

SPORT

I AM THE TOP 5

Zlatan Ibrahimovic is reportedly fuming after a Swedish newspaper ranked him second in a list of Sweden's all-time sporting heroes, behind five-time Wimbledon champion Bjorn Borg.

Having been congratulated by the paper, Zlatan replied: "Thank you, but to finish second is like finishing last. I would have been No. 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5, with due respect to the others."



Nasir starts making selectors happy

SPORTS REPORTER



There were a number of performances that would have impressed the selectors after the first round of the Dhaka Premier League's Super Sixes on Monday. Prime Bank Cricket Club's Soumya Sarkar put in a fine all-round performance, hammering 81 with the bat and scalping two crucial wickets with his medium pacers. Abul Hasan surprisingly put in a good performance with the bat, scoring an 80-ball 72. With the selectors looking for a pace-bowling all-rounder for the World Cup, more performances like these could make a difference.

However, of all the performances, it was Nasir Hossain's defiant 82 not out that got the selectors excited. The out-of-favour batsman seemed to have gone back to his old days as he rescued Abahani from a precarious position against archrivals Mohammedan Sporting Club.

With more than 40 runs required in the last four overs, Nasir hammered three consecutive sixes and changed the complexion of the game.

"Nasir played well. What his innings has done is that it has added an option for us. We always want a number of players to fight for one place and this is a good sign," said selector Habibul Bashar.

Chief selector Faruque Ahmed echoed Bashar's thoughts.

"I thought the innings was a really good one and I am really happy that he played such a knock. He was out of form and that's the reason why he was dropped from the side. If he continues playing like this then he can be considered," said Faruque.

While there is no doubt that Nasir managed to dazzle the few spectators present at Fatullah on Wednesday, there are still four more rounds to go and he still has a lot to do to get his place in the team back. In addition, his replacement in the national side, Sabbir Rahman has been performing as well.

Sabbir hammered a 53-ball 75 for Kalabagan Cricket Academy at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium at Mirpur the same day. And even in terms of runs scored in the league the two are neck-and-neck.

Meanwhile, selectors, who were initially planning to submit the final 15 by January 3, may wait till the last date of submission due to Tamim Iqbal's knee injury.

"We are going to wait for Tamim's report and then make the final decision. We have not thought of a replacement, but there are a number of openers who are performing in the league," said Bashar.

While Bashar's statement may be true, the problem is that all those openers are inexperienced.

Currently the highest run-getter, Liton Kumar Das, is yet to make his international debut. At number two is Rony Talukdar who, like Liton, is uncapped. Soumya has also done well and is currently the eighth highest run-getter with an average of 37.82.



Players of Busan I'Park are greeted by Bangladesh Football Federation officials at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport last night. The South Korean top-tier club will play a FIFA International Friendly (Category-II) against Bangladesh Premier League champions Sheikh Jamal Dhanmondi Club at the Bangabandhu National Stadium tomorrow.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Zia loses again

SPORTS REPORTER

Grandmaster Ziaur Rahman lost against WGM Pourkashiyar Atousa of Iran in the seventh round match of the Al Ain Classical Chess Tournament in United Arab Emirates yesterday.

Zia remained at 3.5 points after the seventh round, said a press release from Bangladesh Chess Federation.

Jamal starts at 8th

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh's professional golfer Jamal Hossain Mollah was tied for eighth position after the first round of the season-ending event, the Mcleod Russel Tour Championship, in Kolkata yesterday. The 29-year-old golfer, who is currently ranked 19th in the Professional Golfers Tour of India (PGTI), traded five birdies for three bogeys at the Royal Calcutta Golf Club for a first-day score of two-under (70).

Shubhankar Sharma of Gurgaon claimed top honours on day one of the 1.5 crore rupee event by firing a blistering eight-under (64), followed by S Chikkarangappa of Bangalore at six-under (66).

Despite failing to win an event at the PGTI tour this season, Jamal managed to make three top-ten finishes and 11 cuts in 13 events this season, racking up 11,47,800 rupees so far.

Dhoni doesn't mind sledging

AFP, Melbourne

Captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni said Thursday sledging had nothing to do with India's losing performance in the series against Australia and he encouraged more of it in this week's third Test in Melbourne.

Dhoni said he saw nothing wrong with sledging despite India coming off second best in their efforts to distract Mitchell Johnson during last week's second Test in Brisbane.

India's Test of survival

PTI, Melbourne



Stung by two successive defeats and hit by a dressing room unrest, India go into the must-win third Test against Australia in Melbourne on Friday seeking to salvage a tour which seems to be falling apart both on and off the field.

With a 2-0 lead in hand, Australia need merely a draw to regain the Border-Gavaskar Trophy while India have to win both the remaining two Tests to hold on to the trophy.

The trophy aside, India would be looking to avoid yet another overseas Test-series loss, a situation which is familiar territory for Mahendra Singh Dhoni's men.

