

SPORT

THE YEAR OF SPORTS

LIONS IN TIGERS' DEN



THE SPEEDWAGON!
Bangladesh pacers (R-L) Mashrafe Bin Mortaza, Rubel Hossain, Al-Amin Hossain and Shafiul Islam line up to bowl in the nets during a training session at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium yesterday. Mashrafe may be back for the Tigers for today's second one-day international against Sri Lanka.

PHOTO:
STAR

Make or break for TIGERS

BISHWAJIT ROY

When Bangladesh face Sri Lanka in the second ODI of the three-match series at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur today, fans would dearly hope that the home side does not waste any more opportunities. It's a do-or-die match for the Tigers not only because another defeat will seal a series defeat but also because they cannot afford to have their confidence further dented ahead of the two big events -- Asia Cup and ICC World Twenty20 -- at home.

Things could so easily have been different for Bangladesh if they had not played slipshod cricket to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory in the first game. It may be unwise to dwell too long on the past, but lessons must be learnt instead of blaming any imagined misfortune if they want to bounce back in the series in a format of the game they are most comfortable in. Since the poor showing in the first Test at Mirpur, Bangladesh have been playing some good cricket and probably deserved a victory, but that it eluded them in the first ODI after having the opponents at 67 for eight was their own fault. After such a reversal the question that is being asked is whether Bangladesh have the will to turn it around and get that elusive win.

One cannot expect a team like Sri Lanka to collapse amateurishly in consecutive matches, so the onus is on Mushfiquir Rahim's men to play their best cricket to regain confidence.

Mushfiquir has to lead the team from the front and make sure that his team, especially the senior members, keep their wits about them under pressure. Ahead of the two mega events Mushfiquir will also have to

quell speculation over his captaincy. There have always been questions about Mushfiquir's efficacy as a captain on the field, even though the team has made great strides at the highest level under his leadership. These questions were further fuelled by his poor effort in the last match not only as a batsman but also as a skipper.

He therefore faces a big challenge which not only involves raising the confidence levels of his team after the demoralisation of three near-misses, but also marshalling his resources intelligently on the field to try and affect a comeback.

The hard-working and dedicated Mushfiquir was found keeping during yesterday's practice session but it is not certain whether he will stand behind the stumps again. The team was reportedly in favour of resting him as a keeper for the next two games too but if Mushfiquir make up his mind nobody will be able to change it. Stubbornness is not sometimes bad for a leader but Mushfiquir must also acknowledge his mistakes and listen to the team management.

On the eve of the second match the big question was how many changes the team management would make. Mashrafe Bin Mortaza was seen to be bowling at full stretch yesterday and has a good chance of playing the match and there is also a possibility of fielding three pacers. The team management has been mulling many options and will settle on a combination in the morning today after an assessment on Tamim Iqbal, who has been suffering from neck sprain.

It would however be a cause for surprise is Mushfiquir continues to place faith on Mahmudullah Riyad and keep Naeem Islam out.

'I'm a cool guy'

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In the side as an off-spinner, Sachitra Senanayake's ability to bat in pressure-filled scenarios has helped Sri Lanka score two close wins against the hosts. In the second T20I, with two runs required off the last ball, Senanayake coolly pulled the ball for a boundary and led his side home.

In the first ODI, with Sri Lanka at 67 for eight, he played second fiddle to Thisara Perera and his 30 runs proved to be extremely crucial.

"I think I am a cool guy. I don't take pressure," said Senanayake at Mirpur yesterday. "We have to handle the pressure. Pitches here are really nice so we can bat through. If I get a chance, my mission is to bat till the last over. I feel I am lucky to be there in the end. We do basic things with Marvan Atapattu. He wants the bowlers to bat every day. I think because of that the bowlers are batting really well," he added.

Fortune favours the wise

NAIMUL KARIM



The words unfortunate, hiccup and (bad) luck were commonly used by the Bangladesh team management over the last few days when asked to describe the events that took place in the limited overs matches of the tour.

