

SPORT



The Bangladesh Premier League caravan has moved from Dhaka to Chittagong and along with it numerous stars, including Khulna Titans captain Mahmudullah Riyad and Rangpur Riders all-rounder Shahid Afridi, have landed in the port city.



PHOTOS: ANURUP KANTI DAS

More hype than substance

SAKEB SUBHAN

The only disappointing aspect of last month's Bangladesh-England Test series was that in both Dhaka and Chittagong, Bangladesh cricket's two most seminal matches were being played out in front of crowds that fell well short of even half the capacity of the stadiums.

But three days after the conclusion of the Test series the 'entertainment' started with the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL), the first leg of which ended on November 14 with a stretch of 13 matches over seven days. With the cricket circus moving from Dhaka to Chittagong, it is hard to avoid the impression that entertainment, no matter how reliably one may expect the whizz-bang form of T20 cricket to supply it, cannot be foisted upon a paying public.

The crowds for BPL matches so far have been considerably less than the turnout for the old-fashioned Tests. The reasons are actually varied, ranging from the format of

the tournament, quality of cricket, and the very concept of the BPL.

The oft-expressed wish of the administrators to see this tournament rub shoulders with the two pre-eminent T20 franchise leagues in the world -- the Big Bash League in Australia and the Indian Premier League -- is both instructive by contrast and damning by comparison. The Big Bash, in its last edition in 2015-16, held 35 matches over 38 days at eight different stadiums spread out over six cities. This edition of the BPL will feature 46 matches over 31 days (original schedule was 35 days) in two stadiums in two cities. Four of those days are travel days between two cities, so you basically have 46 matches over 27 days.

While Bangladesh do not boast Australia's riches in venues, there are still five other viable options in Fatullah, Bogra, Khulna, Sylhet and Cox's Bazar. Those are seven stadiums for seven teams and that may foster brand loyalty, the absence of which may have a lot to do with the underwhelming response from the public.

Security measures in these troubled times is the stated reason for limiting matches to just Dhaka and Chittagong, but that does not stand up to scrutiny as even in the last edition it was thus, with Khulna featuring as a third venue only once in four editions, in 2013.

It is not just the public who will be suffering from *cricketitis* instead of enjoying the much-feted 'cricket-ainment', the players and pitches stand to be affected negatively too. In the first week, all franchises except Rajshahi Kings were required to play on consecutive days -- not a recipe for maintaining high standards of cricket. When rain caused a four-day delay to the start of the BPL, Dhaka Dynamites captain Shakib Al Hasan was actually thankful for the break not just because it gave the national players a longer breathing space after the England series, but according to the all-rounder it gave his team of disparate individuals greater time to bond.

He also worried about the pitches; what the constant play would do to the quality of the surfaces in Dhaka and Chittagong -- a concern vindicated by the string of low-

scoring matches in Dhaka.

The thinking behind the tournament has also too often been characterised by 'on-the-fly' adjustments like the last-minute change to the semifinal line-up in the first edition, and the eleventh-hour schedule rejig after the first two days were washed out this time, even after the first two matches ended with points shared.

Last, but not least, is the player-by-choice system by which squads are formed prior to the start of the tournament that hampers the franchises' ability to strategise and form the team that they want and instead have to rely on luck.

A tournament like the BPL comes with a fair amount of festivity, but when the action starts it resembles a hastily arranged tournament that is being played for the sake of hosting a lucrative event. Unless its deep-seated flaws are addressed and corrected, it is hard to see how the BPL can live up to the hype.

BPL NUMBERS SO FAR

- 194** The highest team score this season, scored by Dhaka Dynamites in the last match of the first leg.
- 184** The highest amount of runs scored by a player, Shahriar Nafees, in the BPL.
- 174** Mushfiqur Rahim's staggering batting average in four matches. He was dismissed just once.
- 150** The highest stand of the league, scored between Nafees and Dawid Malan for the second wicket.
- 122** The highest ever individual score posted in the BPL, scored by Sabbir Rahman this season.
- 108** The number of sixes hit in the BPL with Mehedi Maruf's 10 leading the list.
- 0** The number of points scored by reigning champions Comilla Victorians.
- 0** Arafat Sunny's economy rate during Rangpur's game against the Khulna.
- 1** The number of five wicket hauls in the BPL. Abul Hasan's 5 for 28 the only instance.
- 2** The number of times Umar Akmal has been dismissed for a duck.
- 2** The number of times Mahmudullah defended seven or less runs in the last over of a chase.
- 7** The number of dismissals Kumar Sangakkara has been involved in.
- 8** Mohammad Shahid and Shafiqul Islam lead the wickets column with eight wickets each.
- 22** The highest number of extras, leaked by Comilla against Khulna conceded in a game.

