

SPORT



Bangladesh Test skipper Mushfiqur Rahim is pictured running between the wickets, signalling that he is all set to make his return to the national side after being sidelined for five games due to a hamstring injury when the Tigers take on New Zealand at the Basin Reserve in Wellington for the first of the two-match Test series, starting from tomorrow.

PHOTO: BCB

Mushy puts onus on batsmen

AL-AMIN from Wellington



Bangladesh Test captain Mushfiqur Rahim said that they need to show character if they are to put up a fight in the

Two-Test series against New Zealand with the first one starting at the Basin Reserve in Wellington from Thursday.

The wicketkeeper-batsman, who missed the all but the first match of the six-match limited overs series after picking up a hamstring injury in the opening ODI at Christchurch, also stressed the need of the batting unit to show grit and application in the demanding five-day contest.

"Our main challenge will be for our batsman to set the tone for our bowlers to fight. If we can put up enough runs on the board in both innings, it will help our bowlers to defend. And it is very important for us to score runs," said Mushfiqur, adding that he was feeling alright at the moment but cannot rule out the recurrence of hamstring pain.

He said that Bangladesh's Test victory against England at home in October does not mean that they have become a very good team.

"The conditions we have got at home, we believe we can give a tough time to any team in the world. But an overseas series is very difficult and our goal here is that we want a start. In the

Test we want to stay at the wicket for a long time and try to be competitive. Tamim scored here, Shakib scored a century, Riyad also scored a century in New Zealand. We have got good memories here," said the captain.

He however said that they have to play as a unit, which has not been the case in the shorter version matches.

"We will have to prove ourselves as a team, which we have failed to do in the one-day and T20s. If we contributed collectively, one or two games would have come our way. We will have to do that in the Tests, and I firmly believe we have the capability to do that. We will have to show that character. We will have to work hard session by session, which is tough but not impossible.

"As a bowling unit when you know that you have got the ability to take 20 wickets, and if there is proof of that, it is very inspiring. But these are different conditions and here the pacers will have to play the lead role instead of the spinners," said Mushfiqur, adding that he has every faith in his five bowlers, including Soumya Sarker, having the capacity to take 20 wickets against a top team and not only against New Zealand in these conditions.

"To get a batsman out you need one good delivery and our message to the bowlers is to bowl consistently on good line. It's not easy but that's the beauty of a Test match. You will have to

work hard for five days if you are batting, bowling or fielding. And the result after that gives you maximum satisfaction," Mushfiqur observed.

He also warned that they would not get many opportunities here like they did get at home.

"We got an opportunity in the ODIs and T20s but we could not grab that and in this condition you will not get many chances you get at home, so it will be important for us to grab chances if we want to get better results than before."

He also did not give undue pressure on Taskin Ahmed.

"If he can play in all the three formats of the game it is a big advantage. It will be too much to demand from him and you know he did not play that much of longer version of cricket. But it's certainly the best time for him to start," said Mushfiqur about his young fast bowler.

He lamented the absence of Mustafizur Rahman but felt that it could have been a good experience for the left-arm pace bowler.

"Fizz is an integral part of our team. Unfortunately we will miss him. It could have been a good learning curve for him if he had played both Tests here because he could have learnt something more on wickets where his cutters are at times not effective. But his fitness is above everything for us. We don't want him to get injured and out for another 5-6 months. We want to give him more time to recover," said the key middle-order batsman.

'Playing Tests will be career highlight'

AL-AMIN from Wellington



Bangladesh are yet to decide the final eleven for the opening Test against New Zealand that starts in Wellington on Thursday. But one thing is guaranteed -- Taskin Ahmed will make his Test debut on the green top of the Basin Reserve, a safe assumption as the right-arm pace bowler appeared at the pre-match briefing today.

It is customary for someone who is playing to confront the media before a game and when Taskin appeared at the media session after the team's training with a big smile on his face, he looked very excited at the prospect of donning the white shirt and taking the shiny red ball for the Tigers.

