

SPORT

On the road to the World Cup

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Sportspeople like to say that their focus is only on the game at hand or the next game, but with the 2019 World Cup in England less than six months away, Mashrafe Bin Mortaza's words and decisions strongly hinted that the Bangladesh skipper has one eye on cricket's greatest prize.

In the first ODI against West Indies, which the hosts won by five wickets on Sunday, the Bangladesh eleven had four batsmen who usually open the innings. Tamim Iqbal and Liton Das opened the innings, Imrul Kayes -- who hit two centuries and a 90 in the preceding ODI series against Zimbabwe -- came in at number three while Soumya Sarkar, who returned to national reckoning through good domestic performances and hit a century from number three in the third match against Zimbabwe, batted at number six.

While Mashrafe denied that the inclusion of four openers was experimentation, he stressed on the value of flexibility.

"Soumya likes playing pace more than spin. Usually openers are more at home against pace," Mashrafe said after the match. "In the World Cup he will be facing the pacers when he bats in the position he is currently in."

Soumya has taken the place of Mohammad Mithun, who had impressed in

the Asia Cup with two fifties but with a maximum of 10 ODIs to go before Bangladesh take on South Africa in their opening World Cup match, honing the best eleven now seems to be the priority.

"There is no scope to belittle Mithun because of the kind of innings he played in the Asia Cup and also against Zimbabwe. The biggest thing for us is to find a stable combination. Even though we are playing four openers, there are one or two among them who can bat elsewhere -- Liton has played quite a few matches at six in Tests. This ability increases the flexibility of the side. Mithun is also there -- we want to keep him in such a way that he can return to his former position. I think the 16 [players] that we have now are more or less settled."

With that in mind, there may or may not be some changes to the batting order in today's second ODI, and the World Cup focus imbues these two matches with greater importance. Under the spotlight will be Imrul Kayes, who despite doing well in the Zimbabwe ODIs has lost form in the Tests against West Indies and was thoroughly beaten by the pace of Oshane Thomas in the first ODI.

With the three ODIs in New Zealand in February next year expected to be the ideal primer for conditions in England, one can expect the performances in the next two matches -- the last at home before the World Cup -- to rise steeply in value.



Mustafizur Rahman and Soumya Sarkar attended the optional training at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday ahead of today's second ODI against the West Indies. Soumya's attempt to balance the bat was reflective of the Tigers' need to find the right balance in their shaky top order while Mustafizur was all smiles after the bowling unit's triumph in the first ODI, which needs to be emulated today if the Tigers are to seal the series with a game in hand.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

CAPTAIN IN MOST ODIS FOR BANGLADESH



Habibul Bashar		Mashrafe Bin Mortaza
69	Matches	68*
29	Wins	39
40	Losses	27
0	N/R	2
0.725	W/L	1.4
149 runs vs Scotland, Dhaka '06	Biggest win (runs)	163 runs vs Sri Lanka, Dhaka '18
9 wkts with 157 balls remaining vs Kenya, Khulna '06	Biggest win (wickets)	9 wkts with 83 balls remaining vs South Africa, Chattogram '15

*Mashrafe will join Bashar on 69 matches as captain when he leads Bangladesh against West Indies in the second ODI today.

On top in more ways than one

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There were dark clouds surrounding Bangladesh cricket in 2014 as the Tigers were going through one of the toughest periods in international cricket.

Bangladesh were careening from one loss to the next in limited-overs cricket under then skipper Mushfiqur Rahim as they lost 13 consecutive ODIs.

Close defeats against Sri Lanka, followed by a blunder against Afghanistan in the Asia Cup, the embarrassing loss to Hong Kong in the World T20 at home and an all-loss tour of the West Indies had the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) looking for someone to rejuvenate the jaded side.

In came Mashrafe Bin Mortaza to take up the challenge of leading the Tigers in his second stint after a brief captaincy spell back in 2009 was ended by injury.

He returned to lead Bangladesh in ODIs in 2010 where the Tigers registered a famous win against England, but once again injury forced him out after leading in seven ODIs.

The rise of Bangladesh cricket in the ODI format started with Mashrafe's second stint as he led Bangladesh to its maiden World Cup quarterfinal in 2015, presided over home series wins over India, Pakistan and South Africa and also reached the semifinal of the ICC Champions Trophy in 2017.

The once injury-prone Mashrafe has not missed a single game due to injury in his



When the Tigers take on West Indies in the second ODI in Mirpur today, it will be Mashrafe Bin Mortaza's 69th outing as captain in the format, taking him level with Habibul Bashar on most matches led by a Bangladeshi.

PHOTO: STAR

second tenure as captain and since November 2014 till the first ODI against West Indies, he has led Bangladesh in 61 of 64 games.

The three matches he missed were due to either suspensions for slow over rate or being rested.

The inspirational cricketer has often turned things around when Bangladesh badly needed a lift. The most recent example would be the

ODI series win in West Indies earlier this year which came just after the humiliating defeats in the two-match Test series.

When he leads Bangladesh out for the 69th time in today's second ODI against the West Indies, the 35-year-old will join Habibul Bashar at the top of the list of most ODIs captained by a Bangladeshi.

