

SPORT

Fever-pitch Sylhet awaits holders

SPORTS REPORTER from Sylhet

Since the inaugural edition of the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) in 2012, the cash-rich T20 tournament has come a long way despite being shrouded by controversy almost every year.

The opening phase of the fifth edition of the BPL will take place at a beautiful new venue, the Sylhet International Cricket stadium, where defending champions Dhaka Dynamites will take on hosts and newcomers Sylhet Sixers in the first game of the opening day.

On paper Shakib Al Hasan's Dhaka are far ahead of Sylhet considering their arsenal of world class T20 specialists, namely Kumar Sangakkara, Shane Watson, Shahid Afridi, Mohammad Amir, Evin Lewis and Sunil Narine. However they will definitely miss Dwayne Bravo, their star performer last season, who has switched allegiances and will be playing for Comilla this time around.

But despite having eight of the biggest names in T20 cricket including Shakib, Dhaka will face a dilemma with only five spots for foreigners in the playing eleven. However, local players like Mosaddek Hossain, Mehedi Maruf, Mohammad Shahid and Abu Hider will also be counted on to step up and do a job for the holders.

A compact side in all the three departments, Dhaka will be looking for a collective approach from both the locals and foreigners in the side. Then again, the huge expectations could well add an extra layer of pressure and the think-tank will have to walk a fine line from the very start of the tournament.

"This will be my third year for Dhaka and each year, whenever you play for Dhaka, there is the expectation of becoming champions and we have managed that on both occasions. I think the start will be important as it's a long tournament and it's difficult to continue playing well throughout. However we have some very good back-ups who have the ability to play well and win matches," Shakib said ahead of the opening game yesterday.

On a small ground with batting-friendly wickets, Dhaka will be up against hosts Sylhet, whose owners have formed a fairly young side with Sabbir Rahman being the biggest star alongside newly-appointed skipper Nasir Hossain. Pakistan's Babar Azam was their marquee addition to the foreigners' quota but he will miss the first leg due to his national duties.

Liam Plunkett will lead the bowling attack alongside three left-arm pace bowlers -- Krishmar Santokie, Usman Khan and Ghulam Mudassar -- while Taijul Islam and Chaturanga De Silva will play vital roles with their accurate left-arm spin. Leg-spinner Wanindu Hasaranga is also in the side.

The home side may be the unfancied especially when they are up against the holders, but they will be bolstered by a 12th man, the huge crowd in Sylhet that will definitely provide huge support and perhaps the spark to help pump up the hosts and steal a victory.



TIME TO ENJOY

After a gruelling tour of South Africa, Bangladesh's cricketers have quickly found a platform to clear their headspace and relax in the form of the Bangladesh Premier League. Rangpur Riders' Mashrafe Bin Mortaza (R) might be expressing that feeling to Mahmudullah Riyad, while jovial characters like Darren Sammy (L) will only add to the light-hearted atmosphere.

PHOTOS: FIROZ AHMED



Kings up against inspired Riders

MAZHAR UDDIN from Sylhet



Darren Sammy was his usual light-hearted self yesterday, posing for selfies with fans just moments after being declared captain of Rajshahi Kings ahead of Bangladesh Test skipper Mushfiqur Rahim, who was given the role of vice-captain for the fifth edition of the Bangladesh Premier League.

However, Mushfiqur seemed relaxed despite not being named captain and was having fun with his skipper.

The runners-up of the previous edition will be up against a new-look Rangpur Riders under the guidance of Mashrafe Bin Mortaza in what promises to be an exciting encounter in the second game of the opening day at the Sylhet International Cricket Stadium today.

After more or less retaining their team from last year, Rajshahi bolstered their ranks with Mushfiqur Rahim and the inclusion of Luke Wright and Lendl Simmons, which will definitely add the

batting firepower that was missing last time out. Mominul Haque, James Franklin and Samit Patel will add further resistance to the batting line up.

However they will sorely miss the services of fast bowling sensation Mustafizur Rahman, who is recovering from an ankle injury, leaving the onus on young off-spinner Mehedi Hasan Miraz and the pace bowling duo of Mohammad Sami and Farhad Reza.

