

SPORT



PHOTO: ANURUP KANTI DAS

Shakib calm in new role

SPORTS REPORTER from Chittagong

If the Bangladesh squad for the first Test is anything to go by, there will not be much joy for the faster men when England and the home team square off at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chittagong (ZACS) on Thursday.

Seven of the 14-man squad are spinners ranging from the specialists to the useful part-timers. There are only two pacers in newcomer Kamrul Islam Rabbi and the returning Shafiqul Islam. While the spin options are many and the ZACS pitch will likely give them every assistance, all eyes will still be on one man to make inroads into the formidable England line-up -- Bangladesh's highest wicket-taker Shakib Al Hasan.

The man with 147 Test wickets is the best spinner in the country, but yesterday during practice at the ZACS he was not in a mood to take the entire responsibility for Bangladesh's bowling success, something that he has had to do time and again.

"I don't bowl a lot these days so there doesn't seem to be any pressure," said Shakib, whose bowling average drops from 33.31 to 19.74 in the six Bangladesh Test wins he played in. "When I bowled excessively, my role was different."

"I am also not just playing as the main spinner, so I will try to fulfil my responsibilities in the team."

His role in the team is of course not limited to his spin bowling. He is also third on Bangladesh's run-scorers' list, and his presence allows the team to include an extra bowler or batsman in the side according to the need of the hour.

There are of course a lot of questions surrounding the composition of the team as they have brought six changes to the last Test squad which played against South Africa almost 15 months ago. Among the six, four -- off-spinning all-rounders Mehedi Hasan Miraz and Shuvagata Hom, Rabbi and wicketkeeper Nurul Hasan -- are in a Bangladesh Test squad for the first time.

A question surrounds whether skipper Mushfiqur Rahim will keep in the Test as Nurul has been included. The keeping question is an interesting one, especially as Mushfiqur's triple role as captain, keeper and batsman may prove too stressful going forward. The understudy was seen yesterday being put through his paces with the gloves in the nets, but Mushfiqur was also hard at work doing keeping drills on the centre wicket, so the status quo appears to be safe for now.

The only certainty seems to be that Bangladesh will have an arsenal of spinners at their disposal, with Shakib, part-timer Mahmudullah Riyad, Taijul Islam and one or both of Shuvagata and Miraz expected to strut their wares against England. But whether he admits it or not, in a side where the next highest wicket-taker is Riyad, it will be Shakib who will have to shoulder the burden.

Bangladesh's ace all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan says he does not feel the pressure to get the majority of wickets considering the quality around him, but it is very likely that the left-arm spinner will have to do most of the heavy lifting with the ball when the first Test against England begins on Thursday.

First-class absences a problem too

SAKEB SUBHAN from Chittagong

With Bangladesh's season starting with the Afghanistan and England series, there was much hand-wringing over the long gaps between ODI and Test cricket. While ODI cricket, which Bangladesh resumed after an 11-month gap, is not a large concern for the Tigers as they have enjoyed much success in the format in recent times, the 15-month gap in Test cricket -- where Bangladesh remain novices -- is a larger issue.

Yesterday during practice at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chittagong, star all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan, with his usual nonchalance, put the longer version shortage in stark relief when he included the national players' lack of first-class matches in the discussion.

"I can't even remember when I last played the [domestic] longer version," chuckled Shakib when asked about the lack of longer form practice. "I think we still played in the NCL [National Cricket League] back then but now I haven't played that either. We have also played ODIs after nearly a year and it took us 2-3 matches to get into the groove. It is different to bat or bowl for a longer period, which in itself is a challenge."

The last time he played domestic first-class matches was the NCL match between Khulna Division and Dhaka Division in September 2015. While that is not too long ago, you will have to go back to 2012 for his previous domestic first-class match.

In fact, the number for all of the big four players of Bangladesh -- Shakib, Tamim Iqbal, Mushfiqur Rahim and Mahmudullah Riyad --

in that regard paints a damning picture. Since 2011 Shakib has played two, Tamim nine, Mushfiqur 13 and Riyad 15 domestic first-class matches. Only Mushfiqur has played at least one match every year since 2011; Tamim had a barren 2011 and 2013, Riyad played no matches in 2013 while Shakib just played a match each in 2012 and 2015.

All of these players have been playing for a decade or close to that mark, but none except Riyad (58) has played more than 50 first-class games, excluding Tests. Mushfiqur has played 39, Shakib 36 and Tamim just 30. The reason for this varies -- it is true that national players miss a chunk of the domestic season because of international assignments -- but a large portion of the blame has to fall on the domestic organisers, with many seasons not being held regularly and one running into the next.

