

SPORT

'CAPTAINS TRUST ME'

The country hangs on his every word and action, but it is easy to forget that Mustafizur Rahman is like any other 20-year-old Bangladeshi boy, albeit marked by a maturity that enables him to perform sterling deeds with the ball on the cricket field. Homesickness is a major issue that he is trying to overcome, the joys of riding and owning motorcycles is very close to his heart. His love for bashing the tape-tennis ball seems second to none, while his philosophy on sporting injuries belie the mind of a clear-thinker. He speaks on these subjects with The Daily Star's Sports Editor Mohammed Al-Amin in the second instalment of our two-part interview with the Fizz.

Homesickness

If I stay away from home for a long time I feel a bit sad but at the same time I console myself by thinking that the game I play is my main job. When I'm playing I don't feel that much of homesickness. But when there is a break or holidays and I can't go home it disturbs me the most. It is true that I think of my home before a game but once I'm on the field I forget everything. I only think, if I get 10 overs or four overs, about how to bowl in different spells. However, I'm learning to accept the reality [that he will have to stay away from home].

On his passion for bikes

Actually I didn't travel around that much this time at home. I rode my bike just once. I had gone to a field to see my friends playing football. But this time I preferred driving my car because it was raining and it would have been risky to ride my bike. I always loved to have



a bike. During the Asia Cup there were three bikes up for grabs [as the man-of-the-match prize]. I told my family and friends back home that if I get one I will give it to them. But I didn't get one. Now I have got a bike and want more. It's my hobby. I may not drive every

day, but at least it's good to have your options. I have a car which runs on automatic transmission. I didn't prefer a manual-transmission car because in that case I will have to use both my hands and legs. Isn't it easy to use just one leg?

On his injury

My logic is that, if I hide an injury and then end up bowling badly in the game it hurts the team. There is also a strong possibility of aggravating my injury. It also deprives someone an opportunity. If someone plays instead of me, it can be good for him, his career and help the team as well. So there's no gain in hiding injuries. It hurts you. The issue of injury goes along with how your captain treats you on the field. [Abdur Razzak] Raj bhai cared for me the most during the National Cricket League. He told me that if I can bowl even one over in a session, he won't mind. He gave me enough rest as well.

Secret behind not overstepping

Before the Asia Cup I had a few problems with no-balls. After that I kept practising with markers and with umpires present during training. I tried hard to solve the problem. This was before the Asia Cup, when we had a session in Chittagong. Over there I used to bowl plenty of no-balls in almost every practice game. After that I changed my shoes and changed my spikes. I bought a pair of Adidas shoes and then it got better. Before that I noticed that I bowled no-balls even when I was in good rhythm. I think the shoes that I wore previously used to hurt my knee a lot. I didn't like that and so I changed it.

Captain's go-to man

When I bowl, captains trust me in general. Mashrafe [Bin Mortaza] bhai for instance trusts me so the field is set up accordingly. Sometimes when everyone is conceding plenty of runs, I think of giving less runs and then suggest a field set-up that way.

Then there are times when the field is tight when I bowl. Sometimes I tell bhai: "Bhai, if you keep the fielder there it may be better." He then tells me, this is good, you bowl! [laughs].

The batsman at home

The bat is mine when I'm at home. It's really fun when I take the field with all my friends around me. They just keep on bowling one after another and I try to entertain everyone with the bat. I really love batting against that tennis ball. I also do a lot of batting with my brothers in our backyard. We have also erected sufficient netting on top of the trees so that the ball is not lost. I love playing tape-tennis competitions in my hometown and I can turn and bounce that ball more. After the first match against Pakistan when I returned home I took part in a competition organised by the local people. It's very popular and players like [Mohammad] Ashraf bhai took part. I got him out and he didn't score much.

