



Dhaka Dynamites captain Shakib Al Hasan (L) is well aware that his team's dominance in the Bangladesh Premier League so far will count for little if they fail to cross the Rajshahi Kings hurdle in the grand final at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur today.

Frontrunners v underdogs

SPORTS REPORTER



The 2016 edition of the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) has been a touch underwhelming as far as the matches, the pitches and the fanfare surrounding the lucrative T20 tournament are concerned. The lukewarm reception is clearly to be seen in the serially low turn-outs at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium, the venue for today's final between the high-flying Dhaka Dynamites and the fighting underdogs Rajshahi Kings.

The pitches in Dhaka will have to take a large share of the blame for the lack of a festive atmosphere in the BPL so far. The average first-innings score in Dhaka has been a less-than-impressive 143.6.

Fortunately however, there are other subplots that may pique the watchers' interest. Today's match features the ultimate frontrunners in Dhaka, led by Shakib Al Hasan, against a team that would not have been hot pre-tournament favourites, but one that has drawn strength in unity and inspiration from talismanic skipper Darren Sammy. Their unity was

forged under fire as they lost four of their first five matches before finding their feet and going on a winning spree of four matches in the league stage, and are currently riding a three-match streak that has led them to a final.

The lynchpin of their batting is Sabbir Rahman, the sole centurion in this year's league, and perhaps the most dangerous player in the final, although there are other very worthy candidates. In the qualifier against Khulna Titans on Wednesday, he displayed a high level of maturity by playing sedately at first and then opening his shoulders when the target was in sight. The message was clear: Sabbir wants to win this and he wants to have a big part in the triumph.

He will be supported by the 17-year-old Afif Hossain, who has so far impressed with both bat and ball and may well be the find of the season, and the likes of Samit Patel, Nurul Hasan and Mominul Haque. The X factor is skipper Sammy, however, as he proved with his barn-storming effort in the Eliminator when he rescued his side against Chittagong Kings with a flurry of late sixes. The in-

form bowling unit consists of Kestrick Williams, Mehedi Hasan Miraz, their highest wicket-taker Abul Hasan, Afif and of course, Sammy.

All that may still not be good enough to beat Dhaka, the team that from the start of the tournament has seemed like winning the whole thing. At the helm is Shakib's canny leadership and mastery of the format, but backing him up are Kumar Sangakkara, Dwayne Bravo, Andre Russell, Evin Lewis, Nasir Hossain and Mosaddeq Hossain to name but a few. Such is the wealth in depth that Mahela Jayawardene cannot get a place in the 11.

They boast the highest wicket-taker in Dwayne Bravo, who has scalped 20, while Lewis has the highest batting strike rate -- 204. Moreover, players like Bravo and Russell have the ability to turn a game with either bat or ball in the space of an over or two -- a quality worth its weight in gold in this format.

It is folly to predict the outcome of a T20 match, but Dhaka does have the better team on paper. However, with players like Sabbir and Sammy, Rajshahi does have the ability to provide the inspirational end this tournament needs.

BISHWAJIT ROY



Bangladesh cricket has already entered a new era where the Tigers' main aim is to convert their dreams into reality. They are a team whose name is uttered with a lot of respect nowadays when it comes to limited-overs cricket. It was not long ago that they were considered novices in the five-day game despite a few glittering performances, but the entire complexion changed following their recent Test win against England at home.

However, a new challenge now stands before the Tigers -- the challenge to make their presence felt on foreign soil. And when Bangladesh Test captain Mushfiqur Rahim exuded confidence of playing good cricket in the upcoming New Zealand tour prior to the team's departure for Sydney, it was not just a case of issuing a catchy soundbite.

Mushfiqur knows how big a challenge it will be to push New Zealand in their territory and he was focused on his batsmen as he believes a lot will depend upon how they cope with the demanding conditions.

However, he has confidence because of the brilliant way in which the Bangladesh batsmen, including the skipper himself, applied themselves in different yet equally demanding conditions at home during the two-match Test series against England.

"I believe the batsmen will have to cope with the conditions and if they can do that, it will be a very good series for us. We have the ability and the confidence. We have good memories of playing good cricket at home against England and I firmly believe that our batsmen are capable of applying themselves in New Zealand's conditions," said a self-assured Mushfiqur while

talking to The Daily Star yesterday.

"The performance in the World Cup down under [2015 World Cup in Australia-New Zealand] will also help our confidence. We carry fantastic memories of the World Cup," he added.

Mushfiqur believed that the upcoming series would pose a challenge unlike any other so far while also setting the tone for the Tigers' busy international schedule in the coming months.

"This series is a different challenge for us. We have been playing good cricket at home. It is in this series that we will have to prove that we are capable of carrying the momentum," added the Test skipper, who was accompanying the first batch of cricketers to Australia as part of the Tigers' preparation for the tour.

"We have a lot of matches in the coming year and this is a series from where we can take our voyage to a higher destination," he continued.

The injury to two pace bowlers had hampered the think-tank's initial plans but Mushfiqur said that what had happened was out of their hands.

"Yes, we suffered a few blows following the injuries to the pacers. I am especially frustrated with [Mohammad] Shahid's injury, but we have no hand in that and I still believe we have a good bowling attack," opined Mushfiqur.

The Tigers will attend a camp in Sydney till December 18 before leaving for New Zealand where they are scheduled to play three ODIs, three T20Is and two Tests against the Black Caps.

However, Mushfiqur believed that that camp, no matter how short, would be of great benefit to the team.

"It is a very short camp, but we believe it will help us tremendously as it will help us acclimatise with the conditions."

