

SPORT



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Mashrafe Bin Mortaza will look to lead his pace attack from the front in his record 70th ODI as captain against the West Indies in the series-deciding third and final game in Sylhet today.

Powell's salvo draws Mashrafe's retort

SAKEB SUBHAN from Sylhet



A bit of needle was introduced into the final and series-deciding ODI between Bangladesh and West Indies, to take place at the Sylhet International Stadium today, after West Indies skipper Rovman Powell said that Bangladesh had problems against pace.

"It is a fact. Bangladesh don't like fast bowling," Powell told reporters yesterday. His categorisation of his assessment as fact suggested that the skipper was looking to stir things up ahead of the series decider. "We are definitely looking to exploit it. Hopefully tomorrow [Friday] we can do that."

Powell, leading the side in place of injured regular skipper Jason Holder, was perhaps referring to their fast bowler Oshane Thomas, who consistently bowled above 140 kilometres per hour in the first two matches of the series, which stands at 1-1 after West Indies won the second ODI by four wickets in Mirpur on Tuesday.

Thomas has been the highest wicket-taker for West Indies with one wicket in the first match and three scalps in the second.

Bangladesh skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza, when told about Powell's assessment, seemed bemused and disagreed.

"We have had their pace bowling covered in both matches. Yes, there were one or two early wickets. In the last match, they could not really unbalance Tamim [Iqbal] with pace, nor

[Mahmudullah] Riyad. Initially there may be something. Shakib played comfortably and also played shots. I don't think it [pace] makes much of a difference," Mashrafe said.

"Maybe in the past there was a time when these things affected us, but that time is gone. If you talk about extreme pace, then all batsmen around the world have trouble with that. But 140-143 [kmph], I think we have a lot of batsmen at this level [who are comfortable]."

When reminded that Thomas could be 'extreme' pace, Mashrafe's reply suggested that he did not quite see it that way.

"Both days he bowled at an economy rate of six, so if they think that he is their best bowler, then we have been pretty much at ease by picking six runs an over off him," Mashrafe replied. Thomas conceded 34 runs in five overs in the first match and 54 from 10 in the second. "The guy bowling at 147 kph was taken for 16 in an over by Shakib. So it was not much of a problem -- we just lost wickets at crucial moments."

Mashrafe could also have pointed out that Bangladesh's three pacers -- himself, Mustafizur Rahman and Rubel Hossain -- have outperformed their West Indian counterparts, taking 12 wickets to the nine shared by Kemar Roach, Keemo Paul, Thomas and skipper Powell.

The games on West Indies' tour so far have been played in excellent spirit and that is likely to continue today, but one can expect an extra yard of pace from Thomas as well as a more pumped-up Mashrafe in the last game of the year for both sides.



West Indies fast bowler Oshane Thomas has consistently troubled the Bangladeshi batsmen with his raw pace and will be looking for more of the same in the third ODI in Sylhet today. PHOTO: STAR

A WIN TO MAKE the 70th special

SPORTS REPORTER



Bangladesh ODI captain Mashrafe Bin Mortaza will reach new heights when he steps onto the pitch today against West Indies at the Sylhet International Cricket Stadium. He will be captaining the Tigers in the format for the 70th time, the most by any Bangladeshi player and surpassing Habibul Bashar who led the side 69 times.

When Mashrafe takes the field today, marking this milestone with a victory should be the only thing swirling in his mind. Mashrafe, who battled with injury issues throughout his career, always prioritized playing for the team more than the captaincy.

"When I started it was not with a lot of hope. Because I had gotten the captaincy before and gotten injured within 4-5 games and left for a long time. The next time, the outlook was the same -- captaincy was never an issue with me; more important was playing for Bangladesh," he said during a press conference in Sylhet yesterday.

After a short stint as skipper in 2010, he was again given the helm in 2014. According to the skipper, he never sketched out a particular goal for himself after that.

"When I got it in 2014 I did not really think about my future, and even as a player I did not set anything for myself. I just thought that let it go as far as it can.

