

SPORT

Mindset is the difference: Mash

AL-AMIN from Christchurch

Bangladesh have previously played three bilateral series in New Zealand and lost without making much of an impression. This is something very much common for a touring team and the latest instance is Pakistan's defeat against the Black Caps a couple of months back. It is said that even the all-conquering West Indies struggled in this part of the world.

But what is the difference between Bangladesh's visit this time and their last three tours that can possibly change their fortune? According to Bangladesh's most successful one-day captain Mashrafe Bin Mortaza the biggest difference is that the present corps has got a very positive mindset.

"As you have said, every team in the world struggles in New Zealand. It will not be different for us. But our mindset is different now. When we came here before, our concern was what can we do and what the opponents will do. But we don't have that negative thinking now. We can have a bad day but we are mentally very positive about doing well," observed the Bangladesh captain while talking to reporters on Sunday, on the eve of the first ODI at the Hagley Oval today.

He also said that he was aware of the tough challenges in different conditions away from home.

"We could not have better prepared considering the time and journey we have had. This is a colder place than we had experienced in our camp in Sydney. We are here for the last two days. It's a bit cloudy today. We will have to adjust with the conditions. We

are hopeful of playing good cricket," said Mashrafe, adding that the first game of any series is very important.

"In a one-on-one series the first match is very important. If you come out well in the first game it helps for the rest of the series. These are different condition but we have prepared ourselves individually and collectively," he added.

He was of the opinion that the wickets for the bilateral series would not be as good for batting as it is during an ICC event.

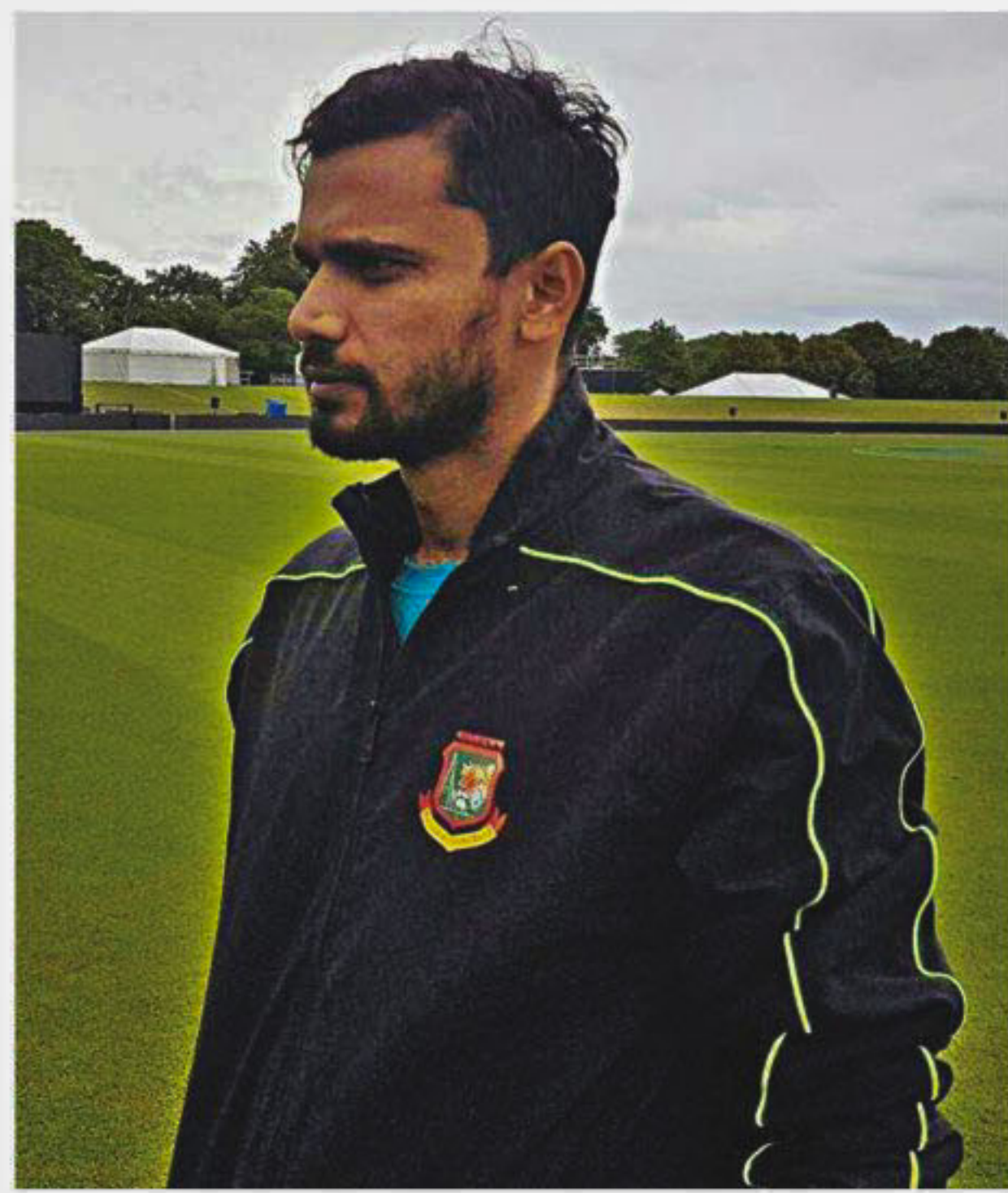
"We will not get the same kind of wicket that we got in New Zealand in the last World Cup. In the World Cup you always get better wickets," Mashrafe observed.

