

SPORT



Following his century in the third ODI against New Zealand in Dunedin, Sabbir Rahman (2nd from L) was somewhat of a celebrity among other Dhaka Premier League players upon his return to the BCB Academy yesterday. Perhaps Mossadek Hossain (R) was asking the controversial batsman if this was the bat he used to smite his ton. PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

'DPL can yet regain old charm'

SPORTS REPORTER

Once the most coveted domestic competition, the Dhaka Premier League (DPL) is all set to roll into action today with a warm-up T20 competition at two different venues before the 50-over fray among 12 clubs begins. T20 cricket is now the most popular format all over the world because of its commercial appeal but it is highly unlikely that this DPL T20 will make any buzz; it will instead work only as a warm-up event for the players before the main competition.

The days are long gone when the country's cricket fraternity eagerly awaited this league as it has gradually lost its charm for many reasons. It now remains to be seen whether there is any scope to bring back those heydays. Reality has changed drastically as the focus has shifted to the national team's participation in international cricket and fans are more interested in franchise-based T20 competition.

Former national captain Gazi Ashraf

Hossain however believed that it would be possible to make the DPL an attractive domestic event and that there is also a necessity for the country's cricket to look deeply into the its premier 50-over competition.

"I think still it's possible to bring back those glory days. Yes, you may not get too many spectators at the galleries but it is possible to make it a glamorous event in the domestic calendar. Definitely, the league lost its charm due to a lack of care, so we have to take proper care to make it a good event and here the question is whether we want to do it or not," said Gazi Ashraf, during whose playing career in the 1980s and early '90s the competition was at its peak of popularity.

"The most important thing is that the players should feel that it's a major tournament for them and they should enjoy the league. I think club officials should come forward, along with the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB), to change the whole scenario. There is no straightforward recipe but if everybody feels the necessity of the league's resurgence, then a solution must come. It is

now a reality that you may not get the services of the national players, but if the club officials can set a high standard for the players by providing good practice facilities and training, the competitiveness will generate good hype," he added.

Ashraf also suggested for a separate wing of cricket operations committee only to look after the domestic cricket affairs. "We desperately need to good coordination in all domestic competitions and in this regard it's my opinion that we can form a different cricket operations wing to look after the domestic affair only. There is no alternative than give a good shape of the domestic cricket if we want not only to do better in the international cricket but also improve the cricketing culture of the country and here Dhaka League is a very important cog besides first-class competitions," he opined.

Gazi Ashraf said that while it would not be wise to think about the commercial benefits at this moment, there is a huge scope to make it commercially viable also. "I think the club officials should take big steps forward to make it an attractive event again."

'ALWAYS UNDER PRESSURE'

SPORTS REPORTER

Sabbir Rahman said yesterday that he was a bit emotional while celebrating his maiden ODI hundred against New Zealand in the third match in Dunedin on February 20.

"No reaction actually... it was my first century and that's why I got emotional and I didn't gesture towards anyone. The hundred was desperately needed and everybody has their own way of celebration. I request that it not be taken personally," Sabbir, who made a talking gesture with his hand after the ton, told reporters ahead of today's Dhaka Premier League T20 competition.

"Maybe it's my destiny to always play under pressure and maybe I have to always play under pressure. But I always try to see a match as my last chance and that's why I try to do something in every match," added the right-hander, who believes the maiden hundred gave him huge confidence.

Sabbir said that he has nothing to say about his chances of playing in the Tests in New Zealand as the team management is the sole authority regarding the issue.

"I will play for Abahani in the league and now I want to focus only on that," said Sabbir, who was initially picked up by Uttara Sporting Club but later joined defending champions Abahani through negotiations.

Pacers remain untested

SPORTS REPORTER from Christchurch

The preparation for the first of three Tests against New Zealand was a half-baked one for Bangladesh as rain allowed just 12 overs of play on the second day of the two-day practice match against a New Zealand XI at the Bert Sutcliffe Oval in Christchurch yesterday.