Long break looms for cricketers

BCL, in September, next on domestic calendar

SPORTS REPORTER

Ace all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan and pace sensation Mustafizur Rahman may be busy with their respective commitments abroad for the next few months, but for the rest of the country's cricketers, the next time they are likely to take part in competitive cricket may well be after a gap of two months. According to Bangladesh Cricket Board's (BCB's) chairman of cricket operations, Akram Khan, the board as per its domestic calendar has decided to host the Bangladesh Cricket League (BCL), the country's premier four-day cricket competition, in September. "Since the BCL is the most competitive competition we have in the longer format, we have decided to host it before the start of the Test series against England. It is scheduled to begin on September 20 as per the current calendar," Akram told The Daily Star yesterday. "A few rounds of the tournament will take place before England arrive. After that the national players are expected to get busy with the England series and the domestic players will continue playing the BCL," he added. According to the current itinerary, England are expected to arrive in

MCC calls for limits on bat size

AFP, London

The World Cricket Committee of MCC (Marylebone Cricket Club) has called for new limits on the size of bats in a bid to ensure an even contest between bat and ball. In a statement issued Tuesday, the committee said they were concerned that the balance "has tilted too far in the batsman's favour". Manufacturers have been producing thicker bats with ever larger "sweet spots". While there are limitations on bat length and width, none currently exist on the thickness and overall depth. "The time has come to restrict the size of bat edges and the overall width of bats," committee chairman Mike Brearley, told a news conference at Lord's. "It was pointed out to us that, in 1905, the width of bats was 16mm and that, by 1980, it had increased to 18mm. It is now an average, in professional cricket, of 35-40mm and sometimes up to 60mm" the former England captain added. "That shows how fast the change has been."

All eyes on Amir

England-Pakistan first Test starts today

AFP, London

Pakistan's Mohammad Amir will hope to put the 2010 spot-fixing scandal behind him once and for all when he returns to the scene of the crime in Thursday's first Test against England at Lord's. Six years ago, during a Lord's Test against England, Amir and Pakistan new-ball partner Mohammad Asif deliberately bowled no-balls on the instructions of captain Salman Butt as part of a sting operation carried out by a tabloid newspaper. All three received five-year bans from cricket and, together with sports agent Mazhar Majeed, jail terms. Such was the impact of the controversy, the fact teenage sensation Amir took six for 84 in the first innings of that match has largely been forgotten. For all his time out of cricket, the 24-year-old retains the ability to swing the ball late at sharp pace, as he showed with a first-innings haul of three for 36 in Pakistan's tour opener

middle-order batsman Jonny Bairstow. Pakistan have a strong middle order in skipper Misbahul Haq, fellow veteran Younis Khan and the in-form Asad Shafiq. But doubts persist over openers Mohammad Hafeez and Shan Masood, just as there are concerns as to whether Alex Hales, yet to score a Test hundred, is the right man to partner skipper Alastair Cook at the top of England's order. The combative Riaz is looking to target Root, now promoted to number three by England. For the Yorkshireman, that was just pre-series "trash talk" but Riaz said of Root: "He is the backbone of the England team and getting him out early will put the pressure on England. "If he thinks it is just trash talk then hats off to him." Turning to Amir, Riaz added: "He is a very intelligent bowler and he is a very strong lad...He is eager to perform." England will have to decide whether to give a debut to either Jake Ball or fellow pacesman Toby Roland-Jones, who plays at Lord's for Middlesex, as the fourth-placed team begin their bid to leapfrog Pakistan

WHAT THEY SAID

AGENCIES

People want Amir to do well so there will be enormous pressure on him but I am confident that he will come out a winner. -- Legendary bowler Wasim Akram, who led the country to their last Test series win in England in 1996. I think those that decided to penalise him, have already done so. He has served his sentence, and now he is able to play. He is a good bowler, has a huge amount of skill, and if he gets his rhythm right he can hopefully do something special. -- Former India batsman Sachin Tendulkar. I'm very pleased indeed that he is back. He wasn't an innocent young man, but a naive one, and just a teenager. He had a captain he obviously revered who told him to do something wrong. It would take a very strong-willed teenager to turn round and say no to the captain. He was easy prey. -- Former England captain Bob Willis. I request to England players and fans to allow Amir to play freely. He and two of us others committed a mistake, were punished and now our bans are over so let us play. -- Mohammad Asif, one of Amir's co-conspirators who is now playing club cricket in Norway. Any sportsman or woman caught match fixing, spot fixing or taking drugs should be banned for life. They have broken the rules, should pay the price and not be given a second chance. To try and gain an advantage by taking drugs or devaluing your sport by being bribed is breaking the 11th and 12th commandments. There can be no way back. -- Former England batsman Kevin Pietersen. He's a phenomenal talent, phenomenal. So we're teaching our children that if you're really good at what you do, we will forget your sins. But, if you're mediocre, get ready to be thrown under the bus.