But the Hagley Oval wicket, where Bangladesh will play their first-ever match, has already confused both the Bangladesh captain and coach Chandika Hathurusingha.

"It was green a day back. It's a bit brown today. And they are saying we are going to get a wicket where 290-300 runs will be possible," said a confused Bangladesh skipper.

And the changing nature of the wicket also put Bangladesh's think-tank in a spot of bother regarding the final selection for the first ODI.

If the wicket is brown on Monday then Bangladesh will most probably field three pacers in an attempt to accommodate a bowling all-rounder and preferably a spinning all-rounder. In that event if Mustafizur Rahman is fit to play, Rubel Hossain will have to sit out the game. Besides, leg-spinner Tanbir Hayder has got a bright chance to make his Bangladesh debut ahead of Mosaddek Hossain, the young off-spinning all-rounder who has been a bit uncomfortable with the bat on bouncy practice wickets.



'The start of a new challenge'

AL-AMIN from Christchurch

Bangladesh's most successful coach Chandika Hathurusingha said that the

New Zealand series would be the start of a new challenge for the Tigers. He also said that they could not have asked for a tougher place to launch a significant year away from home including the ICC Champions Trophy in England.

"The New Zealand series will be the start of a new challenge for us," said Hathurusingha after training on Sunday.

Under Hatuhusingha Bangladesh performed beyond anybody's expectations and established their home dominance against the top teams in the world.

But the Sri Lankan now wants to look ahead with a pragmatic set of targets.

"Any team that matter performing in overseas gives you a lot of confidence. Not only Bangladesh, every other team in the world struggling away from home lately. So, for us it's nothing new. Our expectation is realistic. We want to do well; we want to measure up against good teams like New Zealand in their own backyard. So, we are open and we want to see where we are," said Hathurusingha.

He also credited his charges for absorbing his ideas.

"I'm obviously lucky to have a good team. I'm happy that the players are buying into the ideas that they have brought in and they are maturing as well. So, they are playing very good

cricket. Then our selection has improved over the years and we have a lot of options. So I'm very happy the way things are working now."

He said that the opening game would be very important for his team.

"The start is important mentally for us, to get confidence. What I can see from the players and their body language and how they prepared -- I'm very confident going into the first game whether we bowl or bat.

"Our practice session for the first few days in Sydney was a bit of a shock for the system for the boys coming back from BPL. So credit to them that they got the feeling of the pitches for how to adapt," he said, adding that it was definitely a bit taxing for the players to go straight into a series after 45 days of non-stop cricket.

Regarding the wicket the witty coach said: "It's pretty New Zealand. A lot of grass; nothing is surprising."

He also said that the toss is important when you win. "Otherwise you will have to listen to what the other captain says."

Hathurusingha also wanted to keep the playing 11 close to his chest when asked about the possibility of a pace-heavy attack.

