

SPORT



Despite failing for Sylhet Sixers in their BPL match yesterday, Sabbir Rahman would be a happy camper as his six-month international ban was reduced to include him in Bangladesh's ODI squad for the New Zealand tour.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Sabbir's premature inclusion

Taskin also returns to ODI and Test squads for NZ tour

SPORTS REPORTER



Even before the selectors announced the squad for the upcoming ODI series in New Zealand to be held between February 13 and 20, there were rumours over Sabbir Rahman's possible inclusion, despite the batsman being in the middle of a six-month international ban which would have ended on March 1.

However, Sabbir -- who was banned for threatening a fan on social media -- was recalled to the ODI squad alongside pacer Taskin Ahmed. The only uncapped player in the 15-member ODI squad announced yesterday was young off-spinner Nayeem Hasan.

According to chief selector Minhajul Abedin, they received a clearance from Bangladesh Cricket Board's (BCB's) disciplinary committee to the effect that Sabbir's ban was reduced by a month. Minhajul said that Bangladesh ODI skipper

Mashrafe Bin Mortaza firmly wanted Sabbir in the side.

"Let me make this clear, Sabbir's inclusion was mainly because of the captain's demand as he [Mashrafe] firmly asked us to include him and we agreed to it. They want someone who could face fast bowlers in the lower-middle order keeping the upcoming World Cup and New Zealand series in mind. The captain is very confident about him and I also hope that he will be able to make a comeback," Minhajul told reporters in Mirpur yesterday.

Sabbir, who last played an ODI in July 2018 in the West Indies, has not impressed in domestic cricket during his time out of the national team. In the ongoing Bangladesh Premier League, after disappointing in the first five games, the right-hander struck a 51-ball 85 against Rangpur Riders which, according to Minhajul, caught the selectors' eyes.

Taskin, meanwhile, has been in good form, bagging 16 wickets in the BPL for Sylhet Sixers. His reward was inclusion in both the ODI and Test squads for the upcoming New Zealand



TASKIN AHMED

SQUADS

ODI: Mashrafe Bin Mortaza (captain), Shakib Al Hasan (vice-captain), Tamim Iqbal, Liton Kumar, Soumya Sarkar, Mushfiqur Rahim, Mohammad Mithun, Mahmudullah Riyad, Sabbir Rahman, Mehedi Hasan Miraz, Mustafizur Rahman, Rubel Hossain, Taskin Ahmed, Mohammad Saifuddin, Nayeem Hasan

TEST: Shakib Al Hasan (captain), Mahmudullah Riyad (vice-captain), Tamim Iqbal, Shadman Islam, Mominul Haque, Mohammad Mithun, Mushfiqur Rahim, Liton Kumar, Mehedi Hasan Miraz, Taijul Islam, Mustafizur Rahman, Taskin Ahmed, Abu Jayed, Khaled Ahmed, Nayeem Hasan

tour. He played his last ODI and Test back in 2017 against South Africa and since then the 23-year-old was dropped due to injury as well as bad form.

"Taskin has been suffering from injury for a long time and he was part of our rehabilitation programme. After recovering he has played well in the BPL. We initially wanted him only for the longer version but as he is playing matches we decided to include him in the ODI side as well. We will observe his performance in the coming days."

Batsman Imrul Kayes, all-rounder Ariful Haque, left-arm seamer Abu Hider and left-arm spinner Nazmul Islam were excluded from the ODI squad that played against West Indies in December last year.

There was an expected return to the Test side for Tamim Iqbal, who last played a Test in West Indies in July 2018, but missed out since due to left knuckle fracture picked up during the Asia Cup in September last year. Soumya Sarkar and Ariful lost their Test places, but pacer Abu Jayed returned to the longer-version squad.

Is the national team BCB's sole remit?

SAKEB SUBHAN

The national team is of course the most important facet under the Bangladesh Cricket Board's (BCB's) purview, but by reducing the ban on serial disciplinary offender Sabbir Rahman, the BCB has proven that they are willing to sacrifice everything at the altar of the Tigers' short-term future. The sacrificial lambs are team culture, the long-term disciplinary tradition not just around the team but also at lower levels, the future of Sabbir himself and last but not least, any semblance of professionalism.