Siddikur's sound start

SPORTS REPORTER

Siddikur Rahman got a sound start in the UBS Hong Kong Open yesterday. The ace Bangladesh golfer was one of Asia's three top performers along with Thai veteran Thongchai Jaidee and Filipino linksman Juvic Pagunsan with three-under-par 67s as the trio ended the first round of the US 2 million dollar event three shots behind Spanish high-flier Rafa Cabrera Bello.

Straight-shooting Siddikur got his bid for a third Asian Tour title off on a solid note, shooting a bogey-free card like Thongchai en route to his 67 at the Hong Kong Golf Club.

"I'm excited as I was hitting it good. I made some changes with my club shafts and that's helped me a lot. My ball is going higher, I hit a lot of five iron shots which stayed on the green and that helps. I missed a lot of birdie chances as I hit 15 greens in regulation but I can't complain as the greens are really quick and I was scared of making three putts," said the 32-year-old Siddikur, who finished runner-up in the Mauritius Open earlier this season.

Leader Cabrera Bello sensationally eagled his last hole from the fairway to grab a one-shot lead from Frenchman Sebastien Gros following a stellar six-under-par 64, spinning a wedge approach from 99 yards into the 10th hole. Players start their rounds from either the first or 11th tee for the opening two days.

Pace hopes head down under

SPORTS REPORTER



It will be a special moment indeed when Bangladesh's two most promising young pacers Mustafizur Rahman and Taskin Ahmed pair up in conditions such as those in New Zealand. It will be nothing short of a dream if the duo also bowls in the Test series. However, when the two bowlers left for Australia among the first batch of the 22-member preliminary squad, the team management and fans will only pray that one will regain full fitness for his return to the international cricket with his mysterious cutters and any new weapons he might have devised and that the other will remain fit through the tour.

"I am now fit and in good shape; just pray for me so that I can play this series without any trouble," said Taskin Ahmed prior to the departure for Sydney where the Tigers will attend a preparation camp before leaving for

New Zealand on December 19.

"The BPL [Bangladesh Premier League] is over. We are now only concentrating on the New Zealand tour. Our first challenge will be to adjust to the conditions. Everyone is eager to perform well in this coming series. I also have a dream as I want to bowl a special spell to win a match for my team. I am practising to add some variations in my bowling," he added.

"I am looking forward to making my comeback in international cricket. If everything goes according to plan and the team management gives me the chance then I will try my best. I know everybody has high hopes and I will try to fulfil them," said Mustafizur.

On the other hand opener Soumya Sarker, who was also among the first batch, will be hoping to get back among the runs to put an end to his prolonged bad patch.

"When you go through a bad patch, you find lot of problems. I am trying to rectify those mistakes. Many people

are saying many things; many have identified different kinds of problems. To make a comeback I will need to concentrate more on my batting. You cannot overcome all the problems altogether. I am trying my best to get back my rhythm," said Soumya.

Opener Imrul Kayes opined that the New Zealand tour will be a big challenge for them but he said that everyone was determined to do their best during the series.

"We are going to play abroad after the World Cup. Bangladesh established themselves as a good side at home but we are yet to prove our worth abroad, so this series creates an opportunity for us to set the record straight," said Imrul.

"From the very beginning I was telling everyone that it will be the biggest challenge for us and it will be an opportunity for our players to show character. I think everyone is planning individually and if we can contribute as a team, we will automatically do well."



THE DEADLY DUO: Right arm pace bowler Taskin Ahmed (L) and left-arm quick Mustafizur Rahman (R), who is sharing a light moment with Kumar Sangakkara, may form the most exciting partnership with the ball during Bangladesh's tour of New Zealand, starting later this month.



PHOTOS: FIROZ AHMED

'Batting will be key'

KEY FINAL FACTS



RAJSHAHI KINGS
Sabbir Rahman (351)
Abul Hasan (12)
188 for six (v Barisal)
79 (v Rangpur)
Mominul Haque (37)

VITALS

Most Runs
Most Wickets
Highest Total
Lowest Conceded
Most Fours



DHAKA DYNAMITES
Mehedi Maruf (339)
Dwayne Bravo (20)
194 for five (v Comilla)
86 (v Khulna)
Kumar Sangakkara (41)



Darren Sammy

X-FACTOR



Andre russell

ROAD TO FINAL

Lost to Khulna by 3 runs
Defeated Dhaka by 6 wickets
Lost to Barisal by 4 runs
Lost to Chittagong by 19 runs
Lost to Comilla by 32 runs
Defeated Dhaka by 3 wickets
Defeated Rangpur by 12 runs
Defeated Khulna by 9 runs
Defeated Rangpur by 49 runs
Lost to Comilla by 8 wickets
Lost to Barisal by 17 runs
Defeated Chittagong by 6 wickets
Defeated Chittagong by 3 wickets

Defeated Barisal by 8 wickets
Lost to Rajshahi by 6 wickets
Defeated Rangpur by 78 runs
Defeated Comilla by 33 runs
Defeated Chittagong by 19 runs
Lost to Khulna by 9 runs
Lost to Rajshahi by 3 wickets
Defeated Comilla by 32 runs
Defeated Barisal by 4 wickets
Defeated Rangpur by 42 runs
Defeated Chittagong by 6 wickets
Lost to Khulna by 6 wickets
Defeated Khulna by 54 runs

PHOTO: STAR

SL welcome back stars

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka have named rookie fast bowler Vikum Sanjaya Bandara in a 15-member squad for their three-Test series against South Africa later this month.

The uncapped 24-year-old is one of four pacers in the squad led by Angelo Mathews and his deputy Dinesh Chandimal.

Both Mathews and Chandimal missed Sri Lanka's recent tour of Zimbabwe due to injuries.

In addition to the three Tests, Sri Lanka will also play five ODIs and three T20Is against the Proteas.



Bangladesh Test captain Mushfiqur Rahim relishes an exciting New Zealand series.

PHOTO: STAR FILE

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