"It has now been four years and it is a matter of pride for me and my family that I have captained Bangladesh for so long. And if, InshAllah, I can take the field tomorrow I will have led the country in the most ODIs," he concluded.

Mashrafe, who has the highest win percentage as a captain, will surely be looking to lead the Tigers to a victory today and clinch the series because without a win, today will be just another number added to his legacy.

'Culture made it hard to drop Imrul'

SPORTS REPORTER from Sylhet



Twice in two successive home series, Bangladesh's ODI skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza has hinted that the cricketing culture of the country has worked against settling on the best possible team. Bangladesh had an opportunity to test many new faces against the relatively benign challenge of Zimbabwe in October, but the team management was unwilling to go down that path as Mashrafe said that it was not yet certain whether the wider culture would accept the short-term disappointment of a loss in order to gain the long-term benefit of identifying the best personnel for the World Cup in summer 2019.

It is not without irony that the man who exposed the folly of the Tigers' conservatism in October by hammering two centuries and a 90 -- thereby completely outclassing Zimbabwe -- is in December the man who is being talked about as the one to leave out in order to identify the best combination.

Imrul Kayes became Bangladesh's highest scorer in a three-ODI series with 349 runs, but over the Tests against West Indies and the two ODIs has been exposed as vulnerable against high pace, namely that generated by Oshane Thomas, who got him out for four and zero in the first two matches. The series started with four openers -- Tamim Iqbal, Liton Das and Soumya Sarkar being the

others -- in good one-day form, but the strategy of playing all of them with Imrul at three and Soumya at six no longer seems a good one. It created the counter-productive situation of Soumya, a valuable and potentially explosive asset who just recently regained confidence, not really comfortable at number six and pushed out Mohammad Mithun, who was doing well at five or six recently. After two consecutive failures, it seems that Imrul's rope has run out and Soumya is due for a promotion to his preferred position of playing the hard, new ball.

"We can also play Shakib [Al Hasan] at

number three; he was scoring runs there," Mashrafe said on the eve of the third and final series-deciding ODI against West Indies in Sylhet yesterday. "But we were looking for a number three and Shakib batting at number five improves the depth."

He had also said after Bangladesh won the first match in Mirpur that the top three would likely be composed of three of the four openers.

"In the recent Asia Cup Liton scored [a century] in the final. Then Imrul scored against Zimbabwe, and a position was created at number three from among the

four of them. Again, Soumya scoring a hundred in the last practice match and in the [third] ODI [against Zimbabwe] has brought him to a position.

"Imrul has not scored in two matches and Soumya did not click at six in the last match. Our thinking behind such a combination has perhaps not come to fruition," Mashrafe admitted.

It is slightly concerning that the cricketing decisions of team combination were influenced by the possible backlash against the decision.

"After a player scores 350 runs, whoever it was against, dropping him is a big challenge. Maybe you could ask whether we failed in the challenge, but in our culture, it is a big challenge. Soumya's ideal position is to open or at number three because he plays pace well and gets a lot of options when the fielders are in the circle. But there was a situation that we had to set Soumya. Obviously, it is important to make an adjustment, and the sooner the better."

Many countries would probably have a problem dropping a player when his last innings was a century. But with the return of Shakib and Tamim changing the equation and Imrul's oft-proven problems against high pace, he could well have been dropped for the second match in order to win the series. Bangladesh's reactive cricketing culture on the field and off it, has seen to it that the last ODI of the home season will start as the first did -- with the team unsure of its best eleven.



Mohammad Mithun will most likely replace Imrul Kayes in the Bangladesh line-up for the third ODI against West Indies in Sylhet. PHOTO: STAR

Bangladesh ensure the bronze

SPORTS REPORTER



Hosts Bangladesh ensured that they will win at least a bronze medal from the ongoing Yonex-Sunrise Bangladesh International Challenge badminton tournament as the Alina Sultana and Shapla Akter pair moved into the women's doubles event semifinals at the Shaheed Tajuddin Ahmed Indoor Stadium yesterday.

