

SPORT

'A milestone in a long journey'

BISHWAJIT ROY



"It was... I think," said Tamim Iqbal as he took a moment before continuing: "Five to six years back, we had a discussion about our future targets and we set our own goals, which was to grab the number five position in the ICC ODI rankings."

"We then progressed as a team step by step. During that journey, some small steps, among other things, brought us to today's position. We climbed to the number six position in the rankings and we achieved it by our own rights. It is not a gift; we needed hard work to achieve it. We deserve this position," said Tamim breathlessly as he spoke to The Daily Star over phone an hour before boarding the flight from Dublin to Birmingham.

The five-wicket victory over New Zealand in their last match of the tri-series in Ireland gave the Tigers a cushion in the rankings. If one looks solely at their performance since the ICC World Cup in 2015 in Australia-New Zealand when considering the Tigers' rise, Tamim would definitely oppose that kind of myopic view.

"It would be completely wrong if we think that everything started only two years back. You have to go at least six years back if you want to find the team's new journey. Our current coach [Chandika Hathurusingha] has been doing a wonderful job but our previous coaches have also contributed hugely to shape this team," Tamim explained.

"But if you are being honest, you cannot just look at what happened in the last six years. What would have happened to our cricket if a generation failed to become champions in the ICC Trophy and failed to play the World Cup for the first



TAMIM IQBAL

time? Every generation had a great contribution. It was a long journey. It would be wrong to think that this current bunch of cricketers is achieving everything," he continued.

However, what was achieved in Ireland is now in the past and so Tamim looks forward to their next big assignment, the ICC Champions Trophy, where they will face the likes of hosts England, Australia and New Zealand during the group matches.

"We had a target of becoming champions in the tri-series but we are satisfied with what we have done. Our overall performance was good and we almost fulfilled our goal here [Ireland] before the Champions Trophy. It is the best possible way of going into a big tournament like the Champions Trophy. You cannot expect anything better than the build-up we have had to an important tournament," opined Tamim.

The left-handed opener also believes that it will be a different ball game during the ICC Champions Trophy: "It will be a different ball game. The conditions will be different than Ireland. But I have no doubt that our performance in the tri-series will help us a lot. We will need to adapt to the conditions as quickly as possible and it will be all about the execution in the middle."

"The highlights of the tri-series campaign were the performance of Mustafizur [Rahman], as he returned to his old form and it's a big plus point ahead of the Champions Trophy. Rubel [Hossain] was simply fantastic in his bowling and the batsmen scored runs," added Tamim.

In the end, Tamim emphasised the importance of the 'team effort' that has brought them to this stage and hoped that it will continue to bring more good news in the future. Hence, why not in the ICC Champions Trophy?



Mushfiqur Rahim (R) and Mahmudullah Riyad brought all their experience to bear to take Bangladesh home from a tricky situation in the last tri-series match at the Clontarf Cricket Club in Dublin on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

RISE OF THE TIGERS

While the players will say that they do not think about the rankings because it is an unnecessary source of pressure before and during a match, once Bangladesh rose to number six in the ODI rankings by beating New Zealand on Wednesday, ODI skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza could not help but say that 'it was a very important match for us, we knew that if we won we would go up to sixth'. It is important not just because it eases their passage to the 2019 World Cup, but also because it is a certificate of their true standing in world cricket as the sixth best team. They usurped Sri Lanka to get to the sixth position, and on the tour of Sri Lanka Bangladesh not only kept pace with their then higher-ranked side but at times the Tigers looked the superior outfit in the Lions' den. Bangladesh first gave notice of their ODI prowess by beating India and South Africa in the 2007 World Cup, but even then wins were upsets. It was not until they beat New Zealand 4-0 at home in October 2010 that wins became more commonplace. Even then they had to rely on Sri Lanka beating West Indies in February 2011 for the latter to slide down and allow Bangladesh's results before that to lift them to number eight in the world. But since then it has been the Tigers' doing, and it is fitting that they have moved ahead of Sri Lanka on their own steam to rise to number six.

06

Between 7th and 6th
M W L NR
22 11 9 2
1 year, 10 months and 29 days

PATH TO 6TH

07

Between 8th and 7th
M W L NR
68 29 37 2
4 years, 4 months and 18 days

May 24, 2017: The Tigers mauled two preys with one swipe thanks to utterly nerveless batting from Mushfiqur Rahim and Mahmudullah Riyad, they beat New Zealand for the first time away from home and climbed to number six.

June 24, 2015: Rising to number seven was all their own doing – a Mustafizur Rahman-inspired 2-1 series win over India cemented the reputation they had formed in the 2015 World Cup as the new threat in world cricket.

