

SPORT

More than a mere series

SAKEB SUBHAN

Bangladesh has seen many exciting bilateral ODI series over the years, but each of those were either preceded or followed by a Test series where the home team struggled to keep their heads above water while the visitors surfed the waves with ease.

In that respect this just-concluded tour by England is special because it featured intense competition over the two formats. With the two-Test series ending in a 1-1 draw after Bangladesh's victory in the second Test, which itself followed a rollercoaster match in Chittagong after the ODI series had ended 2-1 in the visitors' favour, October 2016 can lay claim to featuring the best cricket played on these shores. But in another respect, this tour by England takes on even more special and resonant significance.

It came in the aftermath of one of the darkest events in Bangladesh's recent history. The July 1 terror attacks at the Holey Artisan Bakery took the lives of 20 civilians but the brutality and intent of the attack shook residents of this city and country to the very core. Personal freedoms were compromised in the fallout -- there was talk of not going out to eat even among the most outgoing of millennials. In this environment, the one thing that brings them together was under threat -- the joy of seeing their beloved Tigers take on the best from across the world. England's tour was in doubt because of security fears.

ODI skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza then issued a plea that reached across physical boundaries and cultures, saying that the Bangladeshi players too had lives and families to worry about, that they face the dangers every day but trust in the organisers and powers that be to keep their livelihoods safe. England players should do the same, he said. Those words, thankfully, were put into earnest action by England's cricketers and the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB). In the best of spirits, they undertook the tour not as an assignment to get over with as quickly as possible but as part of their responsibility as cricketers and ambassadors of the game.



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New day, renewed determination

BISHWAJIT ROY



"Dosto (friend), I have to run... I will talk to you later; will give you a call... please pray for me."

Bangladesh's new cricketing hero Mehedi Hasan Miraz was so busy that he could not manage more time for his friend over the phone. He was talking nonstop and struggled to find a few seconds for a break. He had become a familiar face among the country's cricket fans during his exuberant leadership in the last ICC Under-19 World Cup at home, but he has truly become a household name after taking the stage as a Bangladesh Test cricketer, taking 19 wickets in his first two Tests, and playing the pivotal role in their first Test win over England.

"It's not actually the perfect time to bare my soul," responded the 19-year old when this reporter requested him for an in-depth interview. Miraz came to one of his favourite places at the BCB National Academy in Mirpur from the team hotel yesterday morning before leaving for Khulna and was immediately looking for another young national cricketing hero -- Mustafizur Rahman -- and told someone on the balcony that to 'tell Mustafiz I am here'.

Before entering Mustafizur's room in the academy dormitory, his Under-19s teammate Nazmul Hossain humorously inquired: "Brother, who is this [Mehedi Hasan Miraz]? It seems I know him!"

Miraz then ran like a real Tiger to embrace his friend. He proceeded to catch up with his friends, including the Fizz, in the joyous tones and words only the youth can conjure. But it was almost impossible

for him to have some adda with them because of continuous phone calls from relatives, well-wishers and friends.

"If you ask me a hundred times to talk about him [Mehedi], I will give you the

same answer: he is a fabulous human being and there is no trickery in his character. Obviously he is a good cricketer; how else could he have brought such success for our country? But to me it's his good soul which

matters most," said Mustafizur about his friend.

During a brief discussion Mehedi however once again showed why his celebrated friend emphasized more on his human quality rather than his achievement.

"I cannot think anything out of cricket. Cricket is my love, cricket is my passion, cricket is my hobby, cricket is my profession...cricket is everything. I never thought that I would do anything in my life except cricket," said passionate Miraz.

"In my life cricket is everything... it's a joy and it's a way to forget all the pains in life. I am actually living with cricket," continued Mehedi, who has come from a humble family and had to go endure much hardship in his growing years.

Mehedi is well aware of the thin line between success and failure -- one mistake can make all the difference between darkness and brilliance.

"I know everybody is now looking at me but I'm also aware about the other side of the coin. I know from where I came... I know what's the reality in life. I can assure you I will not be someone who forgets his duty because of too much focus on me."

"Hard work, hard work and more hard work is the only mantra in my life. Pray for me so that I can continue with this mantra," he added.

When he woke up yesterday, the sun seemed to give him a new beginning in his life: "It's a different morning in my life. I was under a mystical spell yesterday [on Sunday evening] and I could not fully understand what we actually achieved but now I can feel it."

"The new morning has given me new hope and new determination," concluded the all-rounder.