Marketing professional Anthony Permal from Karachi, on Asif and Salman Butt not returning while Amir is back in the fold. I do think there were some mitigating factors and that's why I've had some sympathy for him. The first circumstance is the nature of the sting. It was important to understand that this was not a betting scam, there could be no bets made. This was a sting set up to show that players were corruptible. It is perfectly fair to argue, I think, that the newspaper was creating a crime and enticing people into crime, although the justification was that the journalist had been given a tip-off. They turned to the youngest and most vulnerable player in that team and put him under pressure to bowl those no-balls. So, I think on those two mitigating factors a ban for life would be unbelievably harsh. A five-year ban -- that's fine. -- Former England captain Michael Atherton.

Ball to make Eng debut

AFP, London

Jake Ball is set to make his England debut against Pakistan at Lord's on Thursday after captain Alastair Cook confirmed his place in the side a day before the start of the first Test. Ball was in the squad for all three Tests without playing during England's preceding 2-0 series win (with one draw). But Ball has now been included after James Anderson, England's all-time leading wicket-taker, was ruled out of the first of this four-Test series with a shoulder injury. "Jake will make his debut," Cook told reporters at Lord's on Wednesday. "Unfortunately Jimmy has missed out but it's a great opportunity for Jake," the opening batsman added. The 25-year-old Ball has edged out fellow uncapped seamer Toby Roland-Jones, who was hoping to make his Test debut on his Middlesex home ground.

Sachin wants pitches to help bowlers

REUTERS, London

Cricket pitches need to be more bowler-friendly if the rising imbalance between bat and ball is to be addressed, Indian batting great Sachin Tendulkar has said. "The Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC) world cricket committee on Tuesday recommended limitations on the thickness and depth of bats amid concerns that the sport has tilted heavily in favour of the batsmen in recent years. A report commissioned by the MCC, the guardian of the game's laws, in 2014 found the thickness of bats had marginally increased in the last century and that edges had broadened by 300 percent, meaning even mistimed shots could still find the boundary. Tendulkar, who quit international cricket



in 2013 as the game's most prolific batsman both in Tests and the 50-over format, demanded more assistance for the bowlers from the playing surface. "The wickets need to change; they need to be more helpful for bowlers," Tendulkar said. "In T20s, the greatest of bowlers are being reverse-swept. Three-hundred is no longer competitive in ODIs. "So there should be at least one format where bowlers have a better chance of executing their skills and making it more interesting for spectators. "I don't think it's got much to do with bats, but I'm sure people on the (relevant) panel will be able to look into it." Tendulkar's views echoed the sentiments of Australian opener David Warner who said last week that flat pitches rather than bats with thicker edges are the reason batsmen have the upper hand in Test cricket.



Pakistan pacer Mohammad Amir will be the centre of attention in today's first Test against England at Lord's, the scene of his 2010 spot-fixing fall from grace. PHOTO: REUTERS

against Somerset. It means an England side missing all-time leading injured wicket-taker James Anderson and sidelined all-rounder Ben Stokes, should not have things all their own way as they did in the preceding 2-0 home series win over Sri Lanka. While the likes of former Pakistan batsman Rameez Raja have expressed doubts about the wisdom of letting Amir back into international cricket, players on both sides have accepted the situation. "We could talk or moan about it and have our opinions but the fact is it is not going to change him opening the bowling at us on Thursday or playing against us throughout this (four-match) series," said England batsman Joe Root. Amir is far from the only threat in a Pakistan bowling line-up also featuring fellow left-armers Wahab Riaz, Sohail Khan and leg-spinner Yasir Shah. The key to the series could lie with both teams' top-order batsmen. England were repeatedly bailed out of early collapses against Sri Lanka by in-

(third) in the world Test rankings. The match will also mark the return to Test cricket of England batsman Gary Ballance after he was dropped last year. But an unconcerned Riaz said: "We are not worried about what England has picked or they haven't picked. "The only thing we know is that England is a good team in their home conditions." For Riaz, and many Pakistanis, there is more riding on this match than just the raw result. "Under the captaincy of Misbah this team is much more united," he said. "We have seen the hard time of Pakistan cricket... we have managed to make the people all over the world believe that Pakistan is a good Test team. "The Pakistan team are a strong team and can always give you a hard time." Being without Anderson is a blow for England. However, when he was ruled out of last year's fourth Test, fellow quick Stuart Broad took eight for 15 on his Trent Bridge home ground, as Australia were skittled out for 60, to set up an Ashes-clinching win.