

SPORT



Mashrafe Bin Mortaza (4th from L) and his teammates celebrate a wicket during a T20 practice match played between members of the BCB's preliminary squad yesterday in Khulna, where the Tigers have set camp for the upcoming Zimbabwe series. PHOTO: BCB

Soumya hopes for fresh start

SPORTS REPORTER



2015 was an excellent year for Soumya Sarkar. Internationally, the left-hander impressed ever since he received the wild-card entry into the World Cup squad. In the first six months of 2015, Soumya's brilliant knocks at the top played emphatic roles in Bangladesh's victories against Pakistan, India and South Africa.

However, he didn't get to enjoy the last six months of 2015 as much. In a bid to provide him with as much exposure as possible, the management had sent him to two tours abroad with the Bangladesh A team, but the left-hander failed to perform.

His performance in the Bangladesh Premier League wasn't too pleasing either with the batsman averaging 16. The half-century that he scored against the Chittagong Vikings on December 1 was his first 50-plus score in 18 outings. In essence, the batsman just had one 50-plus score in the last six months of 2015.

These domestic stats of course can always be overridden once they are compared to his phenomenal international run last year. However Soumya, who recently recovered from an injury, admits that he is working hard in the nets to overcome this tricky

patch that he has gotten into.

"I think practice is the only way I can overcome these issues. We played practice matches today in Khulna and that's a good start. I am very hopeful. The way I performed before is over. There is no point talking about that. I am more focused on how I can do better in the upcoming games.

"The only way we can improve ourselves in T20 cricket is through playing more matches. We haven't played too many in this format so it's good that we are getting the Zimbabwe series ahead of the upcoming tournaments," he said.

"The matches against Zimbabwe are international matches and there won't be any scope for taking them lightly. We all have to perform to our roles and get used to them," he added.

Hailing from Satkhira, Soumya reckons that playing in Khulna will be an extra inspiration for him.

"I don't think there will be an extra pressure on me since I am playing in my home ground. But yes it will definitely be an inspiration because the crowd is going to support you and that's a big thing.

"It's the shortest format and so it's difficult to say what area we need to focus on more. I think you need to be on top of your game in all three to win matches," he added.

'Let's not pressurise these young men'

SPORTS REPORTER



Bangladesh Under-19 technical advisor Stuart Law has reiterated the importance of not putting too much pressure on the team ahead of the Under-19 World Cup due to begin later this month.

When asked what he thought was one of the crucial reasons behind Bangladesh's early exits from the World Cup in the past, Law said: "I think there is so much pressure being placed on the young fellows. Within the game of cricket, there is enough pressure and if you have got the weight of everyone on your shoulders, it creates a lot of confusion."

"I am just telling the boys, let's not worry about winning the competition. If we start doing the basics well, the rest will fall into place. If we don't, then we don't deserve to win. So at the moment, we are not thinking about the World Cup," he added.

Mehedy Miraz and co's first test ahead of the World Cup will begin on January 11 when they take on the West Indies. They will be playing three matches against them which are scheduled to take place on January 11, 14 and 16. The first match will

take place at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur, while the other two will be played in Chittagong.

The Bangladesh team had toured India for a tri-series and lost all the matches to the hosts. Law though wasn't worried about those results and believes that he will get to see where the team truly stands after the series.

"What happened in India doesn't really count for anything at this stage. The West Indies series is what I am looking forward to. That's where we really need to start understanding our roles and improving quickly," the Australian said.

In a similar vein, West Indies Under-19 skipper Shimron Hetmyer said that he hopes his side can adjust to the conditions as quickly as possible through the series.

"In terms of preparation we have been kind of short. I won't say really short, but we hadn't had as much as we could have. We are really looking forward to this series and seeing how well we can play in Bangladesh, because for most of the guys, it's the first time here," said Hetmyer.

He further added that the three-match series will be an advantage for their side in terms of coping with the conditions.



SHIMRON HETMYER

U-23s take on Bahrain today

ANISUR RAHMAN from Jessore



The Bangladesh Olympic team are looking forward to weighing their level as they take on Bahrain in the first Group B fixture of the Bangabandhu Gold Cup at the Shamsul Huda Stadium in Jessore today.

Though Bangladesh Olympic team are participating in the tournament as part of their South Asian (SA) Games preparation, they have set a preliminary target of qualifying for the semifinals, and they want to begin the campaign on a winning note against a side which has brought players born between 1995 and 1996.

