



After having reached the Asia Cup final once again, Bangladesh will this time hope they can go one better and win their first major trophy when they take on India today. Led by Mashrafe Bin Mortaza (C) the Tigers will be relishing the opportunity, especially with Tamim Iqbal (L) back in the side and Sabbir Rahman (R) in a rich vein of form.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

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'Noisy crowd will only amp us up'

SPORTS REPORTER



It is already hard enough to predict the outcome of any cricket game and when that game is a T20, then the equation becomes even more difficult to solve. So it's better not to make any conclusions about who will win this evening's battle in the Asia Cup T20 final in Mirpur. But one thing that is for sure is that the stands in the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium will be filled by a partisan crowd.

Will this partisan crowd make any difference?

"We are used to noise. Let there be hundred per cent, who cares? When you play at that level, you are immune to that. You can use that to your advantage as well. You can be more amped up and show that you can play," was the vehement reply from India team director Ravi Shastri, who attended the pre-match press conference at Mirpur yesterday.

He also said that India will play fearless cricket in the final; the approach that made them a success in the shortest format.

"I will have to sit here for ten hours if I have to tell you all that [regarding India's

fearless cricket]. Since then we are the number one team in T20 cricket, it has been a gradual, but enjoyable process. Let's hope we can play that kind of cricket in the final too tomorrow," he said.

When asked whether Bangladesh were their toughest opponents, Shastri said: "The opening match [against Bangladesh] was a good game. Winning against them was a good way to start the tournament. First game, we were under pressure and in the last ten overs we bounced back. But every game is tough. It's about how you balance things out between the batting and bowling departments in the end. And I thought we did an excellent job."

So far, batsman have not had a good time in the tournament, but Shastri had no complaints about the pitches.

"The pitches are not in our hands. I was asked before the start of the tournament whether you are going to get a green top. So be it. Whatever track is on offer tomorrow, we are ready to play. Our job is to go play in whatever conditions we are offered. Because you realise very quickly that it is not one team playing there, both teams have to play on that surface. So it is fair play," he said.



Playing the final of a major tournament is nothing new to the Indians. And that showed yesterday during their training session as they seemed as relaxed and ready as ever for the game against hosts Bangladesh today.

PHOTO: AFP

Teamwork the antidote

NAIMUL KARIM

21 minutes. That is how long Mashrafe Bin Mortaza spoke during the pre-match press conference at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday.

Compare that to Ravi Shastri's five and you can easily figure out which side was the more enthusiastic one on the eve of the Asia Cup final.

But then again one cannot blame Mashrafe, or the 40-odd journalists in the media room who kept peppering the captain with questions. After all, it is not a position that the Tigers find themselves in very often.

The simple fact that one big knock or one fierce bowling performance might pave the way for Bangladesh to be officially recognised as the best team in Asia in a format that they have been struggling in for years in itself can give the jitters to any of the home fans.

But before that, they have before them the enormous task of beating the best T20 team in the world. Nothing has managed to stop or even threaten

India in the Asia Cup so far.

Mashrafe indicated that it was difficult to find a chink in India's armour. The hosts are instead focused on their own strength: teamwork.

"Clearly India are the favourites, everybody knows that. But what we can do is play as a team. We may not have one or two players who can change the match single-handedly, but at this point of time we have good unity in our team and we want to continue that."

"With India's batting order there's no question of trying to find out a particular weakness. You need to bowl well throughout the match. They will give you the charge, but you need to minimise that. I guess the key areas will be the first six overs and towards the end of the match, because those are the most vulnerable periods," said Mashrafe.

"The important thing here is to focus on our improvement. I had said at the start of the tournament that we are not here as the champion team. We are focused on minimising our mistakes."

"It's not as though our cricket is going to stop if we don't win the final. It doesn't matter if we lose, we will

move on from there. We have a big future ahead. Yes, if we do win, the feeling will be amazing, but the main focus will be on improving our game," he added.

Mashrafe also admitted that the team will enter new territory today and that it would be important for them to be able to sustain the pressure.

"We don't play in finals that often, so there is a chance that at some points of the game our minds may not function properly. I believe that the team that takes decisions without any doubts on the field, will end up winning the game," he said. The captain also suggested that there will be changes in the team for the final game.

"We won't do anything to surprise them. What we believe is that there is no such thing as the winning combination. We prepare the team as per the wicket, the opponent and our strength," he added.

When asked if he considers this match as the most important in his career, Mashrafe said: "I rate the game against England in the World Cup, which got us to the quarter-final, higher than this."

Shakib out of danger

SPORTS REPORTER

There was a bit of fear that spread in the Bangladeshi camp during training at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur earlier this afternoon after Bangladesh's ace-allrounder Shakib Al Hasan was seen cringing in pain following his batting session at Mirpur. Team physio Bayjidul Islam however, at the end of the training session, dispersed those fears.

"Shakib hurt a hip muscle while training on Friday. And today he complained about that area a little bit again. But it's nothing serious. It generally takes 24 hours to recover from such an injury and since he was hurt yesterday he is already in a much better condition," said Bayjidul.

"He was just feeling a little uneasy today. He will be completely ready by tomorrow. There isn't any worry," assured Bayjidul.

