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DHAKA SATURDAY OCTOBER 14, 2017, *ASHWIN 29, 1424 BS*
SPORT
ASIA CUP BANGLADESH 2017

Another seven-goal defeat

SPORTS REPORTER

Hosts Bangladesh turned in another sorry performance in the Hero Asia Cup, losing 0-7 against Asian two-time champions India in their second Pool A match at the Maulana Bhasani Hockey Stadium yesterday.

Mahbub Harun's charges put up a slightly better effort compared to their previous match -- which had the same margin of defeat -- against Pakistan two days ago, especially in terms of holding possession and defending in numbers, yet the massive difference in class between the two sides proved too much as the Indians toyed with the hosts and booked their berth in the Super 4s.

Harmanpreet Singh scored twice while Ramandeep Singh, Gurjant Singh, Akashdeep Singh, Amit Rohidas and Lalit Upadhyay scored a goal apiece for the Indians, who had beaten Japan 5-1 in their opening match on Wednesday.

The margin of defeat could have been much bigger had it not been for some excellent keeping from stand-in goalkeeper Abu Nippon, who replaced No.1 choice Ashim Gope after the latter's lacklustre effort in the previous match.

Nippon made a string of saves -- from open play and penalty corners -- as the top-ranked Asian side failed to turn the match into a goalfest after having taken a 3-0 lead in the first quarter.

Bangladesh skipper Rasel Mahmud Jimmy said it was a much better effort from his team as they never gave up despite going three down in the opening quarter.

"You have to keep in mind the vast difference in individual skill and match experience when considering the margin of defeat," Jimmy said at the post-match press conference.

Skipper Rasel Mahmud Jimmy (C) and as his teammates were visibly dejected after suffering a 7-0 defeat against India -- their second defeat of the same margin -- in the Hero Asia Cup at the Maulana Bhasani Hockey Stadium yesterday. PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

"We started the match poorly but we came back, which was important. The coach's instructions were to try to keep possession and not go down, which we did or else we could have conceded more goals.

"We never came back in the first match since conceding the opening goal. But yesterday we played well after the first quarter," the veteran forward opined.

Indeed Bangladesh looked on course for a much bigger drubbing when they conceded three field goals within the first 13 minutes as the Indians pressed high up the pitch. The marking inside the circle was shabby and converting fast attacks into goals looked to be the order of the day.

However, Bangladesh, unlike the previous match, were intent on holding possession when they had the ball and not needlessly throwing it away with aimless hits towards the up-field. Marking improved too as the game wore on and India could only add two more goals in the second quarter -- their fifth goal coming from a penalty stroke.

The men in blue, who had failed to convert any of the eight penalty corners, finally managed to pull two back at the start of the fourth quarter, eventually wrapping the game up at 7-0.

Bangladesh, on the other hand, hardly had the gas to threaten the Indian goal or earn a penalty corner against 13 won by the Indians.

The sorry statistic to emerge from the first two matches is Bangladesh have conceded a grand total of 14 goals and 22 penalty corners; they are yet to score or even win a penalty corner in this competition so far.

India will take on archrivals Pakistan on Sunday to decide who finishes top of the pool while Bangladesh will square off against an impressive Japan side on the same day to salvage some pride.

Tamim looking better

SPORTS REPORTER *from Kimberley*

All eyes were glued on Tamim Iqbal during practice at the Diamond Oval in Kimberley yesterday afternoon, which is the venue for the first ODI between Bangladesh and South Africa tomorrow. With a misfiring batting line-up, a lot will hinge on his fitness in time for the match.

He seemed untroubled, however, when batting on the centre wicket. With pacer Taskin Ahmed, off-spinner Mehedi Hasan bowling and part-time left-armer Mominul Haque bowling, Tamim seemed in the mood for ODI cricket as he was hitting them a fair distance. Many were deposited beyond the boundary hoardings behind the bowler and there was one special shot, an inside-out lofted cover drive that landed on the grass banks.

"He is looking good while batting," said team director Khaled Mahmud yesterday. "His main problem is he feels a bit of pain while running. It will be clearer tomorrow [Saturday] where he's at."

Nasir Hossain and Mominul followed Tamim, while the rest of the team played football and seemingly in good spirits -- it was a light practice session as they had only arrived in Kimberley barely an hour ago.

Tamim sustained a thigh muscle tear in the tour-opening practice game in Benoni on September 21. He played the first Test but had to sit out the second and is rushing to be fit for the ODI series.

