

# An irreversible decline?

SAKEB SUBHAN

Talk of golden generations may be quite familiar for sport followers in July of 2018. Belgium's golden generation lost a golden opportunity to win a World Cup in Russia recently. Much closer to home, as the football frenzy fades, cricket fans are faced with what must now be seen as the irreversible decline of Bangladesh cricket's golden generation.

There is a certain romanticism associated with golden eras, and especially the protagonists who gild performances that will go down in folklore. But such romanticism may be out of place for Bangladesh cricket, as the golden era has been relative and not absolute. From a team learning the ropes of international cricket, Bangladesh graduated to being potential world beaters at home between the quarterfinal run in the 2015 World Cup and the drawn home series against Australia in August-September 2017.

Since that Australia series, there has been the wall-to-wall disaster of a South Africa tour, an ODI final loss at home to Sri Lanka, a Test and T20I series loss against the same

Since the beginning of the South Africa tour, Bangladesh have folded for sub-150 scores on seven occasions in six Tests.

opponents, a T20I whitewash by Afghanistan and the recent abject surrender in the West Indies.

During their middling peak, Bangladesh solidified a quality core of Shakib Al Hasan, Mashrafe Bin Mortaza (only available for ODIs now), Tamim Iqbal, Mushfiqur Rahim and Mahmudullah Riyad. It seemed that these five cricketers -- three batsmen, the country's greatest all-rounder and its best seamer -- would set examples that lesser and younger cricketers could follow in order to continue a tradition of improved performances. That is no longer true.

The most alarming aspect of this recent slew of debacles is that whereas once the



## THE BIG FOUR'S TEST STATS SINCE THE SOUTH AFRICA TOUR

TAMIM IQBAL
Mts Ave H/S
5 20.2 52

SHAKIB AL HASAN
Mts Ave H/S
3 20.7 54

MUSHFIQUR RAHIM
Mts Ave H/S
6 23 92

MAHMUDULLAH RIYAD
Mts Ave H/S
6 27.5 83*

core members stood tall with lone hands in bad performances, this time they are at the centre of the debacles. That is a bleak sign indeed because, with Mominul Haque's continued decline, there seems to be no one on the horizon who can continue the good work that the seniors have done in the past.

In the West Indies, in a Test series that started with Bangladesh ranked eighth and their once-mighty opponents ninth, the Tigers succumbed to losses by an innings and 219 runs and by 166 runs. Given that Mashrafe has not been part of the longer version setup since 2009, the Big Four of Bangladesh Test cricket were most culpable in failing to provide the leadership that junior cricketers -- who because of the lower domestic standards often have to learn the game from senior pros at the highest level -- could have benefited from.

Shakib plays the part of the aloof captain who cannot be bothered to lead by example with fighting performances that were once his forte. Tamim survives scrutiny to an extent because his dismissals have had more to do with his technique, once thought to be solid and organised, than his temperament. But that the technique and judgement of off stump of the team's best batsman is now repeatedly exposed tells a grim tale of its own.

Mushfiqur, hitherto the technician-par excellence of the Bangladesh team, cannot keep his bat and pad together to save his life, no matter how many hours he religiously practises -- and he has been guilty of temperamental short circuits too. Mahmudullah has proven, for all the calm he brings to the dressing room and during his rare innings of over 50 and less than 100, that his good fortune to still be playing Test cricket rivals that of Mohammad Ashraful's in days gone by. It is an embarrassment that although his only Test century came seven years ago, he remains a fixture in the middle order.

The Big Four have doubtless given Bangladesh great innings and great moments over their careers. But when it comes to leaving lasting legacies, their career stats tell a different tale -- in a bat-dominated era Mushfiqur and Tamim average in the mid-thirties while Mahmudullah's falls short of 30. Only Shakib can be said to have had an above-average career in Test cricket if they were to all stop playing now. Even then, he would likely be remembered as a gifted player who was unable to rein in his instincts for the greater good of the team -- in other words, a good player but not a leader.

As they embarked on the tour of South Africa last September on the heels of a

drawn home series against Australia, the stage was set for them to go upwards and onwards. By the end of the first Test when they were shot out for 90 in the second innings, then skipper Mushfiqur struggled to remember when last they were all out for less than 100.

