



The Bangladesh team endured a dreary day during their travel from London to Leicester, where Shakib Al Hasan (L) and Mushfiqur Rahim underwent a light training session at the Grace Road nets yesterday.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Shakib, Mushy leave teens starstuck

SAKEB SUBHAN from Leicester



The Leicestershire County Cricket Club was under heavy cloud cover yesterday, and the taxi driver weaving through residential streets towards the main entrance appeared a little puzzled about why someone would be going there on such a gloomy day.

"There is no cricket going on today, is there?"

No match as such, but for Bangladesh something important was afoot at Grace Road. The team were stationed around four kilometres away at the Hilton Leicester, and two members had gone to practise at the ground. One obviously was Mushfiqur Rahim, but crucially for Bangladesh the other was Shakib Al Hasan, who missed Bangladesh's maiden triangular series victory in Dublin on Friday because of a back injury.

"There are more people looking after the players than there are players," the grizzled security guard at the entrance said with a wry smile.

It was also a special day for five teenagers -- two left-arm seamers, two right-arm pacers and a right-arm leg-spinner -- of the Leicestershire Academy, who bowled at the two international stalwarts for about an hour at the centre wickets. They all agreed

Shakib was batting okay, without much encouragement -- a boon for Bangladesh ahead of the World Cup starting on May 30.

"I got him out," one of the right-arm seamers said. "Shakib shuffled across and I hit his pads, I didn't appeal but [batting consultant] Neil McKenzie said it was out."

Mushfiqur, however, could not be bested, they said. The leg-spinner opined that Bangladesh's wicketkeeper-batsman played spin very well. Unsurprisingly, the most diligent worker of the team faced throwdowns, pace and spin. Shakib, according to the youngsters, only faced pace and throwdowns.

Back at the Hilton, it was all very quiet, presumably because most of the players were resting and waiting for iftar. Head coach Steve Rhodes was parked in front of a screen in the lobby, watching the England-Pakistan game.

"Shakib seems okay, he had a bit of a back today," offered Rhodes.

A bit further away, Mohammad Mithun was engaged in deep conversation with McKenzie, who was prescribing some practice methods to the right-hander.

It was a sleepy Sunday in Leicester, but there were enough signs that the Tigers were eager to hold on to their Ireland momentum ahead of the real challenge.

Tigers in England for WC

The Bangladesh team were in a relaxed mood during their travel from London to Leicester on May 18. The Tigers are currently in England to participate in the ICC Cricket World Cup, scheduled to begin on May 30. A couple of players participated in a training session at the Grace Road ground in Leicester yesterday but the best news for fans and the team management was the return of Shakib Al Hasan, who practiced at the nets for the first time since missing the tri-nation ODI series final in Ireland last Friday due to injury.

Imperious Nadal fends off Djokovic

AFP, Rome



Rafael Nadal defeated his greatest rival Novak Djokovic 6-0, 4-6, 6-1 to win a ninth Italian Open title and a record 34th Masters on Sunday, leaving his vanquished foe to label the Spaniard as "the number one favourite for Roland Garros".

World No. 1 Djokovic, winner at the Madrid Open last week, produced an error-strewn performance in his 54th meeting with second-ranked Nadal, who claimed the 81st title of his career.

"It's always an honour for me," said Nadal after securing his first title of 2019.

"I remember my first time here in 2005. To still be here with this trophy so many years later means a lot of me."

Djokovic had beaten Nadal in the final of the Australian Open this year for his third straight Grand Slam win after Wimbledon and the US Open.

Nadal overtakes Djokovic at the top of the list for Masters wins -- the pair were level at 33 each before Sunday's final -- in a timely boost ahead of his assault on a 12th French Open crown in a week's time.

"I'm really glad that I managed to get into the third set, considering the first set where I was blown away

from the court," said Djokovic.

"The second set was obviously better. Had my chances in first couple games, I thought, in the third set. Then he ran away from me."