Bangladesh's latest cricketing sensation, Mehedi Hasan Miraz, went to the BCB Academy yesterday morning to say goodbye to his friends including pacer Mustafizur Rahman who was hiding under the blanket, before rushing off to Khulna to spend a much deserved vacation with his parents.

PHOTO: STAR

'This is the beginning of something very big'

Implementing new strategies has been a trademark of Bangladesh head coach Chandika Hathurusingha's tenure in since his arrival in 2014. It was something noticeable right from his first series against India in 2014 to the recent Tests against England. With the England series done, the Sri Lankan is set to take a break and leave for Australia this week. Prior to his departure, he spoke to *The Daily Star's* Naimul Karim on the tactics used against England, the upcoming New Zealand series and how this group of Bangladeshi cricketers loves to take challenges.

TDS: How did the idea of playing on a turning track in Tests come up?

CH: We wanted a sporting wicket that brings a result for either team and then thinking about how it was going to help us. Depending on what we had, we thought this was the best way to go.

TDS: Were the players afraid that playing on such turning tracks might make it worse for them, especially after losing the ODI series?

CH: I will tell you one thing. If you are afraid to lose, you will never win. That's my short answer. That's one thing we tried to instill in the players when we started first. If you are afraid of something, you limit yourselves. It's not just the outcome; you need to challenge the players' ability as well.

TDS: Was it difficult to convince the players?

CH: We had to make them buy the idea because if the players are not comfortable then there is no point of having any plans. They need to trust the plan. We just suggest things. And they liked the idea. That's the positive thing about Bangladesh's cricket. The players are not afraid to challenge their limits. It was not difficult. This group does not fear failure anymore.

TDS: Your strategies are very specific and sharp. How did you develop these attributes?

CH: When I was a player I was not super talented like other players who had achieved a lot of things. I was an okay player. I wanted to maximize what I had and so I had to find other ways

to be competitive in Tests and in other levels. That's probably the reason why I have lot of ideas or why I am not afraid to try things. Before I came to Bangladesh I knew that this team had plenty of potential and obviously they were not maximizing it. That's what I worked on.

TDS: Can you give us hints on your strategies for the New Zealand series?

CH: I really don't want to elaborate because I won't give my plans early. But I can tell you that I have made plans beyond the New Zealand series I have already been thinking about our game plan for the World Cup. For example who might we play in the final or the semifinal of the 2019 World Cup? And then I start thinking backwards from there. What will be the major obstacles for us in England in 2019, and then from there the Champions trophy. And then I come back to the New Zealand series and I try to find out what we can get from this series. I firstly ask whether we have the ammunition to be competitive there or can we win there? When we answer these questions we are not taking risks, but we come to terms with what we have.

TDS: Does any of your plans include Mehedi Hasan in ODIs?

CH: You are all jumping too quickly. I don't think he will play ODI cricket very soon. If I do that I don't think we are developing a player properly. He will lose his rhythm. He has a nice rhythm for Test cricket. Bowling in ODIs and Tests are two different arts. I think it's too early to put him in that position. He was the best bowler among both teams in the series. He bowls with the right speed and control both the old and the new ball in Tests. When he bowls one spell badly he comes back and bowls the second well. That's the beauty of Test cricket. I think it's too soon to bring him to ODIs.

TDS: Coming to the ODI series, how disappointed were you to lose that?

CH: You are not disappointed when you don't have an opportunity to win. When you do have the opportunity and you don't win, then that's disappointing. I think we played good cricket at times during the ODIs, but we didn't play well when it mattered.

TDS: The dew in Chittagong in the final ODI spoiled the party didn't it? England got

immense turn in the first innings, but Bangladesh didn't get anything in the second.

CH: Dew is in the nature. You can't control that. But I am disappointed because, normally they use a kind of chemical on the ground that works against the dew. We expected that chemical to be used in Chittagong in that ODI. But I don't think they used it that day.

TDS: How would you describe the Test win?

CH: I won't describe it as my achievement. I am just a paid employee here. For Bangladesh this is huge because this is Test cricket. You have played 95 Tests and this is the first win. I think this is the beginning for something big. In that way it's really up there. I was surprised with the reaction of not only Bangladesh's cricket, but also the way world cricket reacted to this win. Everyone was very positive.

TDS: What are the future plans going ahead? Will the BPL be important in deciding the teams for the New Zealand series?

CH: No (laughs). If you wait to plan in the last minute, you fail. The players can enjoy their cricket, but there is nothing to do with BPL.

