

# SPORTS

## Full circle for Tigers and Lions

AI-AMIN from London

There will not be much of a difference between the two teams when Bangladesh and hosts England lift the curtain of the Champions Trophy's eighth edition at The Oval today.

Both the teams will go into the game that starts at 10:30am (3:30pm Bangladesh time) with the pronounced intention of proving that their last outing was a freak event rather than an example of their true capabilities. England lost six wickets for 20 runs, the lowest point in their ODI history, in their last one-day game against South Africa at Lord's on Monday. A day later Bangladesh collapsed to 22 for six against India at The Oval and suffered a massive 240-run defeat. The only difference was that Bangladesh's was a practice game.

England have never won the Champions Trophy, the otherwise generous ICC flagship event that has produced six different winners in seven editions, despite the fact that they made it to three previous finals, all on home soil.

Bangladesh was not even a part of the tournament when it was first introduced and was played on their home soil in 1998 - a time when they were not a full



EINOI MORGAN

Member of the ICC. They however played on four previous occasions but this edition will be the first time they will participate in their own right in what evolved into an eight-team event and at the expense of former champions West Indies, who are now ranked ninth in ICC ODI rankings.

England, a team now transformed into an aggressive unit from a conventional one ever since their shock defeat against Bangladesh in the 2015 World Cup, are tipped as favourites to end a trophy drought this time around.

Bangladesh are certainly not a team

quite capable of going all the way. But, like England, they too are a completely different side since that famous victory at Adelaide against the inventors of the game. Freedom of expression and positive intent made both Bangladesh and England successful not only at home but also away. Over the last two years England have blown away any touring side, including bitter rivals Australia, with spectacularly attacking cricket. They were tantalisingly close to winning the T20 World Cup in India last year, only to be denied by a breath-taking Carlos Brathwaite assault in the



MASHRAFE BIN MORTAZA

final. Bangladesh's progress over the last two years was spectacular for a team better known as whipping boys in international cricket. They made it to the 2015 World Cup quarterfinal and followed that up with extreme home dominance in the limited-over format - winning maiden home series against Pakistan, India and South Africa. They made it to the Asia Cup T20 final before losing against India. They were about to pull off the biggest upset in the World Twenty20 in India last year when they were within two runs of a

win against the home side, only to be denied by a Mushfiqur-Mahmudullah brain-freeze. Bangladesh's home series against England last year is one to be remembered for a long time, not only because they won the second Test, but for the fierce competition they provided. The Tigers also had a memorable tour of Sri Lanka after a forgettable yet promising away trip to New Zealand.

They beat New Zealand in the Ireland tri-series before flying to England. They were about to take the trophy home when they were within two runs of a

the road that Bangladesh have travelled over the last two years, during which the New Zealand victory is the latest of many lists they have achieved, you can dream of something big.

The England game will give Bangladesh an indication of where they would be heading in a tournament where they have won only one of their previous seven games.

The batline issue has already been drawn with England confirming that both Ben Stokes and Chris Woakes will be available for the opener despite injury scares. Eoin Morgan will lead the team for the first time against Bangladesh after that 2015 World Cup defeat. The left-hander decided against touring Bangladesh over security concerns last year.

Mashrafe will return along with in-form opener Tamim Iqbal after missing the last practice game against India. Experienced pace bowler Rubel Hossain is also set to make his return to the big occasion at the expense of a wayward Taskin and young off-spinner Mehedi Hasan looks a likely bet to make his big tournament debut against a battery of England left-handers in the line-up.

And when the game starts especially under glorious sunshine, Bangladesh's Tigers will want their champion all-rounder Shahid Ali Hasan to come out of his mutagenic England's Lions.



Bangladesh will face a formidable foe in the form of England's Ben Stokes in their ICC Champions Trophy opener at The Oval today. PHOTO: REUTERS

## Stokes's bowling a concern

APP, London

England captain Eoin Morgan gave struggling opener Jason Roy a huge vote of confidence on the eve of the Champions Trophy by guaranteeing him place for the tournament.

Roy has been out for single-figure scores in four of his last five one-day internationals and hasn't made a fifty in his last 11 innings in all.

England launch the Champions Trophy, a tournament featuring the world's top eight ODI sides, against Bangladesh at the Oval, Roy's Surrey home ground, on Thursday.

But even if the dashing 26-year-old, who has an ODI strike rate of over 102 but an average of 36, does not come good against the Tigers, Morgan is determined to stick with him.

