

SPORT



Wise heads on young shoulders

AL-AMIN

Cricket nowadays is a great advertisement. It has become so popular in this part of the world that an under-19 World Cup match, which would hardly have been noticed had it been played down under, South Africa or even in England, drew a half-packed audience at Bangladesh's home of cricket in Mirpur on Friday.

One of the flagship events of the ICC, the U-19 World Cup is still a promotional tournament in the game's governing body's roster and more importantly regarded as a jamboree of future stars from all over the world. But the access to live coverage of the event has created a lot of buzz with fans, albeit in small numbers, flocking to Bangladesh to support their future stars.

It's not just about the fans but also the conscious minds of those cricketers, who are keenly following the progress of their young teams. For example, an editor of a reputed English language daily from Nepal was having lunch at The Daily Star Centre on Friday. While having his meal he was curious to know the progress of the Bangladesh-Nepal quarterfinal. And after he was updated with the latest score (Bangladesh youths struggling at 98 for four by the end of the 30th over while chasing Nepal's 211) his eyes glinted.

Bangladesh youths however eventually won the game but Nepal, despite being an associate member-nation, impressed all and sundry in a game which offered high-octane entertainment. The home side won

the game by six wickets and with ten balls to spare, but it hardly depicted how close Nepal were to a dream passage to the semifinal, only to be denied by a magnificent century partnership between skipper Mehedi Hasan (55) and Zakir Hasan (75) for the fourth wicket.

Although it's only a game involving youths, it will not be an overstatement to consider this partnership a mature and well-constructed stand that can match any other good stands witnessed on the world stage at the senior level.

The beauty of that partnership against a predominantly disciplined spin attack was its absorption of pressure, consolidation, progression and that too with minimum risk-factor involved. There was only one moment of uncertainty in that partnership, which was when Mehedi charged down the wicket. The Bangladesh captain and his Nepalese counterpart behind the wicket both missed it completely, leaving the latter with little chance to have a firm grip of the game.

Bangladesh were in need of 90 odd runs in the final 15 overs and they required 70 odd runs in the final 10. The situation was tempting enough to play big shots, but the two mature heads on young shoulders never played a single rash stroke. Instead they pushed for quick singles, translated those one and a half runs to twos. They did play some lofted shots but those were executed with immaculate foot-work and magnificent placement. Even the last shot from Zakir for six, a lofted heave between long-on and mid-wicket, was a case of sheer timing. It was a partnership of maturity beyond age.



Mehedi Hasan Miraz (L) and Zakir Hassan etched their names in the annals of history yesterday. Their brilliant 117-run fifth-wicket partnership helped the hosts defeat Nepal by six wickets in the ICC Under-19 World Cup quarterfinal at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium, securing Bangladesh's place in the semifinal for the first time.

'Zakir was unbelievable'

SPORTS REPORTER

It wasn't the most comprehensive win, but the entire Bangladesh Under-19 contingent was more than happy to have been able to overcome the obstacle placed by Nepal in the quarterfinal of the ICC Under-19 World Cup yesterday. It therefore wasn't a surprise when Bangladesh skipper Mehedi Hasan Miraz said that he was relieved following the match.

"I am feeling great. We are in the World Cup semifinal for the first time. That was our target at the start of the tournament. We had the belief and you saw that we responded well under pressure. We could do it because we had belief in ourselves," said Mehedi.

He admitted that the team was under pressure when they had lost four wickets within the first 30 overs and that was an aspect which was quite visible, especially when they were running between the wickets.

"The ground was slightly different. There were times when we didn't understand where the ball was. When we defended the ball at times, we couldn't tell whether it went into the gap or not.

"The ground is quite large too. But we have good understanding. Of course there may be one or two mistakes, but I don't think that is a major problem," he continued.

"We never played in front of such a large crowd but it was great. Everyone supported us and it inspired us. We were enjoying all of it," he added.

The skipper had special praise preserved for Zakir Hasan, who took the game away from Nepal with his composed 77-ball 75. Mehedi also credited Zakir for helping him calm down in the middle.

"He was unbelievable. He got back to scoring runs after a long time with this fine innings. It was great timing for the team since we really needed him today.

"There was some pressure when I was in the middle but Zakir told me that we would just play on singles, rotate the strike and not go for fours or sixes. His words worked quite well for us," he concluded.

'Something different' on coach's mind Afghans, Zim progress

SPORTS REPORTER

The inclusion of Mohammad Mithun in Bangladesh's World Cup squad had raised quite a few eyebrows, not because of any questions about his credentials -- there is no doubt about his talent -- but because he came in at the expense of the in-form Imrul Kayes.

When the 15-member team was disclosed to the media on February 3, chief selector Faruque Ahmed said that he had decided to select Mithun ahead of Imrul since the former fit the team management and the coach's plan better.