The hosts won by 48 runs in Adelaide and by four wickets in Brisbane and can win back the Border-Gavaskar Trophy here at the Melbourne Cricket Ground.

Stretching back to England in 2011-12, India have lost their last five overseas Test series without exception. The last time this happened was when they were minnows and had just started playing Test cricket.

They lost six consecutive overseas Test series starting from their inaugural tour to England in 1932 until the first West Indies tour in 1953, a run spanning defeats in 12 Tests out of 21 played.

But a lot has changed for Indian cricket since. They are not the lowly ranked newcomers in this sport anymore. They are the

alpha male of cricket, dominating the game outside the boundary ropes.

It is only to be expected then that they should go on to perform equally well on the field, irrespective of conditions.

Yet, results haven't matched expectations for the past four seasons.

During this time, the golden generation of the past two decades has either retired or been brushed aside, and the transition got underway. Even that latter bit is coming to an end now, as the Indian team prepares to play the last two of their consecutive run of overseas Tests in a calendar year.

From South Africa to New Zealand to England, it has been a steep learning curve with important lessons at every stage.

The team management has proclaimed many times that they have been assimilated as part of the process. Apart from the Lord's win, the outcome hasn't changed much.

Landing in Australia then, the Indian team tried something different, raising their aggression on the pitch.

For the first three days of this series, in respect to late Phillip Hughes, emotion tied over proceedings.

Then Virat Kohli, Rohit Sharma, Shikhar Dhawan, Murali Vijay and Ishant Sharma lost their cool at different times during the Adelaide and Brisbane Tests.

On the Australian side, David Warner and Mitchell Johnson came up with curt replies, and got the upper hand of this mini-battle as they helped their side to consecutive Test victories.

Pakistan to add Ajmal?

INTERNET

Saeed Ajmal, Pakistan's ace off-spinner, is set to be included in the 15-man squad for the ICC World Cup 2015. As per reports by Geo News, if Ajmal's action isn't cleared then, International Cricket Council (ICC) will allow Pakistan to name a replacement for the veteran off-spinner.

Earlier, Ajmal was suspended from international cricket in September after tests on his bowling action in Brisbane found that the 36-year-old spinner straightened his arm by more than 15 degrees. Since then, Ajmal has been working hard to rectify his action.

Recently, Ajmal played a few One-Day games against Kenya. Both Ajmal and his teammate, Mohammad Hafeez, will arrive in India at the end of this month to undergo unofficial tests on their bowling actions.

Selection deferred due to infighting

SPORTS REPORTER



Differences of opinions between coach and selectors have seemingly led to the deferment of national hockey team's final squad for next month's Hockey World League (Round-2). The points of contention are the inclusion of four senior players -- Rasel Mahmud Jimmy, Imran Hasan Pintoo, Kamruzzaman Rana and skipper Mamunur Rahman Chayan. It has been learnt that an 18-member squad has been finalised, keeping the senior four, but two of the five selectors refused to sign on the list, leading to the deferral of the announcement.

A source inside the Bangladesh Hockey Federation, on condition of anonymity, informed that head coach Gobinathan Krishnamurthi is adamant on keeping Chayan, the penalty corner specialist defender, despite not having good fitness level and displaying poor performance in recent times, against the will of majority of selectors. Young Khorshedur Rahman's excellent performances recently has also made Chayan a less favourable option for selectors.

While Jimmy's performance is satisfactory, it has been learnt that a faction of selectors are not satisfied with the performance of Pintoo and Rana, even though they have been kept in the 18.

Jimmy, Pintoo, Rana, along with goalkeeper Zahid Hossain, were drafted into the preliminary 39-member squad on December 3, a week after their suspensions were withdrawn. The squad has been thus far been reduced to 25 members as Zahid has already been dropped.

Bangladesh will play against Singapore, Japan, Malaysia, Oman, Poland and Ukraine in HWL, which will be held in Singapore from January 17-25. The Bangladesh team is likely to leave for Malaysia on January 10 to play two practice matches -- against Malaysia youth team and a Malaysian club team -- before reaching Singapore on January 14.

Sammy given Roach's spot

IAN'S, Bridgetown

All-rounder Darren Sammy has replaced Kemar Roach in the West Indies' 15-member one-day international squad to face South Africa next month, in another twist in the ongoing selection saga.

The West Indies Cricket Board (WICB) announced the move on Wednesday, even as allegations of victimisation regarding Sammy and fellow all-rounders Dwayne Bravo and Kieron Pollard, continued to swirl around the region, reports in the Caribbean media said.

Sammy, Bravo and Pollard were all left out of the initial 14-man squad announced last Saturday, prompting the players' attorney Ralph Thorne to accuse the WICB of victimisation, stemming from their roles in the abandoned tour of India last October.

