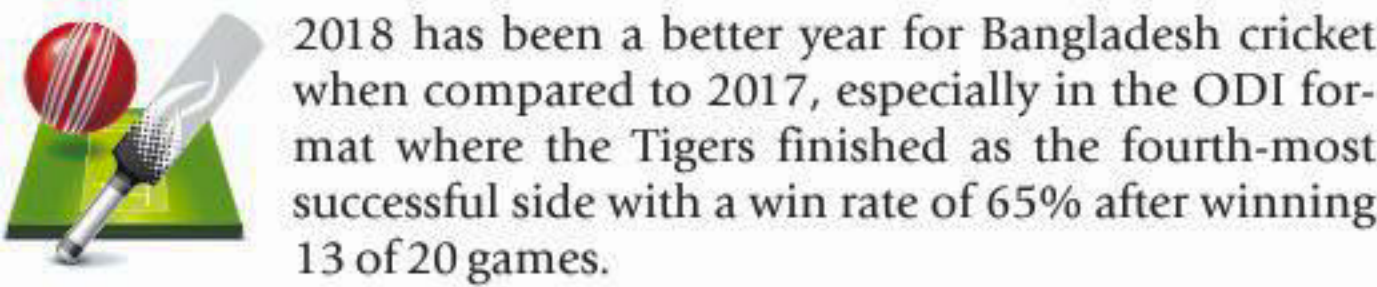


Now it's time to overcome away challenge

MAZHAR UDDIN



2018 has been a better year for Bangladesh cricket when compared to 2017, especially in the ODI format where the Tigers finished as the fourth-most successful side with a win rate of 65% after winning 13 of 20 games.

Bangladesh ended the year behind only New Zealand, England and India, the last of whom finished as the most successful side in the 50-over format. However, the signs of huge improvement will definitely boost the Tigers ahead of the ICC World Cup in 2019.

In 2017, the Tigers had won just four matches while losing seven of their 14 total games, with the other three ending without a result.

The Tigers also showed signs of gradually stepping up in the shortest format of the game this year. They won only five of 16 matches and although that is better than the previous year when they could win only one of seven T20Is, more improvement is required in the format.

Yet the biggest area of concern remains Test cricket, a format the Tigers are struggling to adapt to, especially abroad.

In 2017, Bangladesh had won just two of their nine matches in the game's longest format while losing all the others. However, the two wins were special moments -- a win in the Tigers' landmark 100th Test against Sri Lanka in Colombo and a maiden Test victory against Australia.

However, apart from those two results, Bangladesh were on the receiving end of crushing defeats from New Zealand and India before ending the year with a horror tour of South Africa.

Bangladesh have interestingly played one less Test in 2018, winning three, losing four and drawing the other but once again their performances away from home remain the biggest concern. The Tigers lost both the away Tests in the Caribbean comprehensively while all three of their wins came at home.

In light of those performances, the 2019 Future Tour Programme (FTP) poses a huge challenge to the Tigers as they are scheduled to play just six of their 25 international fixtures at home.

They will play even less Test cricket in 2019 than they did this year, with just six Tests -- five of which will be played abroad -- scheduled. Among the 17 ODIs, which includes the group stage games of the 2019 ICC World Cup, there are no home games for the Tigers in their most favoured format.

Given that scenario, it will be important for the Tigers' think-tank to prepare for the away challenges, an area of disappointment for Bangladesh so far.



Although Bangladesh's cricketing calendar ended with a 2-1 T20I series defeat to the West Indies, the Tigers dominated in ODIs throughout 2018, led by captain Mashrafe Bin Mortaza. The picture here depicts a winning moment from one of those 13 victories.

PHOTO: STAR FILE

2017 EVALUATION

It was three of the Tigers' most experienced cricketers -- Mushfiqur Rahim, Tamim Iqbal and Shakib Al Hasan -- who were the top performers with the bat. Mushfiqur finished as the highest run-getter with 766 runs across eight Tests at an average of 54.71. Shakib and Tamim finished in second and third position with 665 and 537 runs respectively. In T20Is, Soumya Sarkar led the chart with 235 runs from seven games. Shakib was the highest wicket-taker for the Tigers in Tests with 29 scalps across seven games while Mehedi Hasan Miraz finished second 24. Mustafizur Rahman took over from Shakib in ODIs, finishing as the top wicket-taker with 14 scalps with skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza behind him on 13 wickets. With eight wickets each, Rubel Hossain and Shakib were the highest wicket-takers for Bangladesh in T20Is.

2018 EVALUATION

After hitting four hundreds, Mominul Haque finished as the top run-getter with 673 runs across eight Tests. Mushfiqur Rahim and Mahmudullah Riyad finished second and third with 490 and 476 runs respectively. Left-arm spinner Tajul Islam had a terrific 2018, ending with 43 wickets across seven Tests while Mehedi trailed him with 41 scalps. In ODIs, Mushfiqur was the top run-getter with 770 runs at an average of 55. Tamim and Shakib followed with 684 and 497 runs respectively. Mahmudullah was the leading run-getter in T20Is with 414 runs from 16 games, with Mushfiqur behind on 397 runs. Mustafizur led the charts for most ODI wickets with 29 scalps in 18 games while Mashrafe, Rubel and Shakib bagged 26, 23 and 21 wickets respectively. Mustafizur also led the way in T20Is with 21 wickets, ahead of Shakib with 15 scalps.

