

SPORT

Tigers return with eye on Sri Lanka

SPORTS REPORTER

The Tigers returned home yesterday after playing the much-talked about one-off Test against India in Hyderabad which the visitors lost by 208 runs.

While some key players like Shakib Al Hasan, Tamim Iqbal and Mahmudullah Riyad will be busy playing the ongoing Pakistan Super League (PSL) in Dubai, the rest of the players will enjoy a break from cricket.

The Tigers' next focus will be on their upcoming month-long tour of Sri Lanka where they will play two Tests, three ODIs and two T20I matches. However, they will get back to business on February 24 when a short camp begins in Mirpur.

The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) was waiting for official disclosure of the itinerary of the tour from their Sri Lanka counterparts although the schedule has been finalised long ago.

However it was learnt that Bangladesh would fly to Colombo on February 27 although the departure may be delayed by a day subject to availability of flights and they are set to play a two-day practice match before the first of the two Tests starting in Dambulla from March 7.

Mushfiqur Rahim did not return with the team as the Bangladesh Test skipper went to Delhi to collect brand new bats from his sponsor. He is set to return home tomorrow. Opener Tamim Iqbal and middle-order batsman Mahmudullah Riyad went straight to Dubai to feature in Pakistan Super League (PSL).

Premier all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan returned with the team but will leave for Dubai today to play in the PSL as well.

The foreign coaching staff of the Bangladesh team, including coach Chandika Hathurusingha, also went to their respective homes from India. They will return to Dhaka before the first training session for the Sri Lanka tour.



Bangladesh all-rounder Mehedi Hasan Miraz (L) and pacer Taskin Ahmed are pictured at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport after returning from India yesterday.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Lessons from Ashwin

STAR SPORT DESK

Although the one-off Test in Hyderabad against India ended in a heavy defeat, there were positives for Bangladesh in the form of skipper Mushfiqur Rahim's century and the performance with bat and ball of young off-spinner and allrounder-in-waiting Mehedi Hasan Miraz.

Miraz found form with the bat by scoring a half-century in the first innings -- a sorely needed innings after averaging below three in his first four Test matches. His main value to Bangladesh, however, is as an off-spinner and he has taken some special lessons to improve on that front as well.

In line with his stated intention of taking tips from India spinner and the

top-ranked Test bowler in the world, Miraz had a session with Ravichandran Ashwin after the Test ended in a 208-run defeat in the afternoon session of the fifth day on Monday.

"He is the world's No. 1 bowler. I follow his bowling closely to see what he does in different situations. How he sets up a batsman and how he plans for his wickets. Whenever India play, I watch the match for him," Mehedi told BCCL.TV after the session with Ashwin on Monday.

"I was looking forward to meet him ever since the time we landed in India. After the match, I asked him how to handle certain situations. I have no experience of match situations. He encouraged me. He said I had the potential to have a long and successful international career and advised me to work really hard. He has so many variations, so I asked him about his different deliveries.

"I am very happy today that I got to meet Ashwin and even Virat Kohli later. Ashwin has done so well in the last few years and has so much experience. I had an excellent time with him. His tips are going to be very useful," beamed Mehedi.

"I have a high arm action and can bowl in good areas, which are my plus points. I want to add more variety and vary my pace. I spoke to Ashwin about it. He told me to stick to my strengths. His advice was to follow my instincts and bowl in the manner I feel most comfortable in," he added in his interaction with BCCL.TV.

Miraz was still talking about the meeting with Ashwin after landing at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport along with the team yesterday afternoon. "He [Ashwin] showed me some techniques but above all he stressed the need to have patience in order to be successful in Test cricket."

About the one-off Test, Miraz said that despite the loss there were positives to take from their first-ever Test on Indian soil.

"We were all very excited about the one-off Test in India," Miraz told reporters at the airport. "We could have done better, but there were still a few positives and we are not altogether unhappy with our performance. The fielding could have been better and we need to improve in that department."

"It felt good to score some runs. Mushfiqur bhai helped me a lot with advice during our [87-run seventh-wicket] partnership," Miraz added.



PHOTO: BCCL

The good and bad from historic Test

NAIMUL KARIM from Hyderabad

Bangladesh's short tour of India may be over but they barely have any time to relax. They have returned home and will probably get a week-long break before beginning their camp for the Sri Lanka series set to begin in the first week of March. Unlike the India series however, this is going to include matches in all three formats.

With barely any time remaining, it is important that Bangladesh work on rectifying the mistakes made during the tour of India as soon as possible. The India series, truth be told, was a mixed bag. There were a couple of frustrating performances and then there were brilliant knocks from the likes of Mushfiqur Rahim and Mehedi Hasan Miraz which helped the visitors stand up for themselves. The following are the main highlights from the tour:

KEY LEARNINGS

One of the most obvious aspects that Bangladesh missed on this tour was support from their top order. You cannot always depend on Shakib Al Hasan and Mushfiqur Rahim. Bangladesh need the likes of Tamim Iqbal, Mominul Haque and Soumya Sarkar to not just score half-centuries, but to negotiate the opening hour of a Test session successfully and score big. One feels that the top order, which has generally been Bangladesh's major strength, missed out on such a good batting track in Hyderabad. It was Tamim's knock that helped Bangladesh beat England in Bangladesh in some very trying conditions and if the openers can provide the momentum, things can only get better for Bangladesh.