Sabbir was banned from international cricket for six months on September 1 for abusing and threatening a fan on social media while on tour in West Indies. However, the hard-hitting batsman apparently remained integral to Bangladesh's plans for the 2019 World Cup, and with the New Zealand tour in February coming up, it has suddenly been decided that sending him on the tour is a must even if it meant violating the BCB's own ban. The reason given by chief selector Minhajul Abedin yesterday was that captain Mashrafe Bin Mortaza wanted Sabbir sufficiently prepared for the World Cup.

It would not be an opinionated stance to term this as the height of unprofessionalism. Consider what went behind the U-turn. When levying the ban, the BCB knew that it would end on March 1 -- by which time the New Zealand ODIs would have ended -- and they would have also talked to the team leadership about the decision. In other words, nothing but time had changed between the BCB levying a six-month ban in September and reducing it to a five-month one yesterday.

Therefore, having had all the knowledge then that they do now, BCB could either have displayed minimal long-term vision and planning acumen and started off with a five-month ban or, as more professional bodies do, stuck to the original punishment as an example to others as well as Sabbir.

And Sabbir is not even in the top five among Bangladesh's batsmen. By stark contrast, Cricket Australia had banned two of their best batsmen in Steven Smith and

David Warner for a year for ball-tampering, which will end only at the end of March. In the meantime, Australian cricket suffered greatly, losing all series home and away. Australia want to win the World Cup too, but perhaps they have an appreciation that it requires not just good cricketers, but cricketers with a healthy mindset that contributes to the overall culture of the team.

Likewise India, who sent integral players like KL Rahul and Hardik Pandya home from their recent tour of Australia because of the pair's sexist remarks on a talk show. India also want to win the World Cup, presumably.

Even if Mashrafe wanted Sabbir back, is it the board's sole remit to satisfy the captain's whims at the expense of the overall health of the country's cricket? BCB has contributed to the problem that is Sabbir. In December 2017, he assaulted a young fan in Rajshahi while playing a National Cricket League match and then threateningly telling match officials not to reveal the incident. The BCB's response was to ban him from domestic cricket and levy a hefty fine, but he kept playing international cricket despite the commission of a crime that would have ended most cricketers' careers anywhere else in the world. The message to Sabbir was that as long as he held value for the national team, the board would bend over backwards to accommodate him.

As for Mashrafe, his legacy in the national team has been overwhelmingly positive but if he did play a part in this, he will have contributed to the deterioration of the team culture that he so painstakingly and lovingly helped create. There may be solid cricketing reasons for wanting Sabbir back, but surely they were not so compelling that the batsman would have to be brought back one month before his ban ended rather than in the Ireland tri-series in May.

While this will be a negative mark on his record, the bigger culpability is BCB's because the board have once again proven that far from performing the duties of a governing body -- which include securing the future of cricket at all levels and planning with a long-term perspective -- they are only adept at pandering to the sentiment of the day and ensuring problems of tomorrow.



Captain Mushfiqur Rahim's unbeaten 64 propelled Chittagong Vikings to a six-wicket victory in a BPL encounter against Rajshahi Kings at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

Vikings rise on Mushy's shoulders

SPORTS REPORTER



Once again, it was skipper Mushfiqur Rahim who made the difference as he stood firm and authored an unbeaten 46-ball 64 to ensure that Chittagong Vikings successfully chased a 158-run target against Rajshahi Kings to win by six wickets at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday. The win meant that Mushfiqur has guided the Vikings to the top of the table for the first time in the sixth edition of the Bangladesh premier League.

Mushfiqur picked up in the new year from where he had left off in 2018 as the most consistent batsman for Bangladesh across all formats carried his form with the national side to the BPL. Mushfiqur's scores

of 25, 5 and 34 in the first three matches of the BPL might not seem very impactful but those knocks came at a stage of the tournament when most teams were struggling to post big totals and batsmen were still finding their feet on slow wickets. Since then, the 31-year-old scored two consecutive fifties -- 75 runs against Comilla Victorians and 52 against Khulna Titans -- and that was followed by a 23-ball 22 against Dhaka Dynamites in a winning cause, before authoring his unbeaten knock yesterday.

