

Advantage or desperation?

SPORTS REPORTER

NIDAHAS TROPHY 2018
The morning of the do-or-die Nidahas Trophy game against Sri Lanka finds the Bangladesh team bolstered by the presence that they had so missed and craved over the best part of a cricket-filled last two months. Shakib Al Hasan checked into the team hotel in Colombo yesterday afternoon, and for the first time since injuring his left little finger in the home ODI tri-series final against Sri Lanka on January 27, there is a real possibility that he will take the field today in the virtual semifinal to help Bangladesh fight it out for a spot in Sunday's final against India.

Shakib had an appointment with an Australian surgeon on March 9 who, according to Bangladesh Cricket Board Physician Debasish Chowdhury gave the all-rounder an anti-inflammatory injection. While Chowdhury did say on March 12 that it would take Shakib seven to 10 days to be able to partake in sporting activities, he added that the decision of when to return would be left to him.

Given how influential the Bangladesh Test and T20I captain's presence is to the side's fortunes, the manner of his return will be crucial. Is Shakib back of his own will and conviction or has he been rushed in as a last-ditch gambit by the BCB and team management? It was a distinction made by someone who has intimate knowledge of Bangladesh's cricketing impulses -- Chandika Hathurusingha, who before his



Bangladesh T20I skipper Shakib Al Hasan joined the team in Sri Lanka yesterday afternoon and much will depend on whether he can play today's Nidahas Trophy match against Sri Lanka.

PHOTO: BCB

current gig as head coach of Sri Lanka was in charge of Bangladesh from mid-2014 to late 2017.

"As I said at the start there is nothing in store in both teams that can surprise," said Hathurusingha yesterday, on the eve of potentially the sides' last face-off in a series of nine encounters across formats this year alone. "The only thing that I can think of is, if Shakib is half fit, it's a desperate measure and if he is really

fit they have an advantage and we all know that he is the number one all-rounder and a quality player."

It is an interesting comment from the coach and finds an echo in his words back in late January when, in the aftermath of Shakib's injury-forced absence from the two-Test series between the sides in Bangladesh, the selectors included as many as six spinners in the squad. The Sri Lankan had then said that

Shakib's absence 'sent the cat among the pigeons' and Bangladesh's subsequent implorations proved him right.

"It's an advantage for them because they can have a different combination when Shakib comes in," Hathurusingha added before Sri Lanka's practice at the R Premadasa Stadium in Colombo yesterday. "They can have a batsman if he wants [to play as a batsman], they can have a bowler if he bowls. Our target is to tackle his four overs when he bowls and how we are going to restrict him when he is batting."

Shakib did have net sessions in Dhaka before leaving, and interim coach Courtney Walsh insisted yesterday that he was always part of the set-up and will be a shoo-in to the squad if passed fit. On the other hand, there is the precedent of Shakib being part of the squad selection process ahead of February's T20I home series against Sri Lanka and was therefore party to the decision to be included in that squad, so his eventual non-participation casts a bit of doubt about the process by which these decisions are made.

A fully committed Shakib is an asset and an advantage, but a Shakib forced into his role may not be as big a boon. If Shakib is passed unfit or even if he performs half his role, it will be telegraphing Bangladesh's desperation to a coach eager to receive that message. If things turn out more positively for Bangladesh, however, it may be the first time that they manage to wrong-foot Sri Lanka and Hathurusingha this year.

Kusal Mendis fit to play

AGENCIES, Colombo

Top-order bat Kusal Mendis has been declared fit for Friday's Sri Lanka's last group game against Bangladesh in the Nidahas Trophy tri-nation series.

According to Sri Lanka Cricket sources, Mendis has been nursing a quadriceps muscle strain during Sri Lanka's six-wicket loss to India on Monday.

The 23-year-old hobbled off the field after attempting to cut down a boundary while fielding in the deep during the match.

"He is fine now," said Ashley de Silva, CEO Sri Lanka Cricket. He was under observation for 24 hours, but has now been cleared to play.

Everyone needs to do their bit: Walsh

SPORTS REPORTER from Colombo



Soon after yesterday's pre-match press conference ahead of today's Nidahas Trophy encounter against hosts Sri Lanka, this reporter asked

Bangladesh's interim head coach Courtney Walsh how he felt about Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) president Nazmul Hassan stating that the board do not expect batting plans from the legendary former fast bowler.

Hassan made the comments a day after Bangladesh's famous win against Sri Lanka.

