

SPORT



Mashrafe urges cautious optimism

MAZHAR UDDIN

"The team we are going to play against are, in my opinion, one of the two most passionate Test playing teams, the other being England. But I personally think that Australia is the most passionate team when it comes to Test cricket," said Bangladesh ODI skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza when talking about the Tigers' immediate opposition.

The upcoming Test series against Australia has already created a lot of excitement among players and fans as the Tigers are going to play Tests against the Aussies after 11 years.

The recent successes of the Tigers have taken expectation among the fans to another level altogether, while the players are also up for the challenge to play a Test against the Aussies. Mashrafe however urged not to put unnecessary pressure on the players.

"I don't play Test cricket but being a supporter I want to say that if we put unnecessary pressure on them it will be difficult for the boys. Australia are far better and ahead in all formats, and especially in Test cricket. In limited-overs cricket, it's just a day but it's not the same in Test cricket where you have to play at your best till the fifth day and then the result will come. From that point, Australia is ahead in passion and patience compared to us, and we need to be patient.

"The message I want to give is that we should not create



extra pressure on ourselves and realistically Australia are a better team. At the same time, we have the ability to win a Test match against them on home soil. Being a player I am not expecting so much and I am hoping that they [Bangladesh] will give their best, and fight hundred per cent and if there is any outstanding spell or brilliant innings, it can change the scenario. But I would also say that we have all the ability to beat Australia," Mashrafe told The Daily Star yesterday.

The Bangladesh think tank is going to finalise their team combination and game plan before the first of the two-Test series starting from August 27. According to Mashrafe, the

cricketers have taken the best possible preparation and are practising specific skills, which will help them against Australia.

"Obviously, I am very positive and what is very important for Bangladesh is that they are prepared physically, mentally and skills-wise. I believe they were always prepared and they are getting better. They are practising specifically on those areas which are required and I think the boys have taken the best possible preparation to play against Australia," Mashrafe added.

Meanwhile, none of the current members of the Bangladesh team have played a Test against Australia, apart from Mashrafe, and according to the Tigers ODI skipper he had played against the all-time best Test team in the Australia sides of the 2000s.

"When I played against Australia I think it was not only the best ever Australian team but also the all-time best eleven in Test cricket. Matthew Hayden, Shane Warne, Jason Gillespie, Adam Gilchrist, Ricky Ponting, Steve Waugh -- who wasn't there?"

"Maybe this team is different from what we have played before and it's obviously possible to beat them if we can give our best and more importantly, we have to continue the attitude in which we have been playing. Those who are coming with the Australian team, many have said this is not their strongest side, but this same team has played very well in India but unfortunately they were unable to win the series. They have Smith, Handscomb who can single-handedly change the course of the game," he said.

Middle-order conundrum

SPORTS REPORTER



Much like the pleasant dilemma they have with the fast-bowling department, the Bangladesh team management face a puzzle with the middle order in their endeavour to form a playing eleven for

the upcoming Test series against Australia.

There are several options for the head coach Chandika Hathurusingha depending on the game plan and conditions, while at the same time a few out of favour batsmen are knocking on the door to make a comeback.

Two big names that immediately come to mind is Mominul Haque and Mahmudullah Riyad, both of whom were left out of Bangladesh's prestigious 100th Test which the Tigers managed to win earlier in March this year.

It will be a tough call for the think tank to form a playing eleven and even if one of these two batsmen makes a comeback to the team, it will require Bangladesh to make a change to the winning combination from the previous Test - the 100th in Colombo.

Imrul Kayes replaced Mominul at number three in that second Test against Sri Lanka but was unable to perform, scoring 34 and 0, while Mominul's recent performance in the three-day practice game in Chittagong, where he scored 73 and more importantly looked in fine touch, could well work in his favour.

The 25-year-old had a terrific start to his Test career but

Mohammedan end losing streak

SPORTS REPORTER



With the arrival of coach Syed Naeemuddin, Mohammedan Sporting Club got their fledgling Bangladesh Premier League campaign off the ground with a 4-0 drubbing of Farashganj SC at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

The Black and Whites had been without their Indian coach since their opening game defeat against Sheikh Jamal DC. They had lost the following two games narrowly against Chittagong

FARASHGANJ 0 - 4 MOHAMMEDAN
(BIPLU 19, TOKLISH 24, ANIK 28, CHIGOZIE 60)

Abahani and Dhaka Abahani as the coach left for Kolkata for personal reasons.

