

SPORT



Three of Brazil's biggest stars -- Neymar (L), Marcelo (2nd from L) and Philippe Coutinho (R) -- scored as the Canarinho defeated Paraguay in their World Cup qualifying match on Wednesday and became the first team to secure a berth in the 2018 World Cup in Russia.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Tite magic takes Brazil to Russia

Star Sports Desk

Brazil are where they belong. The five-time world champions jetted their way to next year's World Cup in Russia with a clinical 3-0 win against Paraguay at Sao Paulo's Corinthians Arena on Wednesday. Neymar, Philippe Coutinho and Marcelo struck in a match that capped off a magnificent turnaround of a team that was in a shambles with only nine points in six games less than a year ago. The victory, followed by Uruguay's shock 1-2 defeat against Peru on the same day, not only confirmed Brazil's ticket to Russia as the first team with four games in hand but also fulfilled the steely resolve of no-nonsense coach Adenor Leonardo Bacchi.

Popularly known as Tite, the 55-year-old former Corinthians coach took over the team when it was in all sorts of trouble

after that 7-1 annihilation by Germany in the 2014 World Cup on their home turf. Brazil turned to Dunga after their humiliation but he failed miserably in Copa America, from where Brazil made a first-round exit. They were languishing at sixth position after six World Cup qualifying games when the federation appointed Tite in June last year.

On his first day in the job, Tite said he still had "trembling knees" or nerves about taking the job after a succession of humiliations for Brazilian football in recent years.

"The focus is the qualification for the World Cup and we are not in the qualification zone," he said in his first press briefing. "There is the risk [of being out]. If you don't accept that, you will be fighting against reality. I am here because unfortunately the results did not come. But there is a potential for us to grow and aim for a spot."

And Wednesday after nearly a year, the task-master completed the job in style -- winning eight games on the trot. Not only that, he transformed the team into a cohesive unit and more importantly the flair that the men in yellow are revered for all over the world has returned. He did a few things that worked well for Brazil. He was very assertive when he took over, pronouncing that he had no intention of overseeing the Brazilian Olympic team. His sole focus was to see Brazil through to the qualifying phase. He has also rotated the captaincy, primarily to shed the burden on Neymar. Brazil had never been a one-man team and his effort was to make sure that his side does not become over-reliant on Neymar.

A shrewd Tite however utilised the star value of the Barcelona forward to create space for his other attackers. "The collective empowers the individual. If the ball arrives to Neymar, they mark [him], but the other

side is more exposed. Coutinho creates chances. Enter Fagner, enter Paulinho. We take Neymar to one side, let him be isolated and make room for another. If they mark two, somewhere there are going to be people free. [We have to] find these alternative areas," Tite revealed.

He has also changed Neymar from a temperamental one to a more disciplined person on the field.

"We only learn when we get hurt or do something wrong. I already argued unnecessarily. I got yellow and red cards, harmed myself, harmed my teammates. But time makes us more mature. Nowadays I only think about playing football, I am better in every aspect," Neymar said at a press conference recently.

Interestingly, Neymar donned the captain's arm-band after a long time against Paraguay. Perhaps Tite feels the striker has matured to lead Brazil to glory in Russia.

Taskin's just reward

Sakeb Subhan from Colombo



It was not the best bowling performance from Bangladesh, flat wicket notwithstanding, as Sri Lanka scored 311 all out in the second ODI in Dambulla on Tuesday, a match that was eventually abandoned because of rain after Sri Lanka's innings. The story of the day may have been Taskin Ahmed's hatrick to end Sri Lanka's innings one ball shy of the full 50 overs, but his contributions earlier in the day were just as important to Bangladesh keeping the score well below 350.

Taskin's ODI stats make for good reading -- an average of 26.52 for a fast bowler bowling mostly on subcontinent pitches is not something to sneeze at -- but he has often been susceptible to batsmen going after him, which is evidenced by the fact that he has had an economy rate of six or higher in 12 of the 25 innings he has bowled in since his ODI debut in June 2014. On Tuesday, however, when Kusal Mendis and Upul Tharanga were going great guns, he was the one who pulled things back with a first spell of five overs that conceded just 19 runs.

He conceded just one boundary in that spell, and being Bangladesh's fastest bowler, he repeatedly pegged the duo back with well-directed bouncers that they had no choice but to sway out of the way of.

