

SPORT



The year of Mehedi's elevation

NABID YEASIN

After losing Tamim Iqbal, their most dependable opener, to a left knuckle fracture sustained in the first match of the Asia Cup against Sri Lanka in September this year, Bangladesh's already shaky top-order was shaken to its core. Having tried Nazmul Hossain Shanto and Liton Das in the opening slot in vain, it was off-spinner and potential all-rounder Mehedi Hasan Miraz to whom ODI captain Mashrafe Bin Mortaza turned as he was vested with the responsibility of opening with Liton in the Asia Cup final against India.

Overshadowed by Liton's brilliant 117-ball 121, the patiently built 59-ball 32 from Miraz was exactly what Bangladesh needed as the Tigers' opening pair made over 100 runs for the first time since December 2016.

In Bangladesh's 37-run victory against Pakistan in the Super Four stage of the same tournament -- a match where all the spotlight was rightly grabbed by Mushfiqur Rahim for his heroic 99 -- Mehedi's role with the ball had escaped the eyes of many. The off-spinner dispatched Pakistan opener Fakhar Zaman in the very first over and also came on later to end a 71-run sixth-wicket stand between Imam ul Haq and Asif Ali by removing the latter and ending with a miserly economy rate of 2.8 with figures of two for 28.

Although it was Bangladesh's Big Five -- Mashrafe, Tamim, Shakib Al Hasan, Mushfiqur and Mahmudullah Riyad -- who shone throughout 2018 across all formats, Miraz remains the only other player to have risen to the occasions at crucial times for the Tigers.

Other than the five stalwarts, players like left-arm spinner Taijul Islam and off-spinner Nayeem Hasan also made an impact in Tests -- the former finished the year as Bangladesh's top wicket-taker in Tests, scalping 43 wickets in seven matches while Nayeem made his Test debut against



Bangladesh off-spinner Mehedi Hasan Miraz has emerged as the most consistent performer among the younger members of the team in 2018. PHOTO: STAR FILE

West Indies in November memorable by becoming the youngest ever to register a five-wicket haul in the format. Another exciting prospect -- opener Shadman Islam, who was a surprise inclusion in the Tigers' Test squad against the West Indies -- marked his debut with a memorable 76 earlier this month.

While the likes of Nayeem and Shadman still have a long way to go and Taijul currently only considered for Tests, Mehedi stands tall with consistent performances across all the formats. Following his impactful performances in the Asia Cup, the off-spinner also proved himself in the longer version of the game. His 12 wickets for 117 runs in the second Test against West Indies -- the best match analysis for Bangladesh -- had earned him the player-of-the-match award in a game that Bangladesh won by an innings and 184 runs, their biggest ever win in Tests. His 41 wickets in eight Tests sees him in second position on the wicket-takers' list for Bangladesh in 2018.

His multi-format abilities were proved yet again when Mehedi was the difference maker in the series-deciding third ODI against West Indies in Sylhet. His four for 29 in 10 overs helped Bangladesh win the match handsomely and he was also rewarded for his efforts with another match award.

While he has not set the world alight in T20Is, there were enough creditable performances in the format -- not least his economical spells against Sri Lanka in the Nidahas Trophy and in the second T20I against West Indies last week.

Another player outside the Big Five who made a notable impact this year is Mustafizur Rahman as he finished as Bangladesh's highest wicket-taker in both ODIs and T20Is. Mustafizur however does not have the Mehedi's Test performances, and given that once promising youngsters Taskin Ahmed and Sabbir Rahman have fallen by the wayside, 2018 can be seen as the year that Mehedi cemented himself as the next big thing in Bangladesh cricket.

Razzak's seven pips Ariful's 98

SPORTS REPORTER



Ariful Haque missed out on his century by just two runs when South Zone's Abdur Razzak trapped him leg-before, which was part of the veteran left-arm spinner's seven-wicket haul that helped bundle out North Zone for 293 on the first day of the last round of the Bangladesh Cricket League yesterday.

In reply, South lost the wicket of Shahriar Nafees and ended the day on 21 for one, trailing by 272 runs.

North won the toss and chose to bat at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chattogram and despite a 60-run opening stand between Mizanur Rahman and Junaid Siddique, they lost their way in the middle.