Skipper and centre-back Rezaul Karim wants to start their Jessore campaign from where the senior team left. "The national began with a victory and we will be hoping to produce something similar too. We are confident of a good outing to enthrall the

spectators and there will be the best effort from us," said Reza.

There has, however, been no pressure to perform from either the team management or coach Gonzalo Sanchez Moreno, who has instructed his charges to play their normal football and enjoy the game as long as they are on the field. Moreno wants to see where his charges stand after nearly one month's preparation for next month's SA Games.

"Our target is to find out the level we stand at the moment. We are ready for the tournament and the players are excited to take part," said Moreno, who prefers to build up the game from behind with crisp passing, good amount of ball possession based on zonal marking.

Moreno believes the first match is very important and it is a big test for his charges. The Spaniard can bank on his young guns who have the experience of representing the country at different level as well as playing in top-flight football.

Moreno is likely to go with a 4-3-3

formation with Reza, Kesto Kumar, Arup Baidya and Shakil Ahmed standing in the backline. Midfielders Emon Babu and either of Shahedul Alam of Mashuk Mia Jonny will play ahead of holding midfielder Atiqur Rahman while Aminur Rahman Sajib, Rubel Mia and Yousuf Sifat or Toklish Ahmed are likely to play upfront.

Reza believes the squad, which is a mixture of junior and senior players, is balanced one and the winning mentality among the players is the biggest advantage for them.

Bahrain, who are the top favourites on paper, kept their feet on the ground after being eliminated from the group stages of the last edition, and they have set their initial target of advance to the semifinals.

"We came here with only one week's preparation and we could not even bring some players for exams, but the players accompanying the squad are talented enough and they are playing in the first division in Bahrain," said Bahrain's head coach Marjan Eid at the pre-match conference.

Journos appeased

SPORTS REPORTER from Jessore

Journalists covering the Bangabandhu Gold Cup yesterday withdrew their program to boycott the eight-team tournament after local administration assured them of taking proper measures on the activists of Bangabandhu Sainik League, who had assaulted journalists on Friday night.

After the assurance from lawmaker Kazi Nabil Ahmed and Jessore deputy commissioner Humayun Kabir at the city's Press Club yesterday noon, the journalists withdrew their program and later covered the match between Malaysia XI and Nepal.

Nabil, also a vice-president of Bangladesh Football Federation, apologised to the journalists on behalf of the residents of Jessore.

"It was a shameful incident for the residents of Jessore and I apologise for the unwanted incident. Whoever did this are terrorists. They have no political identity and there will be no favour for them. I believe the administration will bring them under law immediately," said Nabil.

Our Benapole correspondent adds, local law enforcers sealed off the office of the Bangabandhu Sainik League yesterday after recovering 10 sticks, seven iron rods, four boxes [for making bombs], an iron pipe and a bicycle chain from the party office.

Watson not bothered by omission

AGENCIES, Sydney

Australia all-rounder Shane Watson has conceded that his international career may be over after being dropped from the One-Day International (ODI) squad for the series against India.

The 34-year-old, who retired from Tests recently, revealed that he is longer worried about making a comeback and is instead focused on delivering for Sydney Thunder.

"Getting dropped from both formats Test and One Day cricket makes that worry go away," Watson said. "It is more [about playing] for the [Sydney] Thunder than anything now that it's done with the Aussie stuff.

"I am over worrying about all that stuff now, the priority for me is playing well in the games that I am in and to contribute. There is plenty of cricket to come in other competitions as well so whatever happens happens," he added.

WICB drops Bravo, Sammy contracts

AGENCIES, Kingstown



West Indies' Twenty20 captain Darren Sammy and all-rounders Dwayne Bravo and Andre Russell have been dropped from the list of centrally contracted players by the WICB for the season 2015-2016.

Sammy last played for West Indies in the T20s against Sri Lanka in November last year. Globe trotting T20 specialist Russell had played both the ODIs and T20s against Sri Lanka.

Also to miss out in the newly-contracted list, which was increased from 12 to 15 players, are left-arm spinner Sulieman Benn and senior batsman Shivnarine Chanderpaul.

Controversial big-hitting batsman Chris Gayle, who had turned down WICB contracts more than once including last year, also doesn't feature in the list.