"We have got good pace and spin options and we will play to our strength according to the situation," he said, adding that he was not against the idea of Soumya Sarkar bowling a few overs.

"Faster wickets suit Soumya's style of batting. It's good to see him hitting well and he can also bowl a few overs in these conditions."

Christmas nets for NZ

AFP, Christchurch

New Zealand set aside Christmas festivities to pack in a final training session on Sunday before their Boxing Day series opener against Bangladesh in Christchurch.

After being flayed by Australia in a 3-0 series hiding earlier this month, the Kane Williamson-led side are desperate to get back on the right side of the ledger and put the record straight against Bangladesh.

In world rankings, New Zealand are number four and Bangladesh seven, but on the field the margin is not so great.

New Zealand won the last time they met in the 2015 World Cup by three wickets but before that, in Bangladesh, New Zealand lost the 2013 series 3-0 and went down 4-0 on the tour before that in 2010.

Williamson sees the advantage for New Zealand in this three-match one-day international series is that this time they are at home and playing in familiar conditions.

"It's important we look to exploit those as best we can, and get back to our plans which allows us to give ourselves a chance," he said as the New Zealanders trained in the nets on Christmas Day.

"You're always looking to improve and when you go away on tour and get beaten, like we were in Aussie, there's a number of things that you perhaps think you'd have liked to have done a little bit better.

"But when you're under pressure, a lot of the time in those games it's a different prospect."

Williamson said the whitewash in Australia had been thoroughly analysed with coach Mike Hesson and there were obvious lessons to be learned.

"It's important that we're looking to be aggressive and take wickets," he said.

Playing for the present

He is the opener who has been on the national scene for the last eight years, but he has played just 96 of the 224 matches Bangladesh have played across formats since his debut in October 2008. Imrul Kayes is Bangladesh cricket's comeback man -- with his status as Tamim Iqbal's opening partner almost always up for review. Although it is a reality that he has now become accustomed to, Imrul is riding a wave of success that makes his current stint in the national team seem set to continue for some time. The first Bangladeshi to score a century in New Zealand talked to The Daily Star's Sport Editor Al-Amin on the eve of today's first ODI in Christchurch. The following are excerpts from the interview:

The Daily Star (TDS): You are the first Bangladesh batsman to score a century in New Zealand (in February 2010). You have come a long way since that hundred. Isn't the memory still sweet for you?

Imrul Kayes (IK): When people say I have scored the first century in New Zealand it feels good. I was young then and could not understand a lot of things. Since then I have played a lot of matches and now I'm more matured and can act according to the conditions and the situation. But at that time I was very young and my only focus was to score runs to ensure my place in the team.

TDS: Wasn't it the 2015 World Cup where you really wanted to express yourself?

IK: It was a sudden return for me in the World Cup. I was actually not ready to play the World Cup. I was playing at home. So, when I got the call I had to rush. The conditions were completely different so I was not sure which shot to play and which to leave. That was one of the reasons I could not perform well in the World Cup. I also think that I was a bit unlucky because I was out to some very good deliveries.

TDS: You are in Christchurch where you scored 101 in 2010. How tough is it to score runs here?

IK: In such conditions you need to focus on every delivery you are facing.

You can play shots once you are set in our home conditions. But in this kind of wicket you can never consider yourself set and play too many shots. In these conditions if you even score 50 or 70 you cannot think that you are set.

The wickets in New Zealand are different from the ones we have practiced on in Sydney. Here there is more lateral movement and you can see tennis-ball bounce. But as a professional player our job is to adjust to different conditions.

TDS: Your career in the national team is more chequered than others'. Your place as an opening partner of Tamim Iqbal has never been guaranteed.

IK: It has become normal for me that every time I go out in the middle I know if I don't play well today I might not be considered for the next series. I have become used to that scenario and I always keep telling myself that this is the way I will have to keep on playing for the national team. I do not

regret that but sometime it comes to my mind that if I could have played a bit freely I could have score more runs.

TDS: Is this something the team management should have handled with a bit of care?