After three semifinal defeats in Monte Carlo, Barcelona and Madrid, Nadal has returned to his best form ahead of Roland Garros.

"Nadal, number one favourite, without a doubt, then everyone else," said Djokovic of his predictions for Roland Garros.

The Spaniard dominated early with Djokovic losing a set 6-0 for the first time to a player he describes as his "greatest rival".

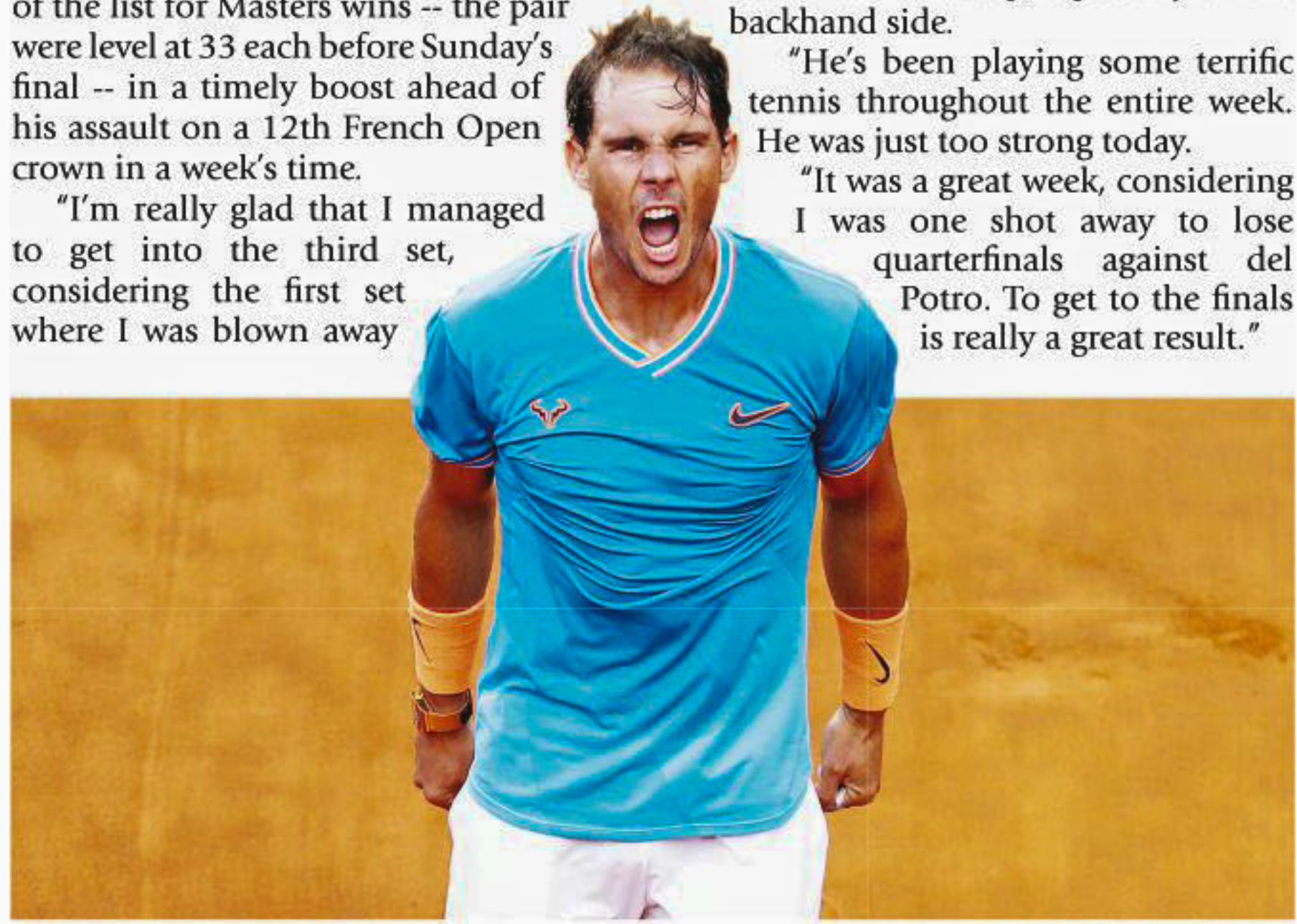
Djokovic had played six hours in his previous two matches.