Alina and Shapla handed 21-4 and 21-9 point defeats to the Nepalese pair of Amita Giri and Nangsal Tamang to set a semifinal clash against Malaysia today.

"Having paired with Alina, I played the semifinals of the Nepal Open in 2016 and 2017. We are happy that we at least ensured a medal but we will be trying our best to qualify for the final, however, the Malaysian pair is a really strong opponent," said national champion Shapla.

However, the other Bangladeshi pair of Bristy Khatun and Rehana Parvin lost by 6-21 and 3-21 points to the Indian pair of Aparna Balan and Sruthi K P in the women's doubles quarterfinal while the Tanbir Ahmed and Ebadul Haque pair lost by 6-21 and 8-21 points to the Leo Rolly Carnando and Daniel Marthin pair in men's doubles event.

In mixed doubles, the Ebadul and Afrina Islam Molly pair lost by 4-21 and 12-21 points to the Leo Rolly Carnando and Indah Cahya Sari pair in their quarterfinal encounter.



The duo of Alina Sultana (L) and Shapla Akter moved into the women's doubles semifinals after defeating the Nepalese pair of Amita Giri and Nangsal Tamang in the Yonex-Sunrise Bangladesh International Challenge at the Shaheed Tajuddin Ahmed Indoor Stadium yesterday. PHOTO: COLLECTED

EMERGING ASIA CUP Campaign comes to a close

SPORTS REPORTER

The Bangladesh Under-23 team's journey in the ongoing ACC Emerging Teams Asia Cup came to an end as they suffered a four-wicket defeat against the Sri Lanka Under-23 team in a semifinal fixture at the R Premadasa Stadium in Sri Lanka yesterday.

After being sent in to bat, Bangladesh lost three of their top order batsmen after having scored 41 runs in the first eleven overs. However, Mizanur Rahman's 95-ball 72 and Yasir Ali's 72-ball 66 helped the Tigers post a modest 237-run total before being bundled out.

In reply, Sri Lanka chased down the total with four wickets and 10 balls remaining.

India cruised into the final with a seven-wicket win over Pakistan in the other semifinal and face hosts Sri Lanka in tomorrow's final at Colombo.

SCORES IN BRIEF
BANGLADESH U-23: 237 all out in 49.1 overs (Mizanur 72, Mosaddek 39, Yasir 66; Karunaratne 4-31)
SRI LANKA U-23: 241 for 6 in 48.2 overs (Mendis 91 not out, Guneratne 24; Shoriful 2-50)
Result: Sri Lanka U-23 won by 4 wickets.

Ashwin, Sharma ruled out Second Test against Australia starts today

AFP, Perth



India skipper Virat Kohli was undaunted Thursday despite losing prolific spinner Ravichandran Ashwin and batsman Rohit Sharma to injury as he looks to twist the knife in the second Test against Australia.

The visitors went 1-0 in the four-Test series after a tense, 31-run win in Adelaide earlier this week -- their first victory in Australia in a decade.

But India, who are searching for their first series win in Australia, suffered a setback when Ashwin and the experienced Sharma

were declared unavailable for the second Test in Perth, starting Friday.

Ashwin is receiving treatment for a left-sided abdominal strain, while Sharma jarred his back while fielding in Adelaide, the Board of Control for Cricket in India said.

However, Kohli was bullish about India's prospects in the inaugural Test at the new Perth Stadium, which has replaced the city's venerable WACA Ground as its premier cricket venue.

"We are definitely confident of the percentage of chances we have and we want to build on that," said Kohli at a pre-match press conference before the injury problems were announced.



They've got a sniff of something special, something they're never done before in Australia so we know it's going to be another hard-fought, highly-competitive Test. **TIM PAINE** AUSTRALIA CAPTAIN



Australia are going to be a strong team on a wicket like Perth which probably offers you more than most other pitches in Australia. But we have an equal chance. **VIRAT KOHLI** INDIA CAPTAIN