

Plenty to play for

NAIMUL KARIM



The two rounds of the Bangladesh Cricket League, which begins at the BKSP today, will be the only opportunity for the national players to get some longer-version practice before the start of the Test series against Sri Lanka later this month.

Mahmudullah Riyad's Central Zone, the reigning champions, will take on Tamim Iqbal's East Zone at BKSP-2 and Mushfiquir Rahim's North Zone will face Abdur Razzak's South Zone at BKSP-3 in the first round.

This will also be the only opportunity for the new selection committee, led by Faruque Ahmed, to finalise the national side and go through any last-minute changes if required. A comparatively decent showing against New Zealand last November witnessed improvements in several grey areas in Bangladesh's Test side.

Marshall Ayub, for instance, looked positive in the dubious number three position. Mominul Haque's ability to play long innings ensured that the middle order has a safety net. Also Bangladesh's tactic to go in with seven batsmen as opposed to the traditional 'eight' depicted a more aggressive mindset.

While there may not be any major changes for the Sri Lanka series, there will however be plenty to look forward to in the four-day competition.

THE OPENING OBSTACLE

Anamul Haque had a terrible Test series against New Zealand and a poor showing in the BCL could well lead to him getting dropped. While none of the national openers have managed to match Tamim Iqbal's record, there are quite a few who have performed in the recent domestic competitions and are in contention for the spot. Jahurul Islam, who played in the previous Test series against Zimbabwe, is one of them. His average of 33.28 as an opener is the highest among the contenders. Imrul Kayes dug out a few good performances this year, whereas

the likes of Shahriar Nafees and Junaed Siddiqui could also be in consideration for their previous record. Either way, the BCL is likely to have an important say in sealing that crucial position.

THE BATSMEN'S BATTLE

With Mominul, Shakib AL Hasan, Mushfiquir Rahim and Nasir Hossain, Bangladesh's middle order seems concrete. However, there are a couple of batsmen in the sidelines who are doing all it takes to get into the side. Naeem Islam, who replaced the injured Shakib in the ODI series against New Zealand, proved to be a game changer and will definitely be eyeing a spot. He can bat at number three as well and could push Marshall all the way. Former national vice-captain Mahmudullah Riyad, who was dropped in the last series, will have to produce something special to end his poor run in the format and earn a recall. Rokibul Hasan, who played a few good knocks in the Dhaka Premier League, will want to continue his good run in order to keep the selectors interested.

AL-AMIN'S OPPORTUNITY

In an ideal world, Bangladesh's pace attack would not see any changes. The traditional two-man pace attack is likely to feature Robiul Islam and Rubel Hossain. Rubel has been generating good pace ever since his recovery from his shoulder injury while Robiul has been proving his efficiency for a while in domestic cricket. However it's the youngster Al Amin Hossain for whom the BCL would mean the most. He has been in good form ever since his return from the A tour in England and if he can produce something special, he could get at least one Test.

MASHRAFE'S RETURN

In the last four years Mashrafe just played two first-class games and his return to the longer format is something that not many could have predicted. While the bowler is not expected to be in contention for the Sri Lanka Test series, his performance in the BCL is likely to shape his future in longer version cricket.



PUSHED TO THE SIDELINES! Dejected Mohammedan players sit on the sidelines of the Bangabandhu National Stadium pitch following their Bangladesh Premier League match against Uttar Baridhara yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

Baridhara shock for MSC

SPORTS REPORTER



Promoted Uttar Baridhara Club earned

their first points in the history of top-tier professional football league when they held giants Mohammedan Sporting Club to a goalless draw in their Bangladesh Premier League match at Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

Baridhara, who have made it from the Third Division to the top-tier seven years ago, never looked overawed by their illustrious opponents, rather impressed one and all with their enterprising play. The head coach of the club, Mohammad Alamgir, made it hard to work the ball in their backline as he fielded a 1-4-3-2 formation with a sweeper back behind the back four.

"This draw is as good as a win for us. We had only 10-12 days of practice, but the boys played really well and they were not overwhelmed by their opponents," said the veteran coach, who oversaw his side's rise through the ranks.

On the other hand, Mohammedan, who have never won the top-tier professional football league in six attempts so far, are already showing signs of slipping out of the title race with their second successive stalemate. The Black and Whites, who brought in Portuguese coach Rui Jose Capela Batista two days before the start of the league, hardly made an impression and despite fielding a 4-2-3-1 formation and creating quite a few chances, never looked like threatening the opponents due to some lacklustre efforts from the strikers and terrible communication

between the players.

