



The duo of Shakib Al Hasan (R) and Sabbir Rahman saw Bangladesh through when they were wavering at 26-3, putting on an 82-run partnership and setting the platform for a big total against Sri Lanka at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday.

Sublime Sabbir

SPORTS REPORTER

Among all the tumult that has surrounded Bangladesh's batting in T20 cricket of late there has been one shining light, and he shone brightest yesterday with a career-best 80 in Bangladesh's 23-run Asia Cup T20 victory against Sri Lanka at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur.

In the seven matches so far this year in the format (four against Zimbabwe in January, three including yesterday's match in the Asia Cup T20) Sabbir Rahman has amassed 270 runs at an average of 45, while the next best is Mahmudullah Riyad's 134 at 26.8.

Sabbir's spot at number three is one that the team have gotten right. Yesterday he performed under acute pressure as he came in to bat when Mohammad Mithun was dismissed off the second ball of the match. Soumya Sarkar, the other opener, followed suit in the next over to leave Bangladesh two wickets down after two overs with just two runs on the board.

"Today after the first wicket fell off the first [second] ball, I tried to get into the flow of the match as fast as possible," said Sabbir at the post-match press conference. "I tried to play according to the ball. There is pressure for every player when two or three wickets fall. I knew that if lost my wicket we would be under pressure, but I tried to play according to my strengths."

Sabbir displayed the merits of concentration even in the high-speed chase that is T20 cricket. As Mushfiqur Rahim struggled to calm his nerves in his anxiety to turn the strike back to his younger partner, Sabbir had

entered a zone, equal to the task against everything the Lankan pacers dished out. On three occasions he hit boundaries off at least three consecutive deliveries.

"Sabbir batted really well," said stand-in Sri Lanka skipper Angelo Mathews about the play of the match. "They were under pressure as we got a couple of early wickets but Sabbir just kept attacking and it was his day today."

The shot of the day came off Thisara Perera in the sixth over. Having seen an edged slog fly to the third man boundary, Perera bowled a perfectly good ball, near yorker length a few inches outside off stump. Sabbir displayed great presence of mind to stay in the crease and hit through the line, perfectly bisecting the gap



between mid off and cover.

It was not flawless; Sabbir played a hand in Mushfiqur's run-out at a crucial stage of the innings. "It was a misunderstanding obviously with Mushfiqur [Rahim] Bhai. But I was not at a loss about what to do when three or four wickets fell; instead I concentrated on staying at the wicket as long as possible and carrying the team as far as possible."

When asked whether this was his best innings in the format, Sabbir recalled an innings that produced another rousing Bangladesh victory. "Maybe it is among the best, but I think the innings I played against Pakistan [32-ball 51 in Dhaka in April 2015] was the best."

A special victory

NAIMUL KARIM

Soon after Al-Amin Hossain delivered the last ball, the fielders from the deep excitedly charged in towards the wicket in synchronised manner; almost as though they had practiced celebrating in training.

The elation on the faces perhaps best reflected the immense amount of work that they had done in this format over the last few months.

The intensity of the celebrations yesterday was perhaps even a degree higher than when Bangladesh beat India and South Africa in the ODIs last year; and this was despite the fact that it wasn't even a close finish.

The emotion probably poured out because deep inside the players knew that yesterday's win was special. Never did the Tigers manage to win a T20 game after making such a terrible start. They were reduced to 26 for 3 in the first five overs and considering their lack of confidence in this format of the game, they had to scale a mountain to go on and win this one.

It needed a special effort, and that came in the form of Sabbir Rahman. An innings of such stature does not come that often in T20s for Bangladesh and the numbers show that. Sabbir's 80 is the fourth highest T20I score by a Bangladeshi. Nazimuddin had scored an 81 in 2007, while Shakib Al Hasan and Tamim Iqbal posted scores of 84 and 88 respectively in two games in 2012.

Once Sabbir laid the platform, Bangladesh's balanced bowling attack did the rest.

It therefore wasn't a surprise to see an extremely happy and relaxed Mashrafe Bin Mortaza at the post-match press conference yesterday. Sabbir's innings might have been unique, but the skipper was barely surprised.

"Sabbir always had the ability. He just managed to execute today. We always give Sabbir the license to play the way he wants to. Had he not played those drives, we wouldn't have been able to come out of pressure and put these many runs on the board," said Mashrafe.

The wicket had less grass on it yesterday and the skipper admitted that aspect made it a bit easier for Bangladesh's batsmen. He however

believed that a score of 160 would have been ideal. And that's why he felt that his bowlers should be given as much credit as Sabbir.

"The bowlers bowled in the right areas and to the field. The wicket was gripping and a little slow, which made it a bit easy for us. Once I saw that, I immediately decided to keep Mustafizur [Rahman] for the end," said Mashrafe.

