

SPORT



Bangladesh pacer Taskin Ahmed (R) was hard at work at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday and he will have to continue to exert himself as he gets ready to return to international cricket after six months when the three-match ODI series against Afghanistan begins tomorrow.

PHOTO: STAR

Taskin can sleep again

SPORTS REPORTER



Taskin Ahmed has filled the vacuum of the fourth pace bowler's spot for the series against Afghanistan, which came as a huge relief for the home team management who were loath to miss the services of a nimble fast bowler. Chief selector Minhajul Abedin was a relieved man as the International Cricket Council (ICC) yesterday cleared the right-arm pacer as well as left-arm spinner Arafat Sunny.

But nothing could compare with the joy of the bowler who said in his immediate reaction that he was not only happy that he will be available for the coming home series but also that he will no longer be faced with strange questions about his action.

"Believe me I could not sleep since I appeared in the examination in Australia. Although I did not commit any crime, still it felt bad since I had been suspended from international cricket. Many people asked strange questions like 'has your arm now become straight?' and it was difficult for me to answer those questions. So today is a big day for me. It was a painful experience. Now nobody

will ask those questions and I don't want to go through such an experience again," said an excited Taskin.

"At first I called my parents and both were over the moon. After a long time they could rejoice wholeheartedly. All our national team's coaching staff helped me a lot. I want to give special thank to Mahbubul Alam Zaki sir who was with me over the last five months and even set up a six-foot mirror in my room," continued the young pacer, who promised better performances on his comeback.

Minhajul also singled out Zaki. "He [Zaki] really worked hard, I want to thank him. We were confident and are now relieved that we got back one of our very important pace bowlers. I am confident that he will be the same bowler he was before the suspension because he only had a slight problem with some of his short balls. We have big plans for Taskin; we would like to see him playing in longer-version domestic cricket so that we can try him in Test cricket."

Regarding Sunny, Minhajul said that they will prefer the left-arm spinner to play domestic cricket as he did not feature much in the Premier League matches and had to make significant changes in his bowling action.

'Afg series as crucial as Eng'

SPORTS REPORTER



Bangladesh opener Tamim Iqbal said yesterday that playing for the country is always an inspiration for them, no matter who they are playing against. He was also not ready to consider the three-match ODI series against Afghanistan a preparation series.

"There is no lack of inspiration for us. We are going to play international matches where if someone achieves a century or five-wicket haul, that will go into the record books. Regardless of whether we play against Afghanistan, Australia or England, playing for the country always motivates us," said Tamim while he was talking to reporters at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday.

The left-handed opener said that they will need to play their best to win matches against Afghanistan. "I always say if you want to win matches, no matter who your opponents are, you must play your best cricket. It's very simple -- the team that can execute their plans in the middle will win in the end, so you have no scope to undermine any team or take any team lightly," he added.

"We need to do the exact same thing against Afghanistan that we will need to do against England. So the Afghanistan series is as important as the England series," he continued. He however believed that the Tigers are now in much better shape than during the ICC World Cup 2015 when they last met Afghanistan.

"But I must say the first match will be important, so we will try our best to do everything right in the first game against Afghanistan. And you know it will not be an easy task to get back the rhythm after such a long break but it's also a new challenge for us to prove ourselves as a good team," he said.

Mosaddek ready for a repeat

SPORTS REPORTER from Fatullah



All eyes were on young batsman Mosaddek Hossain during the lone practice one-day match involving Afghanistan and the BCB XI in Fatullah yesterday.

The right-hander, who has just made it into the Tigers' rank as the lone uncapped player for the first two ODIs against Afghanistan, walked into the middle with his team precariously placed at 15 for two chasing the visitors' 233. The situation was ideal for any young man out to prove a point.

And he justified his elevation to the senior team with a compact 76 off 97 balls, the highest individual score in the game. He was impressive with his compact style of batting, preferring to play in the V. His clean hitting was even more impressive. Besides, the way he handled the Afghan leg-spinners including Rashid Khan Arman, spoke of his watertight defence. He struck five fours and three sixes and each, expect for an attempted cut that raced past the keeper and the first slip, were examples of sheer timing rather than power-hitting.

