

# SPORT



## 2-0 a confident statement: Smith

SPORTS REPORTER



Since Jason Gillespie scored a double century as the nightwatchman against Bangladesh back in April 2006, Australia have won only two Tests in the sub-continent. This statistic, along with their recent performances in the longest format of the game, will probably help Bangladesh immensely as they are now able to capitalise on any opponent's weaknesses, even Australia's.

From the Tigers' head coach Chandika Hathurusingha to Shakib Al Hasan and skipper Mushfiqur Rahim, almost no one hesitated to predict that the result of the two-match series would go 2-0 in their favour.

Perhaps the 2-0 prediction irked the Aussie camp as captain Steven Smith seemed surprised by the forecast and said that it was a 'confident' statement to make.

"It's pretty confident. Isn't it? I think Bangladesh have won only nine out of their 100 games. So it's a very confident prediction. But obviously they are confident about their skill set at the moment. They are at home. Most teams play pretty well at home. Bangladesh have been playing well at home. So it's going to be a good challenge for us. The comment surprised me a little bit, yes," said Smith ahead of the first Test at the Sher-e-Bangla

National Stadium in Mirpur today. The visitors may have been in a better state of mind had the tour match not been cancelled. However, Smith remains confident about their preparations and informed that his side are ready to go.

"I think it's going to be a great series. It's a great challenge for my group of players to see what we have learned from India. Looking at the wicket, I think it's going to be somewhat similar to what we got in India. Hopefully we can learn from what we did there and no doubt it is going to be an exciting series," Smith opined.

Bangladesh generally enjoy keeping the playing eleven a mystery until the game begins while on the other hand, Smith has already announced his squad for the first Test which includes spinners Nathan Lyon and Ashton Agar.

The 28-year-old also had a look at the wicket and said that it tends to be low and slow. In addition, Smith chalked out Shakib and Mustafizur Rahman as big threats.

"Shakib, the way he bowls suits this condition very well. Mustafizur obviously, we will be looking into the way he bowls the slower balls. We are going to have to play well if we want to score big," Smith added.

Furthermore, the cricketer from New South Wales praised Shakib and Tamim Iqbal, who will both be playing their 50th Test, and informed that they will look to keep these two at bay throughout the series.



Bangladesh coach Chandika Hathurusingha is having a good look at the newly-laid Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium wicket in Mirpur yesterday, ahead of the opening Test against Australia. The first Test starts at 10am today.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED



## Aussies are not aliens: Mushfiqur

MAZHAR UDDIN

If Bangladesh had not been able to exploit the home conditions along with the resources and experience they had in the line-up, it might not have been possible to beat England at home last year to level the series 1-1.

Things have changed since then as the Tigers now have more than two or three performers in the likes of Shakib Al Hasan, Tamim Iqbal, Mushfiqur Rahim, young Mehedi Hasan and Mustafizur Rahman, all of whom have the ability to turn tables.

And now, once again, Bangladesh will play a Test on home soil which automatically gives them the upper hand even against a side like Australia. Earlier, there were statements made from the Bangladesh coach, captain and senior members of the team that the result of the series can go 2-0 in their favour.

Perhaps it could be a mind game but one must not forget that Mushfiqur Rahim's side has started to utilise the home conditions quite well since the success against England which boosted their confidence to its peak.

The Tigers captain did elaborate on the reasoning behind the 2-0 result statement, informing that they have enough ability to beat Australia as they are not going to play against 'aliens'.

"Obviously cricket is a game of winning and you all know how consistent we were at home in the past two years or so. I think from that belief they have said that it is possible to win the series against Australia. I also have the belief, resources and

enough players who can change the course of the game. When you have six-seven performers in the side then winning or even taking the side from a bad position to a better place is possible and I have that confidence," said Mushfiqur.

"We have to start from the beginning as we will be playing Test cricket after a while as we last played against Sri Lanka. We will be playing at home nearly after a year so it won't be an easy task. We have to do well in all the departments and have to get our basics right.

"We are not playing against any aliens, we will be playing against Australia, who are a very professional and strong side. We have played against strong players previously but it can be exceptional this time because we are going to play against this Australian team for the first time.

"Apart from that we will be playing after a long time. We last played against them in the Champions Trophy although it was a different format. We don't get many opportunities to play against such top class sides so we want to utilise this to the fullest," continued a confident Mushfiqur ahead of the start of the first Test at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur today.

Meanwhile Tigers head coach Chandika Hathurusingha endured a 'sleepless night' over selection for the playing eleven and tweeted, "Rock n hard place!! Give in to emotion of a nation or go with b combo..#sleeplessnights!"

However, Mushfiqur informed that it is a positive thing to face difficulties while making the playing eleven from the 14 member squad as it clearly shows the depth of the Tigers.



## Will Mehedi spit venom at Mirpur again?

BISHWAJIT ROY

Cricket is a game of uncertainty. It's a very popular saying which sometimes sounds a bit cliché. However, even in the era of topsy-turvy T20 cricket, the oldest format of the game often unfolds in ways that reminds ardent fans of the saying.

The hype surrounding the Bangladesh-Australia series started to escalate soon after Cricket Australia (CA) confirmed the schedule. Then one statement after another from the Tigers' camp regarding a possible 2-0 victory not only gave a great twist to the series but also seemed to have some impact on the minds of the visitors.

