

**FIGHT FOR
ASIAN SUPREMACY**



Liton Das leaves the field after scoring only seven runs against India in Dubai on Friday. The youngster failed to play the lead role in absence of regular opener Tamim Iqbal, who has been ruled out of the Asia Cup.

PHOTO: AFP

Panic starts at the top

SAKIB SUBHAN from Dubai



The 13th-hour inclusion of discarded national openers Soumya Sarkar and Imrul Kayes in Bangladesh's Asia Cup squad may have seemed like reinforcement for a troubled team on Saturday evening, but in the cold light of day it seems little more than a panicked reaction to bad performance. Unfortunately for the team and the fans, panic at the top of the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) often trickles down to the team and the results are there to see on the field.

Soumya and Imrul have not played ODIs since October 2017. While Imrul hit 68 in his penultimate ODI innings, the last time Soumya scored more than 50 was in May 2017 against Ireland and his scores in six subsequent innings were 0, 28, 3, 3, 0 and 8. Imrul, during a near 10-year career, has never been able to become more than a stopgap solution in ODIs and an average of 28.9 from 70 matches depicts a batsman who has failed to cash in on repeated opportunities.

When both were ignored in the 16-man squad named for the Asia Cup, it was evidence that the selectors and the board were looking past them for the time being at least. Instead, with the World Cup on the horizon, a new pair was being tried in Tamim Iqbal and Liton Das, with the then uncapped Nazmul Hossain Shanto as the third opener. With Tamim carrying a finger injury into the tournament, chief selector Minhajul Abedin and Co. included Mominul Haque as cover.

It therefore seemed logical when Minhajul said, after Tamim flew home with a fractured left hand sustained in the opening win against Sri Lanka, that they would not ask for replacements as

they had already taken the precaution of including an extra member in Mominul. As Tamim's injury was already part of the contingency, no extra action was deemed necessary.

However, logic has a short shelf life in the BCB and after two matches where both Liton and Nazmul -- who replaced Tamim for the second league match against Afghanistan which Bangladesh lost by 136 runs on Thursday -- failed to get going, all previous thought went out the window. Without the final say of skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza, who was probably putting on a 66-run partnership with Mehedi Hasan Miraz in Friday's

"They were dropped because they have not performed. And in these conditions, coming in suddenly and taking the pressure -- I don't know what they have done technically."

MASHRAFE BIN MORTAZA

Super Four match against India at the time, the decision was finalised by BCB president Nazmul Hassan to call in both Soumya and Imrul.

After the match, which Bangladesh lost by seven wickets, Mashrafe said that while there had been discussions about reinforcements, he was not clear about the decision as he was on the field when it was finalised. Known as a captain who backs the players he is given in order to get the most out of them, it must not have been a pleasing development.

"Look, those who are coming have also lost their places in the team," said Mashrafe after the India match when asked whether the inclusion of the discarded duo was an admission that the incumbents have failed. "They were dropped because they have not performed. And in these conditions, coming in suddenly and taking the pressure -- I don't know what they have done technically, whether they have rectified the problems for which they were dropped in the first place."

Soumya has scored a T20 half-century on the recent A team tour of Ireland and a 48 in the just-concluded four-day practice match between BCB Red and BCB Green in Khulna. Imrul struck 58 in the same match, but all those performances were in different formats against a much lower standard of opposition than they will face if picked in the 11 for the remaining two Asia Cup games.

If they are picked, the context is not promising. They were set to arrive in Dubai at 10:30pm last night. Not the best of options at the best of times, they will then have to acclimatise to the heat, travel to Abu Dhabi and take part in the match. If neither are picked for the game that Bangladesh have to win to maintain a clear path to the final, then flying them in would be nothing more than a donation to airline company Emirates.

The worst case may be if one or both happen to succeed with the World Cup nine months away. With one opening spot up for grabs when Tamim returns, instead of allowing Nazmul or Liton time to settle into the role, it will give a lifeline to a batsman who has proven time and again that he does not currently have the tools to be successful in the long run.