On the other hand Mashrafe's inclusion in the Rangpur side will add charisma and leadership, something made even scarier by the prospect of squaring up against one of the most potent opening partnerships after the Riders roped in Chris Gayle and Brendon McCullum with their overseas picks.

All-rounders in the likes of Ravi Bopara, David Willey, Thisara Perera and Ziaur Rahman can prove to be vital for Rangpur as well, while Shahriar Nafes and Mohammad Mithun will add further experience.

Rubel Hossain and Ebadat Hossain, who burst onto the scene after a pace bowling hunt, will be alongside Mashrafe

in the bowling department.

"In these types of tournaments players come from various places, so getting the right combination will be important. We are trying to get that and if we can do it then we can hope for something good. Everyone wants to become champions but I think it puts extra pressure and I think it's important to go on till the end. And after that it's a do-or-die scenario in the knockout stages so I think it's more important to start well," Mashrafe said after a training session in Sylhet yesterday.

Although there will be less opportunities for the locals to showcase their talents with five foreigners in the line-up this season, the Tigers' ODI captain believed that the tournament was a great platform for the local cricketers to learn and gain experience.

"It's actually difficult to comment on this and I feel sorry that there will be one less local player in the playing eleven and it's an opportunity lost. At the same time we can learn many things when we go through struggles during international games from here which will help them improve," he concluded.

An evening treat for cricket fans

BISHWAJIT ROY



"For the next one month we can spend the evening with some entertainment." This was the way a pharmacy owner on Friday welcomed the fifth edition of the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL), which kicks off at the Sylhet International Cricket Stadium today.

Like it or hate it, the BPL has become a dish of entertainment for people from all walks of life across the country. What happened in Sylhet over the past few days with regards to ticket sales only highlighted the craze surrounding this domestic T20 tournament.

And over the next forty days people will gather outside TV showrooms to catch the action on screens, cricket will be the most important ingredient at tea stalls and dominate other addas at shops big and small. Office-goers can unwind with the hitting of fours and sixes after returning home while those who visit the stadiums will become fully-engrossed in the 'cricketainment'.

If you want to see the frenzy for yourself, you can even ask a tea vendor and he will be able to give you the details of a match or player.

Gambling -- informal as it may be -- will find its way.

Like it because it induces huge entertainment and indeed a hangout entertainment, due to its shortened nature or because of the local and international players that take the field. Or hate it because of the purists' view that only Test cricket is real cricket, where drama may unfold at any moment or because a player can only show his true character in the five-day game and if not that then 50-over cricket can only be tolerated.

Whatever the debate is, T20 cricket, especially the franchise-based competitions, are now a reality. And at a time when 10-over-a-side cricket is going to be experimented, one had better accept the reality even if he or she is not a great fan of this format.

It is a reality as the organisers also give utmost attention to the competition. This is the only domestic competition where the board attempts to build up the action well before the start of the tournament and ensure that no stone is left unturned in order to make it a success when the rest of the domestic competitions -- including the first-class ones which we love to say are the backbone of our cricket -- suffer from a lack of proper attention.

There is no dearth of sponsors here either. However, all of that is irrelevant for the masses. "Just tell me about the amusement opportunities in our country? The BPL at least keeps us entertained," said Bashir Ahmed, the aforementioned pharmacy owner.

So let them enjoy the evening with the BPL.

A scenic venue for destructive batting



A panoramic view of the Sylhet International Cricket Stadium where the Bangladesh Premier League's opening day's fixtures kick off today.

PHOTO: STAR

MAZHAR UDDIN from Sylhet



"Sylhet is always one of my favourite venues because of its surroundings and atmosphere. The stadium is pretty similar to foreign stadiums, which is unique in our country."

Those words from Shakib Al Hasan said it all ahead of the opening game of the fifth edition of the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) today.

Even before entering the premises, the beautiful view of tea gardens and hillocks surrounding the Sylhet International Cricket stadium, also known as the Green Valley Stadium, seem to offer cricket lovers a totally different atmosphere to other stadiums across Bangladesh.

After its construction in 2007, the Sylhet stadium hosted its first international game -- a 2014 ICC World T20 Qualifiers between Ireland and Zimbabwe before hosting five more T20Is. However it is yet to host any ODI or Test matches.

