

ALL EYES ON THE PITCH

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Bangladeshi Dreams

We went to the 2011 ICC Cricket World Cup with great hopes and aspirations. The World Cup was held on our turf and the quarter-finals seemed to be an easy goal. We were, however, disappointed. This year the Bangladeshi fans are a lot more sceptical, and understandably so. The World Cup 2015 is being held in Australia-New Zealand, a region where even our most experienced cricketers haven't got much game time.

The biggest challenge for Bangladesh will be to fit in with the conditions. When almost every other team is playing prolonged series, we chose to rest in our country. The fact that we've had a horrible 2014 can't be overlooked either. Bangladesh's biggest strength is spin and we have observed in the New Zealand-Sri Lanka and India-Australia series how that is not going to help much either.

But does that mean we should go to the World Cup with no hopes at all? Of course not. We have some really talented players. Our captain Mashrafe Bin Mortaza has been a great leader in the Zimbabwe series and will undoubtedly be so in the upcoming World Cup. Mushfiquir Rahim has been very dependable and it will be a treat to watch him play against the likes of Mitchell Johnson. Our Mr. Finisher, Nasir Hossain is on his way back to form and we can hope to see the old Nasir in the World Cup. There's Taskin Ahmed, who we've all been dying to see bowl on the pitches of Australia and New Zealand. And then there's our very own superstar Shakib Al Hasan.

We can *hope* Bangladesh will be able to defeat the associate nations in Pool A without much trouble. Nevertheless, we must not forget Afghanistan beat us

last year in Asia Cup. They have a decent pace attack which might be deadly in the Australian conditions. But it shouldn't be anything lethal if our batsmen fully utilise their strengths. The fact that we have a few comparatively shorter players shouldn't be a problem either. If anything, we might be able to gain some extra wides from the bouncers.

From the remaining four, Australia and New Zealand can be considered formidable on their home soil. That leaves Sri Lanka and England. Sri Lanka are the favourites to win the cup from South Asia. Their squad is vastly experienced and they have played a long series against New Zealand just before the Cup. So, they will, undoubtedly, be better prepared than us. But if we manage to restrict Sangakkara, we *might* stand a chance. Moreover, they have lost the series against New Zealand which means their morale won't be very high. Most importantly, Cricket Sri Lanka has not yet confirmed whether or not Malinga will play. If he doesn't, it will be a huge plus point for us.

England, apart from a test series against India at home, hasn't had a very good 2014. Yes, they have played well in the tri-series against India and Australia. But we can hope to defeat them if our spinners can do their thing since the English aren't exactly known for their abilities against spin. If we can make the highest use of our abilities, we should be able to defeat them.

Right now, our chances might seem slim but then again, cricket is the game of glorious uncertainty. Unlike 2011, we have nothing to lose this time and all we can do is to stick to our team no matter what. And Bangladeshi fans have been known to do that.

Hunt for the Cup: Match Previews

Bangladesh is placed in 'Pool A' of the ICC World Cup Cricket 2015. They will play Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Scotland, England and the hosts Australia and New Zealand at six different venues. How tough are the opponents? What tactics can be incorporated in the gameplay? Here is almost everything you need to know.

Bangladesh vs Afghanistan

Match Day: February 18, Wednesday
Venue: Manuka Oval, Canberra
Bangladesh have a great chance of starting their World Cup with a win: against an opponent who they are capable of beating comprehensively, and also on a ground that resembles their home conditions most closely out of all the grounds in Australia. Traditionally slow and low, the Manuka Oval pitch in Canberra should help the Bangladeshi spinners to capitalise and extract turn out of the wicket.

Bangladesh vs Australia

Match Day: February 21, Saturday
Venue: The Gabba, Brisbane
This will be the first real test for the Tigers and also the most difficult match for them. The Gabba pitch has always been notorious for its vicious bounce helping the fast bowlers and against the best bowling line-

up in the tournament consisting Johnson, Cummins and Starc – batting is supposed to be difficult. But rather than getting bogged down by the pace, the batsmen should try to bat with a positive mindset.