Batting in limbo sans Tamim

SPORTS REPORTER from Dubai

ASIA CUP UAE 2018 It is a telling statistic that even in Bangladesh's flying start to the Asia Cup on September 15, when Mashfiqur Rahim's sublime 144 authored a 137-run hammering of Sri Lanka, Bangladesh left three balls unused in their total of 261. Set to take on Afghanistan today in a virtual must-win Asia Cup Super Four encounter in Abu Dhabi at 5:30pm (Bangladesh time), Bangladesh are yet to play out 50 overs in the tournament.

The 137-run win in the opener papered over those cracks, but the paper has since been ripped off.

"All areas, really. Overall we have not batted well," said Bangladesh vice-captain Shakib Al Hasan yesterday when asked which areas they need to improve in batting.

In their next two matches, Bangladesh survived just 42.1 overs against Afghanistan with a score of 119 all out and 49.1 overs against India in

their innings of 119 all out.

"To tell the truth, it was only against Sri Lanka, and that too one innings [Mashfiqur's]. Apart from that no one played well," Shakib added. "So, for three matches on the trot we have not played good cricket, especially batting."

The Asia Cup has badly exposed the Tigers' over-reliance on Tamim. The left-hander is Bangladesh's highest run-scorer and century-maker and there seems to be no discernible strategy to cope without him. Even when Tamim departed early, like he did when he retired hurt at the end of the second over against Sri Lanka, the rest of the batsmen go into a sort of plan B to make up for his absence. It was seen in the period of consolidation between Mashfiqur and Mohammad Mitun after Tamim's injury in the opening game, but has been missing since.

While Bangladesh were completely bogged down by Afghanistan -- especially leg-spin wizard Rashid Khan -- in their second match, they went the opposite route the following day against India, with five of the

top seven, including Shakib, gifting their wickets.

After each of their back-to-back defeats, skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza talked about the importance of preserving wickets in the early stages, but there just does not seem to be the will to implement those words.

The team seems to be suffering from a kind of siege mentality. New batting coach Neil McKenzie had said before the tour that he wanted to see the Bangladesh brand of batting -- not necessarily hitting sixes off all the shots but striking boundaries with cricketing shots and picking up singles in between. However, Bangladesh hit just five boundaries against Afghanistan and played out 171 dot balls. Against India, they failed to score off 190 deliveries.

"We will try to play our normal cricket. In such situations, playing your normal game is difficult, but not impossible. We should focus on what kind of cricket we are used to playing and the type of cricket we should play," Shakib said.

It remains to be seen what that normal game currently is.



IMRUL KAYES



SOUMYA SARKAR

Call-ups catch Imrul, Soumya off-guard

SPORTS REPORTER

The four-day match between the two halves of the High Performance squad -- Red team and Green team -- ended in a draw at the Sheikh Abu Naser Stadium in Khulna yesterday.

The first two days of the match lost a session each due to the underprepared outfield in Khulna.

Coming in to chase the target of 242 runs, Red, playing without skipper Imrul Kayes who was recalled to the national team for the Asia Cup, almost tasted defeat as they finished on 117 for 9 at the end of the final day's play, where left-arm spinner Taijul Islam picked up four wickets.

Earlier in the day, Green added a quick 235 for two in 37 overs, courtesy of an unbeaten hundred from Shadman Islam.

After electing to bat, Green posted 289 for 9 in their first innings, riding on wicket-keeper batsman Nurul Hasan's century while Imrul scored 58 runs. Pacer Al-Amin bagged four wickets.

In reply, Red were all-out on 283. Marshall Ayub top scored for the side with 68 runs while Soumya Sarkar added 48. Mohammad Ashraful managed to score just one run in the first innings while he scored a paltry 13 in the second innings.