With the threat of losing the first four matches on the trot and the veteran Indian coach back in the dug-out, the Black and Whites turned on the style at the big bowl with a rousing performance. The first points took the Motijheel outfit off the foot of the table to eighth position on three points, level with

Farashganj, whose only points came in a surprise 1-0 win against defending champions Abahani.

The match, despite being played on a heavy surface, was a lively affair and provided end to end stuff for most part. The first few minutes gave the impression of a keenly contested affair, at least when Farashganj got off the blocks within 30 seconds and came close to breaking the deadlock. Afzal Hossain darted into the box from the right and played a neat cutback for Chinedu Mathew, who could not take control of it from inside the six-yard box.

However, Mohammedan were more dominant in attack and reaped rewards of fine forward play in the 19th minute when Biplu Ahmed opened the scoring with a neat volley on a cross from skipper Faisal Mahmud.

Former national striker Toklish Ahmed doubled the lead five minutes later with a solo effort as he collected the ball outside the box, rounded off a defender and unleashed a diagonal shot from just inside the box to find the far corner of the net.

Another youngster, Anik Hossain, increased the margin four minutes later with another solo effort, beating the Farashganj defence with his pace and guile and slotting the ball past the onrushing goalkeeper.

The second half proved to be less lively, yet Naeemuddin's changes bagged another goal on the hour mark, thanks to Kingsley Chigozie's uncompromising effort. The Nigerian raced on to a long ball from the midfield, which the Farashganj defence failed to clear. He fell on the ground under heavy challenge from the Farashganj goalie, which would have otherwise earned a penalty, yet stood up on his feet and slotted it into the open net.

There were no more goals to come as Mohammedan left the field with their first points.

SL ready to tour Pak in September

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's cricket board has approved a tour to Pakistan, eight years after a deadly militant attack against the team brought top international games there to a standstill, officials said Monday.

Sri Lanka Cricket chief Thilanga Sumathipala said after a security assessment, the team had been cleared to play three Twenty20 internationals including "at least one" in Lahore.

Leading cricket nations have shunned playing in Pakistan since the 2009 assault, in which gunmen ambushed the Sri Lankan team bus en route to the Lahore stadium, wounding at least seven players.

"We have had our security experts visit and make an assessment, and things look positive with things improving all over the country," Sumathipala said.

"We have three T20 games coming up against Pakistan in September and we would like to play at least one of those games in Lahore," he added.



Tamim Iqbal (L) will open the innings against Australia but whether one-down Mominul Haque will make his return is a puzzle yet to be sorted. PHOTO: STAR

was later pigeonholed as a longer-version specialist, which made things difficult for the left-hander as Bangladesh normally play fewer five-day games compared to limited-overs cricket, which ultimately hurt his confidence.

"At one point you can't play with the same graph; it's not only me as it happens with all the players in the world. At certain points, the graph will go downwards so you have to overcome that period and play well again, that's the biggest challenge... for me it's my challenge. I want to overcome that hurdle and I'm working on it," Mominul told reporters after the national team's training session at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium yesterday.

Mahmudullah, who was dropped from the Colombo Test after a string of low scores, has been in phenomenal touch since then, albeit in limited-overs cricket.

His match-winning hundred against New Zealand in the ICC Champions Trophy, alongside Shakib al Hasan, has once again brought him into the limelight. But then again Mahmudullah will have to fight for his spot with young Mosaddek Hossain, who made an outstanding debut against Sri Lanka, scoring 75 in the first innings in Colombo.

Moreover, Sabbir Rahman's performance in his six Tests so far cannot be overlooked, so it will be yet another selection dilemma awaiting Hathurusingha when they draw battle plans against the Aussies.

Zverev stuns Federer

AFP, Montreal

Alexander Zverev shocked second seed Roger Federer in straight sets in the Montreal Masters final to win his fifth title of the season and announce himself as an emerging star for the US Open.

The 20-year-old German used his booming serve to overpower Federer 6-3, 6-4 Sunday as the Swiss superstar never got a chance to get into the match.

"I tried to be aggressive as I can," said Zverev. "If Roger starts being aggressive with his forehand and backhand then it is not going to be an easy day for me."

Zverev avenged a 6-1, 6-3 loss to Federer in the Halle final in June -- his only loss in a final this season.

He is now tied with Federer for the most titles this season at five.