CHALLENGES FOR 2019

One of the biggest challenges for the Tigers in 2019 will be to maintain the upward trend of this year and it will be especially crucial that they perform well in Tests away from home after sub-par showings in the recent past. There have been a few initiatives to encourage fast bowlers in the domestic circuit, namely by providing bowling-friendly pitches. However, the batters will also need to lift their game in tough conditions away from home after succumbing to their lowest-ever Test innings of 43 against the West Indies in 2018. With 25 international fixtures among 31 across all formats taking place away from home, the Tigers' think-tank must work accordingly to become a better side abroad. It will probably also be ODI skipper Mashrafe's last year before retirement and the World Cup in England next year will be crucial for many reasons.

BANGLADESH IN TESTS



BANGLADESH IN ODIs



BANGLADESH IN T20Is



BANGLADESH IN TESTS IN 2019

(Future Tour Programme)	
Home	Away
1	5

BANGLADESH IN ODIs IN 2019

(Future Tour Programme including the World Cup group games)	
Home	Away
0	17

BANGLADESH IN T20Is IN 2019

Home	Away
5	3

Shakib, Riyad move up

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh Test and T20I captain Shakib Al Hasan and all-rounder Mahmudullah Riyad moved up the ICC rankings following their impressive showings in the recently-concluded three-match T20I series against the West Indies, which the visitors won 2-1.

Shakib's 61 runs in the first T20I and an all-round performance in the second T20I, a match that saw him follow an unbeaten 26-ball 42 with a maiden five-wicket haul in the format, were rewarded with a one-spot leap in the T20 all-rounder's rankings. He moved from third to second on the list while also moving from 10th to seventh in the T20 bowler's rankings.

Meanwhile, Mahmudullah's five wickets in the series and an unbeaten 21-ball 43 in the second T20I saw him move from fifth to fourth position in the all-rounder's list.

Final round from today

SPORTS REPORTER



The sixth and final round of the ongoing Bangladesh Cricket League gets underway as defending champions South Zone lock horns with North Zone in Chattogram while East Zone take on Central Zone in Sylhet today.

The two fifth-round matches between South and East in Bogura and North and Central in Rajshahi ended in draws after the opening day was washed out at both venues.

Central remain top while South are second. They are the only teams to have registered a win in this edition. East and North are third and fourth respectively with five draws each.

However, although South opener Anamul Haque said that his side would go into the final round with the upper-hand, he cautioned that things remained wide open with every team having a shot at becoming champions.

"We will be champions if we win this match. It is a huge plus for us, [but] all four teams have a chance to win and become champions."

POINTS TABLE

TEAM	M	W	L	D	Pts
Central Zone	5	1	1	3	21.87
South Zone	5	1	1	3	20.63
East Zone	5	0	0	5	17.89
North Zone	5	0	0	5	17.68

Agrani Bank crowned T20 champions

SPORTS REPORTER

Agrani Bank CC were crowned champions as they came out on top of their opposition Kalabagan KC in their Dhaka First Division T20 Cricket Tournament final match, winning the match by 15 runs at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday.

Agrani Bank's Zahid Javed top-scored for the side with a 34-ball 45 and helped them post a 147-run total for the loss of six wickets after they had elected to bat first.

In reply, Kalabagan were bundled out for 132, courtesy of Agrani Bank bowler Shahidul Islam's five-wicket haul that cost 30 runs. Shahidul received the player of the final award along with prize money of Tk10,000 while Abbas Musa received the player of the tournament award and Tk 20,000.

Shame on domestic culture, not Tanvir

SAKEB SUBHAN



Long before the third T20I between Bangladesh and West Indies on Saturday was reduced to a complete farce, an event warned that the match was not in the safest of hands. Mahmudullah Riyad came on to bowl in the 10th over and struck Shimron Hetmyer on the pads with a straight delivery. A vociferous appeal went up and local umpire Tanvir Ahmed seemed resolved to deny it, but his will seemed to visibly weaken as Mahmudullah, on one knee, increased volume and earnestness until the finger went up.

Hetmyer reviewed and Tanvir's decision was proven right. That however was not the case an hour and a half later when he twice called Oshane Thomas for no-balls erroneously in the fourth over of Bangladesh's chase. It was mere coincidence that Liton Das was caught off the second of those, which led to chaotic scenes as the big screen showed that Thomas's heel landed behind the line. While he had acquitted himself well up till that point -- keeping track of the undisciplined Windies fast bowlers' footfalls was a challenge that he was coping with -- Tanvir committed a cardinal sin when, under pressure from a petulant Carlos Brathwaite, he actually reversed the decision and gave Liton out. Liton did not move.

Both reactions -- Tanvir buckling under pressure and Liton not caring a hoot -- owe much to the farce that is umpiring in domestic cricket.

