

SPORT

'Series win is always the target'

SAKEB SUBHAN from Colombo

After a day of rest on Monday, the Test stars in the Bangladesh ODI squad joined their teammates for a practice session of high intensity yesterday afternoon at the R Premadasa International Stadium in Colombo.

The whole squad, minus opener Tamim Iqbal and all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan who decided to take the option for a break available to the Test players, assembled at first inside the cavernous Premadasa. Fast bowling coach Courtney Walsh first got them together and had some words, then fielding coach Richard Halsall fired them up before Test skipper Mushfiqur Rahim ended the discussion with a few words of his own.

14 players, including pacers Abul Hasan and Mohammad Saifuddin, who have come to the island just for the practice game and are not part of the ODI squad, then took part in a rapid fire fielding session. Two bowlers who played the Test and are in the ODI squad, Mustafizur Rahman and Subashis Roy, were at the ground but stood in the shadows watching their teammates.

Sufficiently pumped up, the Tigers then hit the nets at the Max Cricket Academy just outside the main ground. ODI skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza, who has recently recovered from a thumb fracture sustained during the New Zealand T20Is, seemed to have adjusted well enough with Colombo's sapping heat and was bowling near full tilt. Mushfiqur, Soumya Sarkar and Sabbir Rahman were the first batch of batsmen taking guard in the nets, followed by Imrul Kayes, Mahmudullah Riyad and Mosaddek Hossain.

"As we had a rest day after the Test, the intensity will have to increase because we are adjusting to a shorter format," said Soumya Sarkar as the practice session was winding down. "Also the turnaround time is little. Here, cheeky singles and tough catches are the order of the day. That's why the intensity was higher among everyone; to adjust to the shorter form."

As he spoke, Walsh was standing in one of the nets with a disembodied shoe in front of him, positioned on leg stump around two yards in front of the wicket. Fast bowlers Taskin Ahmed, Abul and Saifuddin were running up and trying to hit the shoe, and when they did the West Indian legend applauded heartily. A few minutes ago Soumya himself was bowling his occasional military medium and had hit the shoe twice in a row.

"I am trying to contribute with the ball along with my batting," said Soumya when asked if there was a team plan to employ him more regularly in the ODI series. "So hopefully, if I get a chance I will try to prove myself. It will be good for me as well as the team."

As part of the team that drew the two-Test series by winning the country's historic 100th Test against the hosts on Sunday, Soumya was asked whether they were more confident about their chances ahead of their favoured ODIs, or whether he thought that Sri Lanka would be a more difficult proposition in the shorter form.

"The target is always to win series. We have three matches and we will want all three matches to go our way. The way everyone is playing, if we can all give our best, then the result will come our way."

He also added that he was trying to get out of the habit of scoring half-centuries and getting out, having hit three on the trot in the Tests without converting a single one into a hundred.

"I have to find out where the problem is and how to ensure that I can finish in a big way. It has happened only two or three days ago, so I don't think the solution can be found so soon. But it will be good for me if we can find it as soon as possible."



Bangladesh opener Soumya Sarkar (2nd from R) and teammates enjoy a kickabout during a practice session at the R Premadasa Stadium in Colombo yesterday. The Tigers will play the first game of their three-match ODI series against Sri Lanka at the Rangiri Dambulla International Cricket Stadium on March 25. PHOTO: AFP

POSTCARD FROM THE ISLAND

SPORTS REPORTER from Colombo

DIFFERENT TIDES

Sri Lanka's first Test defeat to Bangladesh was treated more like a doomsday event by the press. 'RIP Sri Lanka cricket' had proclaimed the headline in The Island newspaper, which also carried an Ashes style obituary notice on Monday, the day following Sri Lanka's humiliation. 'The darkest moment in Sri Lanka cricket history', The Daily News had screamed.

To this extent we can find some common ground -- the press generally reacts viciously when the national team stoops to a new low, and make no mistake about it, Sri Lanka losing to Bangladesh is a new low. That it has coincided with a new high for Bangladesh is not quite relevant now... it wouldn't be for us if the shoe was on the other foot. We can understand this behaviour.

