

Liton first among equals

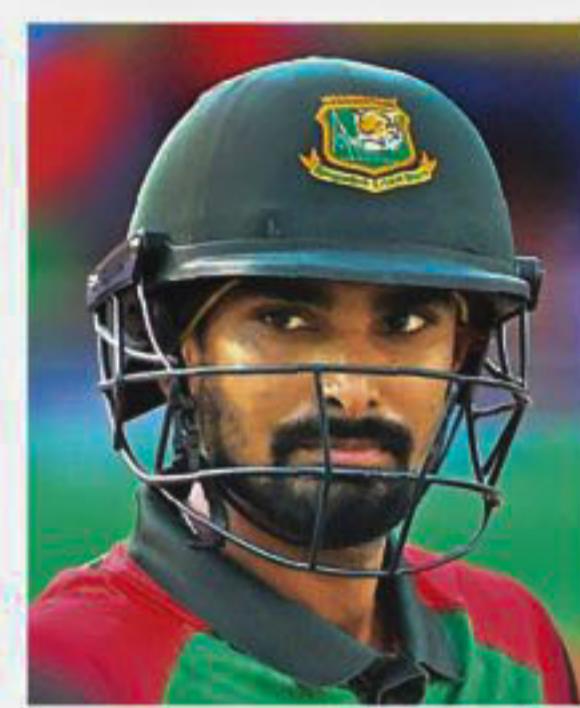
SAKEB SUBHAN from Dubai



Liton Das has been one of the more maligned junior national cricketers in Bangladesh, because the perception is that he was wasting his considerable talent with the bat. To watch him play a cover drive and to witness that extra fraction of a second that he has to play the ball is to realise that he could grow to be one of the better batsmen produced by the country. However, seeing him throw away countless good starts with bad shots tempered those expectations considerably.

In the just-concluded Asia Cup, he took up the poisoned chalice of being Tamim Iqbal's opening partner -- a position that no one has been able to make his own despite being given enough opportunities. He scored a 42-ball 43 against Afghanistan in their Super Four game on Sunday, but as seemed typical then, he squandered the start with a wild slog sweep.

In Friday's final against India, Liton moved past all of that with 117-ball 121 and showed why he has been persisted with. He also proved that, when it comes to possible candidates for the position of Tamim's opening partner, he is the first among equals. If he does make the transition, the innings provided a glimpse into how devastating an opening pair of Tamim and Liton could be.



India's pace attack is a formidable one, and the fiery Jasprit Bumrah had been allowed to settle into his rhythm thus far in the tournament. Liton however displayed that quality that is the bedrock of all batsmen for whom aggression is the modus operandi -- he backed himself to go after the opposition's most feared bowler.

Bumrah bowls above 140 kmph, but Liton repeatedly stepped out to him and hammered boundaries. Bumrah ended his third over, after Liton advanced down the wicket and hit the fast bowler off mid on, having conceded 23 runs. That put the pressure on India's spinners who had thus far come on and benefited from the pacers' economy in their opening spells. Liton took care of that, hitting leg-spinner Yuzvendra Chahal for big sixes, choosing his areas carefully.

But there was then the typical moment of madness when, just having completed his 50 off 33 deliveries, he went for a wild slog sweep off Kuldeep Yadav. This time, however, he survived as Chahal dropped the catch at mid on.

But what happened then was what will give fans the most hope. Liton saw skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza's chest thump from the dressing room asking him to stay strong, and the youngster responded. He chose to play mostly along the ground, picking areas shrewdly for his boundaries. As wickets started falling at regular intervals at the other end, Liton did not throw it away but actually slowed down to complete his maiden century off 87 balls. He kept batting responsibly before a marginal stumping decision, off a defensive shot, ended arguably the innings of the tournament.

It is early days yet, but if Liton can keep mixing his penchant for dominance with thoughtful batting, it will be an auspicious development for Bangladesh cricket.

SPORTS REPORTER



Mashrafe Bin Mortaza had boldly stated prior the Asia Cup final against India that he was not so cheap that he would judge himself by a trophy.

That trophy has eluded the Tigers once again following India's thrilling last-ball win on Friday in the Asia Cup final at the Dubai International Cricket Stadium.

Even with all the limitations and one setback after another, Mashrafe was so close to achieving the much-desired glory for the country but ultimately, he could not put his hands on the trophy. However, we must echo sentiments of Bangladesh's ODI skipper that there is no way we can judge the brave-hearted cricketer or his brigade by their failure to break the trophy jinx.

Sporting achievements are often measured by numbers and that is precisely why it will be difficult to analyse Mashrafe's true contribution in the region's biggest cricket competition.

"The boys should feel proud," responded the Bangladesh skipper after his team's three-wicket defeat in the final. "I think they did a good job without two key members. Missing Shakib [Al Hasan] and Tamim [Iqbal] was a big blow but I think boys have done a really good job," he continued.

Mashrafe had every reason to praise his charges. But we must thank the brave-hearted Tigers leader for the way he inspired his boys to overcome all the chaos. And it looked like he put the 'fear limits you and your vision' mantra to the ears of his charges.