Bangladesh beat India 2-1

SPORTS REPORTER

Following an intense finish, the Bangladesh Physically Challenged Cricket team completed a 2-1 series victory against their Indian counterparts in Ranchi yesterday.

Bangladesh had won the first T20 which took place on November 13. However, they lost the second T20 a day after that, setting up yesterday's must-win finale.

Riding on skipper Faisal Khan Sumit's 36, Moniruzzaman's 31 and Amin's 27, Bangladesh posted a decent 147.

However, their opponents were equal to the task and in a dramatic finish ended up with the same score.

In order to decide the winners a super over was bowled. India batted first but courtesy of some good bowling, they only managed to scrape four runs. In reply, Bangladesh raced home to a win in style as Sumit launched the first ball for a six. It was a delightful ending for a team that has been working extremely hard to gain recognition over the past few years.

'Root should be given a chance'

AGENCIES, Mumbai

Former England captain Michael Vaughan believes that Joe Root should be given a chance to establish his credentials as captain before next year's Ashes series against Australia. With Alastair Cook unsure on how long he will continue as the leader, Vaughan feels that Root should be given enough time in the hot seat before the Three Lions play their arch-rivals.

Cook has hinted that his time as England's Test captain could be coming to an end, though he did not specify when, claiming it could be in "two months or it could be a year."



With the New Zealand tour fast approaching all eyes, including those of Bangladesh bowling coach Courtney Walsh, are on Mustafizur Rahman and his level of fitness.

PHOTO: STAR

No rushing Fizz's rehabilitation

SPORTS REPORTER

It's too early to say whether Mustafizur Rahman will be part of the team which will tour New Zealand but the left-arm pacer has been making steady progress in rehabilitation to keep hopes alive.

The pace bowling sensation, who got a place in the 20-member squad, had suddenly complained about pain on his shoulder that was operated in England last August but bowled in the nets without any complaints over the last two days.

"We conducted an MRI today as a routine check and the report showed nothing wrong, as expected. His improvement graph is showing an upwards trend. We have enough time as we set a December 15 deadline for his full fitness to be proved and we are hopeful that he will be okay by then," said Bangladesh Cricket Board physician Dr. Debashish Roy yesterday.

"He is now bowling off a short run-up and he was not feeling any pain. He claimed that he was giving 50 per cent effort in his bowling. We don't want to rush things, which is why we are not thinking about the New Zealand tour; rather our main objective is to get him fully fit. We will suggest carrying him with the team for the camp in Australia as we believe it will help his rehabilitation process," he added.

Last week Bangladesh pace bowling coach Courtney Walsh also expressed his satisfaction over the progress of Mustafizur and the legendary West Indies pace bowler also intimated that they were not going to rush the process.

The 20-member squad will fly to Australia in two separate contingents on December 9 and 10 after the completion of the Bangladesh Premier League. The Tigers will train and play matches in Sydney during a 10-day camp, before leaving for New Zealand for three ODIs, three T20s and two Tests in December and January.

Rahul returns for 2nd Test

AFP, Mumbai

India received a boost on Tuesday with the news that opener Lokesh Rahul has recovered from injury and is in contention to face England in this week's second Test.

"Rahul has fully recovered from his right hamstring injury and would be joining the squad today," the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) said in an emailed statement.

The right-handed batsman, 24, missed the opening Test in Rajkot -- in India's western state of Gujarat -- which finished in a draw on Sunday.

The second of what is a marathon five-match Test series starts on Thursday.

Rahul's timely return threatens the spot of veteran opener Gautam Gambhir, who disappointed in the first Test.

