

SPORTS



Tigers sprint during their afternoon training session at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium in Mirpur yesterday. A few more sessions and it will be time for the cricketers to leave for Brisbane for their next phase of World Cup preparations.

PHOTO: STAR

TIGERS DOWN UNDER

Can Rubel put it all right in World Cup?

BISHWAJIT ROY

Rubel Hossain received more-than-enough attention in the lead up to the ICC World Cup but unfortunately for all the wrong reasons. There were even doubts as to whether the right-arm pacer could fly with his teammates down under. But following a month-long episode which saw him go behind bars and then return, the path has now been paved for him to travel to Australia and New Zealand.

However, the question remains as to whether the off-field controversies would put any pressure on the 25-year-old pacer and whether he can put it all aside to give his best in the mega event.

"You cannot deny that it will be an issue for him but I believe everything would be okay for him once he flies to Australia because the central focus for everybody would be World Cup then. This is such a tournament that you cannot think of anything apart from that," said former national skipper and now selector Habibur Bashar.

There have been talks about how the off-field events could lead to opponents using it as a mode of sledging against Rubel. Bashar however did not think it would be too much of a concern. "It's the batsmen who generally are the targets," he said.

It's a dream for any fast bowler to show his mettle in Australian conditions and at the same time it's also a challenge since inaccurate bowling is bound to be punished in such conditions.

In this contest a big challenge awaits the pacer who has gone through ups and downs in his recent past ever since his brilliant debut against Sri Lanka in January 2009, where he scalped a match-winning four-wicket haul.

The injury-prone bowler's six-wicket haul including a hat-trick, which guided Bangladesh to victory against New Zealand in Mirpur in the 2013, is a performance

which he can take inspiration from.

Bashar however said that they are encouraged by the bowler's performance in the last series against Zimbabwe.

"Whenever the selectors picked him the main consideration remained the same that he is a wicket-taker and that he can bowl fast. We all know he is inconsistent in his bowling but his last performance against Zimbabwe was really encouraging," observed Bashar.

"I think the World Cup will be a good opportunity for Rubel. He can bowl a deceptive length and he can use that to his advantage."

Rubel scalped 13 wickets in 10 ODIs last year at an average of 34; not so good for a pacer bowler; but still the team will depend on him. He has made several comebacks in the past.



The one in 2013, when he returned from a shoulder injury to put in a brilliant performance against New Zealand got everyone excited. Shane Jurgensen, Bangladesh's former coach reckoned that Rubel was the fastest bowler of the competition.

The time has come again for the bowler to prove that no matter what has happened off the field, he can rise up to the occasion when it is most required.

Booters lose to foreigners

SPORTS REPORTER

If the first practice game of the national team against Abahani at the BKSP in Saver yesterday was any indication, albeit in a light vein, of how they would fair in their international assignment later this month, it depicted a gloomy prospect.

Abahani won the game 2-0, which means their Hungarian gaffer George Kottan, who once served as a Bangladesh coach, has won the battle in the tactical area against national team's interim coach Saiful Bari Titu.

On the field, there were a lot of marksmen of our own in both teams. But on a day where foreign

recruits called the shots, Abahani's Hungarian player Szabolcs Csorba struck both goals in the second half and that too after Titu had fielded his best eleven in a chilly winter afternoon.

Csorba, who mostly warmed the bench of Hungary's current premier league champions Debreceni VSC from 2009 to 2013, could not think of a better way to impress his possible new employer in his maiden Bangladesh trial.

True the national team enjoyed a lion's share of ball possession in the second half and created a couple of good chances but neither Zahid Hasan Emily nor Zahid Hossain could cash in on those

opportunities. For Abahani, national discard Shahedul Alam Shahed, who is likely to be recalled to the national fold, was the key architect behind both goals.

Titu understandably played down the defeat.

"There is nothing to be worried about this result as it was a match to see all the players. We conceded two goals due to silly mistakes and we need to sort this out before the tournament," said Titu.

Kottan felt that Bangladesh national team needed to play more practice matches before going into the Bangabandhu Gold Cup, a six-nation invitational tournament which kicks off on January 29.

Shakib's Big Bash ends in defeat

SPORTS REPORTER

Acc all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan's second stint in the Big Bash League came to an end yesterday after his side, the Melbourne Renegades, went down to leaders Adelaide Strikers by 22 runs at the Docklands Stadium in Melbourne yesterday.

With the ball Shakib finished with figures of none for 28 off four overs. The left-hander, who came into bat at six, attempted to slog a number of deliveries in a bid to catch up with the big asking rate. In the end though, Shakib was caught at long-off for a 16-ball 23. Chasing 167, the Renegades were restricted to 144 for 7 in 20 overs. They finished the league in sixth place.

