

SPORT



On the eve of the first Test against England, Bangladesh head coach Chandika Hathurusingha (L) perhaps demonstrates to his top batsman Mahmudullah Riyad that it will be paramount to play with a straight bat.

PHOTO: ANURUP KANTI DAS

'Was focusing on my game'

SPORTS REPORTER from Chittagong

From late 2012 till 2014, Mushfiqur Rahim was pretty much the face of Bangladesh cricket as the captain of all three formats. During that time, seeing Mushfiqur analysing a victory or defeat after a match or setting the scene before a game was a staple of covering Bangladesh cricket. However since Mashrafe Bin Mortaza took over the limited-overs reins, followed by Bangladesh taking a near 15-month break from Test cricket, the wicket-keeper batsman has been a rare feature in press conferences.

In fact, his last appearance in an official presser was after he scored a hundred against Zimbabwe in a Mirpur ODI in November 2015. That however was followed by a lean patch with the bat in the shorter

forms, so his absence from the media glare coupled with his reputation as being an intense character led to speculation that he was purposely avoiding the media in tough times.

But in his first official media appearance, he started things off on a positive note as soon as the first question was asked with the title 'captain' being used.

"I am being addressed as captain after a long time, it is nice to hear," the diminutive Mushfiqur said with a smile.

When asked about his hiatus from the media, Mushfiqur sought to play it down as just a matter of circumstance and as a consequence of him concentrating on his game.

"This has been to focus my concentration on my game. I have a responsibility and I thought I should not think about other things, do my own work well and devote more time on and off the

field to my game -- there is not much else to it besides that," said Mushfiqur. "And of course, for the last year or so there have been no Tests, so we have not met."

That of course led to the question of whether media interaction will now have a negative effect as he, now being the captain, will have to front up to the press even if there is work to do on his game and on the team.

"No, it will not have an effect. If you ask good questions I will give good answers and there will be no effect," he answered, perhaps revealing a little needle with the press. "If you ask unusual questions then maybe it will have an effect. Will try to perform well on the field as an individual and as a team so that you will not have the scope to ask erratic questions."

"I thought that [it would be better] if I focus on my job, because if I say this or that and am not able

to back it up with actions... instead let me try to do first and then speak. Maybe the things I tried did not come off the way I planned. But thankfully the process I wanted while being away from the media, you were good enough to give me that. Maybe you saw it a different way, but I tried what I thought was good for me and the team."

A back-and-forth with a reporter who claimed to know from a source close to Mushfiqur that when he underperforms he becomes disconnected from the team revealed his not-always-unjustified ire towards the scribes.

"If I really become disconnected then that person you are talking about will not know what I feel. Everyone feels bad when they do badly, but I try not to let it affect others," said Mushfiqur to end an intriguing and long awaited press conference.

Tigers look to special plan to upend Eng

SAKEB SUBHAN from Chittagong



In scorching conditions at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chittagong yesterday, the Bangladesh training contingent bore a depleted look. Many of the bowlers, including the two pacers, were left at the team hotel to rest up for what promises to be a gruelling five days, assuming the first Test against England -- starting today at 10:00am -- makes it that far.

The precaution was presumably taken to prepare for the eventuality of Bangladesh losing the toss and having to bowl first, for it is hard to imagine either captain deciding to bowl first when the home team has packed its squad with spinners, which in turn probably hints that the wicket will be more difficult to bat on as the Test wears on. More than the pitch, the weather would seal the deal in that regard -- batting first and piling on the runs will have the desired effect of draining the opposition's energy.

"The weather will obviously have a big effect," said Bangladesh skipper Mushfiqur Rahim during the pre-match press conference yesterday. "Maintaining concentration and consistency over five days will be challenging. I think it will be more difficult for them [England] than us, as they are not habituated to this weather, although they have been here for around 15-20 days. We will try to maximise our advantage to the fullest, be it from the wicket or the weather."

A major talking point heading into today's Test has been Bangladesh's near 15-month absence from Test cricket and how it will affect the home side against a team that has played 16 Tests in the same period. The other point of discussion has been the four newcomers to the side. The gap, however, was not an excuse that Mushfiqur was looking to employ before the game.