But who knows what actually waits when a spell, a session, a simple mistake in decision-making or lack of concentration can change the complexion of a match, especially when there is another character which can overshadow everything -- rain.

It is always impossible to predict who will be the hero or villain but one thing for sure is that one man will enter the ground at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur today with a level of confidence unmatched by the other 21 members on either side.

Bangladesh off-spinner Mehedi Hasan cannot forget what happened in his last Test match against England at Mirpur in October 2016. A crowning moment for Bangladesh cricket at Mirpur had been delivered by this 19-year old, who finished with a match haul of 12 wickets to spark scenes of jubilation after a five-wicket haul in his debut match in Chittagong.

When all talks have surrounded on the employment of England-like tricks, it is understandably believed that this



PHOTO: STAR FILE

Bangladesh will look for another outstanding performance from young off-spinner Mehedi Hasan (R) against Australia after his famous exploits on debut against England last year.

young man would need to be one of the major architects in fulfilling yet another home domination.

The first difference this time is that the young man may feel the pressure of expectation. But as everybody knows Mehedi loves to smile, even in the most pressurised situations. And perhaps this quality will help him absorb the pressure to a great extent.

It can however be said that this time the biggest challenge may come as there is no doubt that the highly professional Australians have worked a lot to nullify him and they will simply try to outthink him if the batsman can settle in the middle.

Mehedi, who captured 16 wickets in his five matches after that memorable 19-scalp series against England, is an orthodox spin bowler with a round arm action, whose smartness lies in gripping, even with the new ball, and experimenting with the length.

True, Australians have got this kind of information regarding this bowler but what his close followers believe is that he has got the brains to anticipate the batsman's mind and tries to exploit the stronger part of a batsman. And if he can generate turn and bounce at pace like he did against England, he can be deadly again and revive those memories.

A flashback to the home series against England where Mehedi had bamboozled Alastair Cook with a beauty which had zipped on at pace to hit the batsman's back leg after giving quite a number of loose balls in the previous over only showed his intelligence.

This time however he will also need to show maturity to comply with his team's ploy of killing the Aussies with the venom of spin.

## Can Tigers build on the England series?

SAKEB SUBHAN

2-0 has been the refrain, a scarcely believable one if you consider who the opposition are. Much of the courage, or foolhardiness, depending on how you see it, behind that forecast from almost everybody in the Bangladesh squad stems from the result of Bangladesh's last home series against England last year. Shakib's salute to the stands after bowling Ben Stokes and tumbling the first of four English dominoes is by now part of Bangladesh cricket folklore, but the victory that swiftly followed squared a series 1-1 instead of blanking a strong visiting side.

But that such talk has escaped the tight seal of the dressing room door before the series against Australia starts is an indicator of the Tigers' confidence, which has its origins in Test skipper Mushfiqur Rahim having the courage to ask for a spinning wicket against England in Chittagong last October. Bangladesh had then found the weapon with which to dominate home Tests and a perfectly willing and able spin trio of Shakib Al Hasan, Mehedi Hasan and Taijul Islam to wield it.

Asking for the pitch was as big a departure from the Bangladesh of old as was their first ever Test victory over England.

"Before then [Chittagong 2016], we thought that we would make big scores, so that we could at least play a good Test match," Mashrafe Bin Mortaza, Bangladesh's ODI captain, told The Daily Star yesterday. "But now since the boys think about winning, I think that is definitely a positive way to think. Before, the pitches were slow and did not turn much. Last year I think what we had were pitches that, although still slow, turned and were prone to breaking up more."

In 2016, even after the disappointment of losing a hard-fought first Test in Chittagong, Mushfiqur had said: "This is the first time that we got a wicket suited to our plans. The positive sign was that we took 20 wickets."

Indeed, Mushfiqur was instrumental, but according to Mashrafe the idea would have had to be bought into by the rest of the team for it to

be executed the way it was over the two Tests against England. "Whatever decision a team takes, it is taken with everyone on board. There is always a risk while playing, but I don't think it is as if it's happening through just one person," Mashrafe, who played the last of his 36 Tests against the West Indies in 2009, said.

**BATTING IMPROVEMENTS HELPED SPIN STRATEGY**  
Enamul Haque Jr, a left-arm spinner who played 15 Tests through the relatively darker period between 2003 and 2013, credited a department that may not be immediately obvious when talking about the change to spinning tracks from batting-friendly ones.

"Our batting has become much stronger, we have some world-class players. Shakib averages 40, Tamim averages 40. Mushfiqur is there. We now know we can counterattack. We can score 400 and we can also chase 250."

"We could not take full advantage of our strengths when I was playing. In the England series, we had good spinners and so we made spinning wickets. This is the sign of us changing into a good team," said Enamul, who held the record for the best Test match analysis by a Bangladesh bowler of 12 for 200 against Zimbabwe in 2005 before Mehedi surpassed him with a cheaper 12-wicket haul in his debut series.

The series about to get underway today has had the longest build-up in recent memory, with Bangladesh starting their training camp a month and a half in advance. Coupled with the 2-0 talk, expectations of a home victory will be high and at a fever pitch. According to Mashrafe, it may not be that simple: "I think maybe Australia can handle spin better [than England]. And the other thing is they have good spinners. But both sides are among the best Test teams."

2-0 may well be bluster and unrealistic, but the greater point of interest in this series should surround not whether Bangladesh can win 2-0, but if they can solidify a newly discovered home advantage against one of the best teams in the world.

