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Nazmul Hossain Shanto (L) and Liton Das need a little more patience and faith from the Tigers' followers to make up for the colossal loss of opener Tamim Iqbal due to injury in the ongoing Asia Cup.

'Win this one today, Bhai told me'

SPORTS REPORTER from Dubai

Mustafizur Rahman is not the most talkative with microphones placed in front of him and cameras trained on him. However, when he performs like he did on Sunday, stopping Afghanistan dead in their tracks by conceding just four when they needed eight to win off the last over of their Asia Cup match, he has to reluctantly make an appearance.

His eventual figures of 44 for two in nine overs -- taking his second wicket by catching Rashid Khan off his own bowling in the last over -- was all the more remarkable because he was suffering with cramps from his second three-over spell and even during that last over.

"The heat there [in Abu Dhabi] is more than the ground in Dubai; not just me but a lot of us were cramping," said Mustafizur at the team hotel yesterday. "I told bhai [skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza] during my second three-over spell that I was having cramps in my calves. He told me to rest, but that I have to come back at the end. I said that I would do it anyway I could."

"My legs were seizing up if I ran in too hard, so I ran in a way so that that does not happen."

Mashrafe himself was struggling with the heat -- the dehydration had caused a rash on his thigh and he had to go off the field in the death overs -- so it was all the more important for Mustafizur to continue.

His reticence to make public statements however does at times reveal small truths about his thought process -- namely how he likes to keep things simple. When asked for a blow-by-blow account of the last over, he said: "I needed to bowl normally, so I did. If I thought too much then maybe those eight runs would have been taken in two deliveries. We won because I didn't think too much."

He did not think experience of bowling in such situations in the various T20 leagues he has participated in was as important as a bit of help from above.

"A lot of experienced bowlers concede 8-10 runs in the last over. It is all up to luck. Unless the target is above 20, there are no guarantees. But if the almighty is with you, it will happen. I tried, had faith in myself."

It was a special win because Bangladesh had lost many matches, both with bat and ball, from such situations recently.

"Yes, bhai told me," said Mustafizur, perking up briefly. "At the start of the last over he said that we have lost a lot of games trying to score 8-9 runs in the last over, 'now you win this one for us'."

"That felt good. I said that I will try, if luck is with me it will happen; if not, then it won't."



MUSTAFIZUR RAHMAN

Out of the box and back in contention

SAKEB SUBHAN from Dubai

What could be the beginning of a turnaround for Bangladesh in the ongoing Asia Cup may seem on the surface to have been caused by the inspired inclusion of Imrul Kayes in the team for Sunday's match against Afghanistan a mere 17 hours after he was flown into the United Arab Emirates as emergency reinforcement.

Imrul stepped in and scored an unbeaten 72 to help take Bangladesh to 249 for seven after they were cut down to 87 for five in the 21st over. It showed great resolve from the left-hander not just because he coped with the extreme heat with zero time for acclimatisation, but also because he batted at number six for the first time in his career, never having batted below number three in 70 previous matches.

The triumph however was not Imrul's alone. It was that very decision to bat him at number six that rescued the team from wallowing in confusion because, thinking out of the box, they had devised a solution that seemed impossible when they crumbled to 119 all out in their first encounter with Afghanistan. Under the circumstances, it was perhaps the only way to avert potential discord within the team. Unsurprisingly, it seems to have been the result of skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza staying true to his convictions.

Confusion infected the Bangladesh camp ever since talismanic opener and the country's highest run-scorer went home with a fractured left hand last Tuesday. The decision to bring in Imrul and fellow discarded opener Soumya Sarkar was taken after Bangladesh's abject failures in two successive matches against Afghanistan and India on September 20 and 21 stemmed from persistent top-order implosions in Tamim's

absence. It was not a decision that would have sat well with inspirational leader Mashrafe, who likes to back the players he is given so that he can ask them to give their all when it is required.

He was not part of the final decision to call in reinforcements as he was busy playing India when the decision was made, and hinted after the game that it was no real solution as those two had also been dropped for non-performance.

Promising left-hander Nazmul Hossain Apu made his debut against Afghanistan on September 20 as Tamim's replacement, but neither Tamim's partner Liton Das nor the newcomer were successful. Both Mashrafe and vice-captain Shakib Al Hasan, the latter speaking the day after the defeat against India, seemed to speak out in support of the newcomers -- Liton has been a regular opening option for just four matches in this Asia Cup -- saying that they needed more time.

On the day of the match, Mashrafe spearheaded the decision to send the left-handed Imrul at number three to counter Afghanistan's demon leg-spinner Rashid Khan and perhaps negate his googly. It also served the purpose of showing faith in the opening pair that, when Tamim left, was deemed good enough to see them through the tournament. It was out of the box thinking that worked like a charm as far as the result was concerned, but also laid down a positive marker that newcomers can take courage from.

The tournament had started with Mashrafe taking the wildcard decision to ask Tamim to go out at number 11 even though he had his hand in a sling, and that contributed to a memorable 137-run win over Sri Lanka. While that decision was followed by Tamim's departure and, in turn, dismal performances -- the latest example of Mashrafe's out-of-the-box thinking has put the Tigers back into contention.