CORE BATTLES



MASHRAFE BIN MORTAZA V MAHENDRA SINGH DHONI

If one takes the respective attributes of these two captains to stereotypical extremes, this can be billed as a battle between Dhoni's calculation and Mashrafe's inspiration, but there is more to it than that. While Dhoni's methods have crystallised into one of cold-minded rationality over a captaincy career going back almost nine years, there are instinctive masterstrokes -

- an off-beat field placement or bowling change that bears fruit - that defeat anticipation of his tactics. Mashrafe, meanwhile, is much more demonstrative than his Indian counterpart and is the emotional heart of the team, but over the past 18 months or so he has balanced that with being an excellent man manager and an imaginative captain, as his placement of three

fielders between point and third man inside the circle in the late overs of the Pakistan game showed. He is different from Dhoni in that he is a more attacking captain, having at his disposal the best bowling attack in the country's history. Both, nearing the ends of their careers, are now looking to cement their legacies as the most successful leaders of their nations.



SABBIR RAHMAN V VIRAT KOHLI

Kohli is a proven modern batting maestro, a level that the impressive Sabbir still has a long way to go to achieve. Both batsmen however enter the game at the crucial number three position and both are in such form (it has become a perpetual state for the Indian) that their contribution or lack of it proves vital to the team's fortunes. Sabbir, who is part of the Bangladesh crop of youngsters who have enjoyed



more T20 success than their seniors, averages 55.8 - more than 25 average points higher than his career number - in the nine T20 wins he has played in. Kohli averages even higher, 64.46 as opposed to his excellent career average of 51.03, in Indian wins. While Sabbir has shown a greater propensity to hit over the infield, both focus on playing proper cricketing shots and both have played defining innings in this Asia Cup.



SHAKIB AL HASAN V RASHWIN

Both are the main spinners in pace-heavy attacks that are a departure from the countries' traditions, and both can lay claim to being the best bowler in their attacks. Ashwin is someone who is very difficult to attack - his variations are hard to pick and therefore batsmen run a higher risk when taking him on. Shakib makes up with cricketing intelligence and adroit decision-



making - such as when he created a stumping by bowling wide of the stumps when he saw ShehanJayasuriya advancing - what he lacks in mystery variations, although his am-ball has outfoxed enough quality batsmen over the years. Then, of course, there is his batting which has slowly been getting back to its best, and the final will be the perfect occasion for that to shine.

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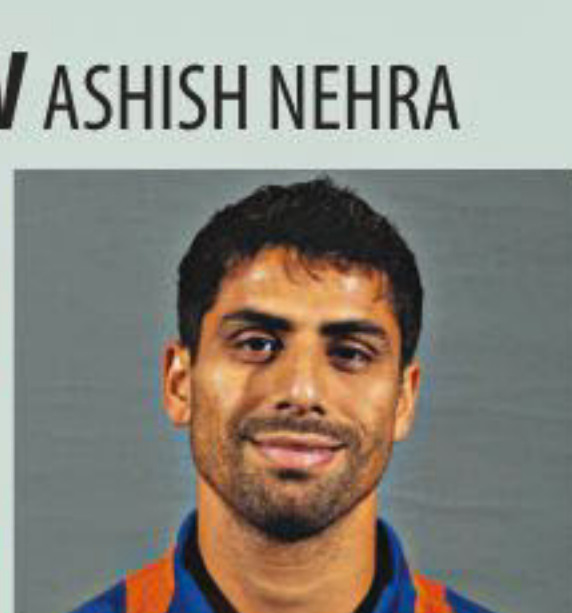
Two very different styles with very similar impacts on their respective teams. Sharma is all silken grace, and often waits to play himself in before treating the world to his luminescent strokeplay, which can turn out to be a deadly kind of



elegance as evidenced in the opening game against Bangladesh. The powerful and often belligerent Tamim sets the tone for the rest of his team. The pre-eminent Bangladeshi batsman of his generation, Tamim loves batting against India and his contribution may prove vital.



The old warhorse versus the young tyro. Nehra came back to the Indian team on the back of strong showings in multiple IPL seasons, where he has developed an expertise in how to bowl in this format on subcontinent pitches. His combination of new-ball movement at



decent pace often results in early wickets, and he will be relishing the prospect if presented with a green Mirpur pitch. So will Taskin, who is much quicker and has repeatedly provided good bowling starts to the Tigers with his economical and incisive spells.



MUSHFIQUR RAHIM V SURESH RAINA

Both batsmen come in at number four and both have the ability to set the tone for their teams. Neither has really made their presence felt in this tournament, although Raina played a crucial cameo in their victory over Sri Lanka. Mushfiqur, an intense character who has the ability to hit the big shots once he gets his eye in, has seemed a little nervous in his innings so far, resulting in cheap dismissals.



Raina, the first T20I centurion for his team, can really take the game away from the opposition if he gets in, which Bangladesh will desperately try to avoid. He is one of the most sought after T20 players around the world and has the ability to do well under pressure. On the other hand, it is hard to count Mushfiqur out because he will be trying everything in his power to have an impact on the final, in which case Bangladesh can be sure of a big score.



MAHMUDULLAH RIYAD V YUVRAJ SINGH

Both are slightly surprise entries as crucial players, as both were written off in varying degrees for different reasons before the tournament. Yuvraj, once feared for his six-hitting abilities, had gone off the boil for a while since his starring role in the 2011 World Cup win. Riyad, seen as a classical batsman, was thought - erroneously as it turns out - too classical to be successful in the T20 format, especially lower down the order. But Yuvraj has rediscovered



his touch, playing crucial innings studded with his trademark sixes against Sri Lanka and the UAE, and has solved the last piece of India's batting puzzle. Riyad has shown time and again, most notably in the last game, that he has more than enough tools to do what is needed for Bangladesh. He may take Bangladesh home in a difficult chase or make sure that there are enough runs on the board to defend, both of which he does in elegant fashion.