Mashrafe has already reached the milestone

of being the first Bangladesh player to play 200 ODIs. As two of those were played for an Asian XI in 2006, he will become the first player to play 200 matches for Bangladesh in the third ODI in Sylhet, where he will also surpass Bashar in the captaincy list.

He is already the most successful Bangladesh captain, winning 39 from 68 games whereas Bashar managed to win 29 ODIs in 69 matches.

But it is not just Mashrafe's leadership qualities that has made him exceptional; he has also led from the front with his bowling and since taking up the captaincy in 2014 he has taken 90 wickets in 68 games -- the most by any Bangladesh bowler during this period.

He issued a reminder of that in his 200th ODI as the man for the big occasion was adjudged player of the match for his superb bowling figures of three for 30 in 10 overs.

If he needs further inspiration to perform today -- not that he needs anything other than the challenge of playing for Bangladesh -- today will also mark another landmark. It will be the 100th international match that Bangladesh's Big Five of Mashrafe, Shakib Al Hasan, Tamim Iqbal, Mushfiqur Rahim and Mahmudullah Riyad play together -- the first time that it has happened with a quintet in Bangladesh cricket.

As the man who has done more than anyone to forge all that talent into a winning outfit, it will be fitting if Mashrafe notches win number 40 today.

Local shuttlers ready without preparation?

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With the aim of giving local shuttlers an international platform to be groomed in absence of international engagements, the Bangladesh International Badminton Challenge was introduced in 2011. Since then the tournament has been held regularly except for in 2017.

Now the seventh edition, sponsored by Yonex-Sunrise, is set to get underway today at the Shaheed Tajuddin Ahmed Indoor Stadium in Paltan, but the local shuttlers are not expected to benefit from the tournament as there has been no proper planning from the Bangladesh Badminton Federation (BBF) in the last seven years.

During the inaugural edition in 2011, Bangladesh won a silver medal in women's doubles event where four Bangladeshi teams and one Sri Lankan team participated while the women and men shuttlers reached the pre-quarterfinals in singles events. Despite having an opportunity for the local shuttlers to improve in familiar environment, the BBF has virtually not taken any initiative focusing on this tournament.

This time around, the BBF started training for the shuttlers on November 16 with a Malaysian coach joining the camp on November 24 and the hosts hardly have any hope of producing good results in the 14-nation tournament where some players ranked between 49 and 85 in the world will compete in men's and women's singles.

pete against those foreign players at the moment," national champion Salman Khan told The Daily Star yesterday.

"These foreign players also did not have the ability to compete at this level, but they have come to this stage by playing a lot of international tournaments. If we get an opportunity to play international tournaments regularly, it is possible for us to improve," Salman said, adding that he last participated in the South Asian Badminton Championship in Nepal this month but the gap with his previous international tournament was one year.

Replying to a query, the 23-year-old lad from Sylhet said, "I have the ability to get improved training aboard with my own money, but why I will go abroad to get training? I am already a national champion, so I do not need to improve to defend the title."

Former national champion Enayet Ullah Khan blamed the federation for not having a proper plan to improve the shuttlers.

"There is no proper nursing at the federation because the new coach has come only a few days ago. He is working on fitness and skill of the players even though he is supposed to work only on technical aspects. However, he is helpless because the local shuttlers are unfit due to the lack of round-the-year training," said Khan.

Admitting the lack of initiatives, BBF general secretary Amir Hossain Bahar said, "It is true that we could not hold the Bangladesh International Challenge with proper plan due to financial limitation, but we will try to run a long-term training camp ahead of the next tournaments in future."

TALK ON WI SERIES



"See, with white ball cricket we are very very strong. White ball cricket can be T20s, can be 50 overs, we are very strong and we have the skill level. Every player in this team has experienced success with international cricket. That makes a bigger role for the players."

SUNIL JOSHI BANGLADESH SPIN BOWLING COACH

Fourth round starts today

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The ongoing seventh edition of the Bangladesh Cricket League witnessed a thrilling first three rounds and so, one can only expect that

more surprises and excitement are in store for the fourth round, which gets underway today.

Defending champions South Zone will lock horns with Central Zone at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chattogram while North Zone takes on East Zone at the Shaheed Kamruzzaman Stadium in Rajshahi.

So far, the competition has been an enthralling one for spectators with ten different batsmen already having scored tons. Naeem Islam is sitting pretty on top of the most runs list with 310 from three matches.

South Zone's Fazole Mahmud (L) and Central Zone's Shadman Islam exchange pleasantries at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium yesterday but all that will change when the two face off in a BCL encounter today.

PHOTO: PRIME BANK

POINTS TABLE					
TEAM	M	W	L	D	Pts
Central Zone	3	1	0	2	16.82
North Zone	3	0	0	3	11.49
East Zone	3	0	0	3	11.44
South Zone	3	0	1	2	6.45

And although Bangladesh's dependency on spin at home provides a negative indication on the emergence of quality fast bowlers, the ability to exploit the green-top showcased by two pacers -- Ebadat Hossain of North and Shahidul Islam of Central -- could put an end to such claims. Ebadat is currently on top of the most wickets list with 17 wickets from three matches.

