

'Opportunity as we are in good form'

SPORTS REPORTER from Chittagong

Towards the end of Bangladesh's training session yesterday morning Taijul Islam decided to shift ends and pad up for a change. At the indoor facilities of Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chittagong, the slow left- armer was up against a bowling machine that seemed to rattle down deliveries at a pace much too fast for Taijul's comfort.

The first delivery shaved his elbow, while the second took an inside edge on to his pad. Captain Mushfiqur Rahim, who himself was resting nearby following a strenuous batting session, noticed that. He got up, clapped twice and urged Taijul to see the line.

As the Test series begins today, there will be plenty more instances when Mushfiqur will have to raise his voice and encourage mates. It was a duty that Mashrafe Bin Mortaza did well during the ODIs. And with the power transferred to Mushfiqur, the Tigers will hope that the wicketkeeper- batsman can uphold the spirit.

While it would be too much to expect all-out victories, akin to the ODI series, in the Tests, one however will hope that the Tigers under Mushfiqur can depict the same fervour and aggression that they did under Mashrafe.

And the skipper is aware of this challenge.

"It's not about Test or one-day, this is a Bangladesh team. So yes it may feel a little bad because the way we are progressing in the one-dayers, everyone wants the same amount of progress in Tests as well.

"The least we should be able to do is play consistent cricket for five days, the results will automatically come. I think that the way we have been playing for the last eight months and with the good results coming by there is a good chance for us to do well in this Test series too," said Mushfiqur.

"We have done so well in the one-dayers that there seems to be a new challenge for us now; replicating that form in Test cricket. Almost the same players play in the Tests as well, so why will we not be able to put in similar performances in Test cricket?

"Maybe because we don't play too many Tests; the rhythm is important. There is also an issue of temperament in the longer version. But on the whole I have been happy with the way our team played this year. We have drawn against Pakistan, India and won three Tests against Zimbabwe," he added.

Mushfiqur also said that the camp was confident after their comeback in the ODIs and were raring to go in the Tests as well.

"We have never faced South Africa with this kind of a mentality. Although Test cricket is a different ball game, this is an opportunity for us because we are in good form," said Mushfiqur.



'We do have the bowlers'

SPORTS REPORTER from Chittagong

Bangladesh coach Chandika Hathurusingha doesn't like to beat around the bush. He seems to have a straightforward policy when it comes to planning Bangladesh's tactics and uses a similar strategy in press conferences.

And so, when he was asked as to what he thought would be the major obstacle for the hosts in the Test series, there weren't any ifs, buts or maybes; he cut straight to the point.

"The biggest challenge will be their bowlers; they have got a really world class bowling attack in Test cricket. How our batters handle their fast bowlers will have a big impact on the outcome," said Hathurusingha in Chittagong yesterday.

Since 2013, South Africa have been the only team that have kept their bowling average below 30. In their last 18 matches, their bowling average has been 27.03.

Despite the threat, Hathurusingha is confident that his batsmen can overcome the challenge.

"Our top order is world class as well. If you compare our batting with any team, I will back my batters. We have got a really good bunch of players. There's Tamim [Iqbal], Imrul [Kayes] at the top and mini [Mominul Haque] coming into the team gives us a lot of stability," reckoned the coach.

History however suggests that Bangladesh's bowlers have had a torrid time against South Africa's batsmen.

On two occasions did South Africa's batsmen post 400-plus partnerships in Chittagong. The first was in 2003 when Boeta Dippenaar and Jacques Rudolph shared an unbeaten 429-run stand for the third wicket in Chittagong. The second instance was in 2008 when Neil McKenzie and Graeme Smith shared a 415-run stand for the opening wicket, a stand that remains a world record.

Hathurusingha though rates Bangladesh's current bowling attack very highly.

"We have a very good bowling attack that can take 20 wickets. Jubair [Hossain] is someone who will have a bigger impact in Bangladesh cricket going forward. He is a wicket-taker and we will use him as an attacking weapon against any team.

"Not only Jubair, Shakib [Al Hasan] as well. We have forgotten about him. He has been the highest wicket-taker. We have also got Mustafizur [Rahman] and Rubel [Hossain] and [Mohammad] Shahid is a work horse. I am much more confident than before with this bowling attack when it comes to taking 20 wickets," said Hathurusingha.



Bangladesh captain Mushfiqur Rahim (R) and his South Africa counterpart Hashim Amla pose for photographs with the trophy on the eve of the two-match Test series yesterday. The first Test will start at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chittagong today.

PHOTO:

STAR

Will the Mustafiz show go on?

NAIMUL KARIM from Chittagong



He can deceive batsmen almost at will, can break the 140 km barrier every now and then, barely bowls outside his radar and has the hunger to transcend boundaries; at the moment it seems as though Bangladesh's team management will have to create fictional reasons, save for injury issues, to prevent Mustafizur Rahman from getting his first-ever Test cap today.

If he is prevented, then the Tigers will have to revert to pace-bowling combinations that haven't really worked for them in the recent past. Since 2014, for instance, only 28 out of the 131 wickets taken by Bangladesh's bowlers were courtesy of the pacers.

When 19-year-old Mustafizur's name was announced in the 14-member Test squad, there was both a sense of relief and a wave of caution.

Can Mustafizur take the rigours of Test cricket? Should the selectors have given him more time? Considering the fact that

the left-armer had only made his ODI debut last month, these questions were inevitable.

While different opinions were reflected in the media and the cricketing fraternity, there wasn't a shadow of doubt in the minds of coach Chandika Hathurusingha and captain Mushfiqur Rahim regarding the move.

"He is good enough to play Test cricket," Hathurusingha said firmly during the pre-match press conference in Chittagong yesterday.

