

SPORT



THE DAWN OF T20-16

The number eight conundrum

NAIMUL KARIM from Khulna

True to captain Mashrafe Bin Mortaza's words, the first two T20Is in Khulna witnessed a number of different tactics employed by the Tigers.

Shakib Al Hasan was asked to bat lower down in the order and the powerful Sabbir Rahman replaced the left-hander at three, Nurul Hasan took over the wicketkeeping gloves from Mushfiqur Rahim while Shuvagata Hom's role in the team was tested as a bowling all-rounder.

While these three moves worked out well, the idea to field a bowling all-rounder who can bat at number eight seems a bit defensive. Furthermore, it may disrupt the balance of the side.

There could be many reasons behind employing an eighth batsman. For starters, it may help the top order play with a lot more freedom. After all, Bangladesh's batting in this format has not exactly been ideal, with players failing to make the most of their starts.

Secondly, it could prove to be a good cover for the last two batsmen, Al-Amin Hossain and Mustafizur Rahman, neither of whom can be trusted with the bat.

As a result, the team management seems to be looking for a player who fits the role. More specifically, they seem to be looking for a bowler who can give the ball quite a whack, which was perhaps the reason why Shuvagata was drafted into the side for the first two matches.

While he did bat at four in the first T20I, it

was only because he didn't get a chance to bowl and Mashrafe later revealed that he wanted to give Shuvagata some extra batting time. The off-spinner did not get to bat in the second T20I, but did manage to get his maiden T20I wicket.

The selectors included Muktar Ali and Mosaddek Hossain for the last two T20Is, and it is likely that both these players will be asked to play a similar role to that of Shuvagata.

A pace bowler who can hit the ball quite hard, Muktar has a reputation similar to that of Ziaur Rahman in domestic cricket. Mosaddek Hossain on the other hand is a middle order batsman who can bowl decent off-spinners as well.

While he did not do well in the recently concluded Bangladesh Premier League, he mesmerised quite a few people in four-day cricket, scoring a string of centuries.

As the experiments continue, one wonders if the move to have a bowling all-rounder instead of a regular bowler at number eight will be worth it. It could place a lot more pressure on the bowling.

The other option could be including another bowler in the side and letting Mashrafe Bin Mortaza bat at eight. The skipper did score a match-winning half-century in the BPL and has been having longer net sessions with bat in hand. Another pacer in the side, say an Abu Hider or a Mohammad Shahid, could actually help the Tigers form a stronger bowling unit.

But of course, the confidence to go down that route can only be attained once the top-order batsmen start playing bigger knocks, something that we are yet to see in



Shakib Al Hasan is enjoying his music on his way to training at the Sheikh Abu Naser Stadium in Khulna yesterday, but his bowling performances may be on his mind ahead of tomorrow's third T20I against Zimbabwe. PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Sheikh Jamal at it again!

SPORTS REPORTER

A Sheikh Jamal Dhanmondi Club official last night allegedly barged into the hotel room of Bangladesh national team players in a bid to take them away to the club tent.

Iqbal Khokon, a director of the Dhanmondi club, went to the Hotel Purbani, the hotel where the team are currently staying for the Bangabandhu Gold Cup, and went straight into the room of skipper Mamunul Islam to take him and some other players away, claiming he had obtained permission from the Bangladesh

Football Federation (BFF) president, it has been learnt.

The club official, who also allegedly threatened the team manager and the team leader, was later escorted out by police. Team manager Ilyas Hossain meanwhile claimed that the BFF president did not give any such permission. Meanwhile, on hearing this news, officials of some other big clubs rushed to the scene.

It may be mentioned here that many of the national team players have already pledged their commitment to different clubs, including Sheikh Jamal DC, for the next season.

The BFF, however, deems these pledges illegal as it maintains that players are free agents until the transfer forms are released on

Booters limp out

SPORTS REPORTER



The Bangladesh national team made a humiliating exit from the Bangabandhu Gold Cup after being beaten 1-0 by a very young Bahrain side in the first semifinal at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

The hosts were given a nice platform to perform in front of their home crowd and familiar conditions to restore confidence and pride they lost in the SAFF Suzuki Cup last month, but threw it all away with their worst performance against a side which comprises players aged between 19 and 20.