But the common ground vanishes when you step out on the street. One shudders to think of the immediate reaction of the Bangladesh public if Bangladesh lost their first match against a newer, much younger Test nation. The P Sara Oval was empty within an hour of the defeat, and

even before that a few Sri Lankans had actually enjoyed the triumph of the underdogs.

That has been the case in the two days following the defeat. Yesterday, as some of the Bangladesh journalists went to the Department of Immigration and Emigration to renew their visas, having gotten a rare few hours when the team were neither practising nor playing, one or two of them had the accreditation cards around their necks. In the elevator, seeing the card, a man said he was happy for Bangladesh, without a hint of the suppressed rage that his counterpart in Bangladesh

would have harboured.

On the way to the R Premadasa International Stadium, our Uber driver told us that not just him, but his young son was also happy about Bangladesh's win. "He called me during the match and asked me if I was watching," the driver told us with a smile. "He told me to watch, because for the first time Bangladesh were winning."

We were all honestly bemused. What would drive such benevolent behaviour? That is when we realised that we are just tourists here; it will probably not be possible to integrate.



ODI warm-up in Colombo today

SPORTS REPORTER from Colombo



Bangladesh will play their one-day warm-up match against a Sri Lanka Board President's XI at the Colombo Cricket Club Ground today. The Tigers will be up against a strong line-up that includes international players

like Janith Perera, Dhananjaya de Silva, Thisara Perera and Dasun Shanaka in the 50-over match starting at 10:30am (Bangladesh time). It is not yet certain if it will be an 11-versus-11 affair or whether Bangladesh will field 13 players. Shakib Al Hasan, Tamim Iqbal, Mustafizur Rahman and Subashis Roy will not play in the match. The match will feature former Under-19 pace-bowling all-rounder Mohammad Saifuddin and national pacer Abul Hasan, both of whom are in Sri Lanka only to gather experience from this practice game. They are expected to fly back to Dhaka tomorrow.

The Sri Lanka Board President's XI features mostly former or current national ODI players, a departure from the relatively weaker team that played the two-day warm-up against the tourists.

The Bangladesh team will travel to Dambulla tomorrow to play two day-nighters on March 25 and March 28 at the Rangiri Dambulla International Stadium, before coming back to Colombo to play the third ODI in a day match at the Sinhalese Sports Club on April 1.

SL BOARD PRESIDENT'S XI

Kusal Janith Perera, Dilshan Munaweera, Sandun Weerakkody, Dhananjaya de Silva, Chaturanga de

Emerging Cup for an emerging Azmir?

SPORTS REPORTER



His name was only heard after he made a barnstorming 222 in a First Division Cricket match at the BKSP in February this year. Following that, the selectors wanted to see him in the nets just out of curiosity, but Azmir Ahmed gave them some food for thought. The selectors picked him in the practice matches for the Emerging Teams Asia Cup and he capitalised by making an unbeaten hundred, impressing the selectors so much that he now finds himself in the 15-member squad for the Emerging Teams Asia Cup which was announced yesterday with Mominul Haque as captain.

Chief selector Minhajul Abedin and selector Habibul Bashar both lavished praise on him, with the former saying: "He [Azmir] is a different kind of batsman and he has got tremendous potential."

"This guy has got the temperament, technique and power. We were really impressed by his practice match performance. I must say he has tremendous quality as a batsman and that's why we gave him a chance. If he is sincere and we can nurse him properly, then this guy will be an asset for us in the future," said Minhajul.

"Honestly, we didn't know anything about him until he made a double hundred. Because of his double-hundred we called him to the nets and he impressed us enough to select him for the practice match. And the way he played those two practice matches was simply outstanding," said Bashar.

"He played against established players but showed no nerves. From experience I can tell you that he is a totally different type of batsman. It was amazing the way he smashed a six over point and how he played most of his shots through the mid-off and mid-on areas. I don't know how long



he will go but he has tremendous potential."

However, Mominul's selection as captain for the eight-team competition was also a talking point as the left-hander's fate in the limited-overs format for the national side are bleak.

"He deserved it," was the short explanation from Bashar.

"Mominul is a very good cricketer and we won't write him off for limited-over cricket; rather we included him to keep him ready so that he can be included in the national side any time if required," added Minhajul.