Head coach Shane Jurgensen had earlier described the loss in the first ODI as an 'unfortunate hiccup'. Shamsur Rahman, who hammered a half-century in that game, shared a similar sentiment yesterday and claimed that luck was simply not on Bangladesh's side.

"Luck was not on our side in the last three matches, although we played well. I think Sri Lanka are under pressure in our conditions. We almost beat them. We just need a bit of luck to get those positive results," said Shamsur.

While bad luck might have been a factor in the last three matches, a major aspect that was exposed in all the three matches was the problems in Bangladesh's decision making ability.

Forhad Reza was asked to bowl a bouncer with a wet ball in the last ball of the second T20I; Mushfiquir Rahim took away his two best bowlers (incidentally left-arm spinners) when the Sri Lankans were 67 for eight in the last ODI only because Thisara Perera was a

left-handed batsman; Naeem Islam who was Bangladesh's best performer in the last series was left out -- these are just some of the inexplicable decisions taken by the team that played a huge role in the three defeats.

Despite initially mentioning the luck factor in the pre-match press conference yesterday, Shamsur did admit the obvious -- that the hosts had made plenty of mistakes in the first ODI.

"We committed a lot of mistakes together all of a sudden, which prevented us from winning. However, everyone in the team is positive. We have taken the match as a learning experience and our focus is to get back in the series," he said.

A learning experience it indeed was for the Tigers, after all it is not everyday that one learns that a match can be lost even from a situation as dire as 67 for eight!

Whether the Tigers can change their mindset and produce a different performance in the upcoming ODIs is a question to ponder upon.

After all, the main reasons behind the defeat of the first ODI, stemmed from the usage of traditional tactics, such as not using a slow left-arm bowler against a left-handed batsman, or spreading the field as soon as Perera started his counter-attack.

Unless and until these basic problems are addressed, even a chest full of luck at the Tigers' doorstep would not make a difference.

W Indies will be without Pollard

REUTERS, Port-of-spain

Defending champions West Indies will be without Kieron Pollard for next month's World Twenty20 in Bangladesh after the big-hitting all-rounder failed to recover from a knee injury.

A shoulder injury has also ruled fast bowler Kemar Roach out of the 15-man squad, which will be led by all-rounder Darren Sammy.

"Neither Kieron Pollard nor Kemar Roach were considered for selection due to continued rehabilitation from injury," the West Indies Cricket Board said in a statement.

"Pollard continues to recover from a knee injury sustained late last year and Roach is still trying to get over a shoulder injury that forced him to return home from the tour of India without playing and required surgery."

West Indies won the last edition of the tournament in 2012 after beating hosts Sri Lanka in the final in Colombo.

SQUAD
Darren Sammy (captain), Samuel Badree, Dwayne Bravo, Johnson Charles, Sheldon Cottrell, Andre Fletcher, Chris Gayle, Sunil Narine, Denesh Ramdin, Ravi Rampaul, Andre Russell, Marlon Samuels, Krishmar Santokie, Lendl Simmons, Dwayne Smith.

Nadal returns with a win

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

Top-ranked Rafael Nadal, playing for the first time since losing last month's Australian Open final, beat fellow Spaniard Daniel Gimeno-Traver 6-3, 7-5 Tuesday at the Rio Open.

Nadal skipped Buenos Aires last week due to the nagging back injury that hindered his bid for a 14th Grand Slam singles crown last month at Melbourne, where he dropped the final to Swiss Stanislas Wawrinka.

That left his comeback for Rio's \$1.3 million ATP and WTA event, one he hopes will launch a clay-court campaign that concludes with a ninth career French Open crown.

NEW ICC STRUCTURE WICB looks on bright side

IANIS, Port of Spain

The West Indies Cricket Board (WICB) president Dave Cameron has given the assurance that the West Indies will benefit more from the recent changes in the governance structure of the International Cricket Council (ICC).

Cameron insists that the Caribbean team will be playing more cricket over the next eight years because of the changes. The WICB was one of eight full members of the ICC to vote in favour of the new proposal, which was approved at the ICC board meeting in Singapore earlier this month.