IK: It has nothing to do with the team management. The domestic structure has changed in Bangladesh. There is a lot of competition now and if a player doesn't perform another player will knock for that place. This is good for our cricket because it will help the players to improve on their performance. To be honest it is very difficult to stay in the team now without performing.

TDS: You have featured in a record partnership with Tamim in Khulna against Pakistan. Which innings do you consider your special one?

IK: Definitely I will rate my century against England [the first ODI in Dhaka in October this year] at the top because I knew if I failed to perform in that series my one-day career would be at stake. There was a lot of pressure and I think it was a crucial knock in my career.

TDS: And what about the Test series against England -- you played extremely well.

IK: I was really surprised with the wickets against England. Actually I never thought that we can prepare this kind of wicket, especially the one in Chittagong. Every delivery

on that wicket was challenging, not just for playing shots but even for defending. We have never played in such condition at home before and I'm happy that we were able to cope with the difficult wicket. We were aware that we would have to play on this type of wicket so I have started batting on rough wickets four days in advance. And it helped us tremendously.

TDS: How do you react to the notion that you are the nearly man of the team?

IK: I am playing for the national team for eight years and I had to make five comebacks and still I'm not sure of my place in the team. It hurts sometime but I have accepted it. You can find players like me in other teams. They are not in the limelight but keep on contributing to the best of their abilities. Australia's Mike Hussey is the best inspiration for cricketers like us. He always maintained a low profile but to me he was one of the best players in world cricket.



Misbah mulls pace changes

AFP, Melbourne

Skipper Misbahul Haq hinted Sunday that Sohail Khan may come in to break up Pakistan's three-man left-arm pace attack in the second Boxing Day Test against Australia in Melbourne.

There was speculation that Rahat Ali, who took two wickets in Brisbane, could make way for one of the right-arm pacemen -- either Sohail or Imran Khan.

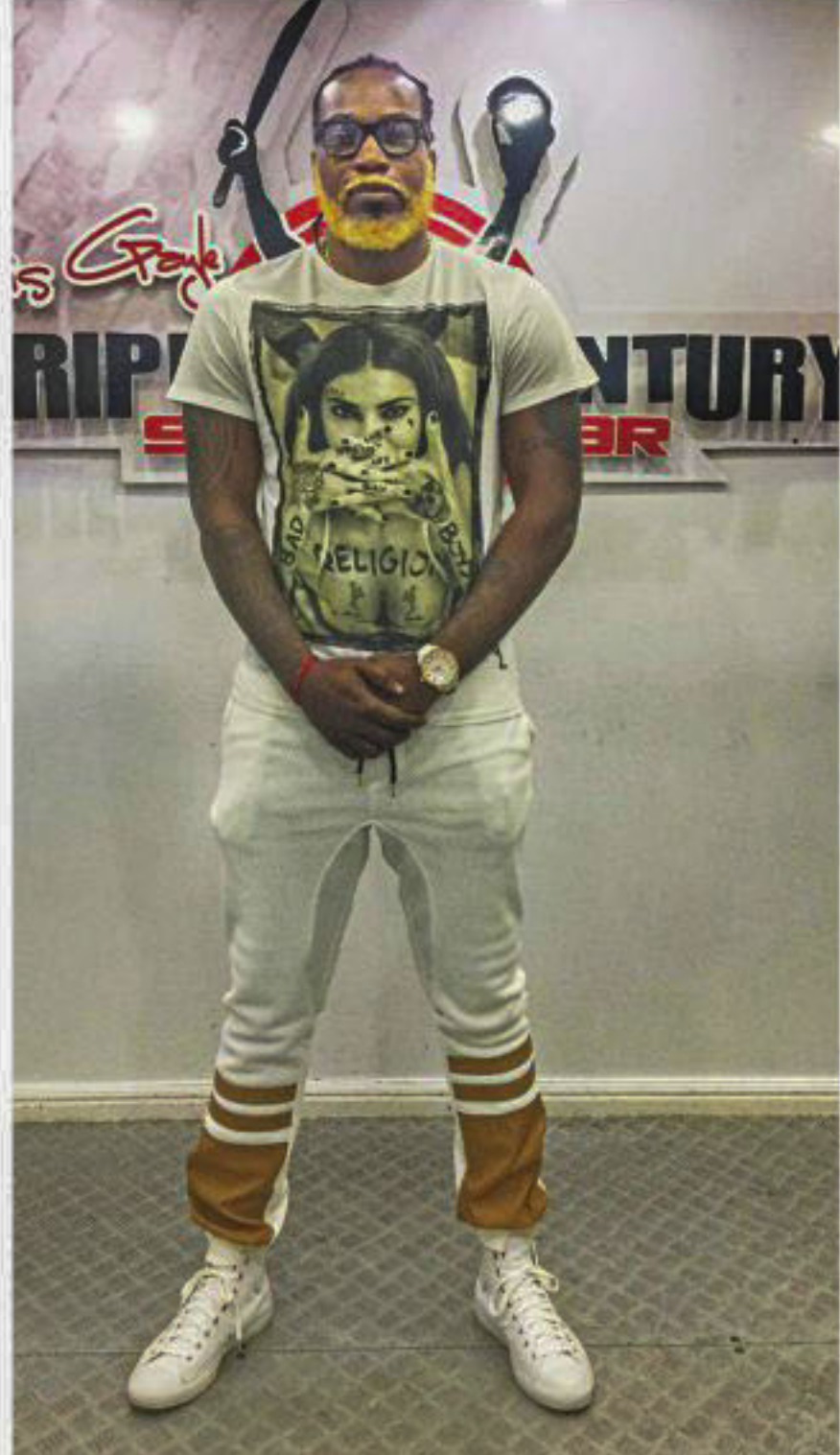
Pakistan's three-man left-arm pace attack was criticised at the Gabba for being one-dimensional and lacking variety.

