

SPORT

Mashrafe looks to arrest away slump

SAKEB SUBHAN from Colombo

It seems that whenever Bangladesh play, they do so with the added burden of turning around past trends. Recently, however, a case could have been made for the scenario being different when the scene turns to ODI cricket, because Bangladesh's record in ODIs since the 2015 World Cup has seen a definite upturn. On the eve of the first match of the three-ODI series starting in Dambulla at 2:30pm (3:00pm Bangladesh time) today, Bangladesh captain Mashrafe Bin Mortaza hinted that here too Bangladesh will have to change the tides of history.

Mashrafe differentiated from Bangladesh's form at home, where most recently they have had a 2-1 win over Afghanistan and a loss by the same margin against England in September-October last year. Since then, Bangladesh have played three ODIs in New Zealand and lost all three.

"The three ODIs pose a big question since we have been playing this format at home for the last two years. We lost all three away ODIs in New Zealand, so it is a different challenge," said Mashrafe at the pre-match press conference at the Rangiri Dambulla International Stadium yesterday.

That last sentence provides another hint -- that despite all his pronouncements to the contrary, Mashrafe does think that Bangladesh are slightly ahead in terms of ability and experience. And that is not an unreasonable position given that Bangladesh are a team that have had an enduring core in Mashrafe himself, Shakib Al Hasan, Tamim Iqbal, Mahmudullah Riyad and Test skipper Mushfiqur Rahim.

Sri Lanka meanwhile, have three cricketers who have played more than 100 ODIs -- skipper Upul Tharanga leads the way with 198, while Dinesh Chandimal has 122 and Thisara Perera 114. The five aforementioned cricketers from Bangladesh, although not having as many games as Tharanga, have all

played substantially more games than Chandimal.

"I never say anything extra. I think Sri Lanka have a more mature squad in the ODIs than the Tests," said Mashrafe when asked whether Bangladesh have the edge. "It is not going to be as easy as people seem to think. Obviously they have some exciting players, which we had too at one point and they are more experienced now. We have to try to execute our plans to the full, or we just have to fight till the end."

"We did well at home, so our challenge started in New Zealand. We couldn't do it there, despite creating a lot of chances. In the second and third ODIs, we gave away good starts. We have to hold on to good starts here, with bat and ball. Home teams have extra advantage. So I think both teams are starting on level terms."

That marked the second time in the 10-minute press conference that he mentioned the reversals against New Zealand, and it seems that what rankled was the wasting of chances and good positions -- a recurring theme in the New Zealand limited-overs leg. Perhaps it worried Mashrafe more because that was the scenario in which he took over the leadership from Mushfiqur Rahim in late 2014, a year that was marred by so many near misses that it seemed to be becoming a habit.

Mashrafe joined the squad for the limited-overs leg in the aftermath of a Test series drawn with a historic win, but also with the lingering gloom over Mahmudullah's exclusion from the squad for that match. Mehedi Hasan Miraz's eleventh-hour inclusion as the 17th member of the ODI squad may have added to the slight uncertainty in the dressing room, but as is well known in Bangladesh cricket, no one quite uplifts his teammates as much as Mashrafe, the senior statesman and cheerleader of the side.

It will now be left to him to ensure that Bangladesh do not relapse into the bad habits that he so painstakingly pulled them out of in 2014, and that New Zealand was an aberration.



With a historic Test win in their last match and evergreen skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza (R) joining up with the squad, the Tigers were all smiles during training yesterday ahead of their first ODI against Sri Lanka in Dambulla today. PHOTO: AFP

Manohar to stay as ICC chairman

AFP, Dharamsala

India's Shashank Manohar has deferred his resignation as the chairman of the International Cricket Council (ICC) to see through a reform programme, the game's world governing body said Friday.

Manohar quit earlier this month in the middle of an overhaul of the ICC's governance designed to reduce the power of cricket's most powerful nations -- India, Australia and England, but he agreed to withdraw his resignation temporarily after the ICC board asked him to see through the restructuring.

"In a significant show of support for Mr. Manohar the board asked him to withdraw his resignation or at the very least defer it until the ongoing process relating to governance and financial restructuring are completed," the ICC said in a statement.

Manohar ended his two-year stint as ICC chairman just eight months into the job after the divisions between the powerful Indian board and most of the rest of the game erupted into the open.