"The amended key principles that cover governance, financing and structure will allow the game to grow and develop in the Caribbean and in the Americas far more robustly and vigorously. The WICB have already secured commitments from major countries to play an increased number of matches and series over the next eight years," Cameron said.

New blood for India friendly

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India due to either injury or poor performance in the ongoing Bangladesh Premier League.

The friendly against India slated for March 5 in Goa will be the first international match for the national team since their disappointing campaign in September 2013's SAFF Championship where they finished seventh among eight teams, collecting a single point.

Dutch coaches of the national team -- Lodewijk De Kruif and Rene Koster -- have made an initial list of 30 players where some U-19 players like Badsha Mia, Hemanta Vincent Biswash, Rubel Mia and Farhad have been included following their consistent performance in the domestic league while a few of the senior players are likely to miss out.

"The two Dutch coaches, along with three local coaches, made up the

initial list. We have directed them to call up only those players who are fully fit and have all the necessary documents to travel to India. With the available players, the training camp will get underway from February 25 and the rest of the players will join the camp after the match between Sheikh Jamal DC and Sheikh Russel KC on February 28," said BFF vice president Tabith M Awal yesterday.

Meanwhile, the Dutch coaches had earlier warned that they would work with the national team only after their unpaid wages are cleared, but Tabith confirmed that the coaches are ready to work with the team from March 25 and they would do everything according to the contract.

Out of the 22 members of the SAFF squad, defender Ariful Islam is suffering from knee injury, Danish-born Jamal Bhuiyan is also not available while some senior players' performance is not up to mark, which will likely make way for some junior players, said a source related to the national team adding that goalkeeper Shahidul Alam Shohel, who missed the SAFF Championship due to an injury at the eleventh hour, is likely to return to the national fold.

McCullum hailed by NZ media

AFP, Wellington

New Zealand media dubbed triple centurion Brendon McCullum "Captain Fantastic" Wednesday, as Black Caps coach Mike Hesson said his unfancied team was finally reaching its potential.

"Our greatest innings," trumpeted the New Zealand Herald's front page, accompanied by a picture of McCullum with his arms aloft after scoring 302 in the second Test against India at Wellington's Basin Reserve.

"History maker," splashed Wellington's Dominion Post, highlighting some of the records McCullum shattered on his way to becoming the first New Zealander in 84 years of Test cricket to reach 300.

They included the longest-ever innings by a New Zealand batsman at 775 minutes, facing the most balls (559) and contributing to a national record Test innings score of 680.

Afghanistan oust BD U-19s again

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In what was a repeat of the Asia Cup, Bangladesh Under-19 failed to qualify to the knock out stages of the Under-19 World Cup in Dubai, by virtue of run-rate, after going down to Australia by 74 runs.

Afghanistan, who had earlier beaten Australia, thumped Namibia by four wickets and finished the game in 25.3 overs to achieve a superior net run-rate and top the group. Meanwhile Australia took the second spot.

In what seemed like a Déjà vu effect, the hosts after thrashing Afghanistan by ten wickets in the first game and defeating Namibia by 52 runs, crashed out of the big league after their defeat to Australia.

In the Asia Cup last year, Bangladesh had similarly gone to a strong position after defeating Afghanistan and Malaysia in their first two games. However, in the final round, they lost to Sri Lanka and at the same time saw the Afghanis thump Malaysia in just four overs; eventually losing out due to an inferior net run-rate.

Yet again, the U-19s failed to keep their nerve in a crucial match. After restricting the Australians for 244, Bangladesh began the chase well by reaching 80 for the loss of one wicket in 18 overs. However, they lost their way in the middle overs -- while Afghanistan completed their win -- and were cheaply bundled out for 170.

Perhaps a more dominant performance against Namibia -- against whom they only managed to score 233 -- could have bettered their fortunes, but at the end of the day it was the same old pressure that the Tigers were compelled to bow down to.

It was a disappointing end to a campaign that the junior Tigers had begun nearly a year ago. They had positive performances against the likes of Sri Lanka, the West Indies and even England in the last twelve months.