Mizanur, on 29, was the first victim of South Zone skipper Razzak while Junaid was dismissed for 44 by off-spinner Mehedi Hasan. North then collapsed from 96 for two to 136 for six, losing Farhad Hossain (24), Naeem Islam (5), skipper Jahurul Islam (3) and Dhiman Ghosh (12) in quick succession.

But Ariful, who has yet to flourish for the national team, once again displayed his pedigree in the domestic circuit as the right-hander, along with Ziaur Rahman, added 135 runs for the seventh wicket.

Ziaur was dismissed for 69 off 103 balls with the help of seven fours and two sixes but Ariful remained composed at the other end and was heading towards his ninth first-class hundred.

But it was Razzak who continued to hurt North as he picked up his fifth wicket by removing Sunzamul Islam and went on to dismiss Ariful for 98, which the all-rounder scored off 151 deliveries with the help of six fours and three sixes.

Razzak then removed last batsman Ebadat Hossain to finish with figures of seven for 69 from 29.4 overs.

At the Sylhet International Stadium, four batsmen scored fifties but none were able to convert those into hundreds as East Zone posted 380 for eight against Central Zone.

After choosing to bat first, skipper Mominul Haque and Imrul Kayes added 136 runs for the second wicket after losing opener Rony Talukdar for a duck. Imrul was eventually dismissed for 78 off 79 balls, which included 12 fours, and Mominul was bowled by Mosaddek Hossain soon afterwards to depart for 82 off 95 balls with the help of nine fours.

Mahmudul Hasan and Zakir Hasan then added 100 for the sixth wicket before the latter departed for 57. Mahmudul remained unbeaten on 74 and will resume batting on the second day.

Taskin Ahmed, Abu Hider, Mosaddek and Mosharraf Hossain took two wickets each for Central.

SCORES IN BRIEF

EAST ZONE V CENTRAL ZONE
EAST ZONE: First innings 380 for 8 in 82.1 overs (Mominul 82, Imrul 78, Mahmudul 74 not out, Zakir 57; Hider 2-69, Taskin 2-78)
NORTH ZONE V SOUTH ZONE
NORTH ZONE: First innings 293 all out in 83.4 overs (Ariful 98, Ziaur 69; Razzak 7 for 69)
SOUTH ZONE: First innings 21 for 1 in 6 overs (Fazle 8 not out, Sunzamul 1-7)

NZ seek record series win

Second Test against SL starts tomorrow

AFP, Christchurch

New Zealand and Sri Lanka both have unfinished business when they head into the series-deciding second Test in Christchurch on Wednesday.

The home side have put the frustration of the drawn first Test aside as they push to win a fourth consecutive series for the first time.

Sri Lanka are equally determined to show the epic partnership by Angelo Mathews and Kusal Mendis to save the match in Wellington last week was no fluke.

"We got so much confidence from that game for this game," wicketkeeper Niroshan Dickwella said during nets practice Monday, ahead of the Boxing Day Test on what promises to be a green wicket.

"If we get some movement here our bowlers will do the job and they know what

posting 578 in their sole innings in the first Test against Sri Lanka, they sense a historic fourth is within reach.

"We're very proud of our home record and I guess that's one of the challenges now," batting coach Craig McMillan said.

"This is a one-off Test match and with the series on the line there's a lot for the side to play for.

The Hagley Oval wicket traditionally offers pace and bounce and both New Zealand and Sri Lanka voiced the importance of winning the toss and bowling first.

Neither side has finalised their playing XI, and while changes are unlikely, the emphasis for the fast bowlers could be less on the short-pitched deliveries New Zealand used to pound Sri Lanka with in Wellington.

New Zealand's batting hero Tom Latham, who toiled for nearly 12 hours for 264 not out in Wellington, said the Hagley Oval wicket

Dhoni picked for NZ T20Is

AGENCIES, New Delhi

MS Dhoni, who wasn't picked for the three-match T20I rubber against the West Indies at home and Australia, returns to the fold for the T20I series versus New Zealand as part of the 15-man squad, starting in February next year.