The stadium currently has a capacity of 15,000 but with expansions works underway it will soon be able to accommodate 20,000. New floodlights have also been installed alongside modern facilities, with the players' dressing room now situated on the second floor of the grand stand in the northern part of the stadium.

But the most eye-catching part of the stadium is the 'Green Gallery' situated in the western part of the ground, where the crowd can relax on green grass while taking in the action similar to venues in South Africa, New Zealand or Australia.

Another fantastic aspect of the Sylhet stadium is the outfield, equipped with a modern drainage system that is capable of preparing the ground for play within thirty minutes of rainfall. A total of seven pitches, all being maintained throughout the year, are likely to offer runs for the batsmen and promise full entertainment to the crowd who will come to watch sixes and fours.

Evidence of the batting-friendly wicket was presented back in 2014, when Netherlands racked up 100 in just 6.6 overs, the fastest for any team in T201 cricket, before plundering 194 off just 13.5 overs with 19 sixes against Ireland.

The venue also boasts a five-storey media centre with the press box situated on the third floor alongside all necessary facilities for broadcasters.

Undoubtedly the most scenic and beautiful stadium in the country, Sylhet will perhaps hold a dress rehearsal for hosting international games in the coming days. Before that however it will be the centrepiece for all the people who will certainly come in droves to witness the most awaited domestic cricket competition in Bangladesh.

Jamal going strong

SPORTS REPORTER



Jamal Hossain Mollah continued his fine form in the Panasonic Open India, moving three places up to 11th at the end of the second round yesterday. The 32-year-old, who started the day at 14th position after a three-under in the opening round, carded two-under-par (70) to take his tally to five-under-par (139).

The two-time PGTI winner played some exciting golf at the Delhi Golf Club yesterday, but a few lapses meant he was still some distance away from the leaders. Having started the day with an eagle and a birdie, Jamal played two bogeys and a double bogey in the front nine to tamper his good start. However, four more birdies and just a single bogey at the back nine resurrected his day as he finished six shots behind the new leader, Paul Paterson of USA (11-under).

A total of 65 golfers made it to the weekend rounds, with the cut set at one-over-par.

Root calls for 'show of character'

AFP, Perth



Captain Joe Root on Friday urged England to show "character" under an expected Ashes barrage in Australia as he dismissed comparisons with the horror tour of 2013.

Root said England were "completely different" from the team thrashed 5-0 on their last visit and should dwell on their Ashes victory on home soil in 2015.

"There's been a lot of talk about last time around (in Australia)," Root told reporters. "We were a completely different side, and so were they (Australia)."

"Of course, they will try to bring up all sorts of stuff like that."

"We've played a lot of cricket since then, and we've played against Australia since then as well --

and that went quite well for us.

"Hopefully, we will be able to do the same." Australian players have been keen to talk up England's struggles in 2013, when they were terrorised by the Mitchell Johnson-led pace attack.

England's inexperienced batting line-up has been highlighted as its biggest weakness as it aims to emulate the feat of Andrew Strauss' team of 2010-11 by becoming only the second England side to retain the Ashes urn in Australia in 31 years.

England also look likely to be missing star allrounder Ben Stokes, who is suspended pending investigations into a nightclub brawl.

"Whenever you play any Australian opponent you don't expect an easy ride," said Root.

"They'll want to prove a point and judge them-

selves against international quality and for us it is about trying to take advantage of getting in or bowling with good rhythm and capitalise on that."

He said the tourists need to make the most of the momentum swings that go their way during the five-Test series, which gets underway in Brisbane from November 23.

"We are going to have to play well as a side, show a lot of character as a group and there can't be any selfish mentality out in the middle," he said.

"It's going to have to be about doing your job within the team, and not worrying about individual performances."

"When it's your turn, you take that on yourself to make it your day."



Flying start for Mymensingh

SPORTS REPORTER

Defending champions Mymensingh made a flying start to the final round of the JFA U-14 Women's Football Championship with an 11-0 win over Satkhira at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

Rozina scored six goals, Amena and Shamsunnahar scored a brace each while Hosne Ara netted one goal for Mymensingh in the one-sided affair.

In the day's other match, Tangail blanked Comilla 7-0, thanks to four goals from Maisha and a hat-trick from Ambia.