There is also a lingering suspicion that longer version matches are not prioritised, something that could be said to have spilled over into the attitude towards Test cricket.

"I think I will find out about my confidence when I get into the game. We are trying to be best prepared. We haven't played a Test for a long time," said Shakib. "So this is going to be a little difficult for me. To be honest, there isn't much to prepare for, since a lot of it is the mentality going into a Test match."

When asked what he wanted out of this Test, the response was: "Our target is to win the Test match, for which we have to play well."

That is something that a sportsman has to say and believe, but given their lack of first-class groove and the oppositions polar opposite attitude to the form, that may be a stretch too far.

'Conditions present immense challenge'



PHOTO: STAR

Captain Alastair Cook, who had trained with the England side during the ODI series, was hard at work at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chittagong yesterday, admitting that he was yet to acclimatise to the 'alien conditions' of the port city.

AGENCIES, Chittagong

Alastair Cook will become England's most capped Test cricketer Thursday when he leads his country into battle for a series against Bangladesh, only days after attending his daughter's birth back home.

Cook will win his 134th cap at the start in Chittagong of a two-match series in which England will hope to maintain a perfect Test record against the hosts.

Along with Australia, England are one of only two teams to have won all of their Test matches against Bangladesh since the nation joined cricket's top table 16 years ago.

And after an impressive victory in the preceding one-day series, England will fancy their chances of extending that 100 percent record with the likes of Cook and fast bowler Stuart Broad back in the mix.

Cook had been acclimatising with his teammates in Bangladesh before flying back home last week for the birth of his second daughter. After arriving back in Bangladesh on Monday night, Cook took part in nets on Tuesday at Chittagong's MA Aziz Stadium but admitted that his side will have a hard time in dealing with the conditions in Bangladesh.

expect to turn up and play and do well, you've got to put those hard yards in. I can't remember doing 10 weeks on the subcontinent."

"Now it's just about acclimatising to the heat. I'm really grateful to the one-day boys to fit me in there because I'd have felt pretty rusty if I hadn't hit a ball for a while," he said, referring to his practice sessions in the nets while England were playing the one day series.

Cook, who missed both of England's warm-up games while attending to his family, told Sky Sports: "It was a proud day, quite an emotional 48 hours."

"It's great that mum and baby are doing very well. [They are] very special moments but I'm out there now so I've got to go and play some cricket."

"There's every motivation that it won't be hard when you get out there because you know what you've left behind - it's not going to guarantee you any runs - but you can throw yourself straight in there and do the best you can because there is no point moping around.

Meanwhile, Cook's teammate Steven Finn has backed his skipper to fit back into the side 'seamlessly'.

"The amount of cricket that Cooky's played in the subcontinent, I think he'll fit back in seamlessly," the England pacer told reporters in Chittagong after the final warm-up match.

"I think you'd be a bit worried if it was someone who was less experienced, I suppose, and hadn't experienced these conditions before and spent time in the middle, because that's important."

Can the newcomers save Bangladesh?

NAIMUL KARIM

The fact that the Bangladesh selectors have included four uncapped players in their Test squad for the England series has received plenty of attention the past week.

Young off-spinner Mehedi Hasan Miraz, the hard-hitting Sabbir Rahman, wicketkeeper Nurul Hasan and pacer Kamrul Islam Rabbi are the four cricketers who have been in the limelight this week. While there's no doubt that all these players are quite talented, questions have been raised regarding the move. Have the hosts taken too big a risk by including four potential debutants?

After all, with the exclusion of the likes of Mohammad Shahid and Jubair Hossain, both of whom were regular members of the Test team until Bangladesh's last series, the bowling attack could suffer due to inexperience. It's not as though Shahid and Jubair are extremely experienced, they themselves debuted in 2015 and 2014 respectively. However, with Kamrul and Miraz yet to play a Test and Shafiqul Islam returning after two years, things could end up being a bit tricky.

But then again, this isn't a new phenomenon. A glance at Bangladesh's Test statistics would suggest that Bangladesh have regularly depended upon new players to fix their perennial problems in the longer version. And unfortunately, almost

BANGLADESH'S TEST DEBUTANTS IN THE LAST 12 SERIES

1. Vs South Africa: Mustafizur Rahman (2015)
2. Vs India: Liton Das (2015)
3. Vs Pakistan: Mohammad Shahid, Soumya Sarkar (2015)
4. Vs Zimbabwe: Jubair Hossain (2014)
5. Vs West Indies: Shuvagata Hom, Taijul Islam (2014)
6. Vs Sri Lanka: Shamsur Rahman (2014)
7. Vs New Zealand: Marshall Ayub, Al-Amin Hossain (2013)
8. Vs Zimbabwe: Ziaur Rahman (2013)
9. Vs Sri Lanka: Anamul Haque, Mominul Haque (2013)
10. Vs West Indies: Shohag Gazi, Abul Hasan (2012)
11. Vs Pakistan: Nazimuddin (2011)

none of those players manage to stay in the team for a long period of time. In a way, it goes to show just how unstable Bangladesh has been in the longer version.