The only reaction from Walsh was a quizzical look and a smile -- not unlike his non-verbal intimidation of batsmen during his playing days -- as he strolled to the elevators of Colombo's R Premadasa Stadium.

During the press conference however, the West Indian did speak about batting when asked about the lone battle waged by Mashfiqur Rahim in the series so far.

"Quite a few batters have got starts. You'd like them to finish it. We are trying to be a bit more consistent in our all-round play. I think it will be good if other batters put their hands up, but Mashfiqur is doing tremendously well," said Walsh.

The last group stage game has become a virtual semifinal as the winner will take on India in the final on Sunday. Walsh emphasised on the need for consistency after the 17-run defeat against India on Wednesday.

"It would have been nice if we won yesterday [Wednesday] but it wouldn't have guaranteed a spot in the final. This

game, whichever team wins, gets to the final. We are up for the challenge of playing consistent cricket. We have to play to the best of our ability, which will give us a chance. The competition has been good. We need to fine-tune ourselves," Walsh continued.

Meanwhile, Shakib Al Hasan joined the team yesterday ahead of the crucial encounter, following his recovery from a finger injury.

Asked whether the star all-rounder's inclusion was a decision made by the higher-ups or the team management, Walsh replied: "We hoped to have him from the beginning of the tournament. He was always part of the setup. We knew he was going to make a comeback if there was any chance. It is nothing to worry about. Once Shakib is fit, we are going to welcome him to the team. If he is fit, he will be considered to play. We are hoping he will be fit enough to play. He had a net session in Dhaka. There won't be any confusion."

In addition, the Tigers' fast bowling department has seen some inconsistency as none of the seamers, apart from Rubel Hossain, seem to be able to maintain momentum.

"Rubel has been very consistent. If the other guys stepped up, it would give us a little more cushion. Someone like Mustafizur [Rahman] having a good game will help us tremendously. Spinners have been as spot-on as we like them to be. They have had good patches. If everyone does their bit, it will give us a very good chance," he said, adding that it is important to have variations in the shortest format of the game and that the execution has not been consistent so far.

It's challenging to bowl in Powerplay: Sundar

PTI, Colombo



"It is definitely a challenging thing but that is what you play cricket for. When you get an opportunity to represent your country you need to face those challenges. When you win those challenges you get a lot of satisfaction," he said.

"I have to admit that I am very fortunate I have got this skill. It's more of reading the batsman's mind, especially in the powerplay because every six balls, they will be looking to hit you out. So it's important to read the mind."

"I myself being a batsman to an extent I can at least suspect what he is thinking or where he is going to hit me," Sundar said at the post-match press conference last night after India beat Bangladesh by 17 runs to seal their place in Sunday's final.

Asked about the mantra behind his success while bowling in the powerplay periods, Sundar said: "I play a lot of league games back home. Couple of years back, we played a tournament. I used to bowl two in the powerplay and two in the death overs which was difficult. These things helped me to get better as a cricketer."

The 18-year-old lanky spinner has come of age in this tournament and is the most penetrative bowler on display with seven wickets to his kitty, including three against Bangladesh on Wednesday.

Besides, Sundar is the most economical bowler in the tournament with an impressive economy rate of 5.87 runs an over -- surprisingly 11 of his 16 overs have been bowled in the powerplay.

While Sundar admitted that it is a challenge for a spinner to bowl in the powerplay, the key to success is to face those challenges and overcome them.

Eng to tour SL for first time in 6 years

AFP, Colombo

England will tour Sri Lanka for the first time in over six years to play three Tests, five one-day internationals and a one-off Twenty20 match, organisers said Thursday.

The tour will begin on October 10 with a day-night ODI at Dambulla, Sri Lanka Cricket said in a statement. There will be three day-night ODI matches in all while the T20 will also be a day-night game.

The first Test will be at the picturesque Galle International Stadium while the other two Tests are slated for Pallekele Stadium in Kandy and in the capital Colombo.

The Third Test is scheduled to be played from November 23 to 27 when the tournament ends.

England's previous tour of Sri Lanka was in 2012 for a two-match Test series they drew 1-1.

Sri Lanka toured England in 2016 for a full tour of three Tests, five ODI matches and a one-off T20 game. England won the series.

'Nagin will turn against you'

MAZHAR UDDIN from Colombo

Bangladesh's record chase of 215 against Sri Lanka on Saturday has had a huge impact on the home fans and today's virtual Nidahas Trophy semifinal between the sides has emerged more than just a fight for a spot in Sunday's final against India.