Bangladesh, who have been pitted in group B along with Pakistan, Hong Kong and Nepal will play their opening game against Hong Kong on March 27.

SQUAD

Mominul Haque (captain), Nasir Hossain (vice-captain), Saif Hassan, Nazmul Hossain, Mohammad Mithun, Yasir Ali, Mehedi Hasan Miraz, Mohammad Saifuddin, Abul Hasan, Abu Hider, Azmir Ahmed, Rahatul Ferdous, Afif Hossain, Salman Hossain and Nasum Ahmed.

Tigers overcome mental barrier

AL-AMIN



The euphoria after Sunday's historic four-wicket win against Sri Lanka at Colombo's P Sara Oval has subsided in this part of the world, although the vanquished home side are still to recover from that painful blow at the hands of the youngest Test playing nation. This is quite natural as no higher-ranked team takes a defeat sportingly against 'a little brother' [as Andrew Fidel Fernando portrayed in his satire piece for CricInfo].

Sri Lanka's leading daily The Island was perhaps one step ahead, writing an epitaph for their national team, but that does not necessarily mean an 'Asian Ashes' series is in the making and nor did Bangladesh hit the expressway after a bumpy 'Mouchak Road' ride all the way to their 100th Test that they showcased with a fabulous win at the P Sara Oval.

True it was Bangladesh's first-ever Test win against Sri Lanka and that too on their home ground, where the top teams in the world dare not dream of winning. True it was Bangladesh's first away Test win of substance against a quality side after that stupendous victory at home against England barely six months ago, but this victory is more fulfilling for the way it was achieved.

It was a game where the Tigers completed the full cycle of a cut-throat five-day contest and held their nerve when it mattered most. Bangladesh won against England at Mirpur inside three days. And if we are not mistaken the quality of cricket they played at Chittagong in the previous Test and the intensity they showed till the fifth morning was a more fruitful effort as far Bangladesh's test of character was concerned.

They were at their potential best in conditions hostile in every sense. They might have had a brain-freeze in the second innings but they have certainly learnt a lesson from that defeat. Before coming to Sri Lanka, the Tigers played their one-off Test in India at Hyderabad. And despite a defeat by a big margin they showed they are no longer afraid even after being buried by an avalanche of first-innings runs that India posted after winning the toss on a placid wicket.

Bangladesh's Sri Lanka trip was originally designed to start with the shorter-version leg. But the Bangladesh Cricket Board wisely persuaded its Sri Lankan counterparts to alter it understandably because the Tigers were in Test mode with three games on the trot. And it worked well for them although they were disappointing in their opening Test at Galle.

Going into the second Test at Colombo, Bangladesh made four changes including a forced one after wicketkeeper Liton Das pulled out following a rib fracture. Pace bowler Taskin Ahmed making way for left-arm spinner Taijul Islam was a technical one considering the nature of P Sara Oval wicket. One-down Mominul Haque was dropped after failing to perform at Galle, where the left-hander paid the price of being rooted to the back-foot in both innings. Opener Imrul Kayes came in place of him and it was a decision that can certainly be debated over and over again. Mahmudullah Riyad was dropped for not performing with the bat. It was a justified call but the way he was handled after being dropped was uncalled for from the team management to the top brass of Bangladesh cricket. Mahmudullah's axing paved the way for Sabbir Rahman to bat up the order and the accommodation of young right-hand batsman Mosaddek Hossain, who is very good batsman against spin.

The night before skipper Mushfiqur Rahim went for the toss at the P Sara Oval, my long-time colleague in the sport section, who is now marshalling the main desk, asked me if it was possible for 'Mushy' to hide somewhere so that his deputy could go for the toss'. His fear was Mushfiqur might lose the toss again and his fear was realised the following morning.

This was perhaps the only step Mushfiqur and his troops could not control. But apart from that they hardly see a foot wrong from the very first ball that Mustafizur Rahman bowled to the opposition and with him, Sabbir, who arrived in international cricket with a strong statement that fear is a word that does not exist in his dictionary, overcame that mental barrier that has haunted them for a long time.