Two days on, coach Chandika Hathurusingha revealed that Mithun was selected in the side

because of his versatility. "He [Mithun] is impressive. We think he can help us give a different dimension being a right-hander at the top of the order. He has the ability to bat in the middle as well. That's why he was considered.

"He has been on our radar for quite some time. He did well in the A team and even in the Bangladesh Premier League he scored runs when he opened the innings," said Hathurusingha.

While Mithun did not feature during the four-match Zimbabwe series, he did well in the practice matches that took place in Khulna after the series. Having hit form at the right time, the team reckons that Mithun can be the best possible backup for the opening position.

The other aspect of the team that created quite a stir was regarding the number of pacers in the side. Of the 15 players, Bangladesh have picked five pacers. The spin attack essentially will mostly be in the hands of all-rounders, since Arafat Sunny is the only specialist spinner in the side.

The reason behind that, according to the selection committee, are the seaming conditions in Dharamshala, where Bangladesh will be playing its qualifying games.

However, no matter what the conditions, it's not very common for a Bangladeshi contingent to be packed with pacers. When asked about the relatively different move taken by the team management, Hathurusingha said: "There have been many new things in Bangladesh recently, haven't there? What happens if we continue doing the same thing? Are we good in T20s? No."

"If we do something different, we might get worse, we might do better. But if we do the same thing, nothing different will happen," he further opined.

The Bangladesh national team will shift to Chittagong and restart their training camp for the Asia Cup and the World Twenty20 from tomorrow. While the World Cup squad has been announced, the squad for the Asia Cup, which is scheduled to begin on February 24, is yet to be revealed. However, selectors had earlier revealed that there isn't likely to be much of a difference between the squads for the two tournaments.

STAR SPORT DESK

Karim Janat hit an imperious 156 as Afghanistan thumped newcomers Fiji by a whopping 226 runs in their ICC Under-19 World Cup ninth place play-off quarterfinals at the Sheikh Kamal International Stadium in Cox's Bazar. At the Academy Ground of the stadium complex, Zimbabwe progressed to the play-off semifinals by beating Canada by six wickets.

Fiji's bowlers were put to the sword to the tune of 340 for nine after their captain chose to field. Three quick wickets after a 40-run opening stand produced no lasting joy for Fiji as Janat and Perwez Malakzai -- who scored 74 off 69 -- combined for a 130-run stand. The innings really took off thereafter as the next 21.4 overs produced 163 runs, a large part of those coming off the blade of Janat who hit 12 fours and six sixes in his 132-ball innings.

Fiji were then bundled out for their highest score of the tournament -- 114 in 31.2 overs. Nijat Masood and Rashid Khan picked up three wickets each.

Meanwhile, Canada chose to bat first and scored 186 for eight, courtesy of a string of 30-plus scores from the middle order. Jeremy Ives was the pick of the Zimbabwe bowlers with three for 30 from his 10. Zimbabwe then cantered home in 31.4 overs, with opener Shaun Snyder hitting 56 and Ives completing an all-round display with an unbeaten 43.

SCORES IN BRIEF	
AFGHANISTAN: 340 for 8 (Janat 156, Malakzai 74, Shafaq 29, Vuniwaqa 41-3)	CANADA: 186 for 8 (Taploo 37, Abraash 32, Arsalan 31; Ives 3-30)
FJI: 114 in 31.2 overs (Baleicikobia 29, Cokovaki 25; Masood 3-6, Rashid 3-16, Musa 2-23)	ZIMBABWE: 190 for 4 in 31.4 overs (Snyder 56, Ives 43 not out, Madhevere 31; Adhithetty 2-23)
Result: Afghanistan won by 226 runs	Result: Zimbabwe won by 8 wickets

BD-NEPAL SCOREBOARD

NEPALU-195		R/B	A/6		
Dhamala run out	25/62	2/0			
Sunarb Saifuddin	7/12	1/0			
Karki c Saif b Mehedi	1/2	0/1			
Rijal run out	72/80	8/1			
Aarif c Joyraz b Saifuddin	21/32	2/0			
Rajbir lbw b Saleh	9/22	0/0			
Airee b Mehedi	22/45	0/0			
Bhurltel run out	14/17	2/0			
Tamang not out	22/24	2/0			
Kandel run out	2/4	0/0			
Extras: (b-1, lb-2, w-13)	16				
Total: (For 9 wickets in 50 overs)	211				
Fall of wickets: 1-17, 2-19, 3-63, 4-114, 5-146, 6-153, 7-178, 8-202, 9-211.					
BANGLADESH U-195		R/B	A/6		
Pinak run out	32/54	2/0			
Saif lbw b Dhamala	5/21	0/0			
Joyraz lbw b Dhamala	38/67	4/0			
Nazmul c b Lamichhane	8/6	1/0			
Zakir not out	75/77	5/1			
Miraz not out	55/65	3/0			
Extras: (w-2)	2				
Total: (For 4 wickets in 48.2 overs)	215				
Fall of wickets: 1-17, 2-63, 3-75, 4-98.					
Bowler		O	M	R	W
Dhamala	10	0	33	2	
Saifuddin	10	0	38	2	
Miraz	10	0	51	1	
Saleh	10	0	31	1	
Ariful	5	0	24	0	
Saeed	3	0	24	0	
Nazmul	2	0	10	0	