"I respect the sentiments expressed by the directors and the confidence they have reposed in me," the ICC statement quoted Manohar as saying. "In the light of this, and although my decision to depart due to personal reasons has not changed, I am willing to continue as chairman."

SL banking on youngsters to bounce back

SPORTS REPORTER from Dambulla



Sri Lanka begin this ODI series with memories of a first-ever Test loss against Bangladesh fresh in their minds; a loss that prompted a local newspaper to mourn the death of Sri Lanka cricket, Ashes style. They also start this series without their regular captain Angelo Mathews and their most lethal limited-overs bowler Lasith Malinga, both out with injuries.

So it will not be an understatement to say that currently, the Sri Lanka cricket team is one backed into a corner and eager to redress the balance that their opponents disturbed with their Test win at the P.Sara Oval in Colombo.

"We were bitterly disappointed to lose the last Test match. This is a new series and it's a good opportunity for us to come back strongly," said stand-in skipper Upul Tharanga yesterday. "Even the last series we played, we were beaten by South Africa 5-0. This is an opportunity for us to bounce back."

He said that he would miss the two seniors, but put the onus on the next generation to come good. "They are two of our senior-most players. There are lot of younger guys who have emerged. In the last two series, guys like Niroshan Dickwella and Asela Gunaratne came up and did a decent job. We are going to miss the seniors no doubt, but it's an opportunity for some of the other guys in the squad to perform."

However, Dickwella is also out of the first ODI as he is serving out a suspension he picked up in

Australia. Kusal Perera, who played well against Bangladesh in the warm-up game on Wednesday, is out with a hamstring strain picked up in that match and will be replaced by Milinda Siriwardena.

"We knew that Niroshan is out of the first game. He has done well and has been consistent for us in South Africa and Australia. Kusal was amongst the runs before he had the injury. But this is a good opportunity for some of the younger guys in the squad."

Even with these setbacks, Tharanga sounded out a fighting tone. "We are well prepared. There are some new players who are in the squad and some seniors have returned like Seekkuge Prasanna and Thisara Perera. After the last Test match, we were down and we are determined to put up a good show."

Country comes first

SPORTS REPORTER from Dambulla



Bangladesh skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza said in the pre-match press conference that his team would have to be prepared for anything when they play the first ODI against Sri Lanka in Dambulla today. However, he probably did

not mean that he would have to expect the unexpected during the press conference itself.

While he was probably expecting questions about the series at hand, and that is what happened for most of the press conference, he was thrown one from out of left field when a neutral reporter asked if Mustafizur Rahman would be given a rest as he had been for the India Test, seeing as the Champions Trophy was coming up and before that, the Indian Premier League (IPL).

Halfway through the question Mashrafe realised what was happening and was taken aback momentarily, before recovering his poise and answering the question with a straight bat.

"Look, it is the physio, trainer and coach and everyone else who will discuss and decide whether he needs rest. But I think that if he has to sacrifice the IPL to play all the matches for Bangladesh, then obviously that is what he should do. Country comes first."

Mustafizur's rise has been celebrated by all and his IPL exploits for Sunrisers Hyderabad is a source of joy for the country as well as his fellow national teammates, who have congratulated him publicly after he contributed to Hyderabad's win last year. But it seemed that it was the implication in the question, the elevation of IPL to international cricket status, that Mashrafe was taken aback by.

'I told Lara not to get out'

In the second instalment of our two-part interview with West Indian fast bowling legend and Bangladesh fast bowling coach Courtney Walsh, the Jamaican talks about how the game has changed since he started playing, and what he -- the record-holder for most ducks in Tests -- said to Brian Lara during their short but crucial last-wicket stand in Barbados in 1999. The following is an excerpt from the great fast bowler's interview with The Daily Star's Sakeb Subhan. To read the interview in full, please visit www.thedailystar.net.

The Daily Star (TDS): Your career as a bowler, captain, then as a selector... you've been in cricket for four decades now.

Courtney Walsh (CW): I've been in cricket forever (laughs).

TDS: So how do you think the game has changed?