Mystery spinner Sunil Narine, who had also turned down the offer last year, also missed out. He is currently suspended from bowling in international cricket due to an illegal action.

The newly-contracted list has several new players including Jermaine Blackwood, Leon Johnson, Shane Dowrich, Shai Hope and Rajendra Chandrika. Leg-spinner Devendra Bishoo and fast bowlers Shannon Gabriel and Sheldon Cottrell also found places in the new list.

The contracts have been issued for the period from October 1, 2015 to September 30, 2016.

CONTRACTED PLAYERS LIST FOR 2015-2016: Jason Holder, Kraigg Brathwaite, Rajendra Chandrika, Darren Bravo, Marlon Samuels, Denesh Ramdin, Devendra Bishoo, Shannon Gabriel, Jermaine Blackwood, Jerome Taylor, Sheldon Cottrell, Shai Hope, Shane Dowrich, Leon Johnson, Kemar Roach.

Afghans take first T20I

AFP, Sharjah

Afghanistan defeated Zimbabwe by five runs in a thrilling Twenty20 clash on Friday to follow their triumph in the one-day series.

Chasing 188 to win, Zimbabwe fell just short when Luke Jongwe, needing a six to win, was dismissed off the last ball of the match.

It was a controversial finish, however, after Afghanistan seamer Dawlat Zadran was allowed to keep bowling the final over despite having sent down two waist-high full tosses.

Jongwe was caught by Gulbadin Naib out in the deep to leave Zimbabwe on 182-7 in their 20 overs.

Malcolm Waller was the not out batsman on 49 with two sixes and two boundaries off 37 balls.

Afghanistan had won the toss and chose to bat, making 187-7 in their 20 overs.

"It's a funny game. The dew was too much, that's why the two beamers," Stanikzai said. "Otherwise he's a good bowler."

The second and final match takes place at the same venue on Sunday.

SCORES IN BRIEF
AFGHANISTAN: 187 for 7 in 20 overs (Ghani 42, Naib 37; Cremer 3-17)
ZIMBABWE: 182 for 7 in 20 overs (Waller 49 not out, Masakadza 33; Zadran 3-32)
Result: Afghanistan won by five runs



Bangladesh players keep an eagle eye on the ball during a training session at the Maulana Bhasani Hockey Stadium in Dhaka yesterday as they continued their preparation for next month's South Asian Games. Bangladesh have already announced a final 18-member squad, with four stand-by players for the event, which will be co-hosted by Guwahati and Shillong from February 6 to 16. PHOTO: STAR

Shami out of Aus tour

AGENCIES, Perth



Indian pacer Mohammed Shami was on Saturday ruled out of India's limited-overs cricket series against Australia due to a hamstring injury. Bhuvneshwar Kumar will replace him for the five ODI and three Twenty20I series, starting here on January 12.

"The BCCI medical team confirms that Mohammed Shami has been ruled out of India's tour of Australia due to injury. He sustained a Grade II injury to his left hamstring, which will restrict him from playing active cricket for about 4 to 6 weeks," BCCI Secretary Anurag Thakur said

in a statement.

"The All-India Senior Selection Committee has named Bhuvneshwar Kumar as the replacement, who will join the team tomorrow."

Shami sustained the injury during a training session before the warm-up Twenty20 game against Western Australia, which the Indians yesterday.

The latest breakdown is a massive setback for Shami, who had returned to the side after being sidelined for nine months owing to injuries.

It can be considered a lucky break for Bhuvneshwar, who was dropped following a poor home series against South Africa last year. The 25-year-old had claimed his seven wickets from five matches at an average of

Hopman Cup Australia's

AFP, Perth

Australians Nick Kyrgios and Daria Gavrilova beat Ukraine's Elina Svitolina and Alexandr Dolgoplov to win the mixed teams Hopman Cup in Perth on Saturday.

For the first time, the host nation fielded two teams in the tournament, and Kyrgios and Gavrilova went through the week unbeaten as Australia Green, culminating in their 2-0 win over Ukraine to give Australia their second Hopman Cup title.

Both players won their singles matches in the final in straight sets, with the mixed doubles not being played.

For both Australians, who have known each other for several years, it was a milestone tournament win.

Kyrgios collected his first senior IIF tournament title while Gavrilova was representing her adopted country for the first time, having been naturalised last month.