

SPORT



Shakib Al Hasan was his usual aggressive self on the third day of the one-off Test against India in Hyderabad yesterday as the all-rounder struck a 103-ball 82, featuring 14 boundaries, to wrestle back some of the momentum from the hosts.

PHOTO: AFP

Tailor-made for adversity

NAIMUL KARIM from Hyderabad



He may be a bit vulnerable with his wicket-keeping gloves on, but there have never been any doubts about his batting. You will probably never see him pull a

'Shakib' and gift the opponents an unexpected wicket. Mushfiqur Rahim's mature approach yesterday showed just why he is rated as Bangladesh's best Test batsman. He helped Bangladesh revive their innings not once, but twice at the Rajiv Gandhi International Cricket Stadium in Hyderabad.

In the first partnership, he was more of a bystander and watched Shakib Al Hasan hit the ball to every corner of the park. For his part, he employed the sweep time and again against the spinners and hit a few through the covers, but they were all safe shots. Together the duo eased the early tension that was created after three quick wickets fell.

However, his real challenge came in the second phase after Shakib threw away his wicket. It was like asking Mushfiqur to start all over again in a snakes and ladders game.

He tried to build a partnership with Sabbir Rahman, but the latter lost his wicket quickly, forcing Mushfiqur to rebuild the innings with Mehedi Hasan Miraz, who prior to yesterday's game had a highest Test score of 10.

He changed his approach and started to spend as much as time possible at the crease, illustrated by the fact that it took him 35 balls to go from 46 to 50.

Aside from the last over of the day, when a bouncer from Ishant Sharma hit his injured hand, he never looked troubled.

According to Shakib, Mushfiqur enjoys playing with the tail. That is one of the reasons why Bangladesh's best Test batsman comes in at six.

"I think he likes those situations...when the situation is tough. He likes to stand up and do the hard work for the team and that character has helped him play for Bangladesh for so long," said Shakib.

Shakib also went to bat for Mushfiqur's keeping skill. "At this moment he likes both. He is someone who likes to take the challenge. If you want him to bat at the top he will do that, but he still wants to keep."

"I don't think it will be wise for him and for the team if he puts his gloves away and plays as a batsman. I think whatever he is doing at the moment -- keeping, batting and captaincy -- it's obviously very difficult for him, but he is someone who likes to do that stuff," said the all-rounder.

I won't change my style: Shakib

SPORTS REPORTER from Hyderabad

There are moments when he makes you dream of achieving the unthinkable and then there are times when he leaves you scratching your head, compelling you to ask the near-perennial question: 'did he actually play that shot?'

That's Shakib Al Hasan for you. He is the man Bangladesh's skipper turn to almost every time the Tigers are in trouble. You can trust him, but then again, you cannot.

That is just the way he plays his cricket and oddly enough, he believes that that is the only way he can be successful in his career. If he is on a roll, he is going to keep hitting you until you are taken out of the attack. Although he will admit that the strategy does not always work.

"Sometimes you are successful and

sometimes you are not. There's your balance," he slyly said at the post-day press conference yesterday when asked about where he plans to draw the line in order to create a balance.

But rarely do you see him taking a defensive approach. That is something that he just cannot do.

And so, it really was not a surprise when Shakib mishit Ravichandran Aswin to the mid-on fielder to get caught for 82. It was a wicket that fell against the run-of-play.

The century stand between him and Mushfiqur Rahim was helping the visitors revive their innings and the pair did not seem threatened at all on the flat pitch. Bangladesh were still a long way away from India's total and they needed to show a lot more patience. However, all of a sudden, Shakib surprised everyone.

"Throughout the innings I was playing shots. So, that one [the one that got him

out] I didn't connect well and that's all I can say. Other than that I think it was very positive the way I was batting. I didn't want to change my innings, I was playing the way I have been playing for the last five to six years," said Shakib.

When asked if he was aware of the tough task ahead while batting, he said: "Actually, I don't think about so many things when I go to bat. If I wouldn't have been out I would have scored a hundred and it would have been good if I could have batted for a longer period for my team."

"I don't know. When I bat I don't think about all these things. I keep batting. I like to play shots. Sometimes I am successful, sometimes I am not. I don't really think much about it because this is my natural game and I like to play this way," continued the left-armer.

"What would have happened had I got out for ten runs [while trying to play defen-

sively]? We would have been 140 for 5 and not 240 for 5," he added.