His hatrick may not have been one of the best you will see in ODIs -- the first two wickets of Asela Gunaratne and Suranga Lakmal were off slogs, with the second one being off a full toss -- but it was reward richly deserved for what went on before. When the last 15 overs started Sri Lanka were sitting pretty on 203 for two, but Taskin's next three overs conceding just 23 runs for the crucial wicket of Mendis was a big reason for Bangladesh pulling it back.

And having done the hard work before the last over of the innings, Taskin said he was visualising something like what eventually happened.

"I was imagining all of this while I was fielding in the previous over. By the grace of Allah, it all transpired like I had planned," said Taskin while speaking to reporters in Dambulla before the team departed for Colombo yesterday morning. "I missed a lot of hatrick chances but this time I was relaxed before the hatrick ball. It just felt right, that I would get it this time. And it happened."

Even though the first two wickets may have owed as much to mishits as bowling skill, the hatrick ball -- a full and fast delivery that homed in on Nuwan Pradeep's middle stump -- was top notch in the circumstances and a delivery that he described as the best of his career.

"It was a big achievement to get an international hatrick. I would have felt better had the match continued, and we went on to win it," said Taskin. "The main target is to win the series. Wicket is a lot about luck. The hatrick ball was a yorker which could have taken an under-edge and gone for four. I got lucky."

He may have gotten lucky, but he certainly earned his slice of fortune on Tuesday.

Aussie media slam Kohli

Pti, Melbourne

Australian media Wednesday launched a scathing attack on Virat Kohli, labelling the India captain as "classless" and "egomaniac" following his no-longer-friends comment at the end of a spiteful Test series.

Australian newspapers came hard on Kohli for declaring that he no longer considers Australian players as friends after what happened in the four-match rubber, which was marred by acrimony between players of both the sides.

The Australian media also took a jibe at Kohli after India reportedly snubbed the visitors' invitation for a beer at the end of the series which the hosts won 2-1 to reclaim the Border-Gavaskar Trophy.

"Virat Kohli had to shake hands and move on after series win but he acted like a child," read a headline in Sydney's 'Daily Telegraph', which also called Kohli an "egomaniac".

"Beergate: Kohli's latest classless act," another headline read.

Peter Lalor of 'The Australian' newspaper added: "If there were any doubts about the poor spirit between the Indian and Australian sides it was confirmed after the series when the home side shunned a suggestion the two sides drink together."

They also compared Kohli's behaviour with his opposite number Steve Smith, who apologised for letting his "emotions slip" during the aggressively-contested series.

"All Virat Kohli had to do was say sorry. Steve Smith did," wrote 'Herald Sun' journalist Russell Gould.

'311 not beyond us'

Sports Reporter from Colombo

On paper it may seem that Sri Lanka scoring 311 and then the match being abandoned was a lucky break for Bangladesh as they come to Colombo secure in the knowledge that at worst, they will have a drawn ODI series to go with a historic drawn Test series on the tour of Sri Lanka. And if you are of a cynical leaning, the team's cheery mood at their hotel yesterday before they departed Dambulla towards Colombo may be read as relief that they did not have to undergo a difficult chase.

Most of the players, however, seemed a little sorry that the match on Tuesday was washed out. Taskin Ahmed said that not being able to complete the match and win took a little gloss off his achievement in becoming the fifth Bangladeshi to take an ODI hatrick. Many of the others were of a similar view, with the general sentiment being that if the match was allowed to be completed, it would have been a good contest.

"I can tell you, yesterday's [Tuesday's] pitch was the same as the one we played the practice match on," said skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza during an informal chat with reporters at the team hotel yesterday morning. In the practice

match on March 22 against a Sri Lanka Board President's XI at the Colombo Cricket Club ground, Bangladesh conceded 354 runs but nearly chased down that total, finishing on 352.

"No, we did not think that we could not chase 311 on that pitch. It would have been a close match, but we believed we could do it. Of course, if we lost wickets it would have been a different matter. We conceded 350 in Colombo, and we did not have Shakib [Al Hasan] or Mustafizur [Rahman], but we almost chased that," added Mashrafe.

And he would know. He bowled on that pitch in Colombo and was the main reason Bangladesh got so close in that chase, hitting a 35-ball 58 with four fours and as many sixes.