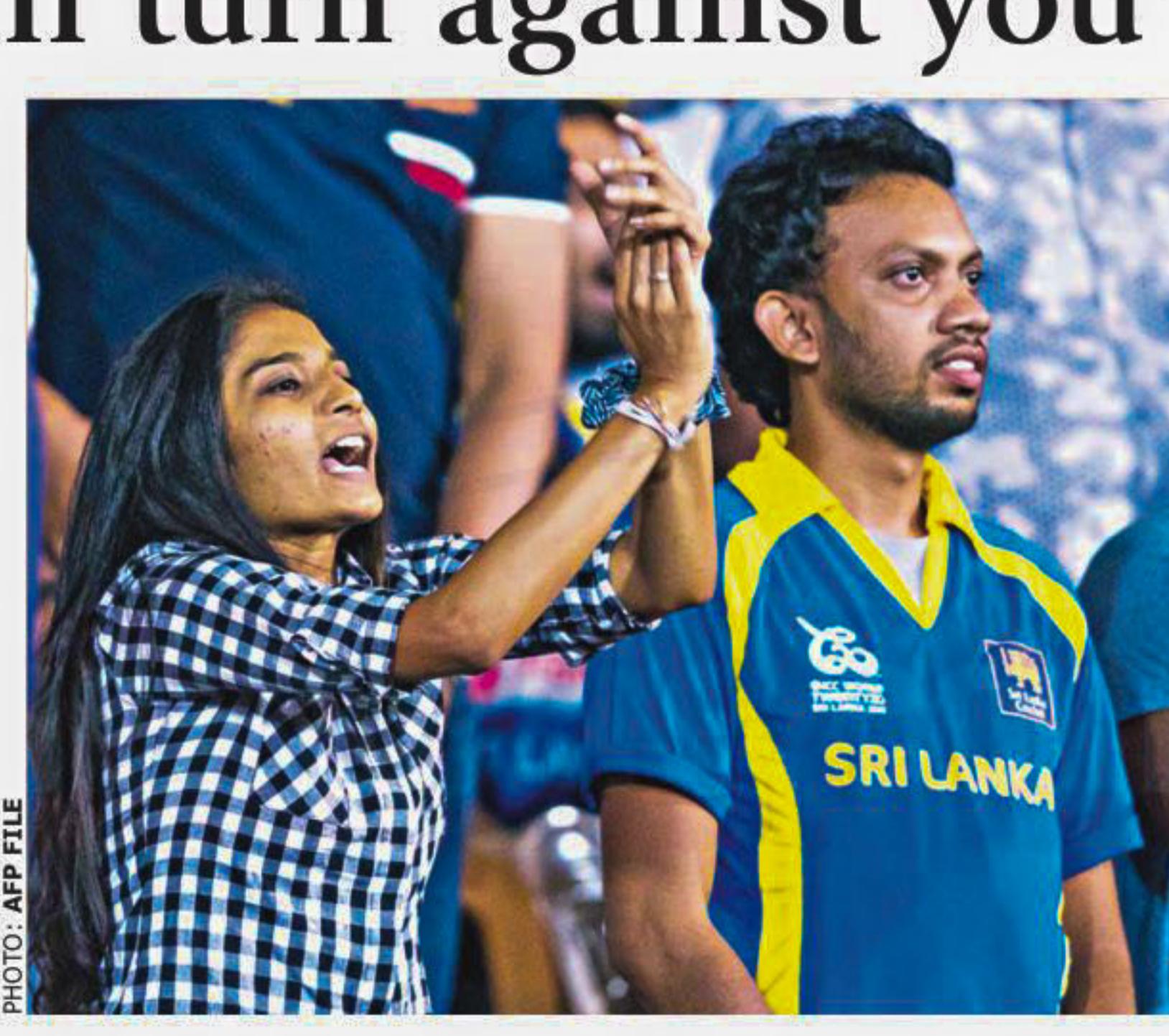
Words of the local fans about today's match were tinged with an air of revenge, which was no doubt fuelled further by Mashfiqur Rahim's 'nagin' celebration -- as his aping of spinner and teammate Nazmul Islam's snake-themed wicket celebration has now come to be called -- after the memorable win.