"I was just running out of fuel a little bit today," said four-time Rome winner Djokovic.

"But I started a bit slower. I wasn't as fresh in my legs. He used it. Just kind of missed that half a step, especially on the backhand side.

"He's been playing some terrific tennis throughout the entire week. He was just too strong today.

"It was a great week, considering I was one shot away to lose quarterfinals against del Potro. To get to the finals is really a great result."



Rafael Nadal proved yet again why is the king of clay and rightly considered favourite for Roland Garros by bagelling World No. 1 Novak Djokovic en route to a three-set win in the Italian Open final yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

Afghans crumble in easy chase of 210

AFP, Belfast



Afghanistan's World Cup preparations suffered a setback as they crashed to a 72-run defeat against Ireland in Sunday's one-day international.

Chasing 211 to win in Belfast, Afghanistan were dismissed for 138 after losing their last six wickets for just 44 runs.

Mark Adair was their chief tormentor with figures of 4-19, while Boyd Rankin took 3-40.

Afghanistan had given themselves a chance of a win as they bowled out the hosts for 210 after captain Gulbadin Naib won the toss and elected to field.

The visitors' bowling attacked sought to use the seam-friendly conditions to make early in-roads. The loss of James McCollum and the in-form Andy Balbirnie, both dismissed by Dawlat Zadran for four, had

Ireland set back on their heels at 35-2.

Paul Stirling and William Porterfield stabilised the Ireland innings as the pair shared a 99-run third wicket partnership.

Stirling (71 from 94 balls) continued his rich vein of form, having scored 77 and 130 in his last two innings. Ireland captain Porterfield (53 from 83 balls) scored his second consecutive half-century.

But Aftab Alam and Zadran each took three wickets to keep the Irish score down.

Afghanistan's hopes faded when a fifth-wicket partnership between Asghar Afghan (29) and Mohammad Nabi (27) came to an end.

SCORES IN BRIEF

IRELAND: 210 all out in 48.5 overs (Stirling 71, Porterfield 53; Zadran 3-35, Aftab 3-28) AFGHANISTAN: 138 all out in 35.4 overs (Asghar 29; Adair 4-19, Rankin 3-40) Result: Ireland won by 72 runs.

Bowlers under scrutiny

SPORTS REPORTER



Bangladesh's upcoming ICC Cricket World Cup campaign in the United Kingdom unofficially began with the tri-nation ODI series in Ireland, which was a successful start to their preparations. This is not just because the Tigers won the series -- their first ever multinational trophy -- but also due to the few positive aspects to take note of.

Now, after arriving in England, the Bangladesh team are participating in a training camp in Leicester. The Tigers' team management will look to work on a few key areas, especially the bowling department, whose wastefulness was to some extent the only drawback of their tri-nation series campaign.

Although there were a few individual performances from pacers like Mustafizur Rahman, Abu Jayed, Mohammad Saifuddin and Rubel Hossain, the only exceptional performances came from Bangladesh skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza. Mashrafe remained the sole consistent seamer for the side, bagging six wickets in four games.

It will be crucial for the inexperienced members of Bangladesh's fast bowling line-up to perform their individual duties well according to the game plan while keeping in mind the opponent's

strengths and weaknesses if the Tigers are to continue their fine form.

Mustafizur did show a glimpse of his previous brilliance in the second match against West Indies, where he picked up four wickets from nine



MUSTAFIZUR RAHMAN

overs for 43 runs. More importantly, his lines and lengths along with his cutters were lethal. However, the left-arm seamer's lack of consistency is still a concern for the team management ahead of the gruelling quadrennial mega event, where Mustafizur is expected to play a pivotal role.