While much is made of umpires' judicial skills of detecting minute edges and divining the path of the ball after it hits pad, one of their most prized attributes is the ability to withstand pressure.

Even in the age of the Decision Review System, cricketers the world over are taught in theory and practice that the umpire's decision is final and not to be questioned. Cricketers in Bangladesh meanwhile -- be it in second division, first division or in the prestigious Dhaka Premier League -- play under conditions that make the umpire's decision merely the starting point of debate. Those debates are often ill-tempered and umpires are often victimised and abused by the players. Players' misbehaviour, however, is a symptom and not the cause --

the distinguishing factor in Bangladesh has to do not with how umpires are treated on the field, but off it.

Umpires are not custodians of the game in Bangladesh, but tools by which powerful officials can implement their wills -- in other words match officiators, who are supposed to be invested with the ultimate respect and authority in the sport, are, in Bangladesh, little more than pressure points that when pressed will swing results in the favour of the more powerful. Players merely take the cue from their club bosses. That also has the knock-on effect of umpires not really needing to hone their skills to build a career as following orders serves that purpose. That explains the mediocre standards seen throughout the series.

The other aspect that probably has been noticed -- albeit generally

persuaded Tanvir to stand his ground.

In the aftermath of the incident, social media warriors were falling over themselves to connect the errors to the nefarious activities that plague domestic cricket. But that does Tanvir, a respected umpire, a disservice.

All that happened in Thomas's over has happened before. Umpires have been ridiculously off the mark before. It is to Brathwaite's immense discredit -- especially after he had become involved in a verbal scuffle with the opposition as a 12th man in the third ODI in Sylhet -- that he stopped the game for eight minutes after watching the replay on the screen because in most other circumstances, the players would have accepted the wrong decision, even if grudgingly.

Even given the misbehaviour, play was supposed to go on. What



for the wrong reason -- is that the other umpire on Saturday was also Bangladeshi. Conspiracy theorists may be gleefully pronouncing that Tanvir was cheating in order to help Bangladesh win, but there is very little rationale for doing that.

Bangladeshi umpires rarely get opportunities to officiate in international matches and when they do, giving a good account of themselves and building a solid reputation are much more important professional considerations than corrupt intentions that will easily be exposed in televised matches, leading to a lasting stigma. Instead of conspiracy, the presence of two Bangladeshi umpires ensured that Brathwaite's bullying actually had an effect. A foreign umpire raised in a system where his judgement, and not orders from beyond the boundary, is paramount would likely have

rarely, if ever, happens is that the umpire caves in to pressure as Tanvir did. In doing that he proved that even a reputed umpire like him is victim to the prevailing domestic culture which is just not conducive to regularly producing umpires capable of thriving in the pressure-cooker atmosphere of international cricket. If the best of the system is vulnerable, then what hope for the run-of-the-mill and for Bangladesh's domestic cricket reaching and sustaining a high standard?

It was a poor advertisement of Bangladesh's domestic game, but there is a silver lining. Given that the authorities do not take meaningful action even when the worst domestic infractions are reported and exposed, perhaps it is shame on an international stage and scale that will finally make them blush.

Ashwin doubtful for third Test

AFP, Melbourne



Ace spinner Ravichandran Ashwin remains an injury doubt for the third Test against Australia, India coach Ravi Shastri said Sunday as he demanded his opening batsmen step up to ease pressure on Virat Kohli.

Ashwin was sidelined with an abdominal strain for the second Test in Perth and was sorely missed as Australia, led by off-spinner Nathan Lyon, won by 146 runs to level the series 1-1.

Shastri revealed Ashwin is racing the clock to be ready for the crunch Boxing Day Test in Melbourne, where the stakes

are high in the four-Test series.

"As far as Ashwin is concerned, we are going to take a look and evaluate over the next 48 hours," Shastri said.

Left-arm off-spinning all-rounder Ravindra Jadeja is also carrying a niggle, but experienced batsman Rohit Sharma, who also missed Perth after hurting his lower back, is fit again.

"He has made a very good improvement but then again we have got to see how he pulls up tomorrow. But he looks good as of today," said Shastri.

India go into the Melbourne showdown with Kohli and number three Cheteshwar Pujara is fine form, effectively carrying their team during the Adelaide and Perth games.

But the opening pair of KL Rahul

and Murali Vijay have struggled for runs and Shastri said that needed to change.

"It's a big concern," he said when asked about the failure of the openers to get a big score.

'Kohli a gentleman'

SMH

India coach Ravi Shastri has passionately defended his captain's on-field demeanour, describing Virat Kohli as "an absolute gentleman" as Australia's senior players opted not to provoke the world No.1 batsman ahead of this week's Boxing Day Test.

Shastri was in a typically punchy mood at the MCG on Sunday, also firing back at critics of India's team selection and urging his men to be galvanised by perceived hostile Australian media coverage.

"Fantastic," he said when asked what he made of Kohli's behaviour so far in the series.

"What's wrong with his behaviour? As far as we're concerned, he's an absolute gentleman."



India captain Virat Kohli (C) gestures during a Meet the Fans event in Melbourne yesterday, ahead of the third Test against Australia on Wednesday. PHOTO: AFP