In fact, they had not been out for less than 150 since April 2013 against Zimbabwe in Harare. Since the beginning of the South Africa tour, they have folded for sub-150 scores on seven occasions in six Tests. Two of those scores came at home against Sri Lanka. Three have come against West Indies, including the 43 all out in the tour-opening Test in Antigua. All of those frequent debacles can be put down to the seniors' inability to buckle down and tough it out on pitches that did not allow for the release shots that they are so fond of. West Indies' Kraigg Brathwaite, someone who may not boast the wealth of talent of the Big Four, showed in each Test how to let patience lead the way.

By the end of the car crash of a tour in South Africa Shakib, then just the T20I captain, said that they would have to look at strengthening mental fitness. It seemed that he was talking about the whole team. For now, himself and his three cohorts would do.

# Tigers' one-day warm-up today

New batting consultant likely to join team by July 22

SPORTS REPORTER



Bangladesh will be looking to start afresh in the three-match ODI series against the West Indies starting from July 22 after their humiliating defeat in the two-match Test series as the visitors take on the UWI Vice Chancellor's XI featuring Chris Gayle and Andre Russell in a fifty-over warm-up game at Sabina Park in Jamaica today.

The game starts at 1:00am Bangladesh time. Tigers' ODI skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza, who flew for West Indies on Monday, will miss the warm-up match but the other five members of the ODI squad, including pacer Mustafizur Rahman, have already joined the side and are expected to take the field today.

Bangladesh can gain some confidence in the fifty-over format where they have a better track record, but it will be difficult for the struggling Tigers to overcome the debacle in the Test series, which included their lowest Test score of 43 all out in the first innings of the first Test in Antigua.

The second and third match of the ODI series will take place on July 26 and 28 respectively.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh Cricket Board [BCB] CEO Nizamuddin Chowdhury yesterday informed that the new batting consultant of the Bangladesh national team is set to join the side in West Indies by July 22.

Nizamuddin however did not reveal the name of the batting consultant and informed that the details of his contract will be revealed soon. But it was widely reported that former South Africa batsman Neil McKenzie is set to join the Tigers till the 2019 ICC World Cup in England.



The Bangladesh team go through their fielding drills at Sabina Park yesterday ahead of their warm-up one-dayer against UWI Vice Chancellor's XI today. PHOTO: BCB

# BD A look to seal series

SPORTS REPORTER

After the tight two-run win in the first game, Bangladesh A will be looking to seal the three-match one-day series when they take on Sri Lanka A in the second game at the Sylhet International Cricket Stadium today.

Ariful Haque's all-round performance, along with pacer Khaled Ahmed's four-wicket haul -- which included the wicket of Shehan Madushanka off the last ball of the game when the visitors required three runs to ace their chase of 280 -- will certainly boost the confidence of the home side.

However, the second-string Bangladesh team will be looking for a better performance from national Soumya Sarkar, who did not score big in the three-match four-day series which the hosts lost 1-0 as well as in the first one-dayer where the left-hander was dismissed for 24.

# Shamsi back for 2nd Test

AGENCIES, Colombo

Tabraiz Shamsi has linked up with the South African team in Colombo ahead of the second Test against Sri Lanka that starts Friday.

The left-arm wrist spinner, who flew home earlier in the week for family reasons, is available for selection in the series decider.

"Shamsi's always been a part of the squad," Keshav Maharaj said on Wednesday.



Paul Pogba holds the World Cup trophy and does his trademark dab celebration alongside his mother and two brothers after the final at the Luzhniki Stadium in Moscow. PHOTO: COLLECTED

# 'We'll kill them, Messi or not'

AGENCIES, Moscow



French midfielder Paul Pogba gave a rousing speech to teammates before their World Cup last 16 game against Argentina, in which he told them to "kill" the opposition and not be bothered about Lionel Messi.

France faced Argentina in the World Cup last 16 in Kazan, winning 4-3 in a thrilling game in which they came from 2-1 down to book a spot in the quarterfinal.

Les Bleus went on to win the World Cup in Moscow on Sunday, and a TF1 documentary titled 'The Blues, the heart of their Russian epic' has now revealed the details of their

campaign -- including a stirring team talk given by midfielder Pogba ahead of the Argentina game.

