



TIGERS

look to turn T20 fortunes around

NAIMUL KARIM from Chittagong

For Bangladesh, the first ever T20 series at the Zohur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chittagong, will be more than just a series. It is going to be an opportunity to gauge the side's chances in the upcoming ICC World Twenty20. Going by the hosts' poor record in this format of the game, a win against the world's number-one ranked side could be the perfect morale-booster ahead of the mega event in March.

A series-squaring victory against Zimbabwe was the only positive result for Bangladesh in the last six games. Their problem has mainly been their inability to finish matches.

The batting does not seem to be much of a problem -- they have averaged 176 runs in the last six games. It's their bowling that has let them down. The bowling records over the last two years have not been impressive.

Shohag Gazi averages 40 with an economy rate of 8.42. Captain Mashrafe Bin Mortaza has an economy rate of 7.68 with a tendency to leak runs in the death overs. Rubel Hossain played just two matches in the last two years but has managed to leak over a 100 runs. On an average Bangladesh gave away 56 runs in the powerplay overs last year, an aspect that has consistently hurt them.

These are matters that they will want to improve on ahead of the world cup, the process of which should begin from this series, according to Mashrafe.

"We are not up to the mark as yet, but we are improving in this format. We were in a similar phase in ODIs before when we could not finish games. The only way we can start winning matches is by playing more competitive games, and we are doing that. This will be a good practice for us ahead of the World Cup,"

said Mashrafe during the pre-match press conference at the ZACS yesterday.

Mushfiqur Rahim and Abdur Razzak's injuries have brought in a number of youngsters to the side, which gives the hosts plenty of options with regards to their final eleven.

Tamim Iqbal, who batted with a neck-brace in practice yesterday, is expected to recover in time for the match. He is expected to be joined by Shamsur Rahman at the top. The usual suspects -- Shakib Al Hasan, Mominul Haque and Nasir Hossain -- will be forming the middle order. With no room at the top for Anamul Haque, Mithun Ali is expected to keep wickets and get a debut game. Mahmudullah Riyad is expected to take the number seven spot; that is of course unless the management decides to give Forhad Reza or the uncapped Sabbir Rahman an opportunity.

The bowling department is likely to include Al-Amin Hossain and Shohag Gazi alongside Mashrafe. Slow-left armer Arafat Sunny is likely to complete the spin-trio.

The Sri Lankans, on the other hand have their work cut out with their limited overs specialists joining the side. Lasith Malinga is one bowler that Bangladesh have special plans for. There was however bad news for the visitors as batting great Mahela Jayawardene injured a finger on his right hand during catching practice yesterday, and chances are that he will be rested today.

"Malinga is one of the best bowlers of the world in T20 cricket. Our batsmen have planned how to handle him. Hopefully we will be successful. We are thinking positively about him. If we think about him too much it will only have a negative impact," said Mashrafe.

The visitors, going by Dinesh Chandimal's statement are expected to follow a similar line-up to their last series and won't be going for 'experimentation'.



WAITING ON THE WINGS: Arafat Sunny (R) and Shabbir Rahman (L) are the two youngsters ready to don the national cap. And it is not unlikely that both or one of them will play Tigers' opening T20 match against Sri Lanka at Chittagong today.

PHOTO: ANURUP KANTI DAS

'Team not worried about Tamim issue'

NAIMUL KARIM from Chittagong

The Bangladesh Cricket Board's sudden decision to name Mashrafe Bin Mortaza captain for the T20 series against Sri Lanka in Mushfiqur Rahim's absence, which was subsequently followed by Tamim Iqbal's resignation as vice-captain of the side, led many to assume that there was an internal rift in the team.

The scenario became a lot more suspicious after the board had prohibited the players to speak to the media for 48 hours. At the end

of the embargo, Mashrafe spoke to the media yesterday and stated that recent events had absolutely no effect on the team.

"There has not been any influence. The reason behind the ban against speaking to the media was because we have plenty of young players in our side. They don't have much experience and we wanted them to concentrate in practice and not get distracted," said Mashrafe.

When asked if he had a separate chat with Tamim regarding the issue, Mashrafe said, "Honestly speaking I didn't have to

speak with him separately, because he is a very professional cricketer and he has played all around the world. He knows the process very well."

"I want to tell all the fans of Bangladesh that we haven't been concerned at all regarding this issue and there was no friction amongst us. We are united as a team and we are focussed completely on the match tomorrow," he added.

Mashrafe, who has been named captain for the second time in his career, however admitted that losing Mushfiqur for the

series was a big blow.

"He is a key player. As a captain he has led us from the front. When we heard that he would not be playing, we spoke among ourselves and told each other to keep our focus and play as a team. We did so in the past in the absence of key players," said Mashrafe.

"When I was announced as captain, Tamim was there and so was everyone else and it did not affect us. It's my duty to lead the side now and the likes of Tamim and other senior players are helping me do it," he added.

India friendly on March 5

SPORTS REPORTER

The Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) has agreed to play a FIFA friendly match against India on March 5 after All Indian Football Federation showed their interest to host the match in India.

"We have confirmed our participation but requested them to stage the friendly in Kolkata," said BFF general secretary Abu Nayeem Shohag yesterday.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh national team's Dutch coaches Lodewijk De Kruif and Rene Koster arrived in Dhaka yesterday after enjoying their Christmas vacation in the Netherlands and they will now prepare the national team for the friendly against India.

Shirin leads despite draw

SPORTS REPORTER

Defending champion Sharmin Sultana Shirin maintained her solo lead in the Sultana Kamal 34th National Women's Chess Championship with 4.5 points at the end of the fifth round at the Bangladesh Chess Federation hall room yesterday.