"No, if we start thinking about these things, then we are going on the back foot. Now is the time to play and we are focusing on that," said Bangladesh's first Test double-centurion. "We were in the game and we were playing, maybe we did not have any matches in this format. On the other hand it has also been a big challenge

to be playing regularly for the last one-and-a-half years, which we did not get before in ODIs. We have been able to achieve that. Mentally and physically we will have to maybe do more than we have had to for the last 10 or 11 years, so that is a challenge."

With there being just two pacers in the squad, there have been questions surrounding the combination that will take the field today. Mushfiqur was keeping things close to his chest, but he did let on that in the search for 20 wickets they may have something up their sleeves.

"I am in agreement with what Shakib said," the diminutive wicket-keeper batsman said when asked about Shakib Al Hasan saying it would be difficult to take 20 wickets if the pitch was flat. "Taking 20 wickets on a flat wicket is difficult. So we have planned a little differently, and if the wicket helps our strengths then I believe that we have enough quality bowlers to take 20 wickets. And if we take our chances, then that is of course possible."

That hints at a heavily spin-friendly wicket, or at least the desire for one, may possibly mean a debut for young off-spinning all-rounder Mehedi Hasan Miraz and an ascension to the Test side for talented batsman Sabbir Rahman, who also bowls a handy leg-break.

One of the newcomers to the squad is wicketkeeper-batsman Nurul Hasan, who head coach Chandika Hathurusingha has recently called one of the best keepers in the country. But incumbent keeper Mushfiqur's slightly sensitive reaction to questions of whether he will keep, having not kept in their last Test due to a finger injury, suggests that the gloves will be worn by the skipper.

"The only reason I did not keep was that my finger was injured," said Mushfiqur. "Now I am fit, so if the team management wants, I will keep. I have kept and scored 200 and I have kept and scored zero too. So it doesn't affect me. My main job is if I can keep and contribute according to the thinking of the team management, and if they think that the team will play well without me in the team, then all the better."



MUSHFIQUR RAHIM

MATCH VITALS

BANGLADESH ENGLAND



HEAD TO HEAD

0	OVERALL (8)	8
0	IN BANGLADESH (4)	4
0	LAST 5 MATCHES	5

KEY PLAYERS



SHAKIB AL HASAN	ALASTAIR COOK	
42	MATCHES	133
2823	RUNS	10599
39.76	AVERAGE	47.31
3	100S	29
19	50S	51
147	WKTS	1
VS ENG 96	HIGH SCORE	VS BD 173

CA monitoring England series

SPORTS REPORTER



The head of Cricket Australia's (CA) security unit is expected to arrive in Bangladesh in order to expedite the required security processes for Australia's scheduled tour of Bangladesh in August 2017. The security official is likely to arrive during the second Test between England and Bangladesh in Mirpur.

According to Bangladesh Cricket Board CEO Nizamuddin Chowdhury, Cricket Australia has been monitoring England's tour of Bangladesh 'closely' and they have also been in touch with officials of the England and Wales Cricket

Board (ECB).

Nizamuddin revealed the details following his return from an ICC board meeting that took place in South Africa last week.

"The ECB representatives said that they were happy with security arrangements made by the BCB. And as per the FTP commitment, Australia are scheduled to play two Tests against Bangladesh next year."

"Australia are closely monitoring this series and are in contact with the ECB. Since the ECB is happy we are confident that Australia will tour Bangladesh in 2017," Nizamuddin told The Daily Star yesterday.

"In addition, the Australian High Commission in Bangladesh is also monitoring the security provided to the ECB. The head of CA's security is

also expected to visit Bangladesh during the second Test to physically see the arrangements that we have made. I had these discussions on the sidelines of the ICC meeting. These talks obviously weren't a part of the ICC board meeting. They were done on the sidelines," he added.

Australia were supposed to tour Bangladesh in October, 2015. However, the series was postponed after CA decided against sending its team on security grounds. Three months later, the board also decided to withdraw its Under-19 team from the U-19 World Cup in Bangladesh in January 2016. The Australians were the only ones to pull out from that event.

Following those events, CA and BCB came to a conclusion and

decided to reschedule Australia's tour of Bangladesh to 2017. Initially, as per the FTP, Bangladesh were supposed to travel to Australia in August next year. However, Bangladesh's tour of Australia had to be pushed to 2018 in order to make room for Australia's arrival. This may mean that Australia could arrive in Bangladesh in August 2017.