The details boys... We want warriors on the pitch today," the 25-year-old said. "I don't want to go home tonight. Me, this evening, I'm not going home. Tomorrow, we're staying at the hotel. We're going to eat that f\*\*\*ing sauteed pasta again. I don't give a s\*\*\*, we're not going home. We're going to finish happy. I want us to have a party tonight."

"I want everyone. Today, we run ourselves to death out on the pitch. No one lets anyone else down. No one drops off. On the pitch, we're all together. Good guys and warriors. Soldiers. We're going to kill them today, these Argentines. Messi or no Messi, we don't give a

s\*\*\*. We're coming to win the World Cup. We have to get through this to do that. Come on boys!"

France won the game thanks to a penalty from Antoine Griezmann, a stunning strike from defender Benjamin Pavard, and two goals from teenage star Kylian Mbappe.

Pogba was at it again before France defeated Uruguay in Nizhny Novgorod in the quarters. "That's it, there is no turning back anymore," Pogba said. "That's it! We're going to continue, we're gonna go all the way! See you on July 15th - all together!"

"And now we're going to fight for our partners, like we did before! Argentina and maybe even more! Even more! Always more! We have to beat the best to be the best!"

# Tigresses to take on WI in opener

SPORTS REPORTER



The Bangladesh women's cricket team have been drawn in Group A of the upcoming 2018 ICC Women's World Twenty20 and will take on England, Sri Lanka, South Africa and hosts West Indies, according to the schedule announced by the International Cricket Council yesterday.

The Tigresses became champions in the ICC Women's World T20 qualifiers last week, beating Ireland in Netherlands and qualifying for the ICC flagship event as the first qualifier.

The sixth edition of the Women's World T20 will begin on November 9 and Bangladesh will take on the defending champion West Indies on the opening day in Guyana. Bangladesh will then take on England on November 12 in their second group game in Saint Lucia.

Salma Khatun and her troops will then

FIXTURE		
DATE	MATCH	VENUE
Nov 9	Bangladesh v West Indies	Guyana
Nov 12	Bangladesh v England	Saint Lucia
Nov 14	Bangladesh v Sri Lanka	Saint Lucia
Nov 18	Bangladesh v South Africa	Saint Lucia

face Sri Lanka on November 18 before taking on South Africa in the last group game at the same venue.

Bangladesh women's team have been in terrific form in recent times. They clinched the ACC Women's Asia Cup title by beating six-time champion India in the final at Kuala Lumpur last month.

The Tigresses continued their consistent form by winning the three-match T20I series against Ireland 2-1 and followed that up by winning the ICC Women's World T20 qualifiers as the unbeaten champions.

# Pakistan seal series

AFP, Bulawayo



Pakistan sealed a series win after strolling to a nine-wicket victory over Zimbabwe in the third one-day international on Wednesday.

Pakistan seamer Faheem Ashraf took a career best five for 22 as the hosts were skittled for just 67.

The total was the home side's lowest ever against Pakistan.

In reply opener Fakhar Zaman then hit an undefeated 43 as Pakistan needed just 10 overs to seal victory and take an unbeatable 3-0 lead in the five-game series.

Prince Masvaure, on his debut, was caught out on a lifter from Usman Khan and Zimbabwe were under immediate pressure at 1 for 1.

The hosts were wobbling at 26 for 3 when matters went from bad to worse when Ashraf came on as first change in the 10th over.

SCORES IN BRIEF  
ZIMBABWE: 67 all out in 25.1 overs (Chibhabha 16, Masakadza 10; Junaid 2-7, Ashraf 5-22)

PAKISTAN: 69 for 1 in 9.5 overs (Zaman 43 not out, Azam 19 not out)  
Result: Pakistan won by 9 wickets and led the 5-match series 3-0.

# SL seek clarity

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's sports minister called on the International Cricket Council to establish "simple, clear rules" Wednesday after skipper Dinesh Chandimal was punished for ball tampering.

"I invite the ICC to revisit the applicable laws and ensure that a set of simple, clear and certain rules and procedures are put in place," Faiszer Musthapha said.

Chandimal, coach Chandika Hathurusingha and manager Asankha Gurusinha were banned for two Tests and four ODIs for holding up the second Test against West Indies.

Match referee Javagal Srinath said Chandimal applied saliva containing the residue of something he had in his mouth to the ball.