Someone else besides Mustafizur and Shakib missed that match -- Bangladesh's batsman in red hot form, Tamim Iqbal. As Tamim made his way from checkout to the restaurant for breakfast, he echoed Mashrafe's views.

"To say we were robbed of a win would be a mistake," Tamim smiled in reply to a leading question. "But I can say that it would have been a good match."

So if you are of an optimistic bent, you can read the positive vibe as the players knowing, not for certain perhaps, that they can handle Sri Lanka's best shot. Either way, we will not know until the third ODI on April 1.

POSTCARD FROM THE ISLAND

Sports Reporter from Colombo

RESPECT THE MOUNTAINS, AND THE CRICKETERS

There are two mountains that can be seen from the Aliya Resort and Spa, the Bangladesh team's hotel in Dambulla. The twin peaks of Pidurangala and the Kashyapa Lion Rock in Sigiriya dominate the skyline and together form one of the most popular tourism packages in Dambulla.

Having spied the mountains during a visit to the team hotel we, the travelling sports journalists, decided to conquer them. A quick google check showed the height of Pidurangala at 200 metres, and that of Lion Rock -- where archaeological remnants of King Kashyapa's rule in the fifth century AD are the major attraction -- a few tens of metres higher.

Now, Mount Everest is nearly 10 kilometres high, and we foolish, unfit journo decided that this was going to be a walk in the park. The package includes a sunrise hike to the top of Pidurangala to see the sunrise over flatlands and distant, faded mountain ranges. So at 4:30 am in the morning we set off, a group of six at varying levels of unfitness, to Pidurangala. We were assured that there would be steps leading up to the peak, and it would not be nearly as arduous as actually having to climb a mountain. And what mountain, this was just 600 feet or so above ground.

40 minutes of climbing later, most of us were lying flat on the rock face on top



The Kashyapa Lion rock, one of two imposing peaks which dominates the skyline in Sigiriya.

PHOTO: SAKEB SUBHAN

of Pidurangala, barely able to countenance getting up and climbing back down again, much less climbing 'stairs' up another mountain. The stairs were not stairs, they were blocks of rocks stacked together in a winding line all the way to the top, and the last bit of the climb involved clinging on to rock faces and branches for dear life.

The view, to say the least, was exhilarating, and after lingering at the top for twice as long as it took us to get up there, we climbed back down again.

By the time we made it to Lion Rock, we rediscovered our bluster, and seeing that the steps in the much more frequented tourist site were more or less evenly elevated, we undertook the

second climb. With the experience under the belt, I can say that the stair heights do not really matter; the mountain's height does. Always respect the mountain.

And respect the cricketers too. A rough calculation shows that the whole exercise burnt around 600 calories for each of us. Let's be generous and make that 700 because of the unevenness of the stairs. By a conservative estimate, a T20 match burns around 1,000 calories.

A Test match day would then burn around 2,100. That means doing what we did three times in a day. Notions of walking a mile in their shoes before we criticise them go out the window right there. I am much happier putting on the calories behind the desk, thank you very



Mominul Haque practises ahead of his team's final group match against Pakistan today. PHOTO: ANURUP KANTI DAS

'Pakistan game is important'

Sports Reporter



Emerging Teams Asia Cup

Bangladesh have already confirmed a semifinal berth in the Emerging Teams Asia Cup, but today's last Group B match against Pakistan still has a great deal of importance for home side skipper Mominul Haque.

Bangladesh won both their previous group stage matches against Hong Kong and Nepal by big

margins, although their batting got a jolt in the second match before Nasir Hossain scored a hundred to take his team to safety.

"The first two matches were good for us. We won the first match quite comfortably, but had a collapse in our batting in the second and I think that collapse gave us a good message. Now we are looking forward to becoming group champions by winning the last group match against Pakistan," Mominul told reporters yesterday.

"I believe there is a scope for us to improve in all three departments despite getting good results in the first two games. And we have to play to our potential as our main target is to become champions. The last group match against Pakistan is important because we would like to go into the semifinal on a high note," he continued.

The two experienced cricketers in the hosts' side, Mominul and Nasir, have so far made great contributions to the team, but Mominul expressed

optimism over the young cricketers.

"All our young players are capable of showing good performances and I am confident that they will show their character," he said.

Mominul also said that they had a good idea about Pakistan, who also confirmed their semifinal spot by winning their first two group matches.

"We have got a good idea about Pakistan. They have some senior players and we must target them to win the match."