"It will be a dream-come-true if I can make my debut in the next game. In the last three years in all the series I have played, I was leaving the team either after the one-day or T20 series. This is the only occasion I'm staying back. If I get the opportunity I will give my best and playing a Test match will be the best moment of my career," said the excited 22-year-old.

His excitement was more befitting because as pace bowler he could not have asked for a better ground to make his Test debut.

"Obviously bowlers are very happy after looking at that pitch. It's greenish and hard; it's good to bowl on. I'm also very happy. We have a couple of good fast bowlers. We already proved that we can do well. If we can bowl to our potential I hope we can make a difference," he added.

He also admitted that he was enjoying every moment leading up to that dream day.

"Hey, you will play a Test," everyone is laughing and telling me. I'm also enjoying it. Everyone is inspiring me," he said with a broad smile on his face.

When asked if this is the format he can bowl really fast and express himself fully, he said that control is more important than pace on any wicket.

"There will be more movement on this wicket. I will be aggressive, but aggression

alone will not help against them because they play pace very well. As a bowler I will have to be aggressive as well as disciplined and the challenge will be to bowl in the right areas," explained the pacer, who however has played only 10 first-class matches.

He said he has been working hard for two years to improve his fitness level as well as regaining the energy it requires to sustain in the longer version.

"I had to work hard to get an opportunity to be in the Test squad. Everybody in the team helped me. A special programme has been arranged for me. I have been doing it for the last two years and I have played two practice games as part of my Test preparation. Of course, I'm fitter now and my goal is not just to play one Test but play for a long time," Taskin opined.

He also said that he was not worried about the workload a fast bowler has to undertake in seaming conditions like New Zealand, where spinners are second-grade options.

"I'm not worried about the volume. If I had played first-class cricket I would have had to put in a lot of effort. I have only played 10 first class games. My focus will be to give hundred per cent on the field. There were so many days that I had to bowl 12-13 overs in the nets with the new and old balls. I'm also learning how to swing the red ball and I believe that if I can play Tests I will become stronger," observed the pace bowler from Dhaka.

He said bowling both with the wind and against it is difficult, but he was quick to say that it will be hard to learn those crafts if someone does not get the opportunity.

"These are certainly different conditions but we will have to adjust. And the quicker you adjust, the better for you. [Tim] Southee and [Trent] Boult are successful bowlers. But there was a time when they played their opening Test. We are starting now and if we can continue like them we will also become good bowlers. We have got Courtney Walsh we are learning from him. Experience-wise we will lack behind but we believe that we are capable of playing Test," said a confident Taskin.



Taskin Ahmed will be hoping to thrill with his performances on a green-top wicket at the Basin Reserve, but it seems he already has some fans in Wellington and one of them came to the Bangladeshi pacer for an autograph yesterday.

PHOTO: BCB



Whether Tamim Iqbal (2nd from L) will play the first Test against the Kiwis will only be decided today as the left-handed opener is suffering discomfort on his injured thumb.

PHOTO: BCB

Athar still not with women's team

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh's women's team is set to begin their five-match ODI series against South Africa in Cox's Bazar tomorrow and yet it's still not confirmed as to whether the team's chief selector and the tour manager, Athar Ali Khan, will be present in Bangladesh to observe the tour.

Athar is currently in New Zealand as part of the broadcaster's commentary team. When the issue was brought up on Monday, Bangladesh Cricket Board president Nazmul Hasan Papon had said that he would talk to the former national player and also admitted that he should have been in Bangladesh for the series.

"I agree with you a 100 percent. I was actually thinking about this because our women's team's batting hasn't been clicking. We have got a new coach and now we need to make sure that we get the best possible players from all over the country.

"I fully agree that Athar should be here during such a tournament. I will talk to Athar and see what can be done regarding the issue," said Papon.

Lack of tour game another disadvantage?

SPORTS REPORTER



The Bangladesh cricket team in New Zealand have already been having a tough time

of it with the six limited-overs games being lost by hefty margins. The prognosis for the Tigers seems especially bleak as the limited-overs leg was supposed to be the portion of the tour where they enjoyed reasonable success in a demanding tour, and from tomorrow they will engage in their weakest format of the game, the Test leg, and that too without playing a practice longer-version match.