Shirin drew her fifth game against WFM Nazrana Khan. Eve and Nazrana beat each other in a half-a-point ahead of joint second-placed WIM Shamima Akter Liza and WFM Zakia Sultana. Liza beat WIM Rani Hamid while Zakia beat Samiha Sharmin Shimmi to secure four points.



Sri Lanka players play with a rugby ball during training at the Zohur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chittagong yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

SA upbeat as favourites

First Test against Australia starts today

AFP, Centurion



South African captain Graeme Smith said his team were happy to be regarded as favourites ahead of the first Test against Australia which starts at SuperSport Park on Wednesday.

"If you are the number one team in the world you have to be favourites," Smith said on Tuesday.

"It's something we have become accustomed to and we feel very comfortable with it. We've been number one for a period of time and we've travelled to some tough places to get it and to defend it."

South Africa has not been beaten in a series since Australia defeated them in

South Africa in 2008/09 and have built up a formidable record to open a sizeable gap at the top of the International Cricket Council Test rankings.

Australia go into the three-match series on the back of a 5-0 whitewash over England but Australian captain Michael Clarke acknowledged that the series would provide his team with a major challenge.

"South Africa have earned the right to be the number one team in the world," said Clarke. "They are extremely tough to beat anywhere in the world but especially in their own backyard."

Clarke said his team were looking forward to the series.

"That's the challenge you want as a player, you want to be playing against

the best to see how you measure up individually and as a team.

"It's a great challenge, test and opportunity for an Australian team who are high on confidence at the moment through the success we had during the Australian summer."

With both teams boasting formidable bowling attacks, Clarke said batting would be crucial.

"Both teams are going to have to bat well because there are two very good bowling attacks."

"It's going to be a challenge for batters. Wickets (in South Africa) have been conducive to fast bowling in the past, which makes it a little bit tougher."

"It's going to be a really good challenge for the Australian batters to come up against probably the best

India pick Asia Cup & World T20 squads

CRICINFO, Mumbai



Suresh Raina has been left out of India's squad for the Asia Cup, which starts on February 25. The batsman, however, is a part of the team for the World Twenty20, scheduled for March.

Cheteshwar Pujara has been included in the Asia Cup squad, while Ishant Sharma has been left out of both teams.

Ishant and Raina's exclusions are the only two changes to the India ODI squad from the one that played in New Zealand.

Since the series against England in January 2013, when he scored 277 runs with four half-centuries, Raina has had just one fifty-plus score - against Zimbabwe - in 24 innings. He was dropped from the last two ODIs against New Zealand, after scores of 18, 35 and 31 in the first three games.

For Pujara, this is his first ODI call-up since the tour to Zimbabwe when the batsman made his one-day debut. Pujara scored 13 and 0 in the two matches, but since been in good form, scoring Test hundreds against West Indies and South Africa.

In Ishant's case, his exclusion due to recent poor form has continued from the New Zealand series, where the bowler was dropped after the first two ODIs in favour of Varun Aaron. Ishant had a poor series against Australia at home, conceding 189 runs in three matches at an average of 94.50 with two wickets. Against South Africa, Ishant picked up four wickets in two ODIs at an average of 19.50, while he picked up two wickets against New Zealand, giving away 118 runs at 59 and an economy rate of 7.86.

The pace attack in both squads is led by Bhuvneshwar Kumar and Mohammed Shami. Ishwar Pandey, who was a part of the tour to New Zealand, has been picked for the Asia Cup, while Mohit Sharma has been named in the Twenty20 squad.

Stuart Binny, who made a debut against New Zealand recently, finds a place in the ODI and T20 squads.

Asia Cup: Mahendra Singh Dhoni (capt), Shikhar Dhawan, Rohit Sharma, Virat Kohli, Cheteshwar Pujara, Ambati Rayudu, Ajinkya Rahane, Ravindra Jadeja, R Ashwin, Bhuvneshwar Kumar, Mohammed Shami, Varun Aaron, Stuart Binny, Amit Mishra, Ishwar Pandey.

World T20: MS Dhoni (capt), Shikhar Dhawan, Rohit Sharma, Virat Kohli, Suresh Raina, Yuvraj Singh, Ajinkya Rahane, Ravindra Jadeja, R Ashwin, Bhuvneshwar Kumar, Mohammed Shami, Stuart Binny, Amit Mishra, Mohit Sharma, Varun Aaron.

Aussie name veterans for T20 WC

AFP, Sydney

Evergreen veterans Brad Hogg and Brad Hodge, with a combined age of 82, were Tuesday called up to the Australian squad for the ICC World Twenty20 in Bangladesh next month.

The sprightly Hogg, 43, has been in top form in the domestic Big Bash League with his wrist spin proving hard to handle, while Hodge, 39, has been prolific with the bat for the Melbourne Stars in the same competition.

If he takes the field, Hogg is set to become the oldest player in the history of international T20 cricket as Australia look for their first trophy after four unsuccessful attempts.

Another veteran, wicketkeeper Brad Haddin, 36, is also included for the March 16-April 6 tournament in a 15-man squad skippered by George Bailey and featuring Test stars Mitchell Johnson, David Warner, and Shane Watson.

Hogg effectively drew the curtain on his international career following his final one-day international for Australia at the end of the 2007-08 summer, but he returned to play a handful of T20 internationals for Australia in 2012.

SQUAD: George Bailey (capt), Dan Christian, Nathan Coulter-Nile, James Faulkner, Aaron Finch, Brad Haddin, Brad Hodge, Brad Hogg, Glenn Maxwell, James Muirhead, Mitchell Johnson, Mitchell Starc, David Warner, Shane Watson, Cameron White.