

SPORT

AFGHANS IN TIGERS' DEN



PILLARS OF SUCCESS: The tactically shrewd coach Chandika Hathurusingha (L), strength and conditioning coach Mario Villavarayan (2nd From R) and the newly arrived bowling legend Courtney Walsh entrusted with taking Bangladesh's pacers forward convene around inspirational captain Mashrafe Bin Mortaza during training in Mirpur yesterday. PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

'Enjoy batting at number 4'

SPORTS REPORTER



Since his debut in international cricket close to a decade ago Mahmudullah Riyad has batted in a number of positions. There were times when he played with the tail and ensured a good finish and then there were times when he was asked to bat in the middle order.

In the last two years though, it seems as though the batsman has finally found a position in the team that suits him the best. He has been batting at number four for a while now and the result has been brilliant. He now averages 74.12 at number four -- the highest ever for a Bangladeshi in this position.

"I will play at whatever position my team wants me to. But yes, at the moment I am enjoying number four quite a bit. It is working for me. But that does not mean that I will keep playing here. I am a team player," he said.

Speaking about yesterday's game at Mirpur, in which the Tigers edged through towards the end, Riyad admitted that the hosts were a bit rusty in their first ODI after nearly 10 months.

"When we keep playing matches, we have the momentum with us. No matter how much we work on our fitness levels, match fitness at the international level is a completely different thing. Hopefully we can overcome that obstacle and do well in the next two matches," Riyad told reporters at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday.

"I think because we were playing our first ODI in 10 months, our fielding was a bit rusty. That's why we did a few fielding drills today (Monday)," he added.

He also was not too happy with the way he got out. Having already battled out the initial stages, Riyad looked in sublime touch. However, he fell while attempting to up the run-rate in the 40th over following his half-century.

"I had told myself that since this was the 40th over and the last of the Powerplay. I told myself that I would go for the hit if the ball was in my zone. Unfortunately I couldn't execute my plan. I think I should have carried on my innings from there and that would have covered up for the runs our team lost. I thought 280 was a good score on that wicket and we were 20 runs short," he explained.



MAHMUDULLAH RIYAD

Win impresses Faruque

SPORTS REPORTER



There was talk that it could have been a much better show, but many were satisfied with the manner the Tigers posted a win in a crunch finish after such a long break. Former national captain and chief selector Faruque Ahmed echoed the second opinion as he said: "Not a bad start if you took consideration of everything. It's not too easy to keep the momentum this team had left last year, so they desperately required a winning start and they did it which was the most important thing."

"I am satisfied with the performance of the team on their return to international cricket after such a long break and yes, there were a lot of issues the team needs to address but I am sure you will see a different team in the next games," he continued.

Faruque opined that the seven-run victory against Afghanistan in the first ODI on Sunday night at Mirpur was a good omen. "Yes, the total could have been much better but Tamim (Iqbal) was brilliant and he showed that he is now much more mature. Riyad (Mahmudullah) also batted brilliantly. They showed that experience matters. And Shakib [Al Hasan] played like Shakib; no need to explain anything, just think about the 47th over [bowled by Shakib] which was the turning point for the match."

"But to me the most encouraging fact was the way they handled the pressure to win the match. It's also happened because of the experience as they have had the experience to play so many close games. Australia won so many matches under crunch situations because they have the experience. It just showed that we are growing into a big team," he said.

Faruque, who resigned as chief selector as he was not ready to work under the new selection system, however raised a question about only one issue. "I think Al-Amin [Hossain] should be in the team as a performer. The explanation from the concerned people regarding his exclusion was not clear to me. It's not good to leave out any performer if there is no valid reason or explanation."



FARUQUE AHMED

'Taskin delivered when needed'

SPORTS REPORTER



One did not need a second glance at Taskin Ahmed to realise how excited he was when he was given the new ball by his skipper. Having finally been cleared by the ICC to bowl in international cricket, Taskin was steaming in right from the word go.

Unfortunately, the excitement got the better of him. For most of his initial spells he seemed to concentrate more on his pace rather than the line and length. To his credit though he held his nerve

towards the end and bowled a series of full-length deliveries to restrict the Afghans.

Bangladesh's new bowling coach Courtney Walsh felt that Taskin had done well in his first game since his return from suspension despite giving away 49 runs in his first six overs. He praised Taskin for being able to turn things around and scalp four wickets in his last two overs.

"I thought he did very well. He was under a bit of pressure before the game. He was reported by the ICC. So to come into a game of this nature after not playing for 10 months would have been hard. I think he was trying a little bit too

hard at the beginning.

"But he delivered what we needed him to do. Credit to him for how he came back. He could have had a completely bad day and that could have cost us the match," said Walsh while speaking to reporters following training at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday.

"We sent messages to try to get him to relax and remember what we were doing in practice. Everyone tried to fit in as best as they could. I think everybody was keen because we hadn't played for a while. We were match rusty. The boys turned it around and did very well," he added.

Patel replaces injured Craig

AFP, Kanpur

New Zealand off-spinner Mark Craig was Monday ruled out of the remaining two Test matches in India with a side strain, prompting the selectors to recall Jeetan Patel as his replacement.

"Craig sustained the injury to his left side while bowling in the second innings of the first Test in Kanpur," said a statement from New Zealand Cricket.

"He left the field to receive treatment and did not return but remains available to bat" in the first Test in Kanpur which finishes on Monday.

Craig, who claimed two wickets in Kanpur, will return home to undergo a rehabilitation programme and will require four weeks to recover, according to New Zealand coach Mike Hesson.