With Bangladesh just one win away from the final -- their last game is against Pakistan -- the most expected question was brought up towards the end. Did Mashrafe foresee a second Asia Cup final for the Tigers?

Hesitated for a bit and provided, as expected of him, a practical answer: "No comments," he smiled. "We are going to take this match by match."

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka skipper Angelo Mathews said that the approach used by his batsmen was 'poor' and that was what led to their defeat.

"We had a tall batting order but the run-rate started creeping up. I thought the wicket was good for batting, but our shot selection was not up to the mark. Credit to the Bangladesh bowling, they really did well," he said.

Pak, UAE seek first win

SPORTS REPORTER



The United Arab Emirates may not have been able to cause upsets in the ongoing Asia Cup T20 so far, but there is no doubt that

they are enjoying every moment in the big league.

In their last game, they made the hosts sweat with their bowling and prior to that, their game against Sri Lanka went right down to the wire. For a team that had arrived in Bangladesh with expectations of returning home after the Qualifiers -- they had pre-booked their return, according to an official -- they must be having the time of their lives.

Having so far managed to expose the batting departments of their opponents in the first two games, the UAE will be hoping they can repeat the task when they take on Pakistan at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur today.

Pakistan did not make the best of starts against India on Saturday. While the wicket might have been a bit difficult to bat on, their score of 83 was well below par. UAE will be hoping they can repeat their bowling performance and jolt Pakistan while they are still a bit unsettled.

Their key bowlers will be Mohammad Naveed and Ajmal Javed. Naveed, in particular, was brilliant in his last match against Bangladesh. The Tigers had actually decided to

see him off. He has played five games in the competition so far and has operated at an average of 8.72 and an economy rate of just 4.80.

However, not a lot can be done if the UAE do not improve their batting. Their batsmen struggled against both Sri Lanka and Bangladesh and with the men from the Gulf going up against an in-form Mohammad Amir, things could get a lot more difficult for them.

For Pakistan, this will be an opportunity to get settled in the competition. They will want their batsmen to score runs and gain some confidence ahead of their crucial encounters against Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

As Shoab Malik put it yesterday, they do not want to commit the same mistakes that they made against India.

"Every game is crucial. Playing against India was a pressure game for both the teams. We made some mistakes. We didn't know what the conditions here would be. Now that we have played, we know how to deal with it. It's going to be a great game against UAE," Malik told reporters yesterday.

With Pakistan playing their home games in the UAE for the last seven years, players from both sides know each other quite well. Some of them are really good friends as well.

"Even two real brothers, when they play against each other, they want to win. It's the same with us," Malik said when asked about the close ties between today's combatants.



THE RETURN OF SHAKIB
Shakib Al Hasan's return to form is a highly welcome development for Bangladesh. Although he did not play the starring role he is accustomed to, he played a crucial hand with both bat and ball. He scored 32 and was part of a crucial 82-run stand with Sabbir Rahman and kept the youngster in check when he seemed about to fly off the handle. Then the all-rounder delivered crucial blows with ball in hand by getting rid of Tillakaratne Dilshan and a threatening Shehan Jayasuriya while giving away just 21 runs from his four overs.

