

SPORT

Local toil for international success

BISHWAJIT ROY



The hero worship is continuing. Mehedi Hasan Miraz is now our new cricketer hero and the 19-year old cricketer deserves the adulation that he has been receiving from all quarters since his spin mastery helped the country achieve their best success in their cricket history.

The people surrounding the national team understandably seize maximum focus whenever something is achieved in top-level cricket. But a player cannot be ready for the highest level overnight and a successful player emerges through the guidance of a number of coaches.

A team think-tank can execute their plans if they have enough resources like the Tigers did with their spin bowlers during the two-match Test series against England. We may only see the end result but a Mehedi or Mustafizur Rahman had to come through a process despite having the special talent to become an elite product.

Over the last few days the name of a little-known coach in Khulna -- apart from the names of few other local coaches like Mizanur Rahman and Sohel Islam -- has found a place in the media coverage, courtesy of Mehedi's outstanding performances. There are however hundreds of similar unsung heroes like Al Mahmud who have tirelessly been trying to produce players all over the country. And in most cases their efforts have come forth out of love for the game and their charges because at that level there is not much financial reward to speak of.

"We, who are working at grassroots levels, were waiting for this kind of day when someone succeeded at the top level. We have to sweat to run an academy and we are also not financially solvent; we don't get anything from anybody but still it feels great as Miraz is now a national hero. Regardless of whether we get anything, I will continue to try to spot another Miraz," said an emotional Mahmud.

Sohel Islam was one of the people that Mehedi credited for his success but the BCB's coach was very humble when talking about his contribution. "I am an employee at the board and it's my duty to look after the players; still when a player mentions my name after such a brilliant international debut it feels great. I love to work with young players and I want to do my work as sincerely as possible.

"You can't expect a player to suddenly perform outstandingly for no reason. What you see in Miraz has developed through the age levels where a number of coaches worked. The young generation sees the game differently and their fearless approach is developed at age level. A Miraz has a special talent but his qualities developed through a process. It doesn't matter if people like us get the focus -- the important things is that players now have faith on local coaches," observed Sohel.

Another behind-the-scenes operator is Mizanur Rahman, who coached the Under-19 team that Mehedi led in the last ICC Under-19 World Cup. "It's our ultimate satisfaction or happiness when a player recognises our contribution after international success. A coach can't make a complete player; rather a successful player comes through the help of a number of coaches. We are employees of the board, we can expect nothing more than the recognition from the player, which gives us enough pleasure.

"I have been working with the under-19s for long and have been associated with the Under-19 world cup team since 2010 and from that experience I can tell you that I am not surprised with Miraz's performance because we have seen his ability during that time. A player not only learns all the basics at the Under-19 level but is also educate about all the other issues so that they can also be good human beings," he added.

There are a number of issues because of which these coaches can have justified grievances but they were all still excited by their student's success. Like the national heroes these behind-the-scenes men all over the country also deserves better lives, better treatment and better facilities because their contribution is not lessened by their anonymity.



Young players like rookie Test batsman Sabbir Rahman (L), latest Test sensation Mehedi Hasan Miraz (R) and the aspiring wicketkeeper-batsman Nurul Hasan (C) owe much to the nameless local coaches all over the country that nurture talents like theirs into finished products.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

The show about to start

SPORTS REPORTER



With just one more day to go till the tournament kicks off, the Bangladesh Premier League franchises are making one last attempt to finalise their teams. A number of the foreign players that the franchises had initially announced have not received their 'no objection certificates' and so they have had to look for replacements.

Certain players have also shifted from one team to the other. Sri Lanka's Thisara Perera for instance was released by reigning champions Comilla Victorians and has been signed by the Barisal Bulls. However, the local players have remained intact. While Comilla, Dhaka Dynamites and Chittagong Vikings were previewed yesterday, today we will take a look at the remaining four teams -- Khulna Titans, Rajshahi Kings, Rangpur Riders and Barisal Bulls.

KHULNA TITANS

While the likes of Dhaka and Chittagong have been focusing on foreign players, newcomers Khulna will hope that their strong local contingent can help them reach their goal. Their key player will be Mahmudullah Riyad, who will also be leading them.

Apart from him, they also boast a good

bowling unit with Mosharraf Hossain, Shafiqul Islam, Shuvagata Hom and Naeem Islam Junior. While the first three players have played international cricket, spinner Naeem has done well in domestic cricket and can be quite a handful.