"The decision remains the same throughout the tournament," Morgan told reporters at the Oval Wednesday. "Jason Roy is part of our strong opening partnership with Alex Hales. He'll definitely play."

England collapsed to 20 for six in their final pre-tournament one-day international against South Africa at Lord's on Monday.

Jonny Bairstow spared England total embarrassment in seven-wicket defeat by the Proteas with a fine 51 - his third fifty in his last four ODIs.

Bairstow has also opened in white-ball cricket for Yorkshire and there are many who believe the England Test wicket-keeper is worthy of becoming an ODI regular, even as a batsman only.

But Morgan said of Bairstow: "He will miss out unfortunately. It's been the case like that for the last couple of years. He's been very good where he's come in, but each and every one of us within the batting department has had ups and downs over the years."

Former Ireland batsman said not chopping and changing had been key to England's recent white-ball success.

"One of the strongest parts of reinforcing the way that we play and the freedom in which we play with is backing that up with selection," he explained.

Asked if Roy's place would be under threat if he didn't come good in the first couple of group games, Morgan replied: "I cannot see it (Roy's position) changing."

Morgan cited Roy's role in helping England reach the final of last year's World Twenty20 in India - where they lost to the West Indies in Kolkata - as proof of how he could come good in a tournament.

"He hadn't gotten runs in a warm-up game against New Zealand, and then was a huge part of us getting to the final of that T20 tournament," Morgan recalled.

"If we want our players to play cagey or without freedom, yes, we would change things and probably half of us wouldn't be here."

"Jason really epitomises the way we play; the aggression in which he plays, he always plays for the team, and he plays in a manner that is dictated with that. He's a very important part of our side."

All-rounder Ben Stokes only bowled five overs during England's 2-1 series win against South Africa and didn't play the third match at Lord's because of a knee injury.

Stokes bowled on the outfield during England's training session at The Oval on Wednesday and Morgan said: "We will see how he pulls up tomorrow (Thursday) to see how much he will bowl. But I certainly see him bowling."

Morgan, however, having seen Stokes hit a series-winning hundred against the Proteas at Southampton on Saturday, said England would be prepared to play him as a batsman only.

"Absolutely. It's a very strange injury in that it's only in his delivery stride that he feels the pain."

"So if given he couldn't bowl, I still think he'd make great contributions with the bat and in the field."

## 2015 was a long time back: Mash

SPORTS REPORTER from London

"The trophy is only an arm's length away from me," Bangladesh captain Mashrafe Bin Mortaza said with a smile on his face.

It sparked laughter during a press briefing at The Oval yesterday, the day before Bangladesh's Champions Trophy opener against hosts England. The inspirational Bangladesh captain, sitting beside the glittering piece of glory, was responding to a question of how far he was from the trophy. He did not touch it, nor did he pose with the trophy like his English counterpart Eoin Morgan, who appeared for the press after Mashrafe and smilingly posed for photographs.

Morgan has a strong case of lifting it come June 18, especially after the defending champions' captain, India's Virat Kohli, remarked that the home team were the most complete package in the tournament.

Mashrafe also admitted that this England team were very exciting and favourites with eleven match-winners in the side. He also dismissed Bangladesh's success against England in the 2015 ICC World Cup as a thing of the past.

"You are asking about 2015. It was a long time back and England are a completely different team now. They win almost everywhere and they are a very strong team at home. At the same time they have improved a lot since that game. But to win away from home is always challenging. This is the first time we are playing the tournament as a

deserving team and the boys are excited and I hope they will give their best," Mashrafe responded when asked if the World Cup win would give them an added advantage.

He said that the presence of five experienced players in his team is what England would be missing.

"We have four to five players who have been playing together for the last 10 to 12 years. We also have got some exciting young players like

### HEAD TO HEAD



Sabbir [Rahman], Mustafizur [Rahman], Mehedi [Hasan] and Taskin [Ahmed]. The combination is very good. And if they can perform to their potential we have a very good chance to do well in this tournament."

Asked if his team can beat England tomorrow [Thursday], he said: "I can say about beating them tomorrow. But on any given day we can beat any team in the world."

He felt that England would be under more pressure than Bangladesh going into the tournament opener.

"They will feel more pressure than us because they will want to win the trophy at home," he observed, adding that they were also not thinking that they had nothing to lose. "I don't know if anyone is thinking we have nothing to lose. Actually there is a lot of expectations at home. They want us to take the trophy home," he said with a smile on his face.