It was arguably one of the chilliest days in New Zealand, with rain making life more unbearable yesterday. The Bangladesh squad will travel today to Hamilton, which is expected to be even chillier, for the first of the three-match series starting from February 28 at Seddon Park.

Talking about half-baked preparations, the Bangladesh batsmen did manage to spend some time out in the middle on Saturday's first day, with most batsmen utilising the opportunity to adapt to conditions following their dismal performance in the ODI series.

But the bowlers did not get that opportunity on the second day as rain washed out the entire day after the Tigers bowlers just 12 overs against New Zealand XI.

Mustafizur Rahman and Ebadot Hossain did pick up a wicket each but they could not bowl nearly enough to be prepared for the grind of a five-day match and were deprived of the vital match practice desperately needed for a relatively inexperienced bowling line-up.

When it comes to experience, Mustafizur -- who has played just 12 Tests so far, is actually the most experienced pacer in the squad. Abu Jayed has played three, Khaled Ahmed just one while Ebadot is still waiting for his Test debut.

It will be important for the young Bangladeshi seamers to utilise the seam-friendly New Zealand conditions and, more importantly, they will

Bangladesh players idle in the dressing room before the practice match against New Zealand XI was eventually called off due to rain in Christchurch yesterday. PHOTO: STAR



have to lead the Tigers' charge in order to pick 20 Kiwi wickets if the visitors want to win a Test.

According to Bangladesh bowling coach Courtney Walsh, it will be important that the young seamers remain consistent while at the same time showing controlled aggression.

"It's a very inexperienced attack so there have been discussions among ourselves, [on] what we've learnt and how things are progressing. But to me, it's all about consistency and getting the ball in the right areas. We have been trying to work on that aspect in practice so far and it's coming on well. The one disappointment was that we didn't get a chance to see how they bowl in the second spell, to see how they adjust in such situations.

"We had enough practice but even then we would want to see them in the matches. The boys are very keen and I think they know the conditions, which might not help spin and it's the seamers who will have to put their hands up. So it's a chance for one or two of these young bowlers to try to establish themselves and try to do well for Bangladesh," Walsh told reporters yesterday.

There was talk about the strong wind gusts in Hamilton and Wellington, which may cause some problems for the seamers, but according to one of the all-time great fast bowlers there was no point looking for excuses and that it is up to the bowlers to try to adjust to the situation.

Hard for Fizz to play all three Tests: Walsh

SPORTS REPORTER from Christchurch

It's been a long and restless last few months for the Bangladesh cricketers, especially the fast bowlers, with the likes of Mustafizur Rahman and Rubel Hossain arriving in New Zealand immediately after finishing their month-long commitments in the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL).

The intensity will only pick up for the cricketers leading up to the ICC World Cup in England in May this year, which will follow hot on the heels of a tri-nation ODI series in Ireland. Before going to Ireland, the members of the national team will also take part in the Dhaka Premier League, which they will partake in after the end of the New Zealand tour.

According to Bangladesh bowling coach Courtney Walsh, it will be important for Mustafizur to manage this workload, going as far as to say that it will be hard for the left-arm seamer to play all three Tests in New Zealand.

"In the case of Mustafizur, we have to make sure he is fine and try to get him fresh. So the question will be how many Tests the selectors want him to play here and once we know that we can monitor his workload. I think in this case it's important to be communicative and we have to look what surface suits him here and it's going to be hard for him to play all three Test matches in my estimation, if you want him to keep fresh.

"Obviously, we are here to win the Test series, so we have to look for the best team in the first Test and I am positive about it. So he is probably going to carry a bit of workload and he knows that. I have got to make sure he doesn't over-bowl in practice or in practice matches. That's my job and

responsibility to try keep him fresh," said Walsh in Christchurch after the second day of the two-day practice game was washed out after just 12 overs.

It will be challenging for the seamers to play three Test matches in the span of 24 days with the first game starting from February 28 in Hamilton, so the team management will surely look to rotate the seamers to provide enough rest for the players.

However, one of the all-time fast bowling greats in history did prescribe another seamer, Rubel, to play

as many games as he can leading up to the World Cup as he missed out on two games in the recently concluded three-ODI series against New Zealand.

