



Afghanistan's top-scorer Rahmat Shah (R) acknowledges the crowd's applause after reaching a half-century against Sri Lanka during their Asia Cup fixture at the Sheikh Zayed Stadium in Abu Dhabi yesterday. Afghanistan won the match by 91 runs. PHOTO: AFP

Momentum a false front

SPORTS REPORTER from Dubai

With the 137-run win in Saturday's Asia Cup opener that skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza had so desired in the lead-up to that match has cast a spell of optimism over Bangladesh's chances in the coveted regional competition. Momentum is the buzz word in Bangladesh cricket, and it is believed that the team needs to start well to do well.

That may be true, but in their last ODI tournament -- at home in January 2018 -- they bossed Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe in the first three matches before falling to abject defeats in the second match against Sri Lanka, with the negative momentum then carrying through in Test and T20I series losses against them.

With recent ODI and T20I series wins against West Indies, they have been riding the crest of positivity but there is a danger that, with opener Tamim Iqbal -- by far their best performing and most crucial batsman in recent times -- being ruled out with a fractured left wrist, the tide could once again turn. If it does, it should expose that the momentum factor is really a false front. The real problem is a lack of real alternatives to the Big Five of Mashrafe Bin Mortaza, Tamim, Shakib Al Hasan, Mushfiqur Rahim and Mahmudullah Riyad on the occasions they fail and when, like now, one of them is missing in action.

Mohammad Mithun was the only batsman other than Mushfiqur who crossed 15 in the Asia Cup opener against Sri Lanka. However, his crucial 63 in the 137-run win has been lost in the fanfare surrounding Mushfiqur's

144 and Tamim's courage in batting at number 11 with a fractured wrist so that the innings could continue.

Mushfiqur on Sunday was generous with his praise for the 27-year-old wicketkeeper-batsman making a comeback to the side after having scored just 33 runs in his previous three ODIs, saying that Mithun's positivity helped ease the pressure on the eventual centurion. Mushfiqur countered that by saying that Mithun should not have gotten out when he did, in the 26th over when the two players had the bowlers at their mercy after at one stage being two down after



MOHAMMAD MITHUN

the first over.

"I think we can improve a lot, the way we lost wickets -- hopefully we'll look after this very well. And also, Mithun was out at the wrong time; we could've made it 280-290 if he wasn't," said skipper Mashrafe, the lynchpin of the Big Five, during the presentation ceremony.

The words of Mushfiqur and Mashrafe reveal a lot, not least why the five cricketers are feted above the rest in Bangladesh cricket. Even in a win they identified a flaw, and unsurprisingly it had to do with a young batsman.

Of course, there was much to cele-

brate about Mithun's batting on Saturday. After Tamim was the third to depart, not because of dismissal but injury, his 131-run partnership with Mushfiqur was the difference between a loss and a thumping win. During that partnership he dominated the bowling with sheer talent, much like previous youngsters like Sabbir Rahman and Soumya Sarkar had done.

However, also like previous youngsters, he displayed a lack of awareness once the ball was in his court and seemed satisfied with a job not yet done. He was out slogging when he knew they were a man short and that he was needed to bat as long as possible. Having been partially responsible for the recovery, he could also be said to be responsible for the extreme measure of Tamim having to come out to try to complete the innings.

Tamim's absence will be more debilitating than most. So will the fact that, if, as seems likely after their thumping win, Bangladesh end up group champions they will have to play three matches in the span of four days in heat that they have not experienced before this tournament. Mithun is an opener in domestic one-dayers, but Tamim will likely be replaced by the uncapped Nazmul Hossain to open with another youngster in Liton Das.

"Obviously, since I have not done much in international cricket before, that was my best innings," Mithun told reporters yesterday. "It was just one match. If I am to have a long international career, I will have to perform well in many matches," he added.

With a pillar in Tamim gone, Bangladesh's Asia Cup will depend on how well the youngsters bear his burden. If they can't, lost momentum will only be the by-product.

A bit nervous: Rohit

India take on Hong Kong today

AGENCIES, Dubai

Rohit Sharma is all set to lead India for the first time in a major international tournament at the Asia Cup 2018, and on the eve of the match, he said he was "a bit nervous, but very excited".

With Virat Kohli rested for the tournament, Sharma will call the shots over the next week-and-a-bit in the United Arab Emirates.

He's donned this role before, though, and to considerable success: He led India to the Nidahas Trophy title against Sri Lanka and Bangladesh in March, and 2-1 and 3-0 victories in one-day internationals and Twenty20 Internationals against Sri Lanka in December.

Despite that, there are some nerves. "Captaincy is a big responsibility," he told reporters on the eve of India's tournament-opener against Hong Kong. "I've done it before in a series, but this is a very big tournament for me. I'm quite excited. A bit nervous, obviously, but very excited."

"It's an important tournament, and I've played with these boys quite a bit, so we understand each other. I'm looking forward to it."

