

SPORT

'It was a perfect game alright'

AL-AMIN



It took Tamim Iqbal almost six months to score a one-day century after his last one against Afghanistan at the home of Bangladesh cricket in Mirpur in October last year. The left-handed opener struck a magnificent 127 in Dambulla on Saturday, an innings of assurance that fashioned Bangladesh's robust 90-run victory against hosts Sri Lanka.

But for those who follow the Tigers closely, Tamim's ton has got a special meaning since it has finally lifted a curse of some sort or a locker-room theory that the left-hander has been trying to overcome.

On October 1, 2016 when Tamim scored 118 against Afghanistan, his seventh ODI hundred, his captain Mashrafe Bin Mortaza wrote down in the dressing room that 'it would take him another six months to score his next century'. The captain wrote that so that it would ignite Tamim. It's not that the left-hander was not trying hard -- he got starts in the last six innings he played after that. But bad luck, combined with judgmental errors in shot selection held him back.

However, Tamim was quite happy when a century finally came on Saturday.

"Mashrafe bhai told me he was very happy when I walked into the dressing room after scoring that century," Tamim told this reporter over phone yesterday.

"He [Mashrafe] is threatening to curse me again. But I'm happy that it has so far been confined to threats," said Tamim with a smile.

It was Tamim's second successive innings of authority after his fabulous 82 on the fifth morning of the second Test in Colombo, which Bangladesh won by 4-wickets to showcase their centenary Test in



TAMIM IQBAL

some style.

But both innings are quite different. He was attacking in his 82 while his 127 was more like a vintage wine.

"I'm happy that I could play according to the demands of the team. Sometimes you need to be attacking and sometimes you need to shift that gear. And at the end of the day you feel happy knowing that you have contributed to the cause of the team," said Tamim about his two contrasting innings.

Tamim's 127 helped Bangladesh post a massive 324 for five in the first ODI before the Lankans were bundled out for 234 in their chase. It was a match Bangladesh played like true professionals. They built their innings with minimum risk, bowled beautifully and fielded brilliantly. It was a match where they overwhelmed the

Lankans in every department of the game that prompted Mashrafe to call it 'a perfect game'.

"It's a perfect game alright. But it was one of those perfect games we have played. I think we played perfect games against Pakistan in our 3-0 series win, we were perfect in our 2-1 series success against India and we played a perfect game in that third ODI against South Africa. We have also played a few perfect games in Zimbabwe and West Indies," said Tamim.

"In this match we constructed the innings very well. Sabbir played a vital knock and even those late-order thrusts by [Mahmudullah] Riyad bhai and Mosaddek [Hossain] were equally impressive. But our fourth wicket partnership after the loss of two quick wickets was the best part of the

match. It was very pleasing to see the way Shakib [Al Hasan] played. It shows the maturity of a team," Tamim observed.

Asked how tough it was for him to keep pace with a fleet-footed Shakib, the left-hander said: "I enjoyed batting with him. He is the fastest player in our team when it comes to running between the wickets."

When asked if the senior players are taking more responsibility Tamim said: "We are four to five players who have been playing in the national team together for the last ten years or so. We always try to play according to the demand of the team. You see when you come up with a game plan you can't be 100 per cent successful in executing those plans. We are working very hard to work with those 10 per cent mistakes. And the senior players are playing a vital role to minimize those mistakes. The positive effect was quite evident on the field on Saturday," said a confident Tamim.

The 28-year-old batsman, who celebrated his birthday on March 20, said that he enjoyed that little break after the second Test.

"We have been playing non-stop cricket for a long time. So, these sort of breaks are very helpful for us to recover. I thank the team management for allowing those free spaces," said the Chittagonian.

Asked how he enjoyed his birthday in Mumbai, where he also consulted with his dentist, Tamim said: "It was a family affair. We enjoyed a quiet dinner."

The left-hander will come to play the second ODI at Dambulla on Tuesday and said what happened on Saturday was history.

"We will have to start afresh. We know they will come hard. But our effort will be to play another perfect match. And if I get an opportunity I will try to make it big again," said a self-assured Tamim, who is also the first Bangladeshi batsman to complete 10,000 international runs.

POSTCARD FROM THE ISLAND

SPORTS REPORTER from Dambulla

JEALOUSY IN MOFUSSIL DAMBULLA

If you are a Bangladeshi in Sri Lanka, and a bit of homesickness has crept in after three weeks of relentless cricket coverage taking you from hotel to ground, hotel to team hotel and back to hotel again, the modest township of Dambulla can come as a momentary cure. While Galle with its rampart shores was otherworldly and Colombo's multicultural, big city refinement a world away from Dhaka, Dambulla can fool you into believing that you are back in good old Bangladesh.

