

SPORT



Tigers banking on hard-won confidence

Tamim, Rubel's departure delayed

SPORTS REPORTER

With injury concerns looming over Shakib Al Hasan and Tamim Iqbal, arguably two of the most important seniors of the side, Bangladesh's batting department will bank on another experienced campaigners in Mahmudullah Riyad and Mushfiqur Rahim during the Asia Cup.

The Tigers departed yesterday for the UAE, where their tournament will start on September 15 with a match against Sri Lanka.

Mahmudullah, who was in good form in the Caribbean Cricket League (CPL), has been an integral part of the Bangladesh team and said that he will be looking to utilise the confidence in the upcoming multi-national event.

"I think any challenging cricket gives you good practice and I had a fair outing in the CPL this season. I won't say that I did something exceptional, but whatever scope and opportunity I received I tried to get the most out of it. Let's see how much of that confidence I can take with me," said Mahmudullah before departing at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport yesterday.

The 32-year-old thought that Bangladesh's recent limited-overs series wins in the West Indies will boost confidence ahead of the Asia Cup.

"If we talk about confidence as a team I would say we are in a very good position as we won the ODI and T20I series in West Indies pretty well. The last series went well for us as both batsmen and bowlers did well and we played the



With injury clouds hanging over key members as they departed for the UAE to take part in the Asia Cup, much will depend on (Clockwise from L) ODI skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza, Mahmudullah Riyad and Mushfiqur Rahim to ensure that the Bangladesh flag flies high.



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

final of the last two editions of the Asia Cup, so from that point of view we are confident. Having said that, every team [in the Asia Cup] is good and they have been playing good cricket, so every match is equally important for us. We have to play our best cricket and we have to keep that in mind when we play," he said.

There are concerns over whether Shakib will be available for the whole tournament since he is suffering from a finger injury sustained earlier this year during the tri-nation series at home in January, and when asked whether he is ready to fill Shakib's boots at number three, Mahmudullah said that he is prepared to contribute anywhere the

team management wants him to bat. After the tournament opener against Sri Lanka in Dubai, Bangladesh will face their other group member Afghanistan on September 20 in Abu Dhabi and Mahmudullah said that their main aim would be to qualify for the second round.

"I don't think it will be good if we

are relaxed, as every game is important. I previously said that we have to play our best to beat the opponents and there are no alternatives to that. Be it Sri Lanka or Afghanistan, our main aim is to play good cricket and qualify for the second round and then we will take it from there," said Mahmudullah.

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Bangladesh opener Tamim Iqbal and pace bowler Rubel Hossain did not fly out with the team to the United Arab Emirates, where the Tigers will participate in the Asia Cup, yesterday due to visa complications.

Team manager Khaled Mahmud and chief selector Minhajul Abedin also failed to obtain visas and so, the four of them will join the squad as soon as they receive visas.

"There were some technical problems that prompted them to stay back in Dhaka, however, we are hopeful that Tamim, Rubel and Mahmud will obtain their visas within the next one or two days. After getting the visa, they will immediately depart for the UAE," said a BCB official requesting anonymity.

Bangladesh will take on Sri Lanka in the tournament opener on September 15 in Dubai while they will face Afghanistan in the last match of the group phase on September 20 in Abu Dhabi.

Vice-captain Shakib Al Hasan was expected to join the team directly in Dubai following his vacation in the United States of America.

India set up Pakistan semi

Coin toss takes Maldives to last four

SPORTS REPORTER

Seven-time champions India set up a semifinal clash of the SAFF Suzuki Cup against Pakistan following their 2-0 victory over Maldives in the final Group B fixture at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

Despite the defeat, Maldives advanced to the last four, thanks to a coin toss which put them ahead of Sri Lanka after both sides had finished without any points and with the same goal difference. The former champions will play against Group A champions Nepal in the other semifinal. Both the semifinals will take place on Wednesday.

Having confirmed the semifinal berth with a 2-0 win over Sri Lanka, India came into the match by resting five players from their previous game. Yet Stephen Constantine's charges proved too good for Maldives.

India, comprised of under-23 players, had the upper hand against the Islanders, who could not improve their performance following a goalless draw against Sri Lanka in their previous match.