08

Till the 8th rank
M W L NR
238 64 172 2

February 8, 2011: Sri Lanka's 2-0 defeat of West Indies forced the latter to slide down the ladder, but the Tigers laid the groundwork when they blanked New Zealand 4-0 at home in October 2010 and defeated Zimbabwe 3-1 in December 2010.



'You can't buy experience'

Confident Tigers reach Birmingham

SPORTS REPORTER



As Bangladesh approach the Champions Trophy, perhaps the most auspicious sign is that one member of the team who has recently been out of sorts both mentally and performance-wise has truly turned things around. Mahmudullah Riyad looked like a man hunted on the New Zealand tour at the turn of the year, when the Kiwis excellently exploited his vulnerabilities against the short ball and the moving ball. The turmoil continued into the Sri Lanka tour, where he was dropped after twin failures in the first Test.

Fast forward a month and a half to the end of the tri-series, and Mahmudullah has scored 140 runs at an average of 140 in the four matches. More impressively, he put in a masterful display against short bowling as he and Mushfiqur Rahim took the team home in the last match on Wednesday against former tormentors New Zealand, thereby delivering Bangladesh's rise to number six in the ODI rankings.



MASHRAFE BIN MORTAZA

Wednesday. "We lost a few matches from that situation, so that fear was there."

It was a display of mind over matter as Mahmudullah, whose technique is not ideally suited to playing the short ball as he

10 balls left.

"You can't buy experience -- the way Mushfiqur and Riyad batted was unbelievable," ODI skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza -- who was one of the men fighting to keep Mahmudullah in the fold after he was dropped -- said after the match on

stays side on, was ever-vigilant in picking the bouncers early, which gave him the time to either ramp them over the slips or hit eye-pleasing pulls and hooks. That hinted at hours spent in the nets trying to solve the problem. It is an example that the rest of the teammates will do well to follow in the Champions Trophy.

"The group we are playing in is almost a group of death. We have to play the top three teams [England, Australia and New Zealand] in the world. But you cannot predict anything -- on your good day you can win. We will try to be on our toes from the beginning and if the opportunity comes, hopefully we can utilise it."

"Even though three or four of their regulars will return, I think that a win always gives a team a boost. Before the New Zealand match we have two practice matches [against Pakistan and India] and two important matches against England and Australia. A win gives us confidence and it lets us leave Ireland with confidence, so I hope that will help us," Mashrafe added.

The Bangladesh team arrived in Birmingham from Dublin at around 3:30pm (8:30pm Bangladesh time) yesterday. They will play practice matches against Pakistan at Edgbaston on May 27 and India at The Oval in London on May 30. They will then take on England in the Champions Trophy opener on June 1 at The Oval.

Morgan plays down Stokes fears

REUTERS, London

England captain Eoin Morgan has played down injury concerns for all-rounder Ben Stokes, who left field with a sore knee during Wednesday's 72-run victory over South Africa.

Fresh from his impressive maiden Indian Premier League (IPL) stint, Stokes made 25 with the bat in the first of the three one-dayers against South Africa but bowled just two overs before leaving the field.

Stokes, who turns 26 next month, returned to the field but did not bowl again.

"When he came back onto the field he was fit to bowl," Morgan said after his century helped secure England's 72-run victory at Headingley.

"I felt bowling him again even though he was fit wasn't worth the risk. He doesn't even have swelling -- there are no significant signs of an injury -- but we can assess that over the next couple of days."

BPL set to expand

Sylhet set to return; five foreign players mooted

SPORTS REPORTER



Unlike other domestic competitions, the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) has chalked out almost everything relating to the fifth edition of the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) well in advance.

The cash-rich T20 tournament will kick off on November 4 after a 'gorgeous' opening ceremony on November 2 and the players' draft on September 16. More than five months before the tournament, the BPL governing council called a press conference yesterday at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur, where chairman Afzalur Rahman Sinha and member secretary IH Mallick disclosed the details.

"Except for a few things we have completed all the groundwork for the next tournament. This time eight franchises will take part as Sylhet is almost set to return to the competition after a one-year break. Besides Dhaka and Chittagong, we are planning to hold some matches in Sylhet," said Sinha, also a BCB

director, adding that a total of 60 matches will take place in the season.

Mallick praised the high standard of the Sylhet International Stadium, but also pointed out the accommodation issues in the city as only one international standard hotel exists there.

There was nothing noteworthy in the announcement except for the governing council's plan to increase the quota for inclusion of foreign players in the playing eleven from four to five.

When questioned about the logic behind the increase, Mallick offered different reasons including the rise in the number of participating teams, shortage of talented players in the country, commercial interest and the demand of some participating franchises.

"We are yet to take the final decision but some franchises are demanding five foreign playing members. We will finalise it later. There are both positive and negative sides in this regard, so we will make our final decision after discussing with the franchises," said Mallick.