Bangladesh vs Sri Lanka

Match Day: February 26, Thursday
Venue: MCG, Melbourne
The much anticipated sub-continental duel will take place on the largest cricket ground of the world. While batting, besides scoring boundaries, taking ones and twos are going to be crucial. The experience of veterans Sangakkara and Jayawardene are always an advantage for Sri Lanka. In other words, it promises to be a high scoring match. Bangladesh will like to chase rather than set a target on this day-night encounter.

Bangladesh vs Scotland

Match Day: March 5, Thursday
Venue: Saxton Oval, Nelson
This New Zealand pitch is supposed to provide consistent bounce with good carry to the wicket-keeper. The young pace bowlers of Bangladesh will have a great chance to show their fast bowling skills. Also, if the spinners can bowl in tight line and lengths, they should chip in with some wickets too.

Bangladesh vs England

Match Day: March 9, Monday
Venue: Adelaide Oval, Adelaide
Tigers return to Australia to play against England in Adelaide. Adelaide Oval has been known to be a little dusty and dry which aids the spinners. If the spinners can bowl well, landing the ball in good areas – they are sure to extract significant turn out of the pitch. Tigers can utilise their spin bowling arsenal to great effect against the Englishmen who are not the best of the lot against it. Due to a shorter width of the ground compared to its length, batsmen should target the shorter boundary and try to play more cuts, hooks and pulls.

Bangladesh vs New Zealand

Match Day: March 13, Friday
Venue: Seddon Park, Hamilton
Of all the grassy, bouncy pitches of New Zealand, Hamilton stands out for being a bit drier than the rest. So along with fast bowlers, spinners will come into play too. With the recent winning streak at home, Kiwis will be the favourites to win but Tigers will also feel they have a good chance after whitewashing the Kiwis two times in a row back at home.

Debutants to Look Out for

Steve Smith: Among the first timers, Australian Steve Smith is undoubtedly the biggest name. He started his career as a leg spinner and batsman but his bowling abilities aren't exactly necessary any more. He is one of the best batsmen in the world both in Tests and ODIs. He became the Man of the Series in the recently finished Test series against India, as captain. But he did not stop there. He carried his form to the Carlton Mid ODI Tri series. He led his team in the absence of the regular captain Michael Clarke and Vice-Captain George Bailey against India, and became the first player to score a century on Test and ODI captaincy debuts. At the moment, he has the Midas touch. His recent innings: 10, 73*, 104, 67, 37, 47, 102* for a total of 440 runs at an average of 88.

Corey Anderson: Corey Anderson caught the world's eye after he broke Shahid Afridi's record of fastest 100 against West Indies in only 36 balls. Statistics say he has a healthy average of 36.50 for a batsman at number five. But more importantly, this Kiwi has a strike-rate of 128.78 which is just what you need in the present day when teams often end up having to chase more than 300 often. If the top-order batsmen do their jobs properly, he'll finish the match for you. He'll also be handy if they are batting first to score them some quick runs in the last few overs.

Quinton de Kock: The 22 year-old has been a consistent batsman for South Africa for over a year now. This wicket-keeping batsman has been a great replacement for Mark Boucher. He has already scored six centuries and has an average of 43 with a good strike rate of 88. Having said that, he is recovering from an ankle ligament tear and won't be fit to play until the third game. If he does manage to fight off this untimely injury, we can be sure he'll do everything he can to make his first World Cup memorable.

The Australian Trio: The fast bowlers Pat Cummins, James Faulkner and Josh Hazlewood each, alone, do not stand out. But these Australian speedsters together with Mitchell Johnson will be a nightmare for any batsman in Australian conditions. The "wolf pack", as termed by Brett Lee himself, has the capability to bowl over 145 kilometres in their respective ten overs. It is safe to say, unless it's the likes of De Villiers, any batsman will fear standing in front of them.

Taskin Ahmed: Taskin Ahmed shouldn't be on this list. There are youngsters like Moeen Ali who probably would be better suited. We've only seen glimpses of Taskin's talent. But that will not stop us from expecting him to become the next Mashrafe Bin Mortaza. And we have every right to. He has taken 7 wickets in 3 matches with a best figure of 5/28 against India and that too on a slow Bangladeshi pitch.