Despite it being an Under-19 World Cup, the tournament has been a hot topic in Bangladesh. The fans believe that it is their team's time to capture the trophy and they turned up in numbers to lift their side's spirits.

Probe report to be discussed?

SPORTS REPORTER

As the executive committee of the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) sit for a meeting at the federation headquarters today, all the focus will be on whether the probe committee report on the SAFF Suzuki Cup debacle of the national team is discussed at length and whether any decisions are made regarding the report. Even though the report -- submitted to the BFF president last week before being forwarded to the National

Teams Committee (NTC) -- is not in the official agenda of the meeting, it is likely to make it to discussions, according to an official of the federation.

The report made some damning allegations against a number of players and made recommendations to remove some senior players from the side. Suspended winger Zahid Hossain, who was withdrawn midway through the Bangabandhu Gold Cup after being found to have taken alcohol the night before a match, has been recommended to be suspended from the national team for up to five years, according to a source inside the federa-

tion. The report also recommended suspending a junior player for one year due to his involvement in immoral activities while also questioning the place in the side of five senior players.

With the national team making humiliating group-stage exits from the SAFF Suzuki Cup and the Bangabandhu Gold Cup in the space of three weeks, and the ensuing allegations against the players regarding their commitment and discipline, it will be interesting to see what sort of measures the NTC, which has been expanded in the wake of the two debacles, come out with in the coming days.

India opt for experience

AAP, New Delhi

The hosts India Friday recalled strike bowler Mohammed Shami and named veteran former champions Yuvraj Singh and Harbhajan Singh in their squad for the World Twenty20 which begins next month.

Shami has not played for India since last year's 50 over World Cup after suffering a knee injury and was sent home early from India's recent tour of Australia with hamstring problems.

But chairman of selectors Sandeep Patil said the 25-year-old had recovered and would be given time to prove his fitness, leaving open the possibility of calling up a late replacement before the final selection deadline.

"We have 30 days to ascertain where Shami is," Patil told reporters in New Delhi.

"He has recovered, he has resumed bowling. That's what we know right now."

Shami had been emerging as India's premier fast bowler before his injury woes, shining in all three formats.

Given India's struggles to identify a successor to recently retired spearhead Zaheer Khan, Shami's fitness could be key to their chances of winning the tournament for the second time.

Shami's inclusion was the most eye-catching in a 15-man squad packed with experience and skippered by Mahendra Singh Dhoni, who led India to victory in the 2007 inaugural tournament in South Africa.

There had been questions about Dhoni's future after a disappointing run of scores but critics were silenced when he led India to a 3-0 victory in the recent T20 series against Australia.

Dhoni, who has already relinquished the Test captaincy to Virat Kohli, is widely expected to retire from international after the tournament.

SQUAD

Mahendra Singh Dhoni (capt), Rohit Sharma, Shikhar Dhawan, Virat Kohli, Suresh Raina, Yuvraj Singh, Ajinkya Rahane, Ravindra Jadeja, Hardik Pandya, Ravichandran Ashwin, Harbhajan Singh, Jasprit Bumrah, Ashish Nehra, Pawan Negi and Mohammed Shami.

Siddikur makes cut in Yangon

SPORTS REPORTER

Siddikur Rahman survived the cut in the Leopold 21 Myanmar Open after settling for a one-under-par (71) in the second round yesterday. Having started the day with an overnight three-under-par (69) in the opening round, the 31-year-old golfer traded two birdies for a single bogey in the second round at the Royal Mingalardon Golf and Country Club in Yangon yesterday. That took his overall tally to four-under-par (140) -- just enough to avoid the cut -- as a total of 66 golfers made the weekend rounds.

Shaun Norris of South Africa and SSP Chawrasia of India held joint lead after consecutive 66s in the first two rounds of the 750,000-dollar event.

WORLD T20

Delhi to be scrapped?

AGENCIES, New Delhi

Reports have emerged that New Delhi could be stripped of its status as one of the hosts for the World Twenty20 unless it receives safety clearances, but BCCI secretary Anurag Thakur said that a decision had not been made yet and a back-up plan was in place already.