"To tell you the truth, the board tried to shoehorn in a longer-version tour game before the Tests," said Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) selector Habibul Bashar when contacted yesterday. "But there was a problem with their [New Zealand Cricket's] scheduling. Admittedly, it will be difficult to play the Tests without a warm-up as New Zealand are strong at home and we are not used to their conditions."

New Zealand have a record to be proud of at home, winning 10 of their 20 Test matches over the last five years and losing just three. Those losses came against formidable opponents -- two against Australia in February 2016 and one against South Africa in March 2012.

Moreover, the wind-swept Basin Reserve in Wellington -- the venue for the first Test -- is as alien as conditions get for the Tigers, who are used to playing on slow and low spinning tracks.

Skipper Mushfiqur Rahim was only half-

joking when he said yesterday that he could not make out the pitch from the outfield. And it is not likely to become much more distinguishable come tomorrow morning as the Kiwis have packed their side with five pace bowlers.

"The ODIs and T20Is have not featured the typical New Zealand wickets, but I think Wellington will have that kind of pitch for the Tests as they have included so many fast bowlers," Bashar said.

Even with odds stacked so high against Bangladesh, Bashar was able to provide some positives, mostly to do with the time the squad have already spent in New Zealand.

"There is a certain belief that comes from spending so much time in the country. The nervousness of playing in new conditions will have gone, but still a practice match would have been helpful as it is a big adjustment from T20Is to Tests," said the former national captain.

Bashar however believes that the pacers will perform well, if they can contain their excitement at seeing such an ideal wicket, a rarity for bowlers from the subcontinent.

"I believe the pacers will bowl well in the Tests. They have to rein themselves in and bowl in the right areas, which is the most important thing on pitches such as these.

It will be the first real test for bowling coach Courtney Walsh as the West Indian legend was relegated to the background for the Tests against England on Bangladeshi dustbowls. But most importantly, the batsmen will have to overcome the disadvantage of going in cold on a Wellington green top.

HEAD TO HEAD

BANGLADESH	ALL TESTS	NEW ZEALAND
0	11	8
TESTS IN NEW ZEALAND		
0	5	5

KEY PLAYERS

MUSHFIQUR RAHIM	KANE WILLIAMSON
Matches: 50	Matches: 56
Runs: 2750	Runs: 4684
Highest Score: 200	Highest Score: 242*
Average: 31.97	Average: 49.44
100/50: 3/15	100/50: 14/24

Malinga out with dengue

REUTERS, Cape Town

Sri Lanka pacer Lasith Malinga has been ruled out of the Twenty20 and One Day series against South Africa as he has yet to fully recover from a bout of dengue fever, officials said on Tuesday.

The 33-year-old was expected to make a comeback after a litany of injuries but will have to wait until next month when Sri Lanka play three T20Is in Australia.

He struggled late last year had bout of dengue fever.

"He had a practice game last week and realised he still wasn't up to the level of fitness," team manager Ranjith Fernando told Reuters.

Taylor not taking BD lightly

SPORTS REPORTER



New Zealand batsman Ross Taylor, who is looking to equal his late mentor Martin Crowe's record of 16 Test centuries, has said that Black Caps will leave no stone unturned during the Test series against Bangladesh, despite having comfortably beaten them in the limited overs series.

When asked if he thought that it would be easier to beat Bangladesh in the Tests compared to the limited overs matches, he said: "No, I don't think so. I think

Bangladesh over the last few years haven't played a lot of Test cricket away from home. It's going to be difficult on that wicket. But we can't take them lightly. I am sure their fast bowlers will be licking their lips looking at that wicket. There is a bit of grass on the wicket. Hopefully our pacers will do a good job as well."

At the Basin Reserve, Taylor averages a shade under 56 and has scored centuries against the West Indies in 2013 and India in 2009. Batting second would be a preference at green-topped Basin Reserve, which has a history of assisting the fast bowlers early before flattening out.