The attacking quartet comprising Zahid Hossain, Zahid Hasan Emily, Wahed Ahmed and Egyptian Mostafa Seddik, had a number of chances in the first half to break the deadlock, but were pathetic in front of goal. Capela made two changes at the start of the second half, bringing in Nigerian striker Chuka Charles in place of Wahed and Nigerian midfielder Damien Chigozie in place of Hemanta Vincent Biswas, but that made little impact on their game.

The best action of the match was produced by Uttar Baridhara in the 55th minute when Nigerian forward Akindele took a snap shot at goal in between two defenders after being set up by compatriot Quadri Larne, but a brilliant fingertip save from Mamun saved the day for the Black and Whites.

Mohammedan forward Seddik

missed a sitter in the 60th minute when he failed to get his foot on the end of a Damien Chigozie cross while two late attempts in the stoppage time from Zahid and Emily were cleared off the goalline by Baridhara defender Saeedur Rahman.

Mohammedan coach Capela conceded it was another 'bad day' for his 'not-so-good-team', who need at least three players in different positions during the mid-season transfer window, to mount a title challenge.

"I just had 6-7 training sessions so far and I need more time, so the fans need to keep patience. But at the same time, we are not a very good team at the moment. We need at least a good stopper back, a good striker and a good attacking midfielder during the mid-season transfers," said the 44-year-old Portuguese.

But the question is will it be too late by then for the falling giants?

BSPA awards sports stars

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh Sports Press Association yesterday awarded personalities from a whole range of disciplines for their success and contribution to the country's sports for the calendar years 2011 and 2012 through a gala programme at the National Sports Council auditorium.

Two-time Asian Tour winning golfer Siddikur Rahman and the national cricket team's opening batsman Tamim Iqbal grabbed the most prestigious award, the SA Mohsin Trophy which is named after the famous sports organiser of the 1960s, amid a number of awards given to sports stars, organisers and sports patrons. Siddikur got the 2011 Sports Person of the Year award while Tamim received the following year's award.

A total of 18 players, organisers and sponsor companies were awarded in other categories. The notable winners were -- footballer Mamunul Islam, cricketers Shakib Al Hasan, Mushfiquir Rahim, Shohag Gazi and Salma Khatun, gymnast Syque Cesar, FIDE Master Fahad Rahman, hockey player Mamunur Rahman Chayan, Grand Master Enamul Hossain Rajib, Islami Bank and Walton Group.

Speaker of the parliament Dr. Shirin Sharmin Chowdhury handed over the awards as chief guest.

FIRST ODI TODAY

Australia keep Pattinson out

AFP, Melbourne

Australia have left out fit-again paceman James Pattinson for Sunday's opening one-day international with England at the Melbourne Cricket Ground.

England have rested star batsman Kevin Pietersen for the ODI series, while paceman Stuart Broad will miss the first two games.



Sri Lanka captain Angelo Mathews lifts spin bowler Rangana Herath after the latter got rid of Pakistan skipper Misbahul Haq in Dubai yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Pakistan still alive

AFP, Dubai



Skipper Misbahul Haq led Pakistan's resistance with a gritty 97 to thwart Sri Lanka's victory bids on the fourth day of the second Test in Dubai on Saturday.

Misbah missed his sixth Test hundred by a mere three runs but a career best 70 not out by Sarfraz Ahmed and a defiant 32 by Bilawal Bhatti kept Pakistan's fight to take them to 330-7 at close on a cloudy day.

When bad light and drizzle ended play 15 overs before schedule, Saeed Ajmal was on seven and Pakistan were leading by 107 runs with a full day's play remaining.

Sarfraz added an invaluable 67 runs for the seventh wicket with Bhatti to frustrate the Sri Lanka's bowlers who bowled with discipline and patience on a pitch which had little response for bowlers.

Sri Lanka will look for an early wrap up of Pakistan's second innings to take a 1-0 lead in the three-match series after the first Test ended in a draw in Abu Dhabi last week.

The third and final Test will be played in Sharjah from Thursday.

When left-arm spinner Rangana Herath spun one across Misbah's bat to hit the off stump just 20 minutes before tea it looked as if the match would be over soon but Sarfraz and Bhatti kept the fight before Shaminda Eranga

bowled Bhatti in the dying moments.

Sarfraz said he felt more responsibility after Misbah's fall.

"When I was playing with Misbah, he was guiding me," said Sarfraz. "But when he got out I felt more responsibility and I will continue to fight on Sunday and if we add another 100 then we can win this match."

Sarfraz improved on his highest Test score of 40 he made against South Africa at Centurion earlier this year by posting his maiden half century. He has so far hit seven boundaries during his 123-ball stay.

Sri Lanka had a good chance of dismissing Sarfraz at 51 but paceman Suranga Lakmal dropped a regulation caught and

bowled chance to add to his team's woes after Misbah foiled them for nearly two sessions.