Pakistan held by Japan

SPORTS REPORTER

Former champions Pakistan were held to a 2-2 draw by Japan in their second match of the Hero Asia Cup at the Maulana Bhasani Hockey Stadium yesterday.

Following a convincing 7-0 win over Bangladesh, Pakistan had the opportunity to confirm their Super 4s berth with a second straight victory, but they wasted the opportunity despite taking the lead. To advance now they will need at least a draw against archrivals India in the last Pool A match if Japan beat Bangladesh on the same day.

Japan, who came into the match on the back of a 5-1 defeat at the hands against India, produced a much-improved performance to keep Pakistan at bay in the first quarter, but the former champions took the lead in the first minute of the second quarter through a penalty corner converted by Arslan Qadir.

However, Japan hit back to level the margin in the 22nd minute through a strike from Tanaka Kenta, and then Yoshihara Heita scored in the 29th minute as Japan were sensing an upset.

Pakistan, however, fought hard and levelled the margin in the 50th minute, thanks to a nice build-up play from Arslan and an eventual tap-in from Umar Bhutta.

'It is just a game after all, isn't it?'

SAKEB SUBHAN *from Kimberley*

There were finally some fighting words from the Bangladesh camp two days before the first ODI against South Africa. The last time anything remotely positive, or at any rate realistically positive, emanated from the team was on the eve of the first Test more than two weeks ago when the current tour of South Africa still seemed full of possibilities. But over the course of two bruising Test defeats -- barring some empty bluster during the Tests from youngsters – and murmurs of discontent within the dressing room, the team bore a hunted look.

Yesterday, during training at Kimberley's Diamond Oval -- the mini-pep talk came from an expected source – Shakib Al Hasan. It may be thought that the top-ranked all-rounder has a more rejuvenated outlook than most in the team after seeking and being granted rest from the Test portion of the tour, and that may be so, but Shakib has always played and talked from a perspective that separates the game of cricket from the hysteria that often surrounds Bangladesh cricket.

Mushfiqur Rahim, the Test captain who seemed a little broken after the thrashing in the two Tests, had talked about holding on to the respect that Bangladesh had earned over the last two and a half years. Shakib reminded the fans, the media, and perhaps his teammates, exactly what the team were there for.

"It's a game, isn't it? To talk about it like this or think about it like this seems a little funny to us," he said with a wry smile when asked if Bangladesh can uphold the respect in the upcoming ODI series. "I believe that we have come to play a match, and wherever we play our target is to win and do well. Sometimes we will win and sometimes we won't."

The fighting words soon followed. South Africa skipper Faf du Plessis, before the Test series began, had put pressure on his opponents to prove themselves abroad, with the implication perhaps being that Bangladesh's successes at home were somehow diminished by their failures abroad.

"The last time South Africa went to Bangladesh they lost [2-1 in the ODI series in 2015]; no one expected them to lose, but it's not like everything fell apart for them," Shakib said. "And since they have been playing here since their childhood, a lot of things will be easy for them that aren't easy for us. It doesn't matter if we are here for three weeks, four weeks, if we do a camp of one or two months, we won't get that. A two-month camp and 20 years of practice is not the same.

"No matter how many times they visit or how long they train in our country -- one month, a month and a half -- they will lose even then, considering the team we have now. I believe that.

"There is not much to be worried about. I think that we need to focus on what we have and what we are good at. I believe that we have quite a few world-class players, we have world-class performances on big stages."

Further evidence of Shakib's healthy perspective emerged when he was asked about the practice match against a South Africa Invitational XI on Thursday, during which – apart from fifties from Shakib himself and Sabbir Rahman – all other batsmen failed to make use of a belter of a wicket and a middling bowling line-up and put the horrors of the Test series behind them.

"The important thing is scoring in the main match. If someone scores a hundred in the practice match and does not score in the main match, that's not important," said Shakib. "It is very normal that in one match every batsman will not be able to do well. I think it's important that we try and do as well as possible up the order so that it becomes easier for the batsmen to follow."

The team has also been reinforced with the return of ODI skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza and the more than even chance of the injured Tamim Iqbal's return by the time of the first ODI on Sunday. Tamim was batting in the nets yesterday, and when Shakib was asked how his teammate looked, the reply was typical.

"I was just playing football," he laughed and ended the press session.