Bangladesh were expected to come up with a better performance against Bahrain team, which had struggled against the Bangladesh Olympic team

in their 1-1 draw, but the way Bangladesh played was painful to watch for some 5000 crowd and it seemed as if the players were playing football for first time in their life.

Awarding Bahrain a free-kick in the very first minute around the danger zone gave the indication of a miserable performance, and it turned out to be so as Bangladesh players exchanged one or two passes among themselves and then whipped in a long ball to the opposition half and those unplanned attacks were easily thwarted by the tall Bahrain defenders.

Despite failing to beat the well-built Bahrain defenders, the home side tried tirelessly with the long ball approach and never exposed the opposition's backline. There was also no plan with Raihan Hasan's long throw-ins as each of his throw-ins was well negotiated.

Defensive midfielder Jamal Bhuiyan was a shadow of his former

self while position sense of strikers Shakhawat Hossain Rony and Mithun Chowdhury left a lot to be desired.

Goalkeeper Shahidul Alam Sohel, playing in place of injured Ashraf Islam Rana, made the day's biggest blunder as he failed to read a cross which came from the right flank and hesitantly made a week fist which fell on to the head of unmarked Ebrahim A Hooti. The Bahrain forward did not mistake to nod it in in the stoppage time of the first half, which was enough to turn the home side into spectators for the final match.

Bangladesh were denied an equaliser seven minutes into the second half when Rony saw his diving header on a Mithun cross come off the post before the lanky striker failed to beat goalkeeper Mahboob Al Doseri from a one-on-one situation 10 minutes before the end as the hosts left the field with heads down.



The Bangladesh players express their frustration after conceding a goal against a very young Bahrain side during the first semifinal of the Bangabandhu Gold Cup at the BNS yesterday. PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

South Asian rivals to slug it out today

SPORTS REPORTER

Both Maldives and Nepal will look to make it to the final of the Bangabandhu Gold Cup when they face off in the second semifinal at the Bangabandhu National Stadium today.

The match gets underway at 5:30pm and will be telecast live on Channel 9.

Maldives, the Group B champions, have been the more consistent side as they have notched two wins and a draw. Their attacking line-up, which features Easa Ismail, Nashid Ahmed and Imaaz Ahmed, has struck six goals in three matches. However, coach Ricki Herbert believes that the contest will not be an easy one for them.

"The match is going to be tough and interesting one. We had a couple of good days to recover and the players are ready to face the new challenge," Herbert said during the pre-match press conference.

Nepal coach Bal Gopal Maharjan is, however, keeping his opponents ahead of his side.

"It is satisfying that we have not conceded any goal in the group-stages but we need to improve in the attacking third against Maldives, who are technically better with some speedy players," Maharjan said.

Mosaddek eager for T20 break

SPORTS REPORTER from Khulna



An exciting prospect whom the selectors have been eyeing for quite some time, 20-year-old Mosaddek Hossain has been knocking on the doors of the national team for a while.

Although his talents were on display when he played for Bangladesh Under-19, he truly came to the limelight during the Dhaka Premier League in 2013. He single-handedly led Abahani to an incredible victory over a Mashrafe Bin Mortaza-led Mohammeden, scoring a responsible 76 to bring his side back from the dead.

More recently, he hit the headlines for his brilliant performances in four-day cricket. In 2015 alone he hit three double centuries and three centuries. More importantly, he has hit a



said Mosaddek.

"I know that if I do well here I can get a call-up in the Asia Cup and World Cup squads. I love to play strokes. My strike-rate is really good in one-dayers and T20 cricket. Hopefully I can

50-plus score in his last 10 first-class outings. It was his aggressive strike-rate in those four-day encounters that impressed selectors and compelled them to give him a go in the shortest format of the game. In the National Cricket League in February last year, he smacked 284 off 309 balls. A few months later he hit 200 off 245. Most of his centuries were paced in a similar way, which is why Mosaddek reckons he can do as well in T20 cricket.

"I had gotten injured and after that I didn't get to play too many one-dayers and T20s. Four-day cricket was the only thing available and I tried to do my best there. Now I have these two T20Is ahead of me and that's all I am thinking about,"

Whatmore not worried

SPORTS REPORTER from Khulna



Despite losing the first two T20Is in Khulna, Zimbabwe coach Dav Whatmore remains upbeat. Speaking to reporters in Khulna yesterday the Australian stated that despite the defeats, the visitors are on track as far as their main 'agenda' is concerned, which is finding out their best possible squad for the World Cup.