Maldives came close to conceding the lead in the eighth minute when Mohamed Arif directed the ball towards his own net, only to be spared by the woodwork. Maldives, however, could not stop India striker Nikhil Chandra Shekhar, who played a one-two with Farukh Chowdhury before entering the box and placing it to the left-hand side of Maldives goalkeeper Mohamed Faisal in the 36th minute.

Substitute Manvir Singh doubled the lead eight minutes later after availing a through-pass from Lallianzuala Chhangte before Ibrahim Husain's placing shot at the Indian near post went inches wide in stoppage time.

After resumption, both sides created a few chances but neither managed to capitalise, leaving the fate of Maldives hanging on toss of the coin.



Maldives goalkeeper Mohamed Faisal tries to block a shot from an Indian forward during their Group B fixture of the SAFF Suzuki Cup at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

A fleeting spark that only papered over the cracks

SPORTS REPORTER

Over the last three weeks some positive energy was injected into Bangladesh's otherwise moribund football. A 1-1 draw with Thailand followed by an outstanding 1-0 victory against Qatar in the Asian Games forced the otherwise reluctant home fans to take note of that success.

In that context the SAFF Championship, which can be considered a poor man's World Cup, provided the ideal platform for our football officials to draw fans into the country's long-deserted premier venue -- the Bangabandhu National Stadium (BNS) which is hosting the regional football extravaganza for the third time.

After two wins by the home side -- 2-0 against Bhutan and 1-0 over Pakistan -- it looked like the BNS was getting its soul back with fans turning up in numbers with renewed hope. And for the last few days the atmosphere offered a glimpse of what football meant for the sporting fraternity of the country from the 70s to the early 90s.

To be honest not many even knew the names of the central defenders, the midfielders or the forwards in Bangladesh's line-up before the opening game against Bhutan. But by the time they had played their three group league fixtures and made a painful exit after conceding a 2-0 defeat to Nepal on Saturday night in front of a near-packed audience, the fans across the country at least acknowledged a few by name as heroes or villains.

The image of centre-back Tapu Barman, who scored in the first two games, young striker Mahabubur Rahman Sufil, who struck a wonderful goal against Bhutan, and goalkeeper Shahaidul Alam Sohel, whose butterfingers cost Bangladesh dearly against Nepal, will certainly linger in the minds of the home fans for a while.

The muted love for football among the fans was quite evident as the Sohel gaffe was the most talked about issue on Sunday; not only in sporting circles but beyond that.

It only reminded of those days when football was a daily dose of entertainment in the country and the booters were household names.

Football was very popular then. But it was not that Bangladesh were one of the best teams in Asia. The SAFF Championship was the ultimate goal for Bangladesh at that time too. The only difference between now and then is quality, which was aplenty before.

Alfaz Ahmed, who started his career as a left-back and ended up as a prolific striker, and Imtiaz Ahmed Nakib, one of the few fantastic forwards with a lethal head, were right to say that the present Bangladesh side do not deserve to cross the first-round barrier and that they were very lucky to win their first two games. They are probably the last two marksmen of three golden generations before the country's football started to decline.

Even if we accept their observation as a ground reality, it still cannot take the gloss out of what this team has done in the Asian Games, something that even the

golden generation of booters failed to emulate.

This is a young team born out of necessity and through a club system which still runs with that pre-historic mindset. Maybe they do play like pygmies as a former finance minister of the country once famously said while refusing to allocate additional budget for the improvement of the game. They do lack the basic skill of receiving a ball properly, and more importantly don't know the art of the cut-throat modern football, where creating space as well as blocking it is the biggest challenge.

We may also accept the fact that the present generation of football fans simply refused to follow them in the SAFF Championship. Ask them and the majority will tell you that they would prefer to watch the Bangladesh girls playing than the men's team.

But a vast section of fans, past romantics, still desperately want to follow Bangladesh football and the proof was aplenty in the SAFF Championship. This is a team that showed solid defensive organisation in the Asian Games and carried it into the regional championship. What they lacked was assuming the role of predator, both in the defeat against Sri Lanka in an international friendly and against Nepal in the SAFF Championship.

If this young set keeps continuing like this and are allowed to hone their skills in a more proactive club football, where the ambition should be to create homegrown midfielders and forwards, they will certainly come up with better performances in their next international assignment.