No country for leg-spinners

AL-AMIN



Is there reason to be critical about Bangladesh's performance in a nervy seven-run win against a feisty Afghanistan? On the face of it, not much apart from a few dropped catches, wayward bowling in patches and above all a cautious approach, which is understandable since the Tigers were playing their first one-day international after a gap of almost one year in Mirpur on Sunday.

But think of one outstanding bowling performance from the opposite camp. Young leg-spinner Rashid Khan took two wickets for 37 runs, the best bowling effort for his team and the second best bowler in the match after Bangladesh's champion all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan.

The young Afghan leggie with an open-chested action bowled those googlies with great effect, hurled a few beautiful leg-breaks and mixed his variation that included the top-spinner with authority. His biggest forte was bowling in good spots constantly and only delivered a few full tosses when he erred in length.

However, this is not about how well he bowled in the first ODI or what an asset he can be for Afghanistan in the future. We do not even want to be critical of the discomfort he caused for the now vaunted Bangladesh batting line up. Top batsman Mahmudullah Riyad was beaten on a number of occasions by Rashid's leg-break, opener Tamim Iqbal was also not comfortable facing him, Mushfiqur Rahim played all over a Rashid googly only to be clean bowled, Sabbir Rahman failed to read a few of those googlies before being adjudged leg before. Sabbir might consider himself a bit unlucky as the ball hit on the flap of his thigh pad; the dashing right-hander might also be wondering why he was batting at number seven.

But our concern is that the art of leg-spin has been a neglected phenomenon in Bangladesh's domestic cricket. True, we have cracked the code of playing top quality fast bowlers; we have now got a number of pace bowlers coming through the system, we have got a lot of finger-spinners but if you look at our domestic cricket you will hardly find a big turner or a leg-spinner. Slow bowlers rather than big-turning finger-spinners dominate the scene, where leg-spinners are downright rarities. And if you do not play leg-spin in domestic cricket, you are destined to face a lot of

problems while playing international cricket even if you are a good batsman.

Although since the arrival of Chandika Hathurusingha there have been efforts afoot to ensure a well-rounded education in the system, picking a leg-spinner in the main team is still not a prevalent practice at the club level, district or divisional levels. It may sound harsh but the ground reality is that if any young player desires to be a leg-spinner, he will hardly find a team. And even if a team includes a leg-spinner he is considered as a bench-warmer throughout the season. Leg-spinners may at times prove expensive especially in the shorter formats of the game, but if you are to be a complete package as a team, leg-spinners or big turners are necessary artillery in your repertoire.

It was not long ago when Bangladesh struggled against leg-spin on a slightly different wicket that helped turners. The classic example was Bangladesh's second Test against Pakistan at Mirpur last year, where our batsmen were clueless

against Yasir Shah. During the World T20 in India last year our batsmen were at sea against New Zealand leg-spinner Ish Sodhi.

We do not want to blame our players for being uncomfortable against top quality turners. It is a shame that they do not get the opportunity to play leg-spin in domestic cricket which would have allowed them to be better prepared for international assignments.

It is about time our board gives a long hard look into this serious issue by promoting leg-spinners like it is promoting fast bowlers at age-group level and make sure they get enough opportunity to play domestic cricket.

Bangladesh will travel to New Zealand in December for a full series; they will then embark on their maiden one-off Test in India, where true spinners are considered a virtue. They will most probably travel to Sri Lanka after that where turners rule the roost. And if turners put the otherwise healthy Tigers in a spot of bother, do not blame them. Blame the system.

Chittagong in control

SPORTS REPORTER



Rain once again delayed Mohammad Ashraful's return to professional cricket yesterday as the second day of the first round of the National Cricket League's match between Dhaka and Dhaka Metro at the Shaheed Chandu Stadium in Bogra was washed out without a ball being bowled. Ashraful is playing for Dhaka Metro.

The Shaheed Kamruzzaman Stadium in Rajshahi witnessed a similar fate as there was also no play in the game between Rajshahi and Sylhet.

The Sylhet International Cricket Stadium though witnessed a full day's play in the match between Chittagong and Rangpur. Chittagong had an overnight score of 294 for five. They were eventually bundled out for 368 in 106.2 overs. Rangpur pacers Alauddin Babu and Sajedul Islam scalped

three and two wickets respectively.

In reply, Rangpur rode on a half-century by Saymon Ahmed and finished the day on 183 for five. For Chittagong, Yasir Arafat Mishu took three wickets while Tasamul Haque scalped two.

The Sheikh Abu Naser Stadium in Khulna also witnessed a full day's play. Barisal had an overnight score of 165 for three. However, three wickets each from Abdur Razzak and Al-Amin Hossain and a two-wicket haul from Mehedi Hasan Miraz bundled out Barisal for just 261. In reply, Khulna rode on Mahedi Hasan's 85 and Tushar Imran's 91 to finish the day on 221 for four.

SCORES IN BRIEF

BARISAL: 261

KHULNA: 221 for 4 (Tushar 91; Golam 3-21)

CHITTAGONG: 368 all out in 106.2 overs (Yasir 90; Alauddin 3-73)

RANGPUR: 183 for 5 (Saymon 53, Mahmudul 39; Yasir 3-36)



Even the best Bangladesh batsmen found it hard to cope with Afghanistan leg-spinner Rashid Khan on Sunday as his style of bowling is not something local batsmen are accustomed to. PHOTO: STRA