Mofussil is a term that comes readily to mind when talking of Dambulla. The highway from Colombo to Dambulla is much like the two-lane roads that connect Dhaka to most other cities of Bangladesh and once in Dambulla, whether it involves going to the team hotel or the stadium, the highway is the main artery of travel and intermittent markets along it have collected small settlements in the surrounding areas. The best approximation of a Bangladeshi counterpart can be said to be a cross between a mofussil town and the stretch of road from Gabtoli to Savar.

But the similarities are momentary; as soon as your eyes stray from the road and its immediate vicinity, you will see the largest rose quartz mountain range in South Asia, and perhaps subconsciously curse Mountbatten for depriving us of mountains when he sat with pen and map to carve up the subcontinent.



PHOTO: SAKEB SUBHAN

The picturesque exterior of the Cave Temple in Dambulla.

But we can only curse ourselves when we look at the heritage these Sri Lankans hold on to. The Cave Temple is a major attraction in Dambulla and a big source of tourism revenue. 160 metres above the surrounding plains is a complex of caves covered in glowing murals and adorned with a total of 153 statues of Buddha. It is not just the beauty of these caves or that they were adorned thus around 2,000 years ago, but the fact that it has been maintained with such integrity in an area far from the madding crowd that is awe-inspiring.

THE STADIUM

That mindset is reflected in the venue of Bangladesh's recent glory -- the Rangiri Dambulla International Stadium. In every sense of the word, the 16,800-capacity venue is of international standard. It showcases the best of the area it occupies -- the ground is open on three sides, taking in the surrounding forests and also allowing the water body known as the Kandalama Reservoir on one side to draw the eyes away from the hubbub inside the ground to the soothing sunset behind the lake and faraway mountains.

Perhaps that is why there was not much public reaction to the home team's big loss to Bangladesh on Saturday. The crowd just cheered Thisara Perera's late blows as long as possible, then walked away knowing that there are treasures to be had beyond the confines of the cricket field.



A view of the Rangiri Dambulla International Stadium from the stands.

PHOTO: SAKEB SUBHAN

De Kock drives SA to 314

AFP, Hamilton

Quinton de Kock batted through the pain of a damaged finger to bolster South Africa with a defiant 90 as the deciding Test against New Zealand was evenly poised at the end of day three in Hamilton on Sunday.

In the rain disrupted Test, New Zealand were 67 without loss at stumps, with a rejuvenated Tom Latham on 42, in reply to South Africa's 314.

The injured De Kock and previously out-of-form Latham were the individual stars in the deciding Test with South Africa 1-0 up and New Zealand needing a win to draw the series.

De Kock, playing with damaged ligaments in his right index finger, went to the middle with South Africa 148 for five and he held the innings together while the bottom half of the batting order added a further 166.

South African batting coach Neil McKenzie described de Kock as "a unique player" who needed painkillers to get through the day.

"We're threatening to get bowled out for around 200 and he comes and gets a really quality 90," McKenzie said.

"There's a few tablets, anti-inflammatories and that sort of stuff but Quinton doesn't mind he just gets on with it.

"But I definitely see he was very uncomfortable." Latham, who managed 24 in total in three previous innings in the series, put his string of low scores behind him to ensure a positive start to Zealand's reply with Jeetan Raval who was 25 not out at stumps.

SCORES IN BRIEF
SOUTH AFRICA: First innings 314 (Amla 50, Du Plessis 53, Bavuma 29, De Kock 90, Rabada 34; Henry 4-93, de Grandhomme 2-62, Wagner 3-104)
NEW ZEALAND: First innings 67 for no loss (Latham 42 not out, Raval 25 not out)

'Have to keep improving'

SAKEB SUBHAN from Dambulla



Putting behind the hullabaloo that surrounded his last-minute inclusion into the ODI squad, Mehedi Hasan Miraz has proved once again that he is a player not cowed by the big occasion. On his ODI debut in the first ODI against Sri Lanka in Dambulla on Saturday, Miraz struck up a lethal spin-and-pace partnership with skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza to all but bowl Sri Lanka out of the game in 10 tight overs that stymied the launch of their chase of Bangladesh's 324.

Much like his friend from the Under-19 days Mustafizur Rahman, former youth captain Miraz has had auspicious starts in both Tests and ODIs. It speaks of his will to be on the winning side that Miraz had trouble deciding which one he would rate higher, the Test debut against England last October where he took a five-for but the team lost narrowly or Saturday's ODI debut where his two wickets contributed to a potentially series-deciding win.

"It was a dream debut for me on both occasions," Miraz said at the team hotel yesterday afternoon. "I took five wickets on debut but unfortunately we lost the match. But in ODIs I made a winning start. Actually both the starts went pretty well for me. Now I want to continue with this good start."

