



## Primed Tigers