While Hong Kong represent a tricky challenge, Sharma was, unsurprisingly, asked of the subsequent clash against arch-rivals Pakistan.

"We've not played here. The last time a lot of the boys played here was during the IPL [Indian Premier League] in 2014," said Sharma. "It's been a long time since we played at this (Dubai International Cricket Stadium) particular venue. Tomorrow is a good chance to assess the pitch, the grounds, the dimensions -- it's important you understand all of that and take it into your game."

India have some concerns to address, though. The middle-order isn't settled -- all of Kedar Jadhav, Ambati Rayudu, Manish Pandey, Suresh Raina and KL Rahul -- have been tried out in recent times, and India are yet to settle on the best options.

With the ICC Cricket World Cup 2019 a little under eight months away, there's a sense of urgency to get it right, and the Asia Cup will play a big role in that.

"There are a lot of spots up for grabs -- No.3, 4, 6. All these guys are eyeing that," said Sharma. "We've got to see what the best combination can be for this particular series. We want to give chances to as many guys as possible, make sure that No.4 and No.6 spot is sealed."

A lesson for management too

SPORTS REPORTER from Dubai



Bangladesh opener Tamim Iqbal walks out of the team hotel in Dubai yesterday. The injured left-hander, who has been ruled out of the Asia Cup, will return home today. PHOTO: STAR

After Bangladesh lost the first Test against Sri Lanka in Galle by a big margin in March 2017, they famously came back in the next Test to seal a rare away win in their 100th Test match. The players then revealed that they had instituted a policy of holding a players-only team meeting on the eve of each match so that they can talk through problems and find solutions on their own.

A year and a half later, that attitude surfaced again when Mashrafe Bin Mortaza took the decision to send Tamim Iqbal out to bat even though the batsman was sitting with his fractured left wrist in a sling in Saturday's Asia Cup opener against Sri Lanka. It changed the complexion of the match as it allowed Mushfiqur Rahim to add 32 priceless runs, and Bangladesh ended up winning by 137 runs.

That clarity of thought, lamentably, has not been found in the machinations of the team management. They needlessly dragged their feet about whether Tamim would remain a part of the Asia Cup when the whole world saw him sitting on the dressing room balcony with his left hand heavily bandaged. It was only yesterday that the team management announced, after Tamim had visited a German specialist, that Tamim would be out of the Asia Cup. Tamim will be flying home today and the reports from yesterday's scans will be sent to

finger specialists in Australia.

"Tamim will be out for three-four weeks," team manager Khaled Mahmud told The Daily Star yesterday. "He will not need an operation, but the specialist in Australia will recommend the next course of action."

News had done the rounds that the secrecy about Tamim's status was to keep Afghanistan, Bangladesh's opponents on September 20, on their toes about the status of the team's most important batsman.

"Not at all, it was only to keep Sri Lanka guessing about whether Tamim would go out to bat," said Mahmud. If that was the case, it was brilliant because it did severely wrong-foot the Sri Lankans. But talking to Tamim and other players, and Mahmud himself, a picture emerged that although the idea was mooted by Mashrafe with 20 overs to go -- around the same time that Mahmud had announced that Tamim would not bat again in the match -- the final decision was a last-second one that Tamim made on a whim.

Also, while the management were asked repeatedly why they were delaying the announcement of Tamim's exit on Sunday, they could not come up with the reason Mahmud gave yesterday. If it was indeed to wrong-foot Afghanistan, then Tamim walking around with a sling in the same hotel certainly put paid to that. Whatever was the reason, there seems to be a lack of coordination in the management setup, and in that they can learn from the team.

'Need to be at our best to beat India'

PTI, Dubai

A comprehensive win over Hong Kong is a perfect start but Pakistan captain Sarfraz Ahmed says his team will have to raise the game by several notches to outwit arch-rivals India in the much-awaited Asia Cup clash on Wednesday.

Pakistan defeated Hong Kong by eight wickets Sunday night. Sarfraz said his team needs to iron out a few things before the clash against India.

"As a captain, I saw a couple of things which we should work on. For us to go the distance in the tournament, we should have won this game (against Hong Kong) by nine or 10 wickets."

"We also need to bowl better with the new ball. We need to get early wickets with the new ball. It's a good win but to win against India we have to be at our best in all the three departments," Sarfraz added.

INFO-ZONE

INDIA V HONG KONG

HEAD TO HEAD IN ASIA CUP

M	W	L	M	W	L
1	1	0	1	0	1

IN ALL ODIs

M	W	L	M	W	L
1	1	0	1	0	1

Last meeting in ODIs: Karachi, June 25, 2008. India won by 256 runs.