He might not have carried his bat for the lost cause and his dismissal was quite anticlimactic -- he

dragged an attempted late cut onto his stump off Mohammad Nabi -- but he showed that he has got that firepower to prosper if thrown in at the deep end.

His Ahabani captain and national opener Tamim Iqbal was quite right to say that he has got the head of a 45-year-old on very young shoulders. He was unfazed

when wickets tumbled around him in an unsuccessful chase at Fatullah. He was focused on playing his own game and when he came out to speak to reporters after the match he looked very cool.

"When we go out in the middle we go out to win a match. And at the end of the day if you lose a match you don't feel good. I have played a good

knock but that would have been something to celebrate if we had won," Mosaddek told reporters.

"When I went out there my first concern was to read the wicket. It was a bit difficult wicket, the ball kept a bit low and it was also turning a bit.

"Obviously when you are included in the national team you feel more confident. It was my job

to prove my selection is justified. I tried to stay at the wicket till the end but unfortunately I could not do that," he said.

He was quite spot on when asked what positives he was taking on from the game.

"I have played against them and I have faced all their bowlers. So, it will be no different if I get the opportunity to play against them again," said the promising batsman known for playing long innings as two consecutive double-centuries in first-class cricket would suggest.

He also added that he would share his insight if asked by the senior team members, especially about the three spinners in the Afghan team.

"I think Rashid is very good among the three Afghanistan bowlers. He bowls a very good line and on good spots. He has also got variation," Mosaddek observed.

Regarding his ambition with the national team, where he might make his debut on Sunday, Mosaddek said that he was ready to bat at any position according to the demand of the team.

"I normally bat at number four or five. I have also batted at six last season but I'm ready to bat deep down the order if the team demands that from me," added the right-hander.



Mosaddek Hossain was one of the few bright spots in BCB XI's warm-up defeat to Afghanistan in Fatullah yesterday. With the rest of the team struggling to get among the runs, the young right-hander scored a face-saving 76 for the BCB XI.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Fatullah sets the tone

AL-AMIN from Fatullah



The Tigers are all set to mark their return to ODI cricket after a year's sabbatical. They will take the field at the home of Bangladesh cricket in Mirpur against Afghanistan on Sunday for the first of three one-day internationals. But even before they take the field signalling excitement levels to reach a fever pitch, the festive spirit already returned among the fans turning up in droves to enjoy the lone practice match at the Fatullah Cricket Stadium on Friday.

The Afghans are no heavyweights; they are actually embarking on their first series against Bangladesh. Nor did the BCB XI, a virtual second-string national team, have any big names in the line-up. Still, cricket fans on the outskirts of the city turned up in numbers with many of them buying a Tk 50 face value ticket for Tk 100.

It was not that tickets were unavailable, but most of them turned to scalpers to avoid the hassle of standing in long queues extending from the make-shift counters to about a kilometre away from the venue. Although the 10,000 capacity venue was not packed, considering the gravity of the contest and the opposition the attendance speaks volumes about how passionately Bangladesh fans follow their cricket.

Fatullah has always attracted huge crowds, be it for a practice match, an ODI, a T20I or a Test. The venue was almost packed when Bangladesh launched their stunning home dominance with a practice game against Pakistan at this very ground last year. The BCB XI at that time actually set the tone of a magnificent year by winning that cracker of a game with one Sabbir Rahman plundering 123 off 99 balls to seal a sensational one-wicket victory. A new season, a new start and the Tigers' fans are back to root for their beloved team.



Judging by the number of spectators that turned up and the raucous environment they created in Fatullah yesterday, it would be hard for anyone to believe that they had come to watch a simple warm-up match rather than a full-blooded affair. PHOTO: STAR

'Bowling is our strength'

SPORTS REPORTER



The Afghanistan team have been low-key in their time so far in Dhaka, going about their business quietly since touching down in the Bangladesh capital on September 21. But if reminders were needed that this is a dangerous collection of cricketers who often exceed in performance their status as an Associate Member nation, the home fans got that when they came out trumps in their warm-up match against the BCB XI in Fatullah yesterday.