BD-SL SCOREBOARD

BANGLADESH					R/B	A/V		
Mithun lbw b Mathews	0/2	0/0						
Soumya c Mathews b Kulasekara	0/3	0/0						
Sabbir c Jayasuriya b Chameera	80/54	10/3						
Mushfiqur run out	4/9	0/0						
Shakib c Chandimal b Chameera	32/34	3/0						
Mahmudullah not out	23/12	2/1						
Nurul c Mathews b Chameera	2/5	0/0						
Mashrafe run out	2/2	0/0						
Extras: (b-1, w-2, nb-1)		4						
Total: (For 7 wks in 20 overs)		147						
Fall of wickets: 1-0, 2-2, 3-26, 4-108, 5-123, 6-140, 7-147.								
SRI LANKA					R/B	A/V		
Chandimal c Taskin								
b Mahmudullah	37/37	4/0						
Dilshan c Soumya b Shakib	12/9	2/0						
Jayasuriya st Nurul b Shakib	26/21	1/2						
Mathews c Shakib b Al-Amin	12/20	0/0						
Perera lbw b Mustafizur	4/6	0/0						
Siriwardana c Sabbir b Mashrafe	3/4	0/0						
Shanaka c Mushfiqur b Al-Amin	14/14	0/1						
Kapugedera not out	12/7	0/1						
Kulasekara c Soumya b Al-Amin	0/1	0/0						
Chameera not out	1/1	0/0						
Extras: (w-3)		3						
Total: (For 8 wks in 20 overs)		124						
Fall of wickets: 1-20, 2-76, 3-78, 4-85, 5-92, 6-102, 7-116, 8-117.								
Bowler					O	M	R	W
Mathews	3	0	8	1				
Kulasekara	4	0	44	1				
Perera	1	0	14	0				
Jayasuriya	3	0	21	0				
Herath	4	0	24	0				
Dilshan	1	0	5	0				
Chameera	4	0	30	3				
SRI LANKA					R/B	A/V		
Chandimal c Taskin								
b Mahmudullah	37/37	4/0						
Dilshan c Soumya b Shakib	12/9	2/0						
Jayasuriya st Nurul b Shakib	26/21	1/2						
Mathews c Shakib b Al-Amin	12/20	0/0						
Perera lbw b Mustafizur	4/6	0/0						
Siriwardana c Sabbir b Mashrafe	3/4	0/0						
Shanaka c Mushfiqur b Al-Amin	14/14	0/1						
Kapugedera not out	12/7	0/1						
Kulasekara c Soumya b Al-Amin	0/1	0/0						
Chameera not out	1/1	0/0						
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Total: (For 8 wks in 20 overs)		124						
Fall of wickets: 1-20, 2-76, 3-78, 4-85, 5-92, 6-102, 7-116, 8-117.								
Bowler					O	M	R	W
Taskin	3	0	19	0				
Al-Amin	4	0	34	3				
Shakib	4	0	21	2				
Mustafizur	4	0	19	1				
Mashrafe	3	0	17	1				
Mahmudullah	2	0	14	1				
Result: Bangladesh won by 23 runs.								
Player-of-the-match: Sabbir Rahman.								

Too much green?

SPORTS REPORTER



Once the qualifiers for the Asia Cup T20 in Fatullah were done with, the pitches at Mirpur where the main tournament is being played seemed a world away from the wickets players would expect to see in the subcontinent. The once barren square of pitches in Mirpur can now barely be distinguished from the outfield, covered with lively grass. Until yesterday, that is.

Sources close to the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) have revealed that the grass tops were to be dispensed with in favour of the more barren surface seen yesterday. The reason, according to the sources, is not India skipper Mahendra Singh Dhoni's lament that these pitches are not perfect for T20 cricket, but that board high-ups were unhappy with Bangladesh's batting in their first two matches, when they managed scores of 121 and 133 in their first two outings against India and the UAE.

Before the Sri Lanka-Bangladesh encounter, at least two of the four matches -- the Bangladesh-India opener and the India-Pakistan encounter -- were played on wickets with considerable grass cover and consequently substantial seam movement, while the other matches also had a healthy smattering of green.

It was learnt that before the tournament there was talk of splitting the Asia Cup matches between Fatullah and Mirpur as was the case in the previous edition in 2014. But the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium had assured that with greater grass cover the square would stay together and pitches would not crumble. Also, Bangladesh head coach Chandika Hathurusingha is reported to have wanted green pitches as those are what the Tigers are likely to face when playing the World Twenty20 qualifiers next month in Dharamsala.

The ploy seems to have worked. Bangladesh produced their best score of the tournament by scoring 147 for six yesterday. The preparation for Dharamsala will have to take a backseat for now.

'Shakib not an alien'

SPORTS REPORTER

Apart from the obvious joy brought by Bangladesh's first victory against Sri Lanka in T20Is, the most welcome development in yesterday's match was Shakib Al Hasan's return to form. His dropped catch off Rohit Sharma in the tournament opener set tongues wagging, as if he was above committing the odd mistake. A tongue-in-cheek remark from skipper Mashrafe Mortaza after the match revealed just how unrealistic some expectations regarding Shakib were.

The ace all-rounder played a hand yesterday in Bangladesh's 23-run win over Sri Lanka that has come to be expected by Tigers' fans over the years.

And so the performance led the way for Mashrafe to speak up for his teammate. "I see Shakib as a human being; never thought he was an alien. It's good that he has stepped up, he has always done well, hopefully he will continue. He is one of our biggest players and we always want him to perform. But at the end of the day anyone can make mistakes."

INFO ZONE

PAKISTAN vs UAE

Head to Head In Asia Cup

The teams have never met in the Asia Cup before nor in T20Is

In ALL ODIs

M	W	L	M	W	L
3	3	0	3	0	3

Last meeting: Napier, 4 March, 2015, Pakistan won by 129 runs.

KEY PLAYERS

MOHAMMAD SAMI			MOHAMMAD NAVEED		
8	Inns	12			
16	Wkts	19			
14.75	Avg	13.42			
8.42	Econ	5.66			
3-16	Best	3-14			
0	4w	0			
0	5w	0			