The rivalry between the two sides has reached new heights and while the players and coaches of both teams wanted to play down the needle between them ahead of the crucial encounter, Sri Lankan fans did not hesitate to show their emotions when asked for predictions for the match to take place at the R Premadasa Stadium in Colombo today.

"You may have forgotten that we beat you guys not so long ago in your den," said Bandaranaike Ankura, a salesman of a furniture shop near the Premadasa, who was waiting in line to buy tickets for the game yesterday.

"You know that celebration [Mashfiqur's] will be repeated again but this time it will be our players who will perform it after beating Bangladesh tomorrow [today]," he added.

Emotions remained similarly on the surface when this reporter went to



The Sri Lankan fans are all set to turn up in numbers at the R Premadasa Stadium today for what they termed as a grudge game against Bangladesh.

another Sri Lanka supporter, this time adding some more fuel to the fire by asking whether the inclusion of Shakib Al Hasan before the crucial encounter has put any extra pressure on the home side.

"Obviously you guys are worried over your team combination and strength and so you had to include him before this game," said Dhanapala Jayantha, a student of class 12, with more than a little aggression.

"Yes, his [Shakib's] inclusion will certainly boost Bangladesh but you also have to remember that Sri Lanka are playing at home and you must

know that Sri Lanka were never beaten by Bangladesh in consecutive games in the recent past. It's not like our bowlers are going to make the same mistakes they made during the 215-run chase the other day," he added.

The intensity of the rivalry may not be witnessed on every corner of Colombo but there have been discussions over the defeat to Bangladesh ahead of today's game.

The Sri Lankans will flock in numbers to support their team today and some of the fans even said that they would love to face Bangladesh rather than India in the final.

Afghans shock WI, keep hopes alive

Nepal secure ODI status for the first time

STAR SPORTS DESK



Afghanistan entered the Super Sixes stage of the Cricket World Cup Qualifier knowing they needed to win their next three matches to stand any chance of progressing to the main event next summer.

The first stage of that mission is complete, after they defeated the previously unbeaten West Indies by three wickets in an absorbing, topsy-turvy contest at Harare Sports Club on Thursday.

The much-vaunted Afghan spinners were the architects of the victory, restricting their opponents to 197 for 8, with the teenage spinner Mujeeb Ur Rahman (3/33) continuing his rapid rise to stardom.

Despite the early loss of their openers, Afghanistan looked to have the run chase under control with Rahmat Shah and Mohammad Nabi patiently compiling 49 for the fourth wicket to take them to 132 for 3, but Jason Holder's dismissal of the latter opened the door for the Windies.

Holder, sensing an opportunity to find a vital boundary, took on a short delivery from the Windies captain but Shimron Hetmyer dived forward to take a stunning catch just inside the mid-wicket boundary.

It was Holder's 100th ODI wicket, making him the fastest West Indian to reach the milestone of 100 wickets and 1,000 runs in the 50-over format.

West Indies further tightened the screw when Shah, who had batted so impressively for his 68 from 109 deliveries, played a loose cut stroke to Ashley Nurse and Keemo Paul took a simple catch at point. It left the match in the balance, with Afghanistan requiring 44 runs from 57 balls.

After seven wickets down Rashid Khan (13 not out) and Sharafuddin Ashraf (7 not out) held their nerve to win the game with 14 balls to spare.

Meanwhile, Nepal have gained ODI status for the first time in their history after defeating Papua New Guinea by six wickets in the Cricket World Cup Qualifier play-off at Old Hararians Sports Club on Thursday.

Rabada to play third Test?

AGENCIES, Cape Town

Proteas speedster Kagiso Rabada's appeal against his two-Test suspension has given South African cricket fans a smidgen of hope.

The 22-year-old was given three ICC demerit points following his 'shoulder brush' with Australian captain Steve Smith in the second Test in Port Elizabeth after being found guilty of a Level 2 offence.

But Cricket South Africa (CSA) and Rabada have since appealed that decision in the hope that the punishment will either be lessened or set aside.

Rabada had also accepted a Level 1 charge - one demerit point - for his send-off of David Warner in the same Test. It leaves Rabada on nine demerit points (eight points results in a two-Test suspension). If his appeal sees his charge lessened to a Level 1 offence, then he will be on seven demerit points and will no longer face suspension.

However, for that to happen in time for him to take part in the third Test at Newlands starting on Thursday, March 22 is unlikely.

The appeal was made official on Wednesday afternoon, at which point the ICC had 48 hours to find a judicial commissioner to head up the appeal hearing.