The other aspect that the team management will most likely focus on is the need for a wicketkeeper in the team. It was clear from the last Test that Mushfiqur is having trouble performing his three roles of captain, wicketkeeper and batsman. There are some options, but employing them would mean changing Bangladesh's batting order and it will be interesting to see how the Bangladesh team react to this.

The reverse swing aspect is another issue that the management will need to address. All three Indian pacers were capable of reversing the ball and they all troubled the Bangladesh batsmen. Bangladesh are going to play a number of Tests this year and any opposing team who would have seen this series will definitely try to expose this shortcoming.

With regards to Bangladesh's bowling, the key thing to do would be to help these bowlers grow in confidence. Taskin Ahmed, Mehedi Hasan Miraz and Kamrul

Islam Rabbi all have plenty of talent, but they lack Test experience. They will only get better as they keep playing more games and not just Test games, but four-day matches as well.

It is illogical to expect anyone, even Mustafizur Rahman, to run through the opposition if he does not have any experience. Bangladesh's bowling needs time and it will be important for the team management to support them.

BEST PERFORMER

There weren't too many performers for Bangladesh. Mushfiqur Rahim may have missed a couple of opportunities behind the stumps -- which was twice as frustrating considering that the match was taking place on a placid wicket -- but with the bat he was near-flawless.

He came out with a mission and he was successful at that. He faced the most balls, even more than Virat Kohli, in the first innings of the Test and showed how patient he can be. The fact that five of Mushfiqur's centuries have come in five venues goes on to show just how technically solid he is. It will be very crucial for Bangladesh that he stays in form throughout the year.

THE DISAPPOINTMENTS

Bangladesh's top order would have to be the major disappointment. On a good batting track, they needed to take the lead and not put the pressure on the middle order. Aside from the top order, Sabbir Rahman disappointed as well. That Sabbir has the potential of becoming one of Bangladesh's best batsman is a given, however he needs to keep his focus. He had done well on turning tracks in Chittagong and Dhaka and had almost taken Bangladesh home in the first Tests against Chittagong, but at the moment he seems to be in two minds while playing strokes. He needs to make the confusion disappear.

THE BREAKOUT PERFORMER

Mehedi Hasan Miraz had a batting average below 3 going into the Test and all of a sudden he scored a brilliant half-century to support his captain. It was because of the partnership between these two that Virat Kohli decided against taking the follow-on. With so many games coming up, it will be a boon for Bangladesh if Mehedi manages to continue his form. The team management has waited a long time for him to show his batting prowess and this series showed a glimpse of his capabilities. If he does begin to perform regularly, the Bangladesh will be a lot calmer with regards to their tail and the captain will find it a lot easier to make team combinations.

Impressions from Tigers' mixed bag in India

AL-AMIN

It took almost 17 long years for Bangladesh to travel across the border and play their first Test against India. They lost the one-off Test match by 208 runs in Hyderabad on Monday. But despite the heavy defeat against the top-ranked Test team in their den, Bangladesh have not fared as badly as the score line suggests.

It is true that the wicket at the Rajiv Gandhi International Stadium held firm during the entire five days, which was something unexpected considering the typical nature of Indian pitches where spinners rule the roost after three days. But for Bangladesh to take the game deep into the second session on the fifth and final day on Monday was impressive, if not fulfilling. It was not just about batting more than 100 overs in both innings but batting under pressure after losing that important toss.

Batting on a placid wicket for the first two days is always an advantage. But after fielding for nearly two days and after being buried under an avalanche of runs it is always tough for any top team to bat and score runs. India did not enforce the follow-on and came out to bat briefly for the second time in an attempt to give much-needed rest to their bowling unit. So, it was again a tough job for Bangladesh when they came out to bat for the second time knowing that they have got no chance to chase down 459 in four sessions; the battle would be to survive.

They tried to survive on a good wicket but were mostly undone by those rough footmarks on a good length outside the left-handers' off stump, which was a crucial advantage that India enjoyed against an army of

Bangladeshi southpaws at the top of the order. Four out of five top-order batsmen are left-handers and three of them, including Shakib Al Hasan, were victims of those rough patches.

This is not an argument against the notion that the wicket did not play a part on the fourth evening and on the fifth day. If we analyse the eight wickets shared by the Indian spinning duo of Ravichandran Ashwin and Ravindra Jadeja in Bangladesh's second innings, we will find either the footmarks or the rough played a big part in those dismissals. Actually it was pace bowler Ishant Sharma's two wickets after lunch on the fifth day that stood out as sheer brilliance as far as wicket-taking deliveries are concerned. But that does not mean that Ashwin and Jadeja did not deserve those wickets. What was most fulfilling for Bangladesh was that every batsman, save skipper Mushfiqur Rahim, did not throw away their wickets, which was a definite improvement from their two Tests against New Zealand.