KEY PLAYERS

Player	Batting	Bowling
Rohit Sharma	44.98	17.77
Anshuman Rath	50.33	17.77
	6748	17
	264	HS
	87.18	SR
	34	50s
	18	100s
		755
		143*
		76.80
		6
		1

AFG-SL SCOREBOARD

Player	R/B	4s/6s		
Shahzad lbw b Dananjaya	34/47	4/1		
Ihsanullah lbw b Dananjaya	45/65	6/0		
Rahmat c Perera b Chameera	72/90	5/0		
Asghar lbw b Jayasuriya	1/5	0/0		
Shahidi b Perera	37/52	2/0		
Nabi c Perera b Malinga	15/12	0/1		
Najibullah b Perera	12/14	0/0		
Gulbadin c Dananjaya b Perera	4/5	0/0		
Rashid b Perera	13/6	2/0		
Aftab not out	7/2	0/1		
Mujeeb b Perera	0/2	0/0		
Extras: (lb-2, w-7)	9			
Total: (All out in 50 overs)	249			
Fall of wickets: 1-57, 2-107, 3-110, 4-190, 5-203, 6-222, 7-227, 8-242, 9-249, 10-249.				
Bowler	O	M	R	W
Malinga	10	0	66	1
Chameera	10	2	43	1
Perera	9	0	55	5
Dananjaya	10	0	39	2
De Silva	5	0	22	0
Jayasuriya	6	0	22	1
SRI LANKA:	R/B	4s/6s		
Mendis lbw b Mujeeb	0/2	0/0		
Tharanga c Asghar b Naib	36/64	3/0		
Silva run out (Shenwar/Shahzad)	23/38	2/1		
MDKJ Perera b Rashid	17/17	2/0		
Mathews c Rashid b Nabi	22/39	1/0		
Jayasuriya not out (Rashid/Mujeeb)	14/28/0			
NLC Perera b Naib	28/36	2/0		
Shanaka b Mujeeb	0/2	0/0		
Dananjaya b Nabi	2/10	0/0		
Malinga lbw b Rashid	1/7	0/0		
Chameera not out	2/5	0/0		
Extras: (lb-2, lb-5, w-6)	13			
Total: (All out in 41.2 overs)	158			
Fall of wickets: 1-0, 2-54, 3-86, 4-88, 5-108, 6-143, 7-144, 8-153, 9-156, 10-158.				
Bowler	O	M	R	W
Mujeeb	9	1	32	2
Aftab	7	0	34	0
Naib	8	0	29	2
Nabi	10	1	30	2
Rashid	7.2	0	26	2
Result: Afghanistan won by 91 runs				
Player-of-the-match: Rahmat Shah				

A case of curious selection

SPORTS REPORTER

It came as a surprise when selectors included former Bangladesh captain Mohammad Ashraf in the High Performance (HP) squad for a four-day game to be played at the Sheikh Abu Naser stadium in Khulna. The game will start from tomorrow and the squad will be split into two teams -- Red team and Green Team.

Ashraf, who last month completed his five-year suspension from international cricket for involvement in match and spot fixing, was named in the Red Team alongside Soumya Sarkar, Afif Hossain and others.

According to chief selector Minhajul Abedin, the inclusion of Ashraf in the HP squad is nothing but a formality as they wanted to see his current status in a match situation.

"This is not for high performance as we made two teams, with few players out injured. It was tough to even form a playing eleven. This is just a formality. Let's see how he does in the match as he is fit enough," Minhajul, who is

currently in Dubai, told The Daily Star over phone yesterday.

However, following Ashraf's completion of suspension, the chief selector had claimed that the 34-year-old batsman did not fit in the current system.

"To be honest, he [Ashraf] does not have a space [in the national



MOHAMMAD ASHRAFUL

pipeline] at this point. He is not attached with the system -- of playing in HP, A team -- so he is far from the national team right now. You need to give a player time to go through the journey and achieve the level," Minhajul had told a press conference on August 12.

But Ashraf, who scored 11.4 in the recent beep test conducted by the Bangladesh Cricket Board for the players participating in the upcoming National Cricket League, had prompted the selectors to have a look at his performance.

"Let's see, you can't say anything now as his fitness level is good and there are few other aspects involved, not just performance," said Minhajul. When asked what the reaction could be from youngsters over Ashraf's inclusion in the HP squad, Minhajul said that it would inspire youngsters watching him play.

SQUADS
Red Team: Mohammad Saif Hassan, Soumya Sarkar, Mohammad Ashraf, Afif Hossain, Al-Amin, Mehedi Hasan, Tanvir Islam, Marshal Ayub, Khaled Ahmed, Abu Jayed, Tanbir Haider, Taskin Ahmed, Sanjamul Islam.

Green Team: Imrul Kayes, Mizanur Rahman, Zakir Hasan, Fazle Mahamud, Nurul Hasan, Shadman Islam, Taijul Islam, Al-Amin Hossain, Mahidul Islam, Kamrul Islam Rabbi, Ebadot Hossain, Jubair Hossain, Iftekar Sajjad.