

SPORT

MASHRAFE

Cricket's odyssey of 2015

BISHWAJIT ROY

"Life itself is the most wonderful fairytale of all."

The above words perhaps best describe the cricketing journey of Mashrafe Bin Mortaza. His talent was unearthed instantly and his series of comebacks from injuries already deserves to be a subject of research.

The way the brave-heart from Narail transformed the Tigers to win three consecutive home series and the manner in which he led them to a dream quarterfinal berth in the World Cup has left the world's cricket fraternity hunting down the recipe that made this charismatic character.

Arguably the most beloved cricketer of the country, Mashrafe presented the world with a new Bangladesh in 2015. It can very well be said that the year

2015 belonged to this one man.

Off the field his genuine simplicity separates him from the others and on it his fearless approach is the trademark of his character. The best part is that the man in charge was able to infuse that quality among his charges this year.

With four drawn Tests out of five and two T20I wins, the Tigers did witness improvements in these formats. However, Bangladesh's success story mainly revolved around the ODIs, a format in which they won 13 out of the 18 games.

The Tigers' win-rate this year was second only to Australia, but the numbers will not actually tell you the entire story. The respect that the Tigers gained from world cricket not only came through the numbers but also through their fearless brand of cricket.

The fact that several cricket pundits around the world tagged this year as

the year of Bangladesh goes on to show how big an achievement this year has been for Bangladesh's cricket; because these accolades arrive only when the hearts are truly won.

On the night of March 9 in Adelaide, Bangladesh acquired a new self-belief when they shot England out of the World Cup.

That's where the journey began and it continued with spectacular home wins against Pakistan, India and South Africa. Such was the intensity of the wins that it even compelled Mashrafe to admit that he was a bit surprised with the results.

"Before the World Cup I said that if we could perform well then it would help us in the series after that, but I didn't really expect it to help us so much," Mashrafe had told The Daily Star during an interview.

The performances in 2015 easily

leave behind the successes of the previous years.

The ripple effect that took place in the team due to Mashrafe was very much visible. Mahmudullah Riyad ascertained his talent by hitting two hundreds in the World Cup; Rubel Hossain, who was battling a court case, managed to put aside his personal problems and delivered his best; Soumya Sarkar didn't hesitate to fascinate the world with his splendid stroke-play and finally wonder-boy Mustafizur Rahman mesmerized the world with his magic.

The best aspect about the performances was that none of them were expected to be match-winners and yet they turned out with game-changing performances. Many believe that Mashrafe's attitude had a lot to do with this change.

"Any player can be a match-winner... if you want the world to notice

Bangladesh then you have meet the other players eye-to-eye," was something that Mashrafe repeatedly told media during the World Cup and was a message that he had given to the team.

Mashrafe, along with coach Chandika Hathurusingha, created such an atmosphere in the team that it ensured the younger cricketers who arrived this year believed in themselves. Soumya's 'periscope' and Mustafizur's 'cutters' have already become terms used in gully cricket in Bangladesh.

Such has been the impact of Mashrafe on the team that people actually still believe that things could have been different for the Tigers had Mashrafe played the last group stage against New Zealand, a match which Bangladesh lost by a narrow margin.

It reflects where the new-found belief in Bangladesh's cricket team has come from;

and that's why he is called a father figure.

And if the spectacular World Cup story wasn't enough, the way Mashrafe maneuvered the Comilla Victorians, a side that many expected to exit the Bangladesh Premier League after the first round, to the BPL title only added to his legend.

The Comilla coach openly admitted that the entire mood of the team changed once Mashrafe, against the odds, scored a half-century to lead his side to an unlikely victory in one of the group stage matches. "That was enough for the team. Everybody believed that they could win matches from any position from then on," coach Mohammad Salahuddin had said.

The story of Bangladesh sports in 2015 was the story of Bangladesh's cricket and its true leader's true team that made it a fairytale.

BFF keeps Maruful

SPORTS REPORTER

Despite the failure in the SAFF Suzuki Cup, the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) has pinned their faith on coach Maruful Haque after reappointing him as the head coach of the national football team for the Bangabandhu Gold Cup football tournament, scheduled to be held in Jessore and Dhaka from January 8-20.

BFF president Kazi Salahuddin had a brief meeting with Maruful yesterday afternoon and asked the 46-year-old coach to continue with the national football team in the Bangabandhu Gold

Rubel misses long-list

SPORTS REPORTER

The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) announced a 27-member preliminary squad yesterday for the forthcoming international Twenty20 commitments. Pacer Rubel Hossain missed the long-list due to injury.

SQUAD

Tamim Iqbal, Shabbir Rahman, Soumya Sarkar, Masrafe Bin Mortaza, Imrul Kayes, Mustafizur Rahman, Jahurul Islam, Abu Haider, Liton Das, Al Amin Hossain, Anamul Hoque, Shafiul Islam, Mosaddek Hossain, Mohammad Shahid, Mohammad Mithun, Abul Hasan, Mushfiqur Rahim, Taskin Ahmed, Shakib Al Hasan, Kamrul Islam, Mahmudullah Riyad, Arafat Sunny, Nasir Hossain, Saqlain Sajib, Qazi Nurul Hasan, Shohag Gazi and Shuvagata Hom.



If there was anything as big as the success that could compliment our cricketers this year, then it would have to be the victory of the Bangladesh Women's Under-14 team in Nepal against all adversities.

PHOTO: AFP FILE

Unjustly stung

AL-AMIN



As planet earth is about to complete a full circle on its orbit round the sun, ask a cricketer, a cricket official or a cricket aficionado of Bangladesh what was the one wish they had that was not granted in an unforgettable year of 2015.