Won't let up on the pressure: Faf

AFP, Hobart

South African captain Faf du Plessis on Tuesday urged his victorious team to keep their foot on Australia's throat and go after a series whitewash in next week's final Adelaide Test.

The Proteas are on the verge of an unprecedented Test series clean sweep in Australia after crushing the home side by an innings and 80 runs before lunch on the fourth day of the second Test in Hobart.

That clinched the South Africans a third consecutive Test series Down Under stretching back to 2008, and they have the chance of cleaning up all three Tests in the day-night game at Adelaide Oval from November 24.

As far as du Plessis is concerned there will be no easing up on the demoralised Australians.

"That's the mission for us now. We want to do that very badly," he told reporters.

"The same with the ODIs (5-0 series win in South Africa in October), we won't just rest on our laurels and be happy with 2-1 or even 2-0.

"We've got Australia in a position where they're under pressure and won't let that go. It's hard enough to get them in this position so we'll do everything we can to keep them there."

Du Plessis, who replaced the injured AB de Villiers as skipper for the Tests in Australia, rated the series win as the highlight of his playing career.

"I didn't expect it to happen (so quickly). To get eight wickets for 32 runs in one of those sessions we will always remember as a team that won us a series," he said.

Aus skipper Smith 'embarrassed'

AFP, Hobart

"Embarrassed" skipper Steve Smith said Australia needed a shake-up but backed under-fire coach Darren Lehmann after the hosts slumped to a humiliating series defeat to South Africa on Tuesday.

Eight wickets fell for 32 runs as Australia went down by an innings and 80 runs before lunch on the fourth day of the rain-hit second Test, their fifth straight loss in the format.

It followed an inglorious rout of 85 in the first innings, and a 10-86 batting collapse in the first innings of their comprehensive first-Test loss in Perth.

Ashen-faced Smith told reporters he was humiliated by the manner of Australia's abject surrender, and said something had to change ahead of next week's day-night third Test in Adelaide.

"I am embarrassed to be sitting here, to be perfectly honest with you. Too many times we have lost wickets in clumps, 8/32 today, 10/85 in the first innings," Smith said.

"And it is happening way too consistently for my liking. We are not being resilient, we are not willing to tough it out and get through tough periods... it is not good enough."

Smith, who remained 48 not out in the first innings shambles and scored 31 at his second visit to the crease, foreshadowed selection changes as Australian cricket grapples to fix its demoralised national team.

"It is not working. So, obviously on the back of five losses there is going to be a lot talked about in



regards to selection and things like that," the 17-Test skipper said.

"We've got to start finding a way to turn things around. Whether the ball is seaming or spinning or swinging we don't have an answer at the moment."

"We are not resilient enough, we are not

digging in enough, we are not having the pride in our wicket, we're just not being resilient enough and something has got to change.

"We have got to play a lot better than we have been if we are going to beat any opposition around the world at the moment."

All the Test batsmen, including wicketkeeper Peter Nevill and spinner Nathan Lyon but not the three fast bowlers, will play in this week's domestic Sheffield Shield games before the team for the third Test is chosen on Sunday.

"Myself and everyone that is going to wear an Australian cap for the next game need to be a lot better and step up and start playing the way an Australian team needs to play," Smith demanded.

Lehmann is also under major pressure, but Smith offered words of support for the coach and said the players were to blame for Australia's problems.

"It's not his fault we're not playing well, it's up to us to go out there and do the job. I have absolutely no problem with anything Darren is doing at the moment," he said.

He also praised the quality of the Proteas bowling attack, led by Kyle Abbott, Kagiso Rabada and Vernon Philander after strike bowler Dale Steyn was injured in the first Test.

"It's tough and the South African bowlers, when there is something in the wicket, Philander, Abbott and Rabada, they are world class," he said.

"They hit the top of off-stump and got the ball seaming both ways and they don't give you any freebies. And you have got to work hard for your runs."

SCORES IN BRIEF

AUSTRALIA: First innings 85
SOUTH AFRICA: First innings 326
AUSTRALIA: Second innings 161 (Warner 45, Khawaja 64, Smith 31, Abbott 6-77, Rabada 4-34)
Result: South Africa won by an innings and 80 runs and lead 3-match series 2-0
Player-of-the-match: Kyle Abbott.