CW: Ah, the game has evolved, the game has changed. I mean T20 has brought a different aspect to the game. It brings more bums in the seats and adds more spectators. I still think Test cricket is the best, the ultimate test of everything. But any version of the game that can be played, I will cherish it. What I noticed over the years is that a lot of the rule changes have been in favour of the batsmen. You know, they cut the seam off the ball. The wickets are flatter, the bats are getting bigger. I can bowl one, maybe two bouncers an over. Everything is more in favour of the batsmen now. To me it's not an even contest or as even a contest as it could have been or should have been.

TDS: What do you think drives that?

CW: I think because everybody wants to see lots of runs being scored.

TDS: You were the captain of West Indies. It must be a little painful for you now seeing their decline, especially in Test cricket.

those days I just gave it everything I had, and I enjoyed it. I'm a bit sad now to see that we're not as dominant or we're not competing as well as I know we can or we should. The ability and the talent is still in the West Indies. We just need a common ground, a common understanding so we can get the best of both worlds where our best players are prepared and committed to play for us and it will be tremendous to have that going. The sooner we can get that sorted out, the better for West Indies.

TDS: Is the passion for the game still there?

CW: I want to say yes but I don't know, I am not as close to the players as I used to be. I know that the passion for the game from the fans is still there and they want to see the guys performing well. I know from their standpoint it is, but not being that close to the players I don't know what's happening in their heads.

TDS: The West Indies school of fast bowling is a little different from the rest of the world, say Australians, who sledge. Have you ever sledged?

CW: I can't remember slogging. I think we used to let the ball do the talking. I remember there was one incident with Mike, he said something and I thought it was directed at me and I retaliated and then got him out and stuff. To his



credit he came on the field when the game was over and said that what he said was for himself. He was never one to speak or chastise. It was just funny. So I just said to him: "Thank you for saying it so I could hear, because it just pumped me up," (laughs). He was one of the most respected cricketers I played against. Strange to hear it coming from him, but he clarified it. I am not one to sledge and never did, just let the ball do the talking. As the boys would say I probably had 'evil eyes', the glare and the stare.

TDS: How is Bangladesh's fast bowling lining up?

CW: We have a good pool of fast bowlers. I am hoping in a couple of months they will hone their skills and get some experience. Tours like this give them experience and give them exposure. When they are home they don't play as much or they don't bowl as much, so when they come on tour it helps. The New Zealand tour was pretty helpful for that. I know there was only one Test in India, but if you could get more of these tours, more Test matches and the warm-up games to give them that exposure to bowl against quality opposition, that's the only way they can learn their trade.

You can tell them as much as you want, but if they don't go in the middle and try to execute and get that confidence then it's going to be challenging. There is talent there, they have the ability and the guys are working so I hope that we can get better and better with each tour.

TDS: You've been here less than a year. Have you yet had a chance to see the depth in domestic cricket?

CW: Not the full depth. I have seen a couple of guys who have played in the Bangladesh Premier League, but I have not been there yet to see the first-class games or club matches so to speak. I heard about some of them, but unless you see them for yourselves it is a bit difficult. But all the ones who have come to our net sessions are the ones you have to take note of. I make a mental note of some of them or I jot down their names and hopefully I'll see them again.

What I'd like to do at some point of time is to organise a bowling camp with a couple of other international bowlers for one week or two weeks in Bangladesh, once the time permits. I am going to be looking at [the period] after the Champions Trophy to see where the gap is and to see if I can get the board to sort of get involved in

that. Maybe bring Sir Curtly [Ambrose] over and look for maybe one or two others and have a fast bowling camp and try to encourage, develop and improve.

TDS: You might not like this question, but did you practise batting much?

CW: When I was a kid, yes. But not towards the end of my career, which was something I probably regret not doing. We had so many good batsmen getting so many runs in those days. I didn't work on the batting as much as I could have or should have.

TDS: What did Lara say to you when you joined him at the crease in Barbados [when Walsh was the last man in and Brian Lara was batting on 140-odd with seven runs left to seal a famous win against Australia in 1999]?

CW: No, it's what I said to him (absolute straight face).

TDS: What did you say to him?

CW: I said to him that if you get out we're gonna lose this game so you better not get out. And he looked at me, and I said: "I'm not gonna get out".

TDS: And you were confident facing [Jason] Gillespie?

CW: I faced Gillespie and I faced [Glenn] McGrath and I didn't get out.

TDS: So you were more nervous about Lara getting out?

CW: Yes, I was more concerned, not nervous, more concerned.