Dhoni, the seasoned campaigner, with 425 limited overs games to his name, hasn't exactly made an impact in T20Is in recent years. However, after selecting the squad for the T20Is against the Caribbean side, MSK Prasad, the chief selector, had made it clear that it "isn't the end of Dhoni in T20Is" and further noted, "the T20Is here and in Australia, he [Dhoni] is not going to play, because we are also looking at a second wicketkeeper. That will be between Rishabh and Dinesh Karthik. So they will be getting a chance to keep and bat".

Five lifters banned for doping

AFP, Paris

Five weightlifters, including two Olympic champions, have been provisionally suspended after reanalysis of urine samples provided during the 2012 London Olympics, the International Weightlifting Federation announced on Monday. Ukrainian Oleksiy Torokhtiy, Olympic -105kg gold medalist six years ago, and Uzbek Ruslan Nurudinov, who won the same category in the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Games, both tested positive for anabolic steroids.

Valentin Hristov of Azerbaijan could lose his 2012 bronze medal from the -56kg category after also testing positive for an anabolic agent.

The other two athletes to test positive -- Armenia's Meline Daluzyan and Belarusian Mikalai Novikau -- did not win medals in London.



South Zone's Abdur Razzak (3rd from L) almost singlehandedly dismantled North Zone's innings as the left-arm spinner carved out seven wickets to bundle out North for 293 on the first day of their sixth-round Bangladesh Cricket League encounter in Chattogram yesterday. PHOTO: PRIME BANK



New Zealand's Tom Latham struck an awe-inspiring 264 not out in the first Test against Sri Lanka and even though his herculean effort could not win the match, the Kiwis will surely need him in top form again for the second Test starting tomorrow morning. PHOTO: COLLECTED

areas they must bowl at. Unlike in the sub-continent we have to bowl fuller here."

New Zealand went into the two-Test series with a chance to move to number two in the world rankings if they won both Tests.

That opportunity dissolved in Wellington with the heroics of Mathews and Mendis, as well as the rain which washed out most of the final day, leaving New Zealand with their next target of winning a fourth consecutive Test series.

In their 88-year Test history they have won three consecutive series on only four occasions.

But having put down the West Indies, England and Pakistan over the past year, and

would require a rethink from the bowlers.

"There's usually a bit of pace and bounce about it and it does offer a bit for the seamers so we're going to have to adapt to these conditions as quickly as possible as well as the Sri Lankans," he said.

"At least with the Basin it's a little bouncier, so it's about our bowlers realising what the right length is to hit and our batsmen adapting to a certain game plan that suits that sort of surface."

The last time New Zealand and Sri Lanka played at Hagley Oval, in the 2014 Boxing Day Test, the tourists won the toss and bowled first only for New Zealand to win by eight wickets.

Eyeing summit, Steyn primed for Boxing Day

REUTERS, Pretoria



Firebrand fast bowler Dale Steyn will seek to become South Africa's greatest wicket-taker in Tests when they take on Pakistan in the first match of a three-game series at Centurion Park in Pretoria on Wednesday.

Steyn is level with former all-rounder Shaun Pollock on 421 Test wickets and, having played only six Tests in the last three years due to injury, has been left tantalisingly close to capturing the outright top spot on the list for some time.

With injuries to seamers Vernon Philander and Lungi Ngidi, Steyn is likely to be given the new ball against Pakistan along with Kagiso Rabada on what is expected to be a lively wicket in Pretoria.

He will test the visiting batsmen having returned to his express pace of old in recent limited-overs contests, where he impressed against Australia last month.

Captain Faf du Plessis told reporters this week that Steyn was the country's greatest fast bowler and suggested that while the 2019 Cricket World Cup

might be his limited-overs swansong, he still had a good few years of Test cricket in him.

"Test matches are what really drive me to perform," Steyn recently told South African online publication Sport24. "If I can carry on playing Test cricket for as long as possible that will be great."

"There is plenty of T20 cricket going on at the moment because that is where

the money is at but I think that people will always know that Test cricket is the real deal. I love the red-ball game."

Pakistan, who have won only one Test series out of 10 at home and away against South Africa, will have been buoyed by their three-day run-out against an Invitational XI in the build-up to the first Test, where Azhar Ali and Babar Azam made hundreds.



With the first Test between South Africa and Pakistan set to get underway tomorrow, Faf du Plessis (2nd from R) and Co were seen hard at work in training at the Supersport Park in Centurion yesterday. PHOTO: COLLECTED