Mirwais Ashraf, a medium pacer and a useful lower-order batsman, was instrumental in the win as he carried the team to 233 with a 19-ball 32 after coming in at 178 for six, before bowling a miserly spell of three overs for four runs as BCB XI were strangled to a 66-run defeat. Although it wasn't a full-strength Bangladesh side they beat, Mirwais was more than happy with their first match on tour.

"This was a great preparation for us after the 20 days we spent training in India. We played positive cricket and gave Bangladesh [BCB XI] a tough time," he said after the match.

It is common knowledge among cricket fans that their varied bowling arsenal is where Afghanistan excel. That was on display yesterday as pacers Farid Ahmad and Karim Janat and spinners Mohammad Nabi and Rashid Khan combined to kill off BCB XI's hopes of a win.

"Afghanistan's bowling is a key area. It has leg-spin, left-arm spin, off-break bowlers and the pace attack.

"Fareed and Janat are young and talented seam bowlers and have the ability to swing the ball both ways. Bangladesh wickets are good for our spin department. It was tough to chase today, because there was spin in the wicket," Mirwais added.

Afghans come out on top in dull warm-up

SPORTS REPORTER from Fatullah



The lone practice game between Afghanistan and BCB XI at Fatullah was anything but a spectators' delight. Considering the high standard international teams have now set, with not even 300 being a safe score, a total of below 250 in a 50-over contest hardly repays the paying public.

Afghanistan's 233 all out is a package consisting mainly of average contributions coupled with one gritty effort. There was never a fireworks display in the Afghan innings, which was actually built around Hashmatullah Shahidi's resolute 69 on a wicket favourable for shot-making. There was no power-hitting in the Powerplay overs. It was even worse when the BCB XI came out to bat. The home side lost four wickets against the visitors' three in the first 15 overs and the game was more about recovering from a hopeless situation to post a so-called 'respectable' total. It was more about poor shot selection, ordinary fielding and erratic bowling under pressure.

And there were plenty of culprits in the home team who killed the prospect of what could have been a smart chase from smart professionals. It all started with captain Imrul Kayes throwing away his wicket playing an expansive shot. His opening partner Anamul Haq could hardly do justice to his claim that justice was not done by the selectors, ballooning an attempted lofted straight hit high in the air for Afghan wicketkeeper Mohammad Shazad to grab after a seemingly endless wait.

Sabbir Rahman's first shot, a murderous straight drive that rocketed to the rope, was an

expression of intent that he wanted to finish things quickly. But the dashing right-hander soon followed Anamul, clipping a leg-stump half volley straight to the mid-wicket fielder. Liton Das did no justice to his profile as a future Bangladesh top-order batsman when he came down the wicket against veteran off-spinner Mohammad Nabi, but missed the ball completely and was smartly stumped.

By then the virtual second-string national team were reduced to 39 for four, from where they never recovered despite a fine effort from young batsman Mossaddek Hossain, who justified his inclusion in the national team with a compact 76. Mosaddek apart, another young man Mehedi Hasan Miraz played with a lot of heart. The young all-rounder may have been a bit expensive with his off-spin that fetched him two wickets, but he looked like a true fighter with brilliant ground fielding. He also gave the hosts a ray of hope when he was batting with Mosaddek but fell victim to an injudicious decision for a quick single, which was never there for the taking.

The BCB XI were eventually bundled out for 167 runs in 38.1 overs, leaving Afghanistan with a morale-boosting 66-run win going into the three-match ODI series with the first one starting at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur on Sunday.

SCORES IN BRIEF

AFGHANISTAN: 233 all out in 49.2 overs (Shahidi 69, Stanikzai 31, Mirwas 32 not out; Alauddin 3-32, Mehedi 3-48)

BCB XI: 167 all out in 8.1 overs (Mossaddek 76, Shuvagata 34; Nabi 4-24, Rashid 2-25, Fareed 2-19) Result: Afghanistan won by 66 runs.