Shakib will now travel to Brisbane and wait there for the Bangladesh contingent, which is scheduled to leave for Australia on December 24.

Malaysia sending U-23 team too!

SPORTS REPORTER

After Bahrain and Singapore, Malaysia became the third team who will be sending Olympic (U-23) team to the Bangabandhu Gold Cup international football tournament, scheduled to begin on January 29 in Sylhet.

The Football Association of Malaysia (FAM) informed the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) yesterday that it wants to send the Olympic team as it wants to prepare the team for the Olympic Qualifiers in March. BFF General Secretary Abu Nayeem Shohag claimed that they are still trying to persuade their Malaysian counterparts for sending the national team instead of the Olympic team.

Malaysia are scheduled to play against hosts Bangladesh in the opening fixture of the six-nation tournament in Sylhet on January 29. The other team of Group B are Sri Lanka while Group A comprises Thailand, Bahrain Olympic team and Singapore Olympic team.

Sorensen in for Murtagh

AFP, London

Max Sorensen has replaced injured Middlesex seamer Tim Murtagh in Ireland's squad for the upcoming World Cup, team officials announced Sunday.

REVISED SQUAD

William Porterfield (captain), Andrew Balbirnie, Peter Chase, Alex Cusack, George Dockrell, Ed Joyce, Andrew McBrine, John Mooney, Kevin O'Brien, Niall O'Brien, Max Sorensen, Paul Stirling, Stuart Thompson, Gary Wilson, Craig Young.

WC, ASIAN CUP QUALIFICATION

Bangladesh avoid play-off fate

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The 34th place in the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) according to the latest FIFA rankings has helped Bangladesh avoid preliminary play-off matches as they will be taking part straight in the group stage qualifiers for the 2018 FIFA World Cup and the 2019 Asian Cup.

The AFC's competitions committee, through a circular yesterday, unveiled the detailed format of the qualifying campaign for both the tournaments, based on the FIFA rankings published on January 9.

According to the new format, the top 34 teams of Asia will be joined by six more teams -- winners of play-off matches among the 12 teams ranked from 35 to 46 -- for the group stages of the qualifiers. The 40 teams will be split into eight groups of five teams each, and each of the five teams will play all the four other teams twice on home and away basis to decide the standings.

This format ensures that Bangladesh will play at least eight matches in group stages of qualifiers to be held between June 11, 2015 and March 29, 2016.

The eight group winners and four best runners-up teams will go to the final round of World Cup Qualifiers while these 12 teams will also get direct entry into the Asian Cup.

The remaining 28 teams of the group stages will be trimmed to 24 based on their standings and will go through another round of qualification to determine the next 12 teams for the Asian Cup.

Among the seven teams under the South Asian Football Federation (SAFF), only Bangladesh (34) and Maldives (18) have managed to get a direct entry into the group stage of qualifiers while India (35), Sri Lanka (36), Nepal (42), Pakistan (43) and Bhutan (46) will have to go through the play-offs before the group stages. Afghanistan, the holders of the SAFF Championship, have already left SAFF and joined Central Asian Football Federation.

The play-off matches among the bottom 12 teams will be held on March 12 and 17 to determine the six teams who will join the top 34 teams for the group stages. The draw for the group stages will be held after these play-offs. Ten match days have been fixed for the group stage matches: June 11, June 16, September 3, September 8, October 8, October 13, November 12 and November 17 of 2015 and March 24 and March 29 of 2016.

Apart from these eight matches, Bangladesh national team will also participate in the Bangabandhu Gold Cup starting this month and the SAFF Championship towards the end of the year while the Olympic team will take part in the AFC U-23 Qualifiers (Also Olympic Qualifiers) in March in Dhaka.

HOCKEY WORLD LEAGUE

BD face Poland today

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh take on leaders Poland in their last match of pool stage of the Hockey World League (Round-2) in Singapore today. Bangladesh, currently third in Pool B which also includes Japan and Mexico, have three points from two matches. Poland lead the pool with six points from two matches while Japan are equal with Bangladesh on three points, but in second position due to a superior goal difference.

The Bangladesh team, which bounced back from a 1-5 defeat in their opening match against Japan by thumping Mexico 6-1 on Sunday, spent their time at the

team hotel yesterday as they could not practice due to non-availability of practice pitches, according message received from Singapore.

Today's match between Bangladesh and Poland, which begins at 1:00pm Bangladesh time and the one between Japan and Mexico, will decide their group standings, based on which the quarterfinal line-up will be made.