"It becomes cynical, it is an insidious form of victimisation. It doesn't make sense to include them in the 30-man squad for the World Cup -- three very, very senior players -- and then relegate them to mere T20 participation. It doesn't make sense," the prominent Queen's Counsel complained in a recent radio interview here.

Yusuf slaps spectator

CRCINFO, Vadodara

Yusuf Pathan allegedly reacted to "indecent comments" by a young spectator by slapping him during a Ranji Trophy match between Baroda and Jammu and Kashmir in Vadodara. The Baroda all-rounder was upset by remarks passed by the spectator when he was batting.

According to Snehal Parikh, the Baroda Cricket Association secretary, the spectator had been passing "indecent comments" against Yusuf as well as other players during the match.

"This youngster had been shouting and passing indecent comments against Pathan and other players, such as Ambati Rayudu, when they were batting," Parikh said. "Pathan was in no mood to tolerate such behaviour. Thus, after he got out, he called that youngster inside the dressing room and allegedly slapped him twice."

According to Parikh, when Yusuf's younger brother Irfan Pathan learnt about the incident, he rushed to the dressing room to bring the situation under control.

Test returns to Christchurch

First Kiwi-Lankan match from today

AFP, Christchurch



New Zealand and Sri Lanka are expecting a paceman's paradise when their two-Test series starts in Christchurch on Friday.

Aside from the prestige of a Test match, the first in eight years in the earthquake-ravaged city, it also serves as an opportunity for both sides to fine tune ahead of the looming World Cup.

The World Cup squads are due to be finalised on January 8, a day after the second Test ends.

Even as the Sri Lankans settled into lodgings in the main South Island city they were alerted to its earthquake risk when a magnitude 4.0 quake struck on Wednesday, followed by several aftershocks.

With the former home of cricket in Christchurch, Lancaster Park, destroyed in the 2011 quakes which claimed 185 lives, a new venue was purpose built at Hagley Oval and quickly developed a reputation in domestic cricket for producing a result.

Neil Wagner, vying with Doug Bracewell for the third seamer's slot behind spearheads Tim Southee and Trent Boult, said the bowlers have been told the Test pitch is the same as the net wickets.

"And the nets played pretty good. It was nice and quick and had a bit of bounce to it,

so it definitely excited all of the bowlers."

At Test level, both sides have enjoyed a confidence-boosting 2014 with Sri Lanka claiming series wins over England and Pakistan and New Zealand beating the West Indies and India at home, the West Indies away and then drawing on the lifeless wickets in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Southee and Boult have developed into a formidable opening bowling force for New Zealand and also playing Wagner and Bracewell in a four-pronged seam attack was a possibility although batting coach Craig McMillan hinted it was unlikely.

"The fast bowlers have a little bit of a smile on their face, seeing a bit of green grass, which we haven't really seen for the last eight weeks," he said.

"Playing four seamers is an option, and it's something we'll discuss. But there's also a lot of left-handers in that Sri Lankan batting line up, so the off-spinner Mark Craig becomes quite important."

Sri Lanka arrived in New Zealand with a relatively inexperienced squad and admitting the series had an important role in their World Cup preparations where they face New Zealand at Hagley Oval in the opening match on February 14.

"We know whom we want in our 15 except for one or two places which we hope to fill during the Test series," coach Marvan Atapattu said.

WI seek pitch favour

2nd Test in Port Elizabeth starts today

REUTERS, Port Elizabeth



West Indies can look forward to more favourable batting conditions for the second Test in Port Elizabeth on Friday as they look to overcome the mental scars of collapsing on Pretoria's seamer-friendly strip.

The tourists were outplayed in the innings and 220-run defeat and will be particularly disappointed with the way they crumbled with the bat to score just 332 runs in the match in a little more than 100 overs.

However, Shivnarine Chanderpaul, who has been through good and bad times before with the side in his 20-year international career, believes there is no cause for alarm.

"We're disappointed after Centurion. I think we're a better team than that," Chanperpaul told reporters.

"We just have to put it behind us and take it as a learning experience and do better in this next match."

"The guys we have here are the best in the Caribbean, that's the reason why they're here. They've all scored runs in the past, scored a lot of hundreds in regional cricket."

West Indies can at least take heart from their last visit to St George's Park where they won in a 2-1 series defeat in 2007, their only away victory against a major test playing nation since beating England in Birmingham in 2000.

The Port Elizabeth pitch is expected to be less seamer-friendly, harder and drier, taking some of the bite out of the top-ranked South African pace attack that wreaked havoc in Pretoria.

South Africa are almost certain to play leg-spinner Imran Tahir and could also hand a debut to batsman Temba Bavuma after wicketkeeper Quinton de Kock was ruled out of the series with an ankle injury. AB de Villiers will continue to keep wicket.



India batsman Virat Kohli watches the ball during a training session at the Melbourne Cricket Ground yesterday. India take on Australia in the third Test from today.

PHOTO: AFP