Misbah's valiant effort helped Pakistan avoid their first-ever innings defeat against Sri Lanka before his 412-minute resistance ended. He took 38 balls to add to his overnight score of 53 and hit eight boundaries and a six under difficult circumstances.

Paceman Nuwan Pradeep had the best figures of 2-50 while Eranga took 2-70.

Pakistan resumed on 132-3 and needed Younis and Misbah to dig deep but Younis tried to drive a slightly wide delivery from Lakmal, managing only to edge it to wicketkeeper Prasanna Jayawardene, who held his eighth catch of the match.

SCOREBOARD				
PAKISTAN: First innings 165 (Manzoor 73; Pradeep 3-62, Herath 3-26)				
SRI LANKA: First innings 388 (M Jayawardene 129, Silva 95, Mathews 42; Junaid 3-102, Ajmal 2-56, Rahat 2-131)				
PAKISTAN: Second innings (overnight 132-3)				
Manzoor c P Jayawardene b Pradeep	6			
Shehzad c P Jayawardene b Herath	9			
Hafeez c P Jayawardene b Pradeep	1			
Younis c P Jayawardene b Lakmal	77			
Misbah b Herath	97			
Shafiq b Karunaratne b Eranga	23			
Sarfraz not out	70			
Bhatti b Eranga	32			
Ajmal not out	7			
Extras: (b-1, lb-7)	8			
Total: (For 7 wickets in 123.3 overs)	330			
Fall of wickets: 1-11, 2-12, 3-19, 4-148, 5-200, 6-245, 7-312				
Bowler	O	M	R	W
Lakmal	22	3	62	1
Pradeep	19	3	50	2
Herath	43.3	8	124	2
Eranga	33	9	70	2
Mathews	5	1	9	0
Sangakkara	1	0	7	0

Brothers blow Windies away

AFP, Auckland



An unbeaten 85-run stand between Brendon McCullum and Luke Ronchi laid the foundation for New Zealand's 81-run win over West Indies in their opening Twenty20 International on Saturday.

The New Zealand batting was backed up by tight bowling, led by Nathan McCullum who celebrated his 50th Twenty20 International with figures of four for 24.

New Zealand, who elected to bat first, appeared in trouble at 105-3 after 13 overs before McCullum and Ronchi lifted them to 189-5 which proved too big a target for the West Indies.

The tourists were five for 64 after 11

overs in their reply before staggering through to be eight for 108 at the finish.

Brendon had gone in to bat in the fourth over when the removal of Martin Gupitill started a mini-collapse of the top order.

Gupitill gave New Zealand a flying start with a six and two fours off consecutive balls from Tino Best's first over, but was gone for 25 when he gave a soft catch to Johnson Charles in Best's second over.

He was the first of three New Zealand batsmen to reach the 20s but failed to carry on before McCullum and Ronchi gave the innings some backbone.

Brendon, who faced 45 balls, hit four sixes and two fours while Ronchi hit four sixes and three fours from 25 deliveries.

Best recovered from his first over hiding

to finish his four overs with figures of three for 40, while Nikita Miller took two for 26.

The second Twenty20 will be held in Wellington next Wednesday.

SCORES IN BRIEF

NEW ZEALAND: 189 for 5 in 20 overs (B McCullum 60 not out, Ronchi 48 not out, Gupitill 25, Ryder 22, Munro 22; Best 3-40, Miller 2-26)

WEST INDIES: 108 for 8 in 20 overs (Fletcher 23, Charles 16, Miller 15 not out, Badree 14 not out; N McCullum 4-24, Neesham 3-16)

Result: New Zealand won by 81 runs and lead the 2-match series 1-0.

Player-of-the-match: Luke Ronchi.

Toss: New Zealand.

U-19 prep squad named

SPORTS REPORTER



A 21-member Bangladesh Under-19 preliminary squad was announced yesterday for the preparation camp of the upcoming ICC Under-19 Cricket World Cup to be held from February 8 to March 2 in UAE this year.

The camp will start from January 15 and the selected players have been asked to report at the National Cricket Academy in Mirpur on January 14 at 4.30pm. The camp will continue up to February 7.

The Bangladesh Under-19s put in a frustrating performance in the

recently concluded Asia Cup in Dubai, where they were eliminated from the group stage.

SQUAD

Shadman Islam, Najmul Hossain, Yasir Ali Chowdhury, Musaddek Hossain, Mehdi Hassan, Saeed Sarker, Joyraj Sheik, Mohammed Jasim Uddin, Abu Hider Rony, Rifat Pradhan, Mustafizur Rahman, Nihad-Ul-Zaman, Jubair Hossain, Rahatul Ferdous, Prosenjit Das, Zakir Hasan, Sifat Islam, Nahid Hasan, Munim Shahriar, Mohammad Sumon and Mohammad Noor Alam.