If it all started by encouraging Tamim Iqbal to return to the crease at the fall of Bangladesh's ninth wicket in the 47th over against Sri Lanka in the opening match to accompany centurion Mashfiqur Rahim -- who almost single-handedly guided the side to a fighting 261 with his highest ODI score of 144 -- then it ended with the startling motion that saw him inspire opener Liton Das from the dressing room by thumping his chest.

Mashrafe effortlessly carried the burden of expectations throughout the tournament.

The young cricketers' failure to meet expectations has become the centre of discussion in recent times but this Asia Cup at least provided some hope thanks to this charismatic leader who tried his



best to bring the best out of Liton, Mustafizur Rahman, Mehedi Hasan Miraz, Mohammad Mithun and even a proven performer like Mashfiqur Rahim didn't hesitate to praise the Mash impact in their performance.

It was actually a bowing effort that Bangladesh can be proud of as they seemed out of the game on numerous occasions.

However, the bowlers brought them back into the contention thanks to their never-say-die attitude. And it was no exception in the final battle against India.

There were not many who believed that Bangladesh could take the game to the last ball after they managed only 222 runs despite Liton and Miraz's brilliant

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120-run opening stand. Mashrafe however once again proved that he was not a man who would give up on the job before showing any fight and he rightly credited his bowlers for putting up that fight.

"I hope we won a lot of hearts," Mashrafe said.

But a true champion could not stop here and that was why he said: "The positives depend on the individuals. I think losing to India twice was something that I didn't desire. When Shakib and Tamim are back, the team will do well in the future if we can hold on to this spirit."

Yes, it was the spirit that Mashrafe injected most among his charges to win the hearts and in future that spirit will help fulfil their ambitions. Still, when Mashrafe said that "we have lot of work to do" it means a lot for future success.

Women's squad named

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'OUT OR NOT, IT IS HARD TO TELL'

There has been a lot of debate on social media and elsewhere regarding Liton Das's stumping by Mahendra Singh Dhoni in Friday's Asia Cup final. The decision was very close, as multiple angles of the sequence showed, before the third umpire finally ruled in favour of India. Here is what Bangladesh captain Mashrafe Bin Mortaza had to say about this: "It is hard to tell. At one point we felt it was not out. I think the third umpire can say it better. Maybe it will be discussed later."



Tigers expected in first round

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The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) have announced the schedule for the first six rounds of the 20th National Cricket League, a first class competition comprised of eight teams, which is set to be on October 1 at four venues across the country. In Tier-1, defending champions Khulna division will take on Rajshahi at the Shaheed Kamruzzaman Stadium in Rajshahi while Rangpur will face the newly promoted Barishal at the Shaheed Chandra Stadium in Bogura.

Dhaka division will play against Chattogram at the Khan Shaheb Osman Ali Stadium in Fatullah as Sylhet lock horns with Dhaka Metro at the Sylhet International Cricket Stadium.

The national team players, who were expected to return to Bangladesh yesterday after completing their Asia Cup assignment, are also expected to participate in the league from the first round.

"The national players have been instructed to play the first two rounds of the National league," Habibul Bashar, a member of the national selection panel, told The Daily Star yesterday.

"However, if the team management and physio instructed some of the players to take rest then they may miss out but apart from that, the entire national team are expected to take the field for the league," he added.

Heroic Tigers return home

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After an agonising defeat in the final of the Asia Cup against India in UAE on Friday night, the Bangladesh cricket team returned home last night with heads held high.

Mashrafe Bin Mortaza and his troops fought till the last ball of the match defending a small total of 222, but ended up as runners-up once again.

It was a mixed bag for the Tigers in terms of performance and there were a lot of incidents on and off the field, making the competition a memorable one.

It started with Tamim Iqbal's return to bat with a finger injury and defending a Suranga Lakmal delivery against Sri Lanka in the opening game where the left-hander left the field early after suffering a blow to his left hand knuckle against the same bowler. Tamim's bravery was praised worldwide.

Mashfiqur Rahim smashed a magnificent hundred with a fractured rib in the same game before scoring 99 against Pakistan while Shakib Al Hasan's departure from the tournament following a finger injury ahead of the Pakistan game made matters more desperate for the Tigers.

Tigers' next assignment will be the upcoming home series against Zimbabwe later this month featuring three ODIs and two Test matches.

The Zimbabwe series will be followed by another home series against West Indies in November where they will play two Tests, three ODIs and three T20Is.

"We have two home series and the New Zealand tour. We have a lot of work to do in the next two series, where we will have to play well," Mashrafe told reporters after the defeat in the final on Friday.

The team management will also have to deal with the injury concerns of the senior members of the side ahead of the home series.

Ravenous Rubel

Rubel Hossain is known for blowing hot and cold in a career spanning over a decade. Prone to err in the death overs, the right-arm pacer with a slinging action perhaps bowled his best ten overs in the one-day international against India in the Asia Cup final on Friday. His figures of 10-2-26-2 was a demonstration of how well he bowled in Dubai. He had Ravindra Jadeja caught in the 48th over, which was his last over, to create that window for a late twist in a pulsating final that Bangladesh lost off the last ball of the game.