DESERT HAZE

Where it all happens

SPORTS REPORTER from Dubai

On Monday, there was a media day at the ICC headquarters, not far from where India will play Afghanistan in the Asia Cup today, where bigwigs like ICC CEO Dave Richardson, general manager of the Anti-Corruption Unit Alex Marshall and general manager of cricket Geoff Allardice spoke to the media about the state of cricket in 2018.

While that was in equal parts engaging and dull, it was a treat to get a tour of what is the factory of the cricket world. Working there would be a cricket lover's dream as the thread of the gentleman's game runs through the building. Historic and iconic pictures line the walls on every level. In the main conference room where the meeting was held, one side of the wall bears some of the most memorable lines ever written on cricket by the likes of Neville Cardus, John Arlott and CLR James.

The smaller meeting rooms are no less inviting. You can take your pick of the Bradman Room, the Sobers Room, the Heyhoe Flint Room, the WG Grace Room and the Tendulkar room. Each has a wall dedicated to pictures and trivia about the icon the room is named after. On second thought, maybe working here wouldn't be a good idea as it would be too easy to get distracted.

Marshall was talking about the evils of match and spot-fixing and how private leagues attract corruptors like bees to honey. A few hours later in the same city, the T-10 League auctions were set to start.

BANGLADESH WOMEN MAKING WAVES

Allardice was talking in excited tones about women's cricket and how the previous Women's World Twenty20 had set attendance and viewing records for the women's game. While the Bangladesh men's team staged a thrilling turnaround the previous day in the Asia Cup in Abu Dhabi, it was their female counterparts that got special mention because of their recent brilliance in upstaging India in the Women's Asia Cup final in Malaysia in June and following that up by winning the World T20 qualifiers in the Netherlands.

"We acknowledge the giant strides Bangladesh have taken in recent times, upsetting India at the Asia Cup. They're starting to emerge as a strong team, and one of our key areas now is to continue to explore the growth of the women's game. One of the ways to do this we felt was to give international status to all internationals so that it has the potential to unlock government funding," Allardice said.



Mushfiqur Rahim hugs Imrul Kayes (L) after the latter's come-back knock of 74 not out helped Bangladesh post a challenging 249 against Afghanistan on Sunday, which the Tigers successfully defended.

It's all about homework

SPORTS REPORTER

Imrul Kayes had just 48 hours after completing a four-day game in Khulna for the High Performance squad to pack his bags and board a flight to join the Tigers in the United Arab Emirates for a do or die encounter against Afghanistan in the Asia Cup, where he was expected to handle one of the best spin bowlers in the world in Rashid Khan.

However in those short 48 hours the left-hander, who has been in and out of the national team since his ODI debut ten years ago, did not forget to do his homework on Rashid.

"Actually I have not played Rashid that much in the nets of Comilla Victorians during the Bangladesh Premier League as we

don't have that much training in franchise leagues. But there were a few tricks which I followed over his bowling grip. I saw the video analysis and followed that and maybe for that reason I was able to read him. I have seen his recent videos as well as the old ones on which grip he bowls the googlies and his grip for the leg spin. When you follow that early, it's easy to face him," Imrul told the media yesterday.

The 31-year-old grabbed the opportunity to test his knowledge of the infamous bowler with both hands when he was asked to bat at number six, for the first time in career, in that crucial match against Afghanistan. Imrul went on to smash his 15th ODI fifty and remained unbeaten on 72 off 89 balls, including six fours, in that encounter.

More importantly, Imrul and Mahmudullah Riyad added a record 128-run sixth wicket stand after the

Tigers were reeling on 87 for 5 at one stage.

"Me and Riyad bhai (Mahmudullah) were thinking of putting up a partnership at that time. He helped me a lot while batting and I will give him the credit. At one point I felt that I am giving so many dot balls and asked him whether I am playing so many dot balls or not. He told me to continue playing in my way and added that we will try till the end," he said.

Imrul also praised Mushfiqur Rahim for providing mental support even when he was dropped from the squad and after reaching the UAE.

"Everyone supported me but to be honest Mushfiqur supported me a lot. He told me so many good things even before coming to the UAE and after reaching here. He encouraged me after performing which is a big achievement for me as a teammate," said Imrul.

Shakib goes for a scan

SPORTS REPORTER from Dubai

Bangladesh all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan went for a scan on his left little finger in Dubai yesterday. Team manager Khaled Mahmud said that it was not a cause for alarm yet, ahead of tomorrow's virtual semi-final against Pakistan, and they will know more when they get the results today.

"It was just a routine check as he has been playing with the injury for quite some time now," Mahmud told The Daily Star yesterday.

Shakib has had trouble with his left little finger since injuring it while fielding in the tri-series final against Sri Lanka in January this year. His participation in the ongoing Asia Cup was in doubt until it was decided that he would possibly go for a surgery before the home series against Zimbabwe next month.

"There is no cause for alarm yet. We will get the report tomorrow. There is not any real danger of him missing the match against Pakistan," Mahmud added.

CA closes probe into Moeen's claim

REUTERS, Sydney

Cricket Australia has closed its investigation into England all-rounder Moeen Ali's claim that he was called "Osama" by a rival player during an Ashes Test in 2015 after finding no new details, a CA spokesperson said on Monday. Moeen made the allegation in his autobiography saying the apparent reference to Islamist militant Osama bin Laden came during his Ashes debut in Cardiff.

SACHIN TENDULKAR
You know genius when you see it, and let me tell you, Sachin is pure genius.
Brijan Lara