"It's a wonderful achievement for him," Federer said of Zverev. "I wish him the best for the coming months and hope he can finish the season very strong."

"I'm just really happy for him, to see that he's taking everything not just to the next level, but the two next levels."

Zverev blasted six aces and won 80 per cent of first serve points as he needed just 68 minutes to dominate the 19-time Grand Slam winner and reigning Wimbledon and Australian Open champion.

Federer, who was broken three times, looked just as frustrated to open the second set, hitting backhands long and freezing in his tracks as aces whizzed by.

Zverev capped his victory on the first match point when Federer hit a forehand long.

Federer suffered just his third loss of a season and had his longest win match streak



Alexander Zverev of Germany punches the air after his stunning victory over Swiss superstar Roger Federer in the Montreal Masters final on Sunday. PHOTO: AFP

in five years snapped at 16.

Federer, who dropped to 5-1 in finals in 2017, is undergoing a resurgence this season after it appeared to many he might be slowing down as he transitions through his mid-30s.

But he entered the Montreal event on short notice and has taken more time off this year than usual. He skipped the clay-court season from April to mid-June.

He said playing a lot on the hardcourts this week caught up to him on Sunday.

"I felt all right all week. Had a bit of muscle pain, aches and pains here and there, just because it's back on the match courts, on the hard courts," Federer said. "After vacation and practice, it's always a bit of a shock for the body."

"We'll have to wait and see now how I feel in the next couple of days."

Federer will travel to Cincinnati Sunday night for the next tournament then see if he can play back to back events.

India cream SL for first away sweep

AGENCIES, Pallekele



India registered an emphatic win over clueless Sri Lanka, completing a historic 3-0 clean sweep of an away Test series. Bundled out for 135 in the first innings and made to follow on, Sri Lanka went down without a whimper to be all out for 181 at the Pallekele International Stadium on Monday.

The innings win inside three days meant India have for the first time inflicted a whitewash in a three-Test series away from home.

"We are a young side. We look forward to playing Test cricket with the same kind of excitement. That's the only way you can be ruthless... We like to be proactive rather than reactive," said captain Virat Kohli.

"We have age on our side. We have an opportunity to play together for five-six years with this whole bunch and this really excites us," he added.

All-rounder Hardik Pandya set up the win with a blistering 96-ball 108, cracking his maiden Test century in just his third game.

The 23-year-old Pandya, who hit eight fours and seven sixes, received the player of the match award. He also bowled out former Sri Lanka captain Angelo Mathews for nought in the first innings.

"The regulars have performed like they have been doing...but the biggest positive would be Hardik's inclusion and the way he has shaped up in the first three Tests," said Kohli.

"The kind of confidence he has shown with the ball and the maturity with the bat as well, it really gives the boost down the order and a lot of balance as far as our composition of the side is concerned," added Kohli.

Left-arm wrist spinner Kuldeep Yadav turned up the heat with four wickets in Sri Lanka's first

innings as the islanders conceded a 352-run first innings lead.

Sri Lanka skipper Dinesh Chandimal, who made 36, provided some resistance during his 65-run fifth-wicket stand with Angelo Mathews.

Wicketkeeper Niroshan Dickwella top-scored with 41 before falling to the guile of the lanky off-spinner.

Paceman Mohammed Shami combined with off-spinner Ravichandran Ashwin to mop up the tail as struggling Sri Lanka suffered their second successive innings loss after the Colombo Test.

Sri Lanka skipper Dinesh Chandimal declared the Test series to be the worst of his career.

"Toughest series no doubt in my career," he told reporters.

"We were not able to take the games to five days. There have been four-day Tests and three-day Tests. Worst series ever."

"Credit goes to India. They have played outstandingly well in the series... losing within two and half days you cannot give any excuses."

SCORES IN BRIEF

INDIA: First innings 487

SRI LANKA: First innings 135

SRI LANKA: Second innings 181 (Chandimal 36, Mathews 35, Dickwella 41; Shami 3-32, Ashwin 4-68, Yadav 2-21)

Result: India won by an innings and 171 runs and clinched the three-match series 3-0.

Player-of-the-match: Hardik Pandya.

Player-of-the-series: Shikhar Dhawan.



India skipper Virat Kohli (L) and opener Shikhar Dhawan enjoy the moment after completing a historic away series sweep (3-0) against Sri Lanka in Pallekele yesterday. PHOTO: AFP