Much like Bangladesh skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza and Shakib Al Hasan, the opening duo of Imrul Kayes and Soumya Sarkar were surprised by their sudden recall to the Tigers' camp for the ongoing Asia Cup.

Both the openers were caught off guard as they were taking part in the High Performance squad's four-day match in Khulna when they were asked to catch a flight to UAE the next day ahead of Bangladesh's match against Afghanistan today.

Soumya and Imrul last played for the national team in the ODI series in South Africa over a year ago.

The main reason that prompted the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) higher-ups to recall the southpaws was the poor showings from openers Liton Das and Nazmul Hossain -- in the group stage match against Afghanistan and in the Super Four clash against India -- following Tamim Iqbal's departure from the tournament due to a wrist injury.

"Yes, obviously it came as a surprise to me as I was playing a four-day match in Khulna

with the High Performance squad. I never imagined that I would get a call-up for the tournament in such a way. But I feel lucky that I will be able to take part in such a tournament and if I am able to play I will try to give my best to perform well," Imrul told reporters before departing for the UAE yesterday.

Soumya hit his last ODI fifty in May 2017 and has since had innings of 0, 28, 3, 3, 0 and 8.

However the stylish left-hander said that he was looking forward to repaying the faith that has seemingly been placed on him for the Asia Cup.

"Obviously it won't be easy as the conditions in the UAE are tough. But at the same time it's also an opportunity for me to cement my place in the ODI format. I have been working on my batting recently. I want to repay the faith which the team management has shown me and cash in to help my team," said Soumya.

Bangladesh have played six different opening pairs in their last 26 ODI innings and, having now included of Soumya and Imrul for the remaining matches of the Asia Cup, the team management will definitely want to get a stable opening pair in the coming days.

Battle Royale: Part II

AGENCIES, Dubai



The two bitter rivals -- India and Pakistan -- will square off once again in the Asia Cup today and this time with much higher stakes in the Super Four battle at the Dubai International Cricket Stadium.

After just four days of facing each other, India, who comprehensively won the first match against Pakistan in a group match, will be hoping to continue their momentum and snatch a victory for the second time in the tournament. On the other hand, Pakistan will be hoping for redemption and an opportunity to add some much-needed spark in their Asia Cup campaign.

Sarfraz Ahmed-led Pakistan suffered an 8-wicket defeat in a match that proved to be a completely one-sided contest despite all the hype and Pakistan captain will feel the need to tighten a few strings together especially

after a last over win against Afghanistan on Friday in their first Super Four encounter.

After the 7-wicket win over Bangladesh on Friday, skipper Rohit Sharma on the other hand will march confidently to face another challenge against their arch-rivals today.

With the skipper and Shikhar Dhawan in sublime form on top of the order, and Dinesh Karthik and Ambati Rayudu delivering decent performances in the middle, it remains unlikely India will make any changes to the side against Pakistan.

Pakistan may want to make a few changes especially with the opening batsman Fakhar Zaman, who has failed to deliver his best in the tournament so far.

The India-Pakistan battle have historically been an unpredictable affair. While this match will have much higher stakes as compared to their group match few days ago, India and Pakistan will be looking to cement their place in the final with a victory today.

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INFO-ZONE		
HEAD TO HEAD IN ASIA CUP		AFGHANISTAN
M W L		M W L
2 0 2		2 2 0
IN ALL ODIs		
M W L	M W L	
6 3 3	6 3 3	
Last meeting in ODIs: Abu Dhabi, September 20, 2018. Afghanistan won by 136 runs in the Asia Cup.		

INFO-ZONE		
HEAD TO HEAD IN ASIA CUP		PAKISTAN
M W L NR		M W L NR
12 6 5 1		12 5 6 1
IN ALL ODIs		
M W L NR	M W L NR	
130 53 73 4	130 73 53 4	
Last meeting in ODIs: Dubai, September 19, 2018. India won by eight wickets in the Asia Cup.		