

SPORT



UAE all-rounder Rohan Mustafa was on fire against Afghanistan in the first Asia Cup qualifier at Fatullah yesterday. The 27-year-old smashed a 50-ball 77 before returning to claim three wickets with the ball.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

'I struggled a lot for cricket'

SPORTS REPORTER



Meet Rohan Mustafa, the 27-year-old sales executive from the UAE, who almost singlehandedly dealt a killer blow to Afghanistan's Asia Cup campaign in Fatullah yesterday.

Not only did Rohan smack the ball all over the park during his 50-ball 77, he also bowled three tidy overs, including three wickets in the last over of the chase, to peg-back the favourites in the first game of the Asia Cup Qualifiers.

He had a series of brilliant moments in yesterday's game but the highlight was the way he handled the pressure in the last over. The Afghans required 22 off six deliveries, a task that did not seem impossible considering the immense number of boundaries scored yesterday.

The off-break bowler though remained calm and kept his length as full as possible. The result: he gave away just five runs and scalped three wickets.

There was a sense of calm in his batting as well. Considering that he was playing just his 10th T20I and was not that well-known in the Associate members' circuit, the quality was slightly surprising.

Behind Rohan's resilience, as the player later revealed, lies a story of struggle.

"I think my history is very, very different. I was born in Pakistan and then I travelled to the UAE. I lost my father 12 years ago. Ever since then I stayed alone in the UAE.

"I continued in the UAE because it would have been difficult for me to get a job in Pakistan. I am lucky that I got a good contract from the team and where I am working. I have to support my mother and my sister. I have struggled a lot for cricket and I think my time has finally come," an emotional Rohan said.

For most of the cricketers in the UAE cricket is second to their day jobs, which is why Rohan hopes that the board's central contract, expected to be announced after the Asia Cup, is declared as soon as possible.

"Everyone works in the morning and comes to training after six pm. It may seem easy, but it's not. I am not married, but there are loads of people who are and they need to give their family some time. And that's hard when you have to work and then go for duty again in the evening.

"I have been working in sales for the last two to three months. So the central contract could be a big thing for UAE and change the cricket there overall," Rohan said.

All-round Rohan stuns Afghanistan

Oman survive Hayat century to win the day's second match

SPORTS REPORTER



The Asia Cup qualifiers got off to an exciting start as United Arab Emirates (UAE) rode on Rohan

Mustafa's magical all-round show to pull off an upset by beating favourites Afghanistan in the high-scoring opening match at the Khan Shaheb Osman Ali Stadium in Fatullah yesterday evening.

The night match between Oman and Hong Kong was a high-scoring thriller which saw Oman prevail by five runs, but not before Hong Kong batsman Babar Hayat played an innings to remember, scoring 122 of his side's 175 runs.

Back to the first game, Rohan first struck a 50-ball 77 to give UAE a fighting total of 176 and then finished the job with the leather by taking three wickets in an over to secure a

16-run victory as Afghanistan were bundled out for 160 with one ball to spare.

The match was a tale of two knocks but Rohan, who smashed seven fours and four sixes, came out on top as Karim Sadiq's 48-ball 72 went in vain because of the failure of the rest of the Afghanistan batsmen.

Afghan captain Asghar Stanikzai blamed a poor fielding effort behind their disappointing defeat which now makes it difficult for them to qualify to the main event of the tournament, which will kick off on February 24 at Mirpur. He however has not given up hope. "If UAE loses against Hong Kong or Oman we need to win the next two matches with a good run-rate. We have a chance if we don't lose our patience," said Asghar.

UAE opens Rohan and Mohammad Kaleem set the tone after UAE won the toss. The runs came thick and fast as Kaleem complemented match hero Rohan well during the course of a quick 83-run opening

SCORES IN BRIEF

UAE: 176 for 4 in 20 overs (Mustafa 77, Kaleem 25, Shahzad 25; Rashid 3-25)

AFGHANISTAN: 160 all out in 19.5 overs (Sadiq 72; Mustafa 3-19, Naveed 2-23, Ahmed 2-28)

Result: UAE won by 16 runs

OMAN: 180 for 5 (Jatinder 42, Amir 32 not out, Mehran 28 not out; Nadeem 3-27)

HONG KONG: 175 for 7 (Hayat 122; Amir 1-6, Bilal 1-28, Lalcheta 1-29)

Result: Oman won by 5 runs

stand before Rashid Khan struck.