In the last five years for instance, Bangladesh have witnessed debutants in every series. They have played 12 series since October 2011 and have seen 19 players make their Test debuts.

Each of these players was taken into the team in a bid to solve a different problem. For instance, openers Nazimuddin, Anamul Haque and

Shamsur Rahman began their respective Test careers in 2011, 2013 and 2014. Back then, Bangladesh were hoping to move past the out-of-form Imrul Kayes and were looking for new partners for Tamim Iqbal.

The team's hunt for a specialist Test spinner aside from Shakib Al Hasan led them towards Elias Sunny and Sohrawadi Shuvo in 2011, Shohag Gazi in 2012 and finally the likes of Shuvagata Hom, Taijul Islam and Jubair Hossain in 2014.

The pace department has seen several changes as well with Abul Hasan, Ziaur Rahman, Al-Amin Hossain and Mohammad Shahid given opportunities in the last five years.

Unfortunately for the Tigers, a majority of these players haven't managed to make an impact and that is perhaps the reason why four uncapped players have been included in this Test series. The fact that Bangladesh have played just 12 series in the last five years doesn't help the cause either.

The team management's thought process for this series seems to be similar to that of the last five years. They are hoping that the new arrivals can break the monotony. While the move may pay off, it just reinstates the obvious fact, Bangladesh are in dire need of some good Test bowlers. And until they find a couple, it's likely that the experiments will continue.

Ajmal wishes wrong Bravo

AGENCIES, Dubai

Twitter was full of praise for Pakistan cricket team, who defeated West Indies by 56 runs in Asia's first ever day-night Test.

Misbahul Haq and his men, who have been in fine form in whites lately, were in total control of the first Test, which was played at the Dubai International Cricket Stadium.

Several former cricketers of Pakistan wished the team on its brilliant performance. Discarded Pakistani spinner Saeed Ajmal too wished the team, however, the maverick spinner wished Dwayne Bravo instead of Darren Bravo, who delayed Pakistan's win with a stupendous century in the second innings.

Dwayne Bravo is not even a part of the West Indies Test squad. Fans were quick enough to realise his blunder.

Captains hail day-night Test

AFF, Dubai

Rival captains Misbahul Haq and Jason Holder praised the fight till last attitude in the first day-night Test played with Pakistan upstaging West Indies by 56 runs in the final hour on Monday.

West Indies were led in their fight by Darren Bravo who smashed 116 during his 410-minute of defiance before Pakistan dismissed them for 289 with just 12 overs remaining in the match -- the second ever in Test cricket's history.

Misbah said the match was good for Test cricket.

"It was a good Test and good for the Test cricket with everything in it," said Misbah after the victory. "You need Test matches like that and credit to West Indies to put such a fight."

Pakistan had amassed 579-3 declared in their first innings courtesy an epic 302 not out by opener Azhar Ali.

West Indies conceded a 222-run first innings lead but hit back hard by dismissing Pakistan for a paltry 123 in their second knock, thanks to a career best 8-49 by leg-spinner Devendra Bishoo.

Misbah praised Bravo for giving Pakistan a scare.

"West Indies batsmen showed good resilience and credit must be given to them," said Misbah of the rival team who batted for 109 overs on a last day Dubai stadium pitch.

This was the longest batting by a West Indies team in the fourth innings of a Test since their 105.1 over innings against India in Kolkata in 1978.

Misbah admitted he was nervous and worried, with just 100 needed and Bravo at the crease.

"I know how I spent time on the fourth day and in the last session on the last day. It was tough for the team as well as for the captain."

"You were ahead of them for three days but in one session he (Bravo) gave the advantage to them," said

Misbah of the left-hander.

Misbah said dew did not allow the Dubai stadium pitch to deteriorate.

"It is special victory, our 400th Test, first with pink ball, our first day-night match so it was important to get a victory here."

Holder said there were positives despite defeat.

"Disappointed we have lost but there are lot of positives," said Holder. "One thing is that we fought till the end and it was a good team effort unfortunately we did not cross the line."

Holder singled out Bravo's knocks, who made 87 in the first innings.

"It was a quality innings as he showed a lot of maturity in both innings and you could see determination on his face and hopefully he continues in this vein," said Holder of Bravo.

The second Test starts in Abu Dhabi from Friday with the third and final Test played in Sharjah from October 30-November 3.