"Look, our agendas are slightly different. We are still having a look at our final make-up as is the Bangladesh team. They have got some good players, no doubt. But in our case it's a bonus at the moment, we are really looking for the right combination, the right player in order to win our group. That's the priority," said Whatmore.

"We have got our matches planned leading up to the World Cup. We have sufficient games to help fine-tune ourselves," he added.

As Whatmore said, there were a number of different plans that Zimbabwe seemed to try out yesterday, including resting their skipper Elton Chigumbura. However, his exclusion from the side in the last T20I led to speculations of a rift within the team.

Whatmore, however, cleared the air. "He needed a break. I have watched him. He is exhausted as he captains in both formats of the game. We played a lot of cricket during 2015, which is very unusual.

"If you look at Zimbabwe history, recent history anyway, they hardly played anything (like this). And this was incredible. Extreme fixtures of competitions and he was absolutely exhausted," explained Whatmore.

A win towards the end last year helped Zimbabwe draw the previous T20I series against Bangladesh 1-1. With Mustafizur Rahman, Mushfiqur Rahim and Al-Amin Hossain not included for the last two matches, this could perhaps be Zimbabwe's best chance to go for a win.

Whatmore though wasn't worried about the changes Bangladesh made. "That's their policy. That's good. But you know, we are concerned with what we want to achieve," he said.

'Mashrafe' hits bookstores

SPORTS REPORTER from Khulna

A biography on Bangladesh ODI and T20I skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza, titled 'Mashrafe', was unveiled during a jovial ceremony with the entire Bangladesh team in attendance at a city hotel in Khulna yesterday.

With yesterday being an optional training day following their twin victories in the ongoing T20I series against Zimbabwe, the Tigers were in high spirits as they took their seats to put their captain on the spot and ask questions, no doubt enjoying their turn at the grilling they often endure at the hands of the press, albeit at their leader's expense.

Batsmen Tamim Iqbal and Mahmudullah Riyad, team manager Khaled Mahmud and Hathursingha spoke on the occasion.

"It is really inspiring to have a book written about me at the fag end of my career," Mashrafe said at the launch of his biography written by Debabrata Mukherjee and edited by Ariful Islam Roney. "I wish that those in the Bangladesh team have books written about them. People will know more about them."

Bangladesh will play their next T20I at the Sheikh Abu Naser Stadium in Khulna tomorrow. The final T20I will take place on January 22.

'They lack football intelligence'

SPORTS REPORTER



Coach Maruful Haque blamed the lack of football intelligence among the Bangladesh players for successive failures in the the SAFF Suzuki Cup and the Bangabandhu Gold Cup.

Bangladesh had played in the final in the last edition's Bangabandhu Gold Cup after displaying some eye-catching performances against the teams like Malaysia, Thailand and Sri Lanka, but within one year the same group of booters showed some dismal performances in two successive tournaments.

"The main problem in our footballers is a lack of football intelligence and a lack of reading the opponents as well as failure to adapting to changing environment," Maruful summed up his feelings

at the post-match conference.

The UEFA A-licensed coach also found 'no improvement' in two tournaments expect for a gain in 'experience of playing international matches.'

Having taken all the responsibility on his shoulders, Maruful has wished to go back to club coaching as the 46-year-old coach was given extension despite his failure in the SAFF Suzuki Cup last month.

"The players were morally down after the SAFF Championship and I tried my best to motivate them but they could not perform to the expectation despite trying their best. I am taking all the responsibility and I want to go back to club coaching," Maruful said, adding that one or two failures would not affect his coaching career.

Maruful, however, admitted that there was a lack of commitment among some players.

"The players who were selected for the national team are the best possible ones at the moment but if you compare the Bangladesh standard to other South Asian nations, first you will have to see the steps the others have taken in the last 10 to 15 years. But what we have done to develop football? If it goes this way, the future of Bangladesh football is very bleak," Maruful opined.

When asked about the futile long-ball play, Maruful said: "The players have been instructed to play on the ground and put the ball into gaps but they failed to follow the instructions."

Bahrain's assistant coach Al Nasr was ecstatic after making it to the final.

"It was a hard game but we managed it because we were playing against the first team of Bangladesh. We came here just to participate in the tournament, not to win but our young players played well and made it to the final," said Al Nasr, who represented head