The likes of Miraz, Sabbir Rahman, Mosaddek Hossain and Mustafizur represent Bangladesh's



MEHEDI HASAN MIRAZ

next generation of stars who because of the deeds of their predecessors, can dream even bigger. Tamim Iqbal praised Miraz for his nerveless performance on debut after Saturday's 90-run win.

"I think he made a fantastic debut today [Saturday]. He bowled very well. It didn't seem like he was playing his first ODI. I think he is a confident guy with the right attitude. He will go a long way."

When told of Tamim's comment, Miraz smiled shyly and returned the compliment. "I will give credit to the seniors for that. Senior players have supported me very much on the field yesterday."

"Honestly, I felt nervous at the beginning.

Because in a Test match, players have plenty of time to bounce back from a bad spell, but in ODIs there is less time available for a player to prepare himself. Mashrafe bhai inspired me and told me that if I could bowl in good areas then it will be difficult for the batsmen to play. I felt very relaxed and confident due to their support."

In his short career so far, Miraz has shown a noticeable willingness to learn and develop that has been evident in his batting. In the first four Tests he played, he seemingly could not buy a run despite his reputation as a genuine all-rounder in age-level and first-class cricket. But once he got a substantial score in the Hyderabad Test, he has been a consistent performer with the bat in the lower order in Tests. He seems eager to apply that philosophy with the ball too.

"International cricket is pretty tough. To survive I have to improve myself continuously. Because everyone is watching how I play, people will do research and analyse me. So if I stick to the same method it will not work. I have to improve myself day by day," he said.

He then said something that seemed to perfectly reflect the mindset of the Bangladesh team now.

"We all felt good after winning, but what can I say about celebrating?" Miraz said when asked how they celebrated their win. "The game is not over yet. There has only been one match, and if we become satisfied after that then we cannot go forward. We will celebrate only when we win the series."

Lyon stifles India

AFP, Dharamsala



Australian off-spinner Nathan Lyon was the hero on an engrossing second day of the series-deciding fourth and final Test on Sunday, taking four key

Indian wickets

The 29-year-old made the most of a lively track at Dharamsala, which is hosting its first Test, to return a rich haul of 4 for 67.

Fast bowlers Josh Hazlewood (1-40) and Pat Cummins (1-59) also bowled their hearts out during frugal spells to restrict the top-ranked hosts to 248-6 at stumps.

India still trail by 52 runs with four wickets in hand after Australia made 300 in their first knock, largely thanks to a fine 111 from captain Steve Smith.

At stumps Wriddhiman Saha was batting on 10 with Ravindra Jadeja on 16.

"There was a bit out there for me," Lyon said after the day's play.

"We bowled well in partnerships. We would like to come out and bowl well again tomorrow and take the four wickets and then bat well.

"They are a world-class batting line-up and you have to challenge them consistently."

The Indian batsmen were guilty of

squandering good starts in a match they must win to regain the Border-Gavaskar trophy.

But Lokesh Rahul (60) and Cheteshwar Pujara (57) batted patiently to put on 87 for the second wicket, the best partnership so far for the hosts.

"It's by far the best wicket we have played on, there's something in it for the spinners and the fast bowlers as well. The ball kept swinging the whole day," said Rahul.

"If you spend some time in the middle it's really good to bat on. All of us got starts but we couldn't convert.

"But we are happy at the end of the day with 250-odd runs for six wickets. It wasn't really the worst day for us."

Ajinkya Rahane, standing in for injured skipper Virat Kohli, also looked set for a big score but ended up gifting a catch to Smith off Lyon for 46 made off 104 balls.

Ravichandran Ashwin (30) was adjudged lbw off Lyon. The all-rounder opted for a review but ball tracking showed the stumps would have been hit.

SCORES IN BRIEF

AUSTRALIA: First innings 300 (Smith 111, Wade 57, Warner 56, Cummins 21; Yadav 4-68)

INDIA: First innings 248 for 6 (Rahul 60, Pujara 57, Rahane 46, Ashwin 30; Lyon 4-67)

'Toughest session of my career'

AFP, Dharamsala

As an opener India's Lokesh Rahul is used to facing hostile spells from new-ball bowlers. But the Australian attack Sunday, he admitted, was the toughest of his career so far.

After bowling out the visitors for 300 in their first innings, the Indians were hoping to build a big total. But they were impeded by some lethal fast bowling from Josh Hazlewood and Pat Cummins.

And just as the hosts thought they had seen off the worst, off-spinner Nathan Lyon scripted a turnaround in the final session to finish the day with four wickets for 67.

"The way Josh and Cummins bowled in the first session, I can say it has been the toughest session that I have faced in Test cricket so far," said Rahul who has scored 1,149 runs in 17 Tests