Apart from a few exceptions the unequivocal reply would be -- Australia's tour of Bangladesh. We all know Cricket Australia (CA) suspended the two-Test tour, scheduled in October, on security grounds. The CA snub, which hurt Bangladesh cricket deeply, came at a time when the Tigers were making one statement after another against the established giants of world cricket. A maiden quarterfinal berth at the expense of

England in the February-March World Cup down under, followed by a 3-0 Pakistan whitewash in April, a 2-1 series win against India in June and a magnificent comeback 2-1 success against South Africa in July -- all in ODIs at home -- not only made Bangladesh the team to beat in their own den in the shorter version but also injected much-needed confidence into the longer version, where Tamim Iqbal and Imrul Kayes produced 312, a world record second-innings opening stand, against Pakistan in the drawn opening Test at Khulna.

By the time the Tigers conquered the Proteas in Chittagong, the roar was deafening and the mood was like 'bring on the Aussies'. And without getting into the small details of how well the Tigers would have fared in the demanding five-day contest against the Australian juggernauts,

the series could have completed a dream year for Tigers fans.

The Aussie snub has so far been well documented across the cricketing world, which for the first time has also lavishly acknowledged 2015 as the year of the Tigers. But the Aussies no show, in hindsight, has greatly damaged Bangladesh's image as a safe haven for sporting events. The Socceros, the Australian football team, also made a lot of hue and cry before embarking on their away World Cup qualifying fixture against Bangladesh on November 17.

On that day at the Bangabandhu National Stadium the Socceros won 5-0. But thousands of miles away their watching fans must have been taken aback seeing a full house of sports lovers and more importantly not terrorists, which their establishment desperately tried to portray, in the mix.

Few highlights beside cricket

NAIMUL KARIM

Compare the years 2014 and 2015 and one will find a series of contradictions. 2014 with all its 'cricketing' expectations and opportunities, considering that we hosted the World Cup, had turned out to be a year of football.

2015 though witnessed cricketers stealing every possible positive headline available. It wouldn't be harsh to state that aside from cricket there was little Bangladesh's sports arena could cheer about.

And the highlight of that disappointment came towards the end of the year during the most prestigious South Asian football tournament, the SAFF Cup.

The way Bangladesh were absolutely swept aside by Afghanistan and Maldives not only led to an early exit but also raised questions regarding Bangladesh's football standard.

The result was so disappointing that it compelled Bangladesh Football Federation's president Mohammad Salahuddin to issue an apology to the country.

On the whole, football, unlike 2014, ended this year on a worrisome note.

Hockey witnessed a similarly distressing tale. While it did see its first domestic competition after 22 months in December this year, the Victory Day Cup, the sport remains in turmoil.

There were moments this year when players boycotted the national team's training sessions since the federation wasn't able to organise the Dhaka Premier Division League, a competition through which the players earn a majority of their money. The dire straits had even compelled Bangladesh Cricket Board president Nazmul Hassan Papon take a peek into the hockey affairs in a bid to help them out.

The scenario in the individual sporting arena wasn't too bright either. The likes of Abdullah Hel Baki and Siddikur Rahman who had impressed the year before, failed to create a similar impact.

Baki, who had won silver in the 2014 Commonwealth Games failed to grab anything in international shooting tournaments this year while Siddikur who had good starts in a number of tournaments, just couldn't finish well in any of them.

While disappointments were aplenty, there were still reasons to be hopeful. The stories of the Bangladesh U-14 girls and the U-16 boys football team provided reasons to smile. The teamsaced the SAFF championships this year.

In addition, Mabia Akter Simanta received gold in the Commonwealth Weightlifting Championship; and so did Tamimul Islam who topped the Recurve Bow event at the Youth Commonwealth Archery Championships.

2015 has already been dubbed as the year that witnessed the rise of Bangladesh's cricketers and there's no doubt that a majority of the sports enthusiasts would be happy with the way the year went by, since cricket after all is by far the most popular sport.

However, one would hope that the distressing scenes amongst sports outside cricket change next year and that

SAFF semis today

SPORTS REPORTER

Hosts and six-time champions India will take on former champions Maldives while defending champions Afghanistan will face off against lowly Sri Lanka in the two semifinals of the SAFF Suzuki Cup today.

The first semifinal featuring the hosts and the Red Snappers will kick off at 4:00pm (Bangladesh time) and will be followed by the second semifinal at 7:00pm (Bangladesh time). Both the matches will take place at the Greenfield Stadium in Trivandrum and will be telecast live on Star Sports 4.

India's passage to the semis has been quite a comfortable one as Stephen Constantine's side cruised to a 2-0 win over Sri Lanka before dispatching Nepal 4-1 in a commanding performance, having come from a goal down, to emerge champions of Group A.

Moeen spins Eng to win

REUTERS, Durban

Moeen Ali took three wickets on Wednesday as England made quick work of securing victory in the first Test by bundling out South Africa for 174 before lunch and ensure a 241-run win on the last day at Kingsmead.

SCORES IN BRIEF

ENGLAND: 1st innings 303

SOUTH AFRICA: 1st innings 214

ENGLAND: 2nd innings 326

SOUTH AFRICA: 2nd innings 174 (Elgar 40, Van Zyl 33, De Villiers 37, Duminy 26 not out; Finn 4-42, Moeen 3-47)

Result: England won by 241 runs.

Player-of-the-match: Moeen Ali.