"We thought that it would be best for them to come here first and then think about the away tour. As of now, Bangladesh's tour of Australia has been rearranged in the FTP and that is now scheduled to take place in 2018," Nizamuddin added.

Furthermore, Chowdhury also said that Bangladesh's tour of Sri Lanka in March 2017 is in the process of getting confirmed.



Bangladesh bowling coach Courtney Walsh was probably trying turners for the first time in life as he prepared his spin-heavy side for the Chittagong Test yesterday. PHOTO: STAR

'Special day' for record-setting Cook

SPORTS REPORTER from Chittagong

The Test beginning today between England and Bangladesh carries a lot of meaning for an England side that under captain Alastair Cook are aiming to rise to the top of the rankings. They will look to get back to winning ways in Asia after their 2-0 loss against Pakistan in October 2015 in the United Arab Emirates, and with five Tests to follow in India after the Bangladesh tour, they will be trying to recapture the form that won them the series there in 2012, also under Cook.

But today's Test for Cook will have even more significance as when he walks out for the toss, he will be walking out in the England cap for the 134th time in Tests, the most by an England player.

"I've not really thought much more about it. It's going to be a very special day tomorrow on a personal note," said the man who only on Monday landed in Bangladesh after attending the birth of his daughter back in England. "This game is not going to be remembered for a personal thing, it's going to be a team performance, but it's going to be a special day to eclipse a record of such a fantastic England cricketer [Alec Stewart],"



Captain Alastair Cook felt the heat as England went through a rigorous training session in humid conditions at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chittagong yesterday on the eve of the first Test. PHOTO: STAR

said Cook, who scored two tons against Bangladesh in the two Test he played against them in 2010.

The local press has been agog with speculation about Bangladesh's possible team combination, but England have a few decisions to make of their own, namely who

will partner Cook at the top of the batting line-up. Left-handed Ben Duckett has had success in the ODIs as well as in the warm-up matches where he hit a couple of 50s, and is the owner of a naturally aggressive if slightly unconventional style. 19-year-old Hasib Hameed on the other hand is more in Cook's mould in terms

of temperament, seemingly able to bat for days as he proved by batting out two sessions in the second warm-up.

"It's exciting to see two real young guys, a 19-year-old and a 22-year-old. It's another opportunity for someone to grab the spot with both hands," said Cook, also England's highest Test run-scorer. "As I said yesterday, the guys that have come in have done okay, haven't embarrassed themselves at all, just without making that contribution a bit bigger."

A more settled area is England's bowling and Cook revealed that it will be a three pacer-three spinner combination, though not personnel, that will take on Bangladesh on what he thought would be good batting conditions.

"I think with the all-rounders we've got in our side, you'd be right to assume that on these wickets. We seem to get most options with that one," said Cook.

He reluctantly admitted that England are probably favourites, but added that such tags do not matter much.

"I think due to Bangladesh not playing much cricket over the last year or so," said Cook. "You weigh that against us playing in not alien conditions, but conditions that are not natural to us. We won an Ashes series when no one gave us a chance, so it's irrelevant to how we play."

Right arm slow?

SPORTS REPORTER from Chittagong



Even if Bangladesh are novices in Test cricket, there is one person in the team set-up who is a bonafide all-time great. Through the late 80s and 90s he combined lethality with longevity to such an extent that at the time of his retirement, he held the record for the highest number of Test wickets and the most balls delivered by a fast bowler, the second of which stands to this day.

When Courtney Walsh came to these shores in early September as the fast bowling coach it was cause for much excitement as there were then a few up-and-coming pace bowlers in the Bangladesh ranks who could benefit from his vast experience.

But less than two months later the picture has changed with the move from ODIs to Tests. There are only two pace bowlers in the 14-man squad and with the pitch at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chittagong expected to be a spin-friendly one, there is suddenly not a whole lot for Walsh to do. That set up the scene for an unlikely sight during the home team's practice session yesterday.

Off a four-step ambling run-up, Walsh was bowling what appeared to be off-spinners in the nets.

One can imagine that at the other end of the ground in the media centre, former England captain and opener Mike Atherton -- who is top of the list of Walsh's victims, having fallen to the Jamaican 17 times in 27 Tests -- who is now the chief cricket correspondent at The Times, was thinking 'if only he had bowled that in my day'.