Prior to that, Mushfiqur had proved himself pivotal for Bangladesh too last year and even in 2017. Mushfiqur was consistent across all formats for Bangladesh as he finished 2018 as the top run-scorer in ODIs. He also became the only wicketkeeper-batsman to have scored two double-centuries in Tests when he penned a 219-run

SCORES IN BRIEF

RAJSHAHI KINGS v CHITTAGONG VIKINGS
RAJSHAHI: 157 for 5 in 20 overs (Evans 74, Ten Doeschate 28, Jonker 36 not out; Khaled 2-30)
CHITTAGONG: 159 for 4 in 19.4 overs (Shahzad 25, Mushfiqur 64 not out, Najibullah 23, Mosaddek 43 not out; Sunny 3-22)
Result: Chittagong won by 6 wickets.
Player-of-the-match: Mushfiqur Rahim.

unbeaten epic against Zimbabwe in November. He also ended the year as the second-highest scorer in T20Is for Bangladesh.

The stalwart did not lose focus when he started the BPL campaign as Chittagong skipper; instead he held onto his consistency -- the mark of any great batsman.

Yesterday, after Rajshahi batsman Laurie Evans's 56-ball 74 and a late unbeaten cameo of 36 off 20 balls from South African all-

rounder Christian Jonker had seen Rajshahi post a challenging total on the board, Chittagong looked nervy at the beginning of the chase. Chittagong were soon struggling having lost four wickets for 71 runs in 10.5 overs.

However, Mosaddek Hossain joined skipper Mushfiqur at that stage. The pair remained unbeaten till the end as they strung together an 88-run fifth-wicket partnership to see their side over the line.

Following Mushfiqur's heroics, Chittagong replaced Shakib Al Hasan's Dhaka Dynamites at the top of the points table with 12 points earned by winning six of their seven matches. As the second Dhaka leg ended yesterday and with the current equations, surely Mushfiqur has handed his team a great advantage before the tournament moves to their home in Chattogram from tomorrow.

Bowlers, Dhawan star in India's win



India pacer Mohammed Shami celebrates one of his three wickets during their win over New Zealand in the first ODI in Napier yesterday.

AGENCIES, Napier



India's bowlers laid the foundation before Shikhar Dhawan anchored a straightforward chase to secure the tourists a comprehensive eight-wicket victory over New Zealand in the first ODI in Napier on Wednesday.

Opener Dhawan made 75 not out and his 91-run stand with skipper Virat Kohli helped India overwhelm the revised 156-run target with 14.1 overs to spare -- the Duckworth-Lewis method employed after the setting sun stopped play for a while.

On a high having just won Test and ODI series over in Australia, India looked determined to extend their domination across the Tasman Sea as they dismissed their hosts for 157 in 38 overs.

Paceman Mohammed Shami and wrist-spinners Kuldeep Yadav and Yuzvendra Chahal

shared nine wickets among them as New Zealand failed to post a competitive total with only Kane Williamson (64) offering some resistance with the bat.

"150-odd on that kind of wicket was quite an easy total to chase down and it all boils down to the effort of the bowlers," Kohli said.

A disappointed New Zealand captain Kane Williamson blamed his side's effort on an inability to handle the precision Indian attack.

"Usually you come here and you're thinking 300-plus, sometimes mid 300s, but it certainly wasn't that and required a bit more graft," he said.

SCORES IN BRIEF
NEW ZEALAND: 157 all out in 38 overs (Williamson 64, Taylor 24; Shami 3-19, Chahal 2-43, Yadav 4-39)
INDIA: 156 for 2 in 34.5 overs (Dhawan 75 not out, Kohli 45; Bracewell 1-23)
Result: India won by 8 wickets (D/L method)
Player-of-the-match: Mohammed Shami.

SCORES IN BRIEF

KHULNA TITANS v SYLHET SIXERS
KHULNA: 170 for 9 in 20 overs (Taylor 48, Junaid 33, Wiese 25; Taskin 2-35, Nawaz 2-26, Kapali 4-22)
SYLHET: 149 for 7 in 20 overs (Afif 29, Nawaz 54, Pooran 28; Taijul 3-32)
Result: Khulna won by 21 runs.
Player-of-the-match: David Wiese.

Khulna Titans opener Brendan Taylor's 48 off 31 balls helped his side win the BPL match against Sylhet Sixers by 21 runs in Mirpur yesterday.



PHOTO: STAR