The Sri Lankan further said that it was an advantage to have Mustafizur in the side.

"Having a left-armer in any bowling attack is a different thing because it takes the condition out of the equation since he gives you a different angle. Whenever we can get him into the Test team it will be an advantage," said the head coach.

Mushfiqur echoed the coach's sentiments.

"He has done well in domestic cricket and has bowled well in longer version cricket. In addition, four or five of their batsmen haven't yet faced Mustafizur. So I don't think it will be a surprise if we play



Mustafizur on Tuesday," said Mushfiqur.

The team management's confidence stems from the fact that Mustafizur actually has a better record in the longer version of the game in domestic cricket. He has played more four-day games than List-A cricket.

In the 10 first-class matches that he has played, he has scalped 28 wickets at an average of 21.17. In the last National Cricket League, he was the only pacer to take more

than 20 wickets in the competition.

His bowling average of 14.81 was the best among the top 10 wicket-takers in that competition. The tournament in February this year saw him bag three four-wicket and one five-wicket hauls in just nine innings.

In fact, officials were so impressed with Mustafizur's bowling in the longer version that his Bangladesh Cricket League (BCL) franchisee, Prime Bank South Zone, opted to exclude the left-armer from BCL's one-day competition and earmarked him just for the league's four-day competition.

The last time a left-arm pacer made a significant impact for Bangladesh was back in 2001, when Monjurul Islam ripped through Zimbabwe's batting order in Bulawayo. A year into Test cricket back then, Monjurul's feat provided hope for Bangladesh. The bowler though had a dismal record from then on, having managed to take just 22 more wickets in the next three years.

14 years on, the inclusion of another left-arm pacer in the Test squad has instilled a sense of excitement. For the sake of the fans, one would hope that this isn't a false dawn.

Steyn-gun fully loaded

SPORTS REPORTER from Chittagong



With 396 Test wickets in the bag, pacer Dale Steyn requires just four more wickets to become only the second South Africa bowler after Shaun Pollock to take 400 Test scalps. And Steyn's brilliant record in the sub-continent suggests that he is likely to reach that landmark in this two-match series.

For starters, the 32-year-old has taken 22 wickets in four Tests against Bangladesh and averages just 17.18 against the Tigers. In addition, he has taken 84 wickets in 17 matches in Asia, which is currently the highest number of scalps by a non-Asian pacer in the sub-continent. If one were to include the spinner as well, Steyn remains third with Shane Warne and Daniel Vettori ahead of him.

With five 5-wicket hauls and a 10-wicket haul in the sub-continent, there's no doubt that the pacer is bound to be a threat for the hosts.

Steyn's brilliant record in the sub-continent was an aspect that South Africa skipper Hashim Amla emphasised on during the pre-match press conference in Chittagong yesterday.

"He has been a special bowler for us. In crucial times he has made contributions no matter where it has been.

"Hopefully, if he can get there [400 wickets] during this series, there is no doubt that everybody will enjoy the success that he has got because we know the amount of work that he has put in," said Amla.

"I don't know what the figures are but I think he has an equally good record in the sub-continent, as at home and in the other places and not many fast bowlers can do that.

"His action and his style of bowling... especially if the ball starts to



South Africa pace spearhead Dale Steyn bowls during a net session at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chittagong yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

reverse swing, he is really dangerous. There are not too many bowlers in the world who can be as successful as Dale is on flat wickets," the skipper added.

While Amla reckoned that the hosts would be high on confidence following the win in the ODIs, he also however, believed that the visitors would put up a much better

show in a format that they are a lot more comfortable in.

"Test cricket is a different ball game. We have been playing really good Test cricket over the last couple of years. We have a lot of new faces in the team mixed with experienced players. We are a team in transition and we hope to get together as a team and grow in the next couple of years,"

Brilliant U-19s

SPORTS REPORTER



When the Tigers scripted a new chapter in their ODI history with a first-ever series win against a formidable South Africa on their home turf before the Eid break, their future successors also scored an equally impressive 5-2 win against their South

African counterparts away from home during the Eid holidays.

Pinak Ghosh, a 16-year-old opener from Netrokona, hogged the spotlight by hitting a magnificent 141-ball 150 with 21 fours and a six that gave Bangladesh Under-19s a 58-run win in the sixth match at Durban on July 17. Joyraz Sheik then hit a superb 106-ball 90 in the last game of the seven-match one-day series on July 19 as the visitors finished the tour with a 22-run win.

There was doubt if the Bangladesh Under-19s could offset their home success, 6-1 win against the South African youths when they toured Bangladesh in April, in different conditions. BCB's national manager of Game Development Nazmul Abedin Fahim however was not surprised by the outstanding performance of the junior Tigers against the current U-19 world champions.

"We have got a very balanced side. Most importantly I think it's the self-confidence which helped the team to bring success even on foreign soil. Like the senior players, the under-19 players also believe that they can beat any team in the world. And you know apart from India, we have had good records in bilateral series at this level in the last few years. Now, we have to do something in the World Cup," said Fahim. The next Youth World Cup will take place in Bangladesh in January-February next year.

Fahim, a veteran coach, said left-handed opener Pinak has a bright future.

"He just came from the under-17 squad and showed that he had the ability to score big. There are a number of good players in the side but there is something special about Pinak," added Fahim.

In the final game captain Mehedi Hasan claimed four wickets after Joyraz's 90 as the visitors finished the series on a high. Chasing 267, the home team needed 26 to win off the last two overs with three wickets remaining, but Hasan's double-strike in the 49th over dashed their hopes.

Fahim believes that the success in South Africa will serve the team as a huge boost ahead of next year's Youth World Cup, where their best performance so far has been a distant fifth position during the 2006 edition.