Misbah was giving little away team-wise but praised Sohail's work ethic.

"Sohail is working hard and he is the guy who gave us five-fors in the previous matches and that's what we look for when he plays," he told reporters on Sunday.

"He bowls the new ball very well and if he gets you two or three wickets with the new ball it is always helpful for you. He is also good with the reverse swing.

"Obviously he knows that he needs to be good in the later spells because you have to bowl at least 20 overs a day so he is working hard. We are hoping that he will be okay."



Gayle unveils new look

AGENCIES, New Delhi

West Indies cricketer Chris Gayle has unveiled a new look on Saturday to the appreciation of his fans.

The 37-year-old shared a photo of himself in the new avatar on his Instagram page.

Often regarded as one of the most dangerous batsmen of the game, Gayle has numerous records in his name.

But Gayle is also famous for his easy-going lifestyle, and is a fan favourite in many countries.

He is in fact one of the few players who carries a loyal fan base in India, thanks to his long-time association with the Indian Premier League franchise Royal Challengers Bangalore.

No doubt, he calls himself the World Boss.

Faf looks to negate SL spin

First Test starts today

AFP, Port Elizabeth



South African captain Faf du Plessis said he hoped a grassy St George's Park pitch would negate Sri Lanka's spin threat in the first Test starting on Monday.

"There's a little more grass on the wicket than might be normal," Du Plessis said in his pre-match press conference.

"That is making sure that we take their most dangerous player out of the game."

Du Plessis was referring to left-arm spinner Rangana Herath, Sri Lanka's match-winner in their only victory in 10 previous Tests in South Africa. Herath took nine wickets when Sri Lanka won in Durban in 2011/12.

But Du Plessis said it was normal for the St George's pitch to help the spinners in the latter stages of a Test match.

"The pitch looks very dry and Sri Lanka brings a different style of play to Australia (where South Africa won a series last

month). They have really good spinners so our focus has been on making sure we prepare for that."

Du Plessis added that South Africa could not afford to underestimate their opponents, despite their poor record in South Africa and them having a young, largely inexperienced team.

"Young guys can pose the same threat as more experienced players, even more so sometimes because they bring something different."

But he said he expected South Africa's pace bowlers to pose a challenge to the tourists.

"There should be enough in the pitch for the seamers," he said.

Sri Lankan captain Angelo Mathews, meanwhile, said his team had prepared well and that the young batsmen in the side had stepped up to fill the gaps left by Mahela Jayawardene, Kumar Sangakkara and Tillakaratne Dilshan, who have all retired recently.