The 17-year old leg-spinner Rashid brought the Afghans back in the match by dismissing Shaiman Anwar and Amjad

Javed off consecutive overs as UAE, who looked set to get close to 200 at one stage, slipped from 121 for one to 128 for four. But Usman Mushtaq (23) and Mohammad Shahzad (25) gave the finishing touch for UAE.

Afghanistan's chase however never achieved the required pace as Sadiq did not receive any able support from his teammates.

There was even less support for Hayat in the day's second match. Oman had chosen to bat and rode on 42 from opener Jatinder Singh and a late burst from Amir Ali to post 180 for five. Apart from Hayat's glittering 60-ball 122, the next highest score for Hong Kong was 15 by Aizaz Khan. Hayat hit seven sixes and nine fours in a heroic effort, but the 181-run target proved to be just out of his reach. With 11 needed off the last three balls of the match, Hayat was caught at long-off trying to hit his eighth six.

Manik's AFC Cup challenge

Sheikh Jamal fly off to Singapore today

SPORTS REPORTER



Veteran coach Shafiqul Islam Manik will look to use all his experience when he guides his new side, Sheikh Jamal Dhanmondi Club, in the AFC Cup in their opening fixture against Singapore League outfit Tampines Rovers on

February 23. Manik, along with 18 players, coaching staff and team officials, will fly off to Singapore today and will get two days' time to prepare and fine-tune his squad for the first match of the season.

The preparation for the defending Bangladesh Premier League champions has, however, been far from ideal. The defending Bangladesh Premier League champions have seen a number of their local star play-

ers to get together so that there isn't a miscommunication or lack of understanding among them," the veteran coach told The Daily Star yesterday.

One thing that might give Sheikh Jamal hope is the experience of Manik in delivering success in a short time. The 46-year-old coach was handed the charge of Chittagong Abahani in September last year and he guided the side, which was also an assortment of borrowed players from other clubs, to triumph in the Sheikh Kamal International Club Cup later that year. Manik however believes the challenge is far greater this time around because Sheikh Jamal will have to vie against the Malaysian Super League's runner-up Selangor FA, Philippines' League champions Ceres La Salle FC, apart from the Singapore League' runners-up Tampines Rovers.

"The AFC Cup is a tournament of much higher quality as the other sides in our group are very strong, with a number of quality local and foreign players. What we can do is to try to do our best and I guess we will need a bit of luck as well if we have to succeed," said Manik.

Manik believes the foreign recruits of the Tampines Rovers, which include players like former Arsenal and Liverpool star Jermaine Penant, could pose the biggest threat. Sheikh Jamal, for their part, have managed to retain three of their key foreign players -- Emeka Darlington, Landing Darboe and new skipper Wedson Anselme -- as well as roping in Cameroon-born Vietnamese Nguyen Hang Tcheuko Minh to shore up the midfield.

The three strikers played a key role in Sheikh Jamal's qualification campaign and are believed to be the biggest strength of the side. However, Manik feels the locals will have to play the key role.

"If the locals cannot provide the right support to the three forwards, things will not work. So I'm expecting a big contribution from our local players as well," Manik added.

Wedson, Emeka and Landing are expected to constitute the frontline while Jamal Bhuiyan and Sohail Rana are expected to feature alongside Nguyen Minh (fourth foreigner allowed in Asian quota) in the midfield. The defence is expected to feature Yeamin Munna, Yeasin Khan, Topu Barman and Mohammad Linkon while either of Mazharul Islam or Shahidul Alam could don the goalkeeper's gloves.

'We need more matches'

SPORTS REPORTER



While most of the top women's cricket teams are busy battling against each other in a bid to gain as much international game time as possible ahead of the ICC World Twenty20, Bangladesh have had to be content with camps at home.

After all, nations are not likely to be very keen on doing warm up for the mega event against a side that is ranked 10th in the world. It is a disadvantage that the Bangladeshi team management has tried hard to overcome.