Rubel and Saifuddin will also have to play according to their roles, whether it be taking early wickets with the new ball, containing runs in the middle or even restricting the batsmen from playing big shots in the latter stage of the innings.

On the other hand, despite picking up a maiden five-wicket haul in just his second ODI, Jayed is still considered as a back-up player while the experienced Mashrafe could provide variations in the fast bowling department at any stage of the game.

This will not be an easy task though, especially on the pitches in the United Kingdom, which are expected to offer a lot of runs this summer. In the spin department, it will be Shakib Al Hasan to lead the proceedings with his vast experience. The emergence of Mehedi Hasan Miraz as the second specialist spinner in the line-up will certainly be a huge relief for the team think-tank, however, Bangladesh certainly knows that the biggest test for the bowlers is yet to come.

Pollard, Bravo picked as WC reserves

ICC

After missing out on their 15-man squad for the event, all-rounders Dwayne Bravo and Kieron Pollard have been named on Sunday in West Indies' list of reserve players for the ICC World Cup 2019.

Bravo's selection in the 10-man list comes despite him having retired from international cricket in October last year, while Pollard has just returned from a successful IPL season with Mumbai Indians, who lifted the IPL trophy for a record fourth time. The reserves will participate in a four-day camp in Southampton from May 19 to 23, which also includes a warm-up game against Australia on May 22 at The Rose Bowl.

Apart from the star all-rounders, Sunil Ambris and Raymon Reifer, who were a part of the Windies side in the recently-concluded tri-nation series in Ireland, have also been called up as back-ups. While Ambris will be a cover for Ewin Lewis, who has just recovered from a viral illness, Reifer will help in managing the bowling unit's work-load.



'Smith, Warner ready for hostile crowds'

REUTERS, Melbourne

Australia's returning duo of Steve Smith and David Warner could face hostility from English crowds during the World Cup but can rely on their teammates to cope, coach Justin Langer has said.

The pair have returned from year-long bans following a ball-tampering scandal in South Africa and are expected to play vital roles in Australia's title defence although they will not be in leadership positions.

Langer is aware the crowd in England could target Smith and Warner in the May 30-July 14 tournament in England and Wales but said public anger will not be as intense as it was.

"We can't control the crowd. What I do know is... it might heat up but I can guarantee it won't be any hotter than it was 12 months ago. I've never seen anything like it," Langer told reporters in London.

"The boys are well prepared. They've paid a heavy price and we're expecting always to come here and to face the fire and we're ready for that.

"They're human beings as well and... there's not too many I've met who like being booed or heckled or disliked. We're going to have to care for them, we're going to have to put an arm around them and make sure they're going okay."



Last week in Brisbane, [Smith] batted beautifully, he played an unbelievable shot off Nathan Coulter-Nile there - it was like watching Sachin bat. He's in pretty good shape I think.

JUSTIN LANGER
AUSTRALIA COACH



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England take final ODI too

AFP, Leeds

England beat Pakistan by 54 runs to win the fifth one-day international at Headingley on Sunday. Victory saw England complete a 4-0 series win -- in their last fixture before the tournament hosts and favourites name their final World Cup squad on Tuesday.

Pakistan, chasing 352, collapsed to six for three thanks to Chris Woakes, who finished with five for 54.

Babar Azam (80) and Pakistan captain Sarfraz Ahmed (97) ket England at bay before they were both run-out.

England's score was built on a stand of 117 between Test skipper Joe Root (84) and one-day captain Eoin Morgan (76).

SCORES IN BRIEF:
ENGLAND: 351 for 9 (Root 84, Morgan 76, Afridi 4-82, Wasim 3-53)
PAKISTAN: 297 all out in 46.5 overs (Babar 80, Sarfraz 97; Woakes 5-54)

Result: England won by 54 runs and lead the 5-match series 4-0.