams like India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka consistently. But the

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Tamim comes down with fever

SPORTS REPORTER

The home team was left panic-stricken yesterday after in-form opener Tamim Iqbal was diagnosed with fever ahead of the today's Asia Cup final against Pakistan at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday.

Tamim, who was one of the architects of the Tigers two consecutive wins against India and Sri Lanka, appeared in the stadium yesterday with the team but didn't take part in the training session due to high fever.

It would be a big blow for the hosts if Tamim fails to play the match but the team sources confirmed that the left-hander has every chance to play the match as his condition was improving.

The Chittagonian, who has batted sensibly to make three half centuries in as many matches, gave Bangladesh a good platform which was capitalised on by the middle-order.

Bangladesh will play an unchanged team if Tamim is fit.

Recalling bittersweet finals

SPORTS REPORTER

It was wondrous in 1994, tense in 1997 and heart-breaking in 2009. So what will it be like after all these years?

With the Tigers enter their first major final in international cricket, the fond memories of some of those similar rare days from the past often has the tendency to add extra inspiration. As a cricket team, Bangladesh hasn't exactly been final day regulars, making it on very occasions in the various regional tournaments ever since becoming an ICC Associate Nation in 1977.

Their first major final was when they played against India A in the SAARC cricket tournament before making it to the final of the ICC Trophy in 1997. The last final played by the Tigers was three years ago, when the Mohammad Ashraful-led Tigers fell at the

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Mashrafe the motivator

SPORTS REPORTER



Having returned from injury and surgery after eleven months, he has taken four wickets and bowled seven tight spells in the Asia Cup, but what Mashrafe Bin Mortaza brings to the Bangladesh dressing-room as a cricketer is more than just wickets or the confidence of a brave cricketer.

"If Mashrafe bhai is in the team, whether he is playing or not, he is the kind of person who can lift a team's morale just by his presence," says skipper Mushfiqur Rahim. "He always helps us and guides us."

After bowling his heart out in the crucial third and final league game on Tuesday, Mashrafe should have been pleased with his effort; bowling with economy and ending up with at least a wicket on a flat track. But the Narail Express was asked to share his thoughts with the team and from one corner of the huddle, his words spelled assurance.

"It is always Riyad bhai, Shakib or I who talk, so yesterday we asked him [Mashrafe] to say something, which he wanted to say on his own after the innings."

"We would normally go back to the dressing-room and have the talk but he wanted to say it on the field to underline the importance of the match."

"He said that this kind of opportunity does not come often, so we should grab it. And he said that 230 is not a difficult chase but nor is it easy, so we should play our natural game," narrated Mushfiqur.

Imrul Kayes, restricted to the sidelines despite his return to form, also finds Mashrafe as an important figure in the Bangladesh dressing-room. "He fosters a friendly atmosphere. He makes sure everyone is talking and involved. He is everyone's friend, no matter who it is in the team," he said.

"The national team also missed his services as a fast

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Country geared to make a memory

MOHAMMAD ISAM



Years from now we will ask ourselves where we were on the night of March 20, 2012. It might have already been a week of exhilaration and it may even get better today, but the precise moment of achievement lingers on as the sweetest memory, be it in politics or sports.

South Africans, irrespective of ethnicity, can recall exactly where they were when they heard of Nelson Mandela's release from prison. Those who listened to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's seminal March 7 speech remember what they felt like at that given moment.

It is the moment of victory that everyone keeps in their heart as a priceless gem. For sports, Spaniards will not forget Andreas Iniesta's epic extra-time winner that made them World Champions; Jamaicans will singularly recall Usain Bolt's mind-bending feat to break the 100m world record at the Beijing Olympics.

Over the past 24 hours, people across the country have discussed in great details about their moment of joy. When Nasir Hossain's on-drive went



Will there be one final flurry from Shakib Al Hasan?

PHOTO: STAR

past the fielder, the whole country rose up to celebrate.

So did a young man who lives in the Agargaon slum. Saiful is a rickshawpuller who plies the Mirpur road for half a day. He can't afford to take a break even for a day but when he was going past a TV showroom on Tuesday evening, he got down and started to watch Bangladesh playing Sri Lanka.

"When we won, I couldn't see what was happening. I was pushed to the

back so when the people at the front started to jump and shout, I did the same," he said yesterday.

"I like how Shakib Al Hasan bats and bowls. He can do everything. He is like a film hero," said Saiful.

Shamim works in a bakery but as he watched the game, business took a backseat. It was the same with housewives, bankers, students and bus conductors. Everyone made sure they were

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Bijoy talks of victory

BISHWAJIT ROY

Everything happens for a reason and definitely there have been some reasons behind the Tigers' extraordinary performance in the Asia Cup.

So what are the factors which suddenly took Bangladesh Cricket to a new height? Nobody would ask any question if it was the yet another one-off win but one team can't perform in three consecutive matches against the top-ranked sides in same manner without any reasons.

There has been no magic which could change the Tigers overnight. Obviously skill has not developed within three weeks, so as the cricketers have said, it's their mindset and self-belief which made all the difference. Everybody has started to believe that they have the ability to perform consistently if they play as a unit.

And this kind of belief also gives a great message to a newcomer like Anamul Haque, the 19-year-old uncapped player. The young wicketkeeper-batsman has very little chance of making his international debut in

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Pakistan coach Dav Whatmore will be banking on Mohammad Hafeez to deliver the goods upfront when they take on Bangladesh in the Asia Cup final at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium today. The all-rounder has been in supreme form, both with the bat and the ball.

PHOTO: STAR

Stage set for another Northampton?

SPORTS REPORTER



May 31, 1999: the date is tattooed on the minds of Bangladeshis.

That day nearly thirteen years ago saw an epochal shift in the country's cricket. They became giant-killers for the day when they beat Pakistan in Northampton.

Fast forward to the present, and history is still being written, albeit on an entirely different scale. In the intervening years Bangladesh slowly, painfully at times, stepped up from life as whipping boys to become also-rans capable of springing the odd surprise. Slowly but surely, they became the team that is playing the Asia Cup final today -- a team no longer content to wait in the shadows but eager to take their place on centre-stage.

It will be a monumental effort if Mushfiqur Rahim's men do pull it off. Northampton remains their only win against Pakistan and most matches since then have been quite one-sided.

They almost beat Pakistan in the tournament opener with only some panicked batting when the match was almost in the bag leading to their downfall. They beat the two other Asian giants convincingly and confidently and they bear the look of a team that have grown up in the space of three weeks.

Pakistan's senior batsman Younis Khan said as much when talking to the media at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium yesterday.

"You cannot say that Bangladesh are lucky to get into the final," he responded when asked if Bangladesh were fortunate to make the final. "They have improved a lot, they have some aggressiveness in their body language and that helps to bring about positive results. That is the way an international team should play. You cannot count them out before the match."

Younis thought that it was their body language and the fact that they were contributing as a group that has caused the upswing in the team's results. "Their bowling and fielding has aggression and unlike before it is not only

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