But this particular Test match has reignited some serious issues, that need to be addressed and solved if Bangladesh are to go a notch forward.

SHAKIB'S REFUSAL TO CHANGE HIS STYLE

Shakib's down-the-wicket antics against England on the third morning of the opening Test in Chittagong, his similar act on the fifth day of the Wellington Test, his arrogant cut shot straight to the throat of the backward point fielder on the fourth day of the second Test in Christchurch have already been well documented as extremely careless shots and, more importantly, ones that played an important part in Bangladesh's defeat in all three games. He also did the same in the first innings against India when

Bangladesh needed him most to continue taking the fight to the opposition alongside Mushfiqur Rahim.

It is however not his inexplicable shots but his interpretation of those acts that would most baffle even those with a little knowledge about cricket. He said he will not change his style of play. His logic behind that was: if he changes his style he will not be the Shakib people appreciate most. First of all, no one has ever asked him to change his style. We want him to be aggressive with the bat, with the ball and while he is fielding. We want to know the purpose of all his efforts. If all his positive energy and intent does indeed solely point to the benefit of the team, then we demand an explanation from him for the aforementioned shots. Have those acts helped or damaged the team? Perhaps he will not find a single individual to support his acts in those desperate situations.

Secondly, there is apparently an admission in the team's core group that Shakib should be allowed to play the way he plays. While attending a press briefing after the Christchurch Test, Tamim Iqbal defended Shakib's inexplicable shot by saying: "he plays like this". Remember, Tamim led Bangladesh in that Test match in the absence of Mushfiqur. Coach Chandika Hathurusingha in another bout with a reporter refused to single out Shakib's act of audacity. He took that as part of a collective mental breakdown and after being pressed said: "only one or two sessions [with the team] would not be enough to change that."

But Shakib's actions have nothing to do with mental toughness or the lack of it and unfortunately no one holding a responsible position in the Bangladesh Cricket Board or even the national selectors will raise their voices against his wilful acts in any public forum. We

need someone in the board's hierarchy to speak loud and clear with a strong message that the purpose of every effort should point to the benefit of the team.

MUSHFIQUR RAHIM PLAYING THREE KEY ROLES

Donning the wicketkeeping gloves, Mushfiqur has made it a habit of making at least one crucial blunder in every Test innings. He did not dive when Indian one-down batsman Cheteshwar Pujara edged pace bowler

Bangladesh have the luxury to have him behind the stumps in Tests where one good catch makes all the difference. Besides, since he is keeping he comes in to bat at number 6. This is a position many feel he should not bat in, being the number one batsman of the team. His average is under 35 and he often finds himself batting with the tail. His elevation to a more suitable number four position can benefit the team most. But if he keeps it would be physically impossible for him

undoubtedly the best of the three wicketkeepers, but his batting has not improved that much. Liton Das got a decent spell in the national team before being expelled after a poor run of form with the bat.

But that does not necessarily mean Bangladesh will have to stick to the same formula, knowing that they desperately need a good wicketkeeper-batsman firstly to bring the best out of Mushfiqur as a batsman and captain of the Test team. Mahmudullah Riyad has been occupying the crucial number four spot for quite some time. Unfortunately he has not been consistent with the bat. He has scored only two 50s in 16 Test innings since his magnificent twin tons in the 2015 World Cup. The most disturbing aspect of late is that he looks like a sitting duck against those well-directed short-pitched deliveries. And if he continues to fail with the bat Bangladesh can seriously think of resting him for a while and allow a wicketkeeper to come into the frame, pushing Sabbir Rahman to bat at number six.

Besides, with off-spinner Mehedi Hasan proving his potential to be a good all-rounder the hard and fast rule of playing with seven batsmen can be relaxed as a test case to form an ideal combination. After the one-off Test Mushfiqur said that he feels comfortable with all three roles in the team. But he will feel more comfortable if he considers each of his roles from a critic's perspective. He should ask himself what are the scores he deserves as batsman, wicketkeeper and captain. He will get variable figures ranging from 10 out of 10 to six out of 10. And as captain of the team he will definitely prefer 10 out of 10. And if he thinks that way he will feel more comfortable as the most passionate and committed leader of the team.



Shakib Al Hasan's 'I won't be Shakib if I change' comment is the most disturbing remnant of the India Test.

PHOTO: AFP FILE

Kamrul Islam Rabbi on the opening day of the one-off Test against India. Standing at first slip Soumya Sarkar took it on the bounce. Pujara was on 35 then and went on to score 83. Mushfiqur then missed a simple stumping chance while Indian wicketkeeper Wriddhiman Saha was on four. The right-hander went on to make an unbeaten 106. Mushfiqur's errors cost Bangladesh 150 odd runs. Now, the question is whether

to bat in the top order in the demanding five-day contest.

But the biggest dilemma for Mushfiqur to bat up the order and sacrifice his keeping gloves is that Bangladesh will have to sacrifice one batsman to accommodate a keeper. Bangladesh have got two wicketkeepers lining up for the job. They are Nurul Hasan and Liton Kumar Das. Unfortunately however, both have so far failed to excite with the bat. Nurul is