"If it's up to me, yes, Rubel could play some more games because unfortunately, he didn't play a lot of games here. He has done well in the BPL and most games for Bangladesh he has played. So I think it's important for him to play up until the World Cup and to play as many matches as he can once he is been looked after," he added.



Bangladesh pacer Mustafizur Rahman is pictured leaving the team hotel in Christchurch before travelling to Hamilton, where the three-match Test series against New Zealand is set to begin on Thursday. PHOTO: STAR

Tamim negotiates, and delivers

MAZHAR UDDIN from Christchurch

Mehedi Hasan Miraz was sitting at the hotel lobby in Christchurch, trying to convince Tamim Iqbal about something yesterday.

"Tamim bhai, can you please arrange a few of your CA bats for me as I want to play with your bat in the upcoming World Cup," Mehedi said excitedly.

Tamim immediately called one of the owners of the company and said: "Brother, I need a few bats, the same quality as mine, for one of my juniors in the national team."

The reply from the other side was that it would cost around 1,000 US dollars for each bat if he really wanted the same quality as the ones Tamim uses. The left-hander hung up the phone and said: "Look Miraz, it will be expensive. You just tell me straight: do you want them or not?"

"Bhai, try to make it as reasonable as you can," Mehedi replied, still eager.

Tamim again called and started bargaining and eventually finalised four top-quality bats, each worth 700 USD, to be delivered in Wellington ahead of the second Test.

Mehedi, a touch of nervousness creeping into his voice, then said: "Bhai can I give you the money when I return to Bangladesh?"

Tamim, ever mischievous with his teammates, was not about to pass up on this opportunity to make Mehedi sweat. "No, no. I want the money right here; otherwise you won't get any bat."

Mehedi tried another tack. "Tamim bhai, can you give me a loan; I will repay it when I get back."

Tamim eventually agreed and Mehedi went back to his hotel room with a huge smile on his face.

After a while, Taijul Islam came to Tamim with some other issue that he wanted the senior player to solve. Tamim happily listened to the left-arm spinner and said: "It will be done, don't worry."



While Mehedi Hasan Miraz (L) tried to negotiate four premier CA bats through Tamim Iqbal's connections, the latter had to first guarantee payment from the junior cricketer and then negotiate a discount from the manufacturers, both of which he achieved. PHOTO: MAZHAR UDDIN

It was just a glimpse of what Tamim routinely does for almost all members -- senior or junior -- of the Bangladesh team, whether it is a personal or professional matter at hand.

Known for his generosity, Tamim has often gifted his bats to many young cricketers in Bangladesh.

"I have never asked for money if I gift my bat to anyone. It's different if someone asks me to bring bats for them and I really enjoy helping these boys."

It is because of Tamim's love and generosity that he is considered the big brother in the national team, the one who is always there to help. And on this occasion Mehedi will definitely owe a big debt to Tamim -- even if he pays back the monetary sum -- if the youngster scores big in the coming days.

WI-Eng third ODI today

AGENCIES, St George's

A record-breaking chase in the first ODI followed by a collapse in the second means England have a bit to ponder going into the third encounter at St George's, Grenada on Monday with the five-match series against the West Indies poised at 1-1.

With a handful of matches to go, England, who are the No.1 side in the world in ODIs, will have to be wary of such slip-ups as they know one such mistake could potentially cost them the title. While the batsmen have given a good account of themselves in both games so far, the bowlers have been a disappointment.

"It's international cricket, you've got to hurt sides when you get on top. We didn't and they came back and took wickets consistently," he said. "We were probably in a better position than we were in the first game. But a game is never won right until the end. We just left a little bit too much to do."

Windies, on the other hand, have been good but more than a collective effort it has been individual brilliance that has done the job for them. If it was Chris Gayle's blitzkrieg in the first encounter that got them to 360, Shimron Hetmyer's fourth ODI century backed up by Sheldon Cottrell's five-wicket haul saw them over the line in the second ODI.