It is little acts like this that often compel fans and sports analysts to criticise Shakib, no matter how well he plays. He might have been the highest run-getter; he also might have been the best player on the field; but there are times when he plays a below-par shot that leaves everyone frustrated and yesterday was a classic example.

When asked if the reactions of the fans and the critics disappoint him, he said: "Not really, because I don't think along those lines. What I think is I like to contribute for the team. Obviously there are times when even I am not happy enough. I wasn't [satisfied] when I scored 217. I wanted to score more for the team."

"I am not going to change my style of play. If I change it I don't think I will be Shakib. That's my way of thinking," said the calm left-hander.

Venomous Yadav laps up plaudits

NAIMUL KARIM from Hyderabad

When Umesh Yadav was steaming in and bowling those quick reverse-swinging deliveries, there was talk about how the Test could possibly end inside three days.

The manner in which Yadav exploited the flat deck in the morning session was quite incredible. After producing a brilliant delivery to get Soumya Sarkar caught behind on Day One, he trapped Mominul Haque in front with a brutal delivery that swung just enough to stay in line with the wickets. While he got just one wicket yesterday, he troubled the batsmen quite a bit.

And it was because of his spell that the Tigers moved into their shell in the morning session yesterday, which eventually led to them losing more wickets. Had it not been for his burst, the Tigers probably would have been in a strong position at the end of Day Three.

In particular Shakib Al Hasan, his Kolkata Knight Riders (KKR) teammate, was beaten by pace on a number of occasions.

"There was not much on the pitch. Because we play for KKR I know him very well. This was probably the best spell I have ever faced in my Test career. He was tremendous. The way he was moving the ball both

ways, some balls were unplayable.

"The best I could do was hit the balls that I thought I could and try not to nick the ones that I couldn't. I played those with soft hands. I feel lucky that I survived his spell," Shakib said at the post-day press conference yesterday.

India's batting coach Sanjay Bangar also praised Yadav and his pacers.

"All three seamers were able to get the reverse swing, but Umesh with his pace and the lengths that he bowled was good. Bhuvu [Bhuvaneshwar Kumar] can bowl the conventional swing, but Umesh can swing it both ways. Umesh's length allows him to swing with the new ball and also the old ball."

"He's worked a lot on his wrist positions and balance at the crease. Ever since the Delhi Test match against South Africa, you've seen him giving the breakthroughs that the team requires," explained Bangar.

"It's seen that spinners have to do the bulk of the wicket-taking, but our seamers have chipped in with crucial wickets right at the top or in the middle of the innings where the spinners were not able to get the breakthroughs."

"So I think the reason for that many Test victories is not only the contribution of spinners, but small contributions the pacers have made. That's why Umesh stands out because I believe that he's the most improved bowler in the last season and a half," he added.

'Still a long way to go'

SPORTS REPORTER from Hyderabad

After the morning session yesterday, there were a number of Bangladeshi journalists in the Hyderabad press box who were finding ways to reschedule their flight tickets back to Dhaka.

With Bangladesh four down for 109 and Umesh Yadav steaming in with some outrageous deliveries on a flat deck, many expected the game to be over early.

So, when Bangladesh managed to finish the third day on 322 for 6, it was a bit of a surprise.

There were two partnerships that helped revive Bangladesh. It began with Mushfiqur Rahim and Shakib Al Hasan's century stand for the fifth wicket and ended with an unbeaten 87-run partnership between Mushfiqur and Mehedi Hasan Miraz.

Initially, it was Shakib's aggressive attitude that helped Bangladesh climb out of the hole that they were in. After the early wickets fell, Shakib decided to take the attack to the bowlers.

"When I was facing the spinners, it seemed like it was a good wicket. It wasn't helping the spinners and I knew that I could be positive. I moved my feet and I was trying to be as positive as I could. I was looking to score runs rather than just block balls," said Shakib.

"I think the wicket is still really good. We see the ball turn and spin for India on Day Three but that was not happening. And pace, well apart from that one unplayable spell [from Umesh Yadav], we managed to cope with well. As of now the wicket is good, but tomorrow is a new day. Let's see what happens," he added.

While Bangladesh ended the day well, they will be disappointed at their top order. After all, one cannot expect the middle and lower-middle order to take the majority of the pressure on such a brilliant batting wicket. Players like Mahmudullah Riyad, Mominul Haque and Sabbir Rahman will feel that they missed out.

However, Shakib defended his top order and said that it was difficult to survive the first one hour because the ball was moving quite a bit.