Malaysia lead Pool A with six points while Ukraine and Oman are in second and third positions respectively with equal three points. Singapore, like Mexico of Pool B, have failed to earn any points from two matches.

Taijul gave a scare

SPORTS REPORTER

The Bangladesh cricket team management went through a few tensed moments after left-arm spinner Taijul Islam was struck on his bowling arm while batting in the nets at Mirpur yesterday. He was immediately taken to a hospital for an X-ray after the incident.

And according to team manager Khaled Mahmud the reports did not reveal anything serious.

"Taijul hurt his wrist while facing Shafiul Islam in the nets. The X-ray did not reveal any injury and he is expected to join training tomorrow [Tuesday] as per schedule," said Mahmud.

Taijul is one of the six players in the World Cup squad who made their debut in 2014. He made it to the final 15 barely three months after his first international match against the West Indies.

The Tigers have been hit with a couple of injury scares in the last month. Tamim Iqbal underwent a surgery on his left knee due to a problem with his meniscus and is currently going through rehab, while Mushfiqur Rahim had hurt his shoulder during the Dhaka Premier League and was out for a week.

Suspension on Bailey

REUTERS, Brisbane

Australia one-day captain George Bailey has been slapped with a one-match suspension for a second over-rate offence in 12 months, the International Cricket Council (ICC) said on Monday.

In his absence, Steve Smith is likely lead the hosts, who will seek a hat-trick of tri-series match victories against England at Hobart on Friday.

Sharma cannot speak English!

AFP, Sydney



AFP, Sydney

Explosive Australia opener David Warner on Monday defended a heated on-field exchange with Indian batsman Rohit Sharma in which he demanded the Indian cricketer "speak English".

Warner said the verbal fireworks at a one-day international at the Melbourne Cricket Ground on Sunday earned him a fine of 50 per cent of his match fee from the International Cricket Council.

The Australian fielders had taken offence when the Indians went for a single off an overthrow which they wrongly believed was in breach of cricket etiquette.

"When I went over to say something to him, he sort of said something in their language and I said 'speak English' because, if you're going to say something for me to understand, theoretically I cannot speak Hindi," Warner told Sky Sports Radio.

"So I did the polite thing and asked him to speak English, therefore he did and I can't repeat what he said."

Asked whether there was anything wrong in the manner in which he asked the question, Warner said: "I thought I was OK by asking him to speak English and I am going to say it a couple of times if he keeps saying it in Hindi."

Warner admitted he should not have confronted Sharma but said the pair had been engaging in "friendly banter" during the match, which Australia won with six balls to spare despite a century by Sharma, and he didn't feel the need to apologise.

"No, because we were actually going at each other anyway during the game," he said.

During the summer's Test series against India, which saw tense sledging, Warner said he would not be toning down his "banter" and he repeated that stance Monday.

"If people get on the wrong side of me, I'm not going to back down," he said.

"We're always there to play hard aggressive cricket, but you know what comes with that -- that's what happens, sometimes you are going to get fined."

Siddikur ties the knot today

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh's premier golfer Siddikur Rahman will tie the knot today through a private ceremony at the Kurmitola Golf Club. The 30-year-old golfer, who won the Asian Tour title twice, is getting married to Aurni Samaun, a golf enthusiast.

The shy and unassuming golfer, who has been busy with preparations for the



big day, preferred to keep the information close to his chest, but people close to the golfer informed that the marriage is taking place through both personal initiation and family agreement.

The bride has recently completed her honours degree from a university in Dhaka. Her family resides in the cantonment area of Dhaka.

Battle of losers today

PTI, Brisbane



PTI, Brisbane

Jolted by the opening loss to Australia, India would look to plug the bowling loopholes and ensure a stronger batting display when they take on England in their second ODI tri-series match here on Tuesday.

In Brisbane, both sides will be looking to register their first win in this tournament with the hosts having stolen a march on them with two successive wins.

Australia beat England by three wickets in Sydney on Friday and then beat India by four wickets in Melbourne on Sunday.

from two games. In this series, billed as the dress rehearsal for the upcoming ODI World Cup, these two sides will be keen to get a win under their belt.

India can take some solace from their match against Australia in the sense that they pushed the hosts a lot closer.

By their own admission, the Australian batsmen were going for that bonus point against England and thus lost quick wickets in the middle order. The repeated mini-collapse against the Indian bowling was no such fluke.

Two bowlers played a key role in squeezing the run-rate, Bhuvneshwar Kumar and Axar Patel. It was quite a positive for the Indian team, reeling under the inconsistency shown by their attack in the preceding Test series.