He added that they had their own targets. "The most important thing is whether we are progressing or not. Starting as the eighth-ranked side we have now reached sixth. And one-and-a-half years back no one even thought that we would play the Champions Trophy," Mashrafe said.

He said that the motto of this team was to raise the bar. "This is a tournament where we have got that chance to showcase our progress to the world. But to win this trophy we will have to be at our very best, to be honest," said the most successful Bangladesh captain.

He was also not interested in focusing on the demoralising defeat against India at the same venue a couple of days ago.

"We were bowled out for 84 in that practice game against India. We lost against Pakistan [when] we should have won. I don't want the players to delve into those defeats. We had five very good games before that and we hope we will carry on the good work of the last two years," Mashrafe said.

He said that the last game against India was a good lesson for the batsmen, who have actually never been in a situation when the shifting of the weather assisted the bowling in English conditions.

## ANYTHING CAN HAPPEN: AB

PTI, London

South Africa captain AB de Villiers insists his team remain confident of doing well in the Champions Trophy despite a dramatic series defeat at the hands of England going into the biggest beginning tomorrow.

Following on from losses to the tournament's host in the first two games of the three-match series, South Africa's bowlers caused an English collapse as Eoin Morgan's men were reduced to 20 for 6 after just five overs, before being bowled out for 15.

And while de Villiers admits series defeat to England was not what South Africa would have liked to have started its Champions Trophy campaign, he insists it will do little to knock its focus from the task at hand.

"I was pretty happy with our preparations for the Champions Trophy, although obviously you don't want to lose a series that you play in," said de Villiers, who will enter the tournament ranked the world's best batsman. "But I know that we finished on a high, and there were encouraging signs throughout the series and those are the kind of things we like to focus on."

"We're still ranked the No. 1 team in the world going into the tournament, so there are quite a few reasons for us to be confident, but we're still humbled at the same time and know that we have to work hard and take it one step at a time to win this."

"Anything can happen on the day in one-day cricket, that's a fact, and especially with a tournament like the ICC Champions Trophy."

"When the world's top eight teams are competing for one trophy, it's going to be very competitive. I'm sure there will be some close games, and I guess whoever team takes their opportunity the most will come out on top."

South Africa starts its Champions Trophy campaign against Sri Lanka at The Oval on Saturday, as it chases its first title since the tournament's inaugural year in 1998, in what was then called the ICC Knockout Trophy.

## Nasir-powered Gazi continue to win

SPORTS REPORTER

Nasir Hossain continued his good run of form with an all-round performance yesterday as Gazi Group Cricketers posted a comfortable five-wicket victory to maintain their neck-and-neck battle with defending champions Abahani at the top of the Dhaka Premier Division Cricket League table.

After the conclusion of the third round of Super League matches, Abahani and Gazi Group stayed on 22 points each.

Upon his return from Ireland, Nasir bolstered Gazi with a hundred to return them to the winning ways and yesterday he scored an unbeaten 61 off 64 balls - after taking two important wickets - which helped his side chase down Prime Bank's paltry total of 173 with ease in a rain-curtailed 43-over-a-side match at the Fattullah Cricket Stadium.

The right-hander smote nine boundaries during his knock. Opener Anamul Haque contributed with a 52-ball 45 which contained three sixes, while Mominul Haque added 33 off 41 balls with two sixes.

Earlier, Prime Bank resumed their innings on the reserve day at 0 for one before Shani Ahmed (54) and Zakir Hasan laid the foundation for a challenging total after sharing 90 runs for the second-wicket. However, but left-arm spinner Suhrawardi Shuvo removed Zakir, who made 47, to make way for Nasir and Abid Huder to spoil



Nasir Hossain scored an unbeaten 61 off 64 to power Gazi to a win over Prime Bank yesterday. PHOTO: COLLECTED

Prime Bank's chances. Hinder took two more wickets yesterday to finish with figures of three for 32 and Nasir claimed two wickets for 42 runs. Gurkeerat Singh did the rest, taking three wickets for 27 runs.

**SCORES IN BRIEF**  
PRIME BANK: 173-10 in 39.1 overs (Shanaj 54, Zakir 47; Hider 3-32, Gurkeerat 3-27, Nasir 2-42)  
GAZI GROUP: 177-5 in 38.4 overs (Anamul 45, Mominul 33, Nasir 61 not out; Nahidul 2-29)  
Result: Gazi Group Cricketers won by five wickets.  
Player-of-the-match: Nasir Hossain.