"When Riyad bhui was dismissed the ball was moving a lot and it was difficult for batsmen to survive then. I was lucky to survive but he could not. Everyone plays to contribute. Sometimes it works, sometimes it does not, but those who click on their day, should go for it," said Shakib.

Despite the late heroics, Shakib still believes that Bangladesh have a long way to go to save this Test.

"India are obviously on the front foot. We have to play really well in the first two hours of the first session tomorrow. Hopefully Mushfiqur bhai and Miraz can play the first session. That's the key part. If we can score 100 to 120, I think we will be in very good shape and we will be close to saving the follow-on, which is our first target at the moment," concluded the left-armer.

Mushfiqur Rahim (R) and Mehedi Hasan Miraz forged an unbroken seventh wicket partnership of 87 runs as Bangladesh salvaged a precarious position to end the third day of the one-off Test against India in Hyderabad on 322 for six yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP



Miraz finally lives up to potential

SPORTS REPORTER from Hyderabad

If you had a penny for every time someone at a press conference asked Mehedi Hasan Miraz about his poor batting form in international cricket, your life savings would have been taken care of.

The former Bangladesh under-19 all-rounder soared into the national team in 2016, the same year he played his last under-19 game, the semifinal of the Under-19 World Cup in Bangladesh which received plenty of attention.

Even before entering the national team, he had mesmerised the country with a match-saving century and a few other brilliant knocks, not to mention his displays with the ball.

The absence of a genuine off-spinner helped him quickly enter the national team. While he was drafted in as a specialist bowler, there was plenty of pressure on him to perform as a batsman as well, since he had proved himself in the age-level competitions. Well before making his debut, he was being called the junior Shakib Al Hasan.

When Mehedi scored his half-century yesterday, it was a huge relief, not only for the team management but also for those who have watched him grow. Prior to yesterday, his highest Test score was 10 and his batting average was around 2.5.

The most interesting aspect of his half-century yesterday was his duel with Ravichandran Ashwin. Going into the game, Mehedi was asked a number of times whether

he would talk to Ashwin or try to learn something from the senior off-spinner.

Mehedi said that he would talk to him after the game for some tips, but what questions like this can do is make a player intimidated of a particular bowler.

It could have been extremely easy for a batsman averaging below three to be bewildered by Ashwin, no matter how flat a deck he is bowling on. However, Mehedi handled him quite well.

Ashwin was brought on over number 93. At first, he let Ashwin earn a maiden and tried to see him off. From the second over onwards though, he started going down the track and attacking the off-spinner. He went down the track and hit him through covers twice.

The surge in Mehedi's confidence was best understood when he cut Ashwin for a four behind point to reach his maiden half-century.

The long hug that he received from Mushfiqur Rahim at the other end best explained how important Mehedi's innings was for the team.

Shakib described Mehedi's knock as something special.

"It was crucial for him to stay at the wicket for Mushfiqur. He did it perfectly and played just how we expected him to. We rate him very highly both with the bat and the ball. I am hopeful that he will make it a big one tomorrow," said Shakib.

Like Shakib, many of Mehedi's observers, who watched him carry the under-19 team to a number of unlikely victories, will also hope he can bat through the morning session on day four.

BD-INDIA SCOREBOARD

INDIA: First innings 687 for six dec (Kohli 204, Vijay 108, Saha 106 not out; Taijul 3-156)				
BANGLADESH: First innings R/B 4s/6s (Overnight 41-1)				
Tamim run out	24/53	3/0		
Soumya c Saha b Yadav	15/31	3/0		
Mominul lbw b Yadav	12/36	1/0		
Mahmudullah lbw b Sharma	28/57	4/0		
Shakib c Yadav b Ashwin	82/103	14/0		
Mushfiqur not out	81/206	12/0		
Sabbir lbw b Jadeja	16/35	2/0		
Mehedi not out	51/103	10/0		
Extras: (lb-13)	13			
Total: (For 6 wks in 104 overs)	322			
To bat: Taijul Islam, Taskin Ahmed, Kamrul Islam Rabbil.				
Fall of wickets: 1-38, 2-44, 3-64, 4-109, 5-216, 6-235.				
Bowler	O	M	R	W
Kumar	17	6	46	0
Sharma	16	5	54	1
Ashwin	24	6	77	1



The best Indian bowler on display so far, Umesh Yadav troubled the Bangladesh batsmen by swinging the ball both ways and got some reward in the form of the dismissals of Soumya Sarkar and Mominul Haque.

PHOTO: AFP