In the last few months, they have played a series of extra practice matches; the batting department -- which happens to be their weakest link -- has been given an extra focus with batters spending extra hours in the nets; they have also arranged matches at the BKSP against some of the under-17 boys teams and have trained on some of the bigger grounds in the nation.

However, according to skipper Jahanara Alam, none of that can

replace the amount of experience that a player gains from playing an actual match. And that is a problem that this side wants to address at the upcoming World Cup. They want to win matches in order to improve their rankings and attract international games.

"I think the women's cricket scenario has improved a lot more than before. Two to three years ago it was slightly more difficult for us to access the indoors, the gyms or the other facilities, mainly because they were booked. Today, a national player can use these facilities whenever she requires them.

"We are improving every day, but so are other teams. Practice is not enough. We need to play more matches. We may work on a particular shot for hours or improve ourselves technically, but the real test arrives on the day of the match," says Jahanara.

"There was a time when parents didn't want to send their girls to play cricket. Today we have 28 to 30 professional cricketers. Yes, many of them do study on the side, but cricket remains their main focus. Outside the group of 30 though, there are cricketers who

continue facing these issues.

"On the whole, what I can say is that we have survived several difficult situations in the past. And now that we are going to the World Cup, we just want to go there and play good cricket," she adds.

Bangladesh's game plan, as per their coach Janak Champika Gamage, seems quite simple. They want to be able to score at least 120 in each game and then let their army of spinners, their stronger suit, handle the rest.

It's something that Jahanara is confident of doing despite the fact that they have been placed in a group that includes the top three sides of the format -- India, England and the West Indies.

"In the last World Cup in Bangladesh, we managed to put plenty of pressure on both England and the West Indies. We held those games until the 15th over and then lost our way mainly due to lack of experience. It's difficult to say which team we can beat and which team we can't, all I know is that we are not afraid and we will give our best in the competition," says Jahanara.

Shami out of Asia Cup

AGENCIES, New Delhi

Mohammad Shami was on Friday ruled out of India's squad for the upcoming Asia Cup, raising doubts over his participation in the ICC World Twenty20, which will take place in India after the continental tournament.

Seamer Bhuvneshwar Kumar has been named as replacement for Shami by the selection committee.

After a long injury layoff, post last year's World Cup, Shami was recalled to the national squad for the tour of Australia, only to be ruled out again by a hamstring injury.

Shami had not proved his fitness at the time of the announcement of the squad, on February 5, for the two tournaments.

Emotions high for Baz swansong

REUTERS, Christchurch



New Zealand's cricket team have run a gamut of emotions this week after they slumped to a heavy first Test loss to Australia then won three awards at their country's premier sports awards on Thursday.

Now they have the opportunity to send captain Brendon McCullum into international retirement with a possible Test victory that would also prevent Tasmania rivals Australia from reclaiming the world's top ranking in Test cricket.

It is that emotion, however, that McCullum and team management have been attempting to rein in before the second match begins at Hagley Oval in Christchurch on Saturday.

"We've talked among the group and thought we were a bit too keen in the last Test. Sometimes when you want something so much, you start to tighten up a little bit," McCullum told reporters on the eve of his 101st and final Test.

"The focus is to get back to what's worked for us in the last three years, play with a lot of enthusiasm, play with a smile on the face and try and seize the key moments when they arrive."

It was Steve Smith's side who seized the key moments in the Wellington

contest, which they captured by an innings and 52 runs.

"Australia, if you give them an inch, they know how to take it," McCullum said. "That's why they've been such a good team for such a long period of time.



Brendon McCullum (L) takes in the sights during training in Christchurch yesterday, on the eve of his last Test here today.

PHOTO: INTERNET

ers, including national skipper Mamunul Islam and his deputy Nasiruddin Chowdhury, poached by some other clubs ahead of the new season. Manik himself has been a late addition as the former Muktiyoddha, Mohammedan and Chittagong Abahani coach only signed the contract with his new club ten days ago. And even though the club started its preparation almost a month ago, the new coach got all the players at his disposal only yesterday.

The veteran coach rued the lack of time to prepare the side as he felt it will take more time for the players to get together.

"I have only got all the players together today [Friday] and we will have only two days' time left before the match. Besides, international matches are always tough. We will be playing against an unknown team and at their home ground. So it will be very tough for us. What we need now is to get the