Cook drives Eng lead

AFF, London

England were 114 for two in their second innings, a lead of 154 runs, at stumps on the third day of the fifth Test against India at the Oval on Sunday.

Alastair Cook, in his final innings before international retirement, was 46 not out and Joe Root, his successor as England captain, 29 not out.

Their unbroken partnership for the third wicket was worth 52 runs at the close.

Earlier, Ravindra Jadeja marked his return to India duty by top-scoring with 86 not out as England's James Anderson was kept waiting for a landmark wicket.

Jadeja also shared a seventh-wicket stand of 77 with Hanuma Vihari, who made 56 on debut, as India finished on 292 all out -- just 40 runs behind England's first innings 332.

England pacesman Anderson took two for 54 in 21 overs to leave him two shy of Australia great Glenn McGrath's record of 563 Test wickets, the most taken by any fast bowler.

Before play started on Sunday, the International Cricket Council announced Anderson had been fined 15 percent of his match for "speaking in an aggressive manner" to umpire Kumar Dharmasena on Saturday after an lbw review against India captain Virat Kohli went the way of the star batsman.

Kohli eventually fell to Ben Stokes for 49, strengthening an England grip on the game established earlier in the day by Jos Buttler making 89 on his 28th birthday.

India resumed in trouble at 174 for six, with Vihari 25 not out and Jadeja, recalled in place of the injured Ravichandran Ashwin, unbeaten on eight.

The veteran new-ball duo of Stuart Broad and Anderson were straight into the attack on an overcast Sunday morning.

England lead this five-match series 3-1.

SCORES IN BRIEF
ENGLAND: First innings 332
INDIA: First innings 292 (Rahul 37, Pujara 37, Kohli 49, Vihari 56, Jadeja 86 not out; Anderson 2-54, Stokes 2-56, Ali 2-50)
ENGLAND: Second innings 114 for 2 (Cook 46 not out, Root 29 not out)

Sohel takes all the blame

Goalkeeper Shahidul Alam Sohel (SAS) is the centre of all discussions following his incredible fumble against Nepal which cost Bangladesh dearly, culminating in a group-stage exit from the SAFF Suzuki Cup. The 29-year-old goalkeeper is feeling the heat, from the supporters as well as from within himself. The Abahani goalkeeper spoke to The Daily Star's Anisur Rahman yesterday about his mistake and its repercussions.

TDS: How did you spend the night after making such a costly blunder against Nepal?

SAS: There is nothing to say. I spent a sleepless night and walked around in the room the whole night.

TDS: Were you double-minded whether to fist or grip the floating free-kick from Biman Gharti Magar?

SAS: To be honest, I wasn't double-minded. The ball was coming straight from the floodlights and I could not see the ball. I raised my hands in the air without seeing anything and the ball slipped from my grip.

TDS: Who do you blame for this defeat and what about the performance of the outfield players?

SAS: I did not miss the flight in Saturday's game; I just lost grip of

the other players can be blamed; I am the man to blame for that defeat.

TDS: Was the team capable of winning the title this time?

SAS: We had a good team for the SAFF Championship and the team had the ability to become champions. I had a big dream of holding the trophy but the whole team had to pay the price for my mistake.

TDS: You also misjudged the flight in other international matches. A few days ago Bangladesh conceded a goal as you were out of position. Is it a case of over-confidence or lack of confidence when it comes to judging the flight of the ball or ascertaining your position on goal?

SAS: I did not miss the flight in Saturday's game; I just lost grip of



the ball. But I do agree I was out of position for the goal conceded against Sri Lanka [in the FIFA friendly match in Nilphamari]. I always try to put my natural performance. I have never been over-confident or started matches with a lack of confidence.

TDS: What have your family members and teammates told you

after Saturday's game?

SAS: Everyone is trying to console me (he was heard crying during the talk over phone). The teammates and coach tried to console me last night. I talked to my wife who told me to think of the positives.

TDS: Do you want to say anything to the spectators who had turned up to watch the Bangladesh-Nepal match?

SAS: I have never seen such big crowds during my career with the national team like I saw on Saturday. Everyone came with an expectation that Bangladesh would qualify for the semifinals and we will be champions but it did not happen due to my mistake. I am sorry for this. I apologise to everyone for the fumble.