All-rounder Shakib Al Hasan (R) talks with chief selector Minhajul Abedin during training at Kimberley's Diamond Oval yesterday, ahead of the Tigers' first ODI against South Africa tomorrow. PHOTO: SAKEB SUBHAN

Shakib joins MCC officially

SPORTS REPORTER

Shakib Al Hasan, the first Bangladeshi to join the MCC's World Cricket Committee, has been welcomed by the committee's new chairman Mike Gatting, the replacement for fellow former England captain, Mike Brearley.

The all-rounder is one of four new faces to the committee alongside New Zealand women's captain Suzie Bates, former West Indies fast-bowler Ian Bishop and former Sri Lanka off-spinner and current ICC Elite Panel umpire Kumar Dharmasena.

"We're delighted to welcome the four new members who will all have a great deal to offer the committee. Shakib is the first Bangladeshi player to have joined the committee and has great experience of the world game across all formats, both domestically and internationally, and we look forward to his contributions along with the rest of the new additions," said Gatting.

Apart from Brearley, former West Indies captain Jimmy Adams and former England women's captain Charlotte Edwards have also given up their roles. The first meeting of the new committee will take place in Sydney, Australia in January next year.

Test and ODI leagues agreed in principle

AGENCIES, *Wellington*

The International Cricket Council (ICC) has given the green light for a nine-team Test league and a 13-team ODI league to give context to bilateral series between nations.

The schedules of the leagues, due to start in 2019 and 2020 will now be finalised.

The Test series league will see nine teams play six series over two years -- three home and three away -- with each having a minimum of two Tests and a maximum of five, culminating in a World Test League Championship Final.

Every Test series will have the same number of points on offer regardless of how many matches are played.

The ODI league, set to begin in 2020 will feature 12 Test-playing nations plus the winner of the ICC Cricket League Championship.

KEY OUTCOMES

Nine teams will play six series over two years in the World Test League

The ODI League will feature 13 teams with four home and four away series each. It will act as the qualifiers for the 2023 World Cup.

The ICC has also given the green light to begin trialling four-day Test matches.

In the first edition of the ODI league, each team will play four home and four away series. Each series will comprise of three ODIs and the league will provide direct qualification to the 2023 World Cup in India.

The board also approved a trial of four-day Tests matches to run until the ICC Cricket World Cup 2019, for which a set of standardised playing conditions will now be finalised.

LOOKING UP DOWN SOUTH

Diamond and the rough

SAKEB SUBHAN *from Kimberley*

The Bangladeshi cricket tourists in South Africa do not have the good fortune to claim Cape Town as one of their stops during the five-week trek across the southern-most tip of the great continent of Africa. So a visit to Table Mountain may not be on the cards but the African landscape has generously provided miniatures that dot the landscape.

The road from Bloemfontein to Kimberley, the Tigers' next stop, is dotted with hills with flat tops resembling a table. There are so many of them that in your mind's eye you can almost see a gigantic hand lopping off the top of the hills, which perhaps had gotten too big in an otherwise flat landscape, and carting it off elsewhere. The boring explanation is that these Mesas, as they are called here, were formed when horizontally layered rocks were uplifted by tectonic activity.

Kimberley itself is a small town, smaller it seems even than Potchefstroom. But everything is diamond here, because of the Big Hole, which is a humongous diamond mine in Kimberley, the contentious claim being that it is the largest manmade hole in the world.

PHOTO: SAKEB SUBHAN

Seemingly in the middle of nowhere, this sign points to a dirt road, which leads to an international cricket ground in Kimberley.

To give you a better idea of how small the town is: we had been able to locate two taxis in Potchefstroom -- so far in Kimberley, we have found just one, called the Diamond Taxi.

The ground is three kilometres away from our hotel and if you did not know where exactly it is, you are sure to miss it. A small sign on the road, simply with the words 'Cricket' on it, points to a dirt road and quite inconceivably, another sign says "Entrance to the Diamond Oval." If we were not in the trusted hands of the Diamond Taxi, we would have thought it to be a scam to lure unsuspecting cricket fans.

The area that our hotels are situated in is posh, and seemingly safe, and we put that down to this being the 'diamond town' and there not being much poverty because of that. We were not long in our false sense of security. Our taxi driver informed us during the drive back that just a few hundred metres from the stadium, there was an armed robbery the day before, with the perpetrators taking off with 25 million rands. A little rough to go with the diamond.