They also have a number of key all-rounders in Ariful Haque, Alok Kapali and Taiabur Rahman Parvez. They will be coached by Stuart Law.

RAJSHAHI KINGS

A quick glance at Rajshahi's squad will tell you that the selectors have focused on acquiring a young squad. The local players' list especially seems quite strong. They have got the hardest hitter in Bangladesh, Sabbir Rahman, and they also have the best wicketkeeper in the country at the moment, Nurul Hasan. Off-spinner Mehedi Hasan, who took the country by storm during the Tests against England, will face a new challenge in the shortest format of the game. The question remains whether he can adjust to this format.

Coach Chandika Hathurusingha had made it clear earlier this week that Mehedi will not have much of a chance to play in the ODIs in the near future because his bowling is appropriate for Tests and he does not want to spoil that. Only time will tell how effective the former Under-19 captain will be in T20s.

The other player who will also want to make a name for himself in the shortest format is Mominul Haque. Considered a Test specialist, he may get a new beginning if he performs well. Apart from them, they also have in their team a series of domestic performers: Abul Hasan, Nazmul Hossain Apu and Rakibul Hasan. Their foreign players list is quite strong too with the likes of Darren Sammy, Mohammad Sami and Upul Tharanga expected to play for the team.

RANGPUR RIDERS

If this was the year 2015 then one could have considered Rangpur Riders one of the stronger teams in the competition. However, a majority of the players they have taken are yet to hit form. They have signed Soumya Sarkar, who was recently dropped from the Bangladesh ODI team. Arafat Sunny is yet to cope with his new action while Mohammad Mithun too was dropped after a World Twenty20 stint earlier this year. Bowlers Rubel Hossain and Shohag Gazi too are working on finding their way.

The team also includes former national players Ziaur Rahman, Naeem Islam, Elias Sunny and Robiul Islam. The only way Rangpur can make it to the next round is if a couple of these players manage to rediscover their past form.

They will hope that their foreign contingent, which includes the likes of Shahid

Afridi, Mohammad Shahzad, Nasir Jamshed and Sachitra Senanayake can help them out. They are yet to decide on a captain, but it could well be Afridi.

BARISAL BULLS

With a large foreign list and a number of vital players, Barisal Bulls look quite competitive. However, the thing that they will be the happiest about is the return of Mushfiqur Rahim's form. The wicketkeeper-batsman had a superb knock against England in the third ODI and seemed to be in good touch in the two Tests as well. If Mushfiqur hits form, that itself could be a big boost for the team.

Aside from Mushfiqur, they also have a decent batting line-up with the likes of Shamsur Rahman, Shahriar Nafees and Nadif Chowdhury.

From the foreign category they have got Carlos Brathwaite, Dilshan Munaweera and Thisara Perera. In the bowling department, it's their pacers who are likely to talk, with Al-Amin Hossain, Kamrul Islam and Abu Hider in the team. At the same time, they will also be depending upon the in-form Taijul Islam. Considered an attacking spinner by the national team management, Taijul could end up being their key bowler on spin-friendly conditions.

Seminal triumph bears valuable lessons

AL-AMIN



Is it the right time to look at the bigger picture, beyond Bangladesh's historic 108-run victory in the second Test against England in Mirpur on Sunday?

We can switch off the serious button for a while and shift focus from cricket to cricketainment with the return of the BPL, the slam-bang domestic T20 competition that starts on November 4 and will run till December 9. This is certainly a sought-after competition as far as the cricketers' financial prosperities are concerned -- an area where this latest format has contributed most, other than being the most lucrative tool for corporate interests.

It would be unwise, however, to turn off the serious focus on our cricket at large. We can still revel in that stupendous success against England which was actually due after that near-miss in Chittagong. The contributing factor of Bangladesh's change of fortune on the Test front against a top team has nothing to do with miracles. A crucial decision was made that Bangladesh would no longer play for a draw. And then the execution was almost perfect on a turning wicket where a debutant off-spinner, who has been honing his skill in the otherwise ill-structured domestic first-class competitions, played the biggest role in that success. The result against England is more than just a win and we can rest assured from now on that Bangladesh will try to be as fiercely competitive in Tests as

they already are in ODIs.

The England tour has had far-reaching implications in the context of Bangladesh's coming of age in the truest sense. The world took notice of this tour not because of the three closely-fought ODIs, but because of the way the home side fought in the two Tests.

England had expected a tough fight in the three ODIs when they arrived here a month ago, but they never expected Bangladesh to push them into tight corners in the Tests -- the oldest yet most important format of the game where a team's real value is judged.

Bangladesh's Sri Lankan coach Chandika Hathurusingha perhaps summed it up well when confronted with the question of how big that Test win is: "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."

Hathurusingha was right to point out that this could be the beginning of something big. But to be a big team from one that gained Test status 'obscenely prematurely', as Scyld Berry wrote in The Telegraph on October 19, we need to make those necessary adjustments even if it goes against the popular sentiment.

Bangladesh's next serious assignment is a full series in New Zealand starting on December 26. There are already calls that



MUSHFIQUR RAHIM

if Bangladesh are to prove that they have really improved they would have to be successful away from home. This is a kind of rhetoric Bangladesh have been familiar with for a long time. Why on earth would Bangladesh need to prove that when this particular qualifier is also applicable for the very best teams in world cricket including England.

Having said that, the New Zealand series will be the first big challenge for Bangladesh going into a hectic 2017 when they will also feature in three more Test series -- away in Sri Lanka and India and most probably against Australia at home after the ICC Champions Trophy in England.

And for a team that is now more capable of executing a plan once they have endorsed it as a realistic option, it is high time to select the right combination and on top of it a captain who will lead Bangladesh in a very demanding Test arena.

We have already got a captain in every sense for the ODIs and T20s in Mashrafe Bin Mortaza whose success for the last couple of years is something any skipper would be very proud of.

Mushfiqur Rahim leads Bangladesh in Test and before being critical of him we must first acknowledge his bold decision that actually played the key role in our first-ever Test win of

substance. He was the person most vocal in the demand for a spinning track and virtually forced the curator in Chittagong to prepare what eventually turned out to be a magnificent Test wicket where the ball spun but was consistent in its spin over the course of a classic match.

In Chittagong he did exceedingly well and it will not be an overstatement if we say that it brought out the best of Mushfiqur as captain despite that 22-run defeat. However, for those who have been closely following this extremely introverted gentleman, it was an exception and cannot be treated as the rule.

Bangladesh won the second Test in Dhaka in dramatic fashion and those closely associated with the team are convinced that the post-Tea session could not have been that devastating for England had there not been a serious dressing down in the dressing room after the visitors had put up 100 runs for no loss.

While it is true that Ben Duckett put the Bangladesh attack to the sword in that opening stand with England captain Alastair Cook, it was Mushfiqur's inexplicable decision to use as many as four bowlers without any logic and his defensive field placements that contributed greatly to the disadvantageous position. There is another glaring instance in the same Test when his ultra-defensive approach allowed Adil Rashid and Chris Woakes to put on 99 runs for the ninth wicket and, more importantly, gave England a first-innings lead. It is nothing new and his defensive mindset has already been well documented over the years.

It did not come as a surprise when the board named him captain for ODIs and Tests in 2011. That decision was born of the fact that he was the best performer in the team across all formats and that he had been captain in age-level cricket. Someone hugely driven by emotion, Mushfiqur expressed his desire to quit the captaincy in 2013 after the ODI series in Zimbabwe. But the board, understandably, convinced him to continue as there was no suitable alternative. He was eventually relieved of his ODI duty with the return of the injured Mashrafe Bin Mortaza and that decision paid rich dividends.

Being a fast bowler Mashrafe has always been attacking and positive in his approach. He has never been afraid of defeat and his partnership with coach Hathurusingha has changed Bangladesh's one-day fortunes. Unfortunately, Mashrafe with those bad legs is not fit to play the demanding five-day contest.

In what ways do Mashrafe and Mushfiqur differ? As human beings, both are very good souls and are always caring for others but they are like Desmond Haynes and Gordon Greenidge in the dressing room -- one acts like he is attending a cocktail party and the other appears to be at a funeral.

The board will announce a Test captain for the New Zealand tour sooner or later. Will it be Mushfiqur again? And even if Mushfiqur is retained -- as can be expected after the Tigers' seminal triumph -- we would like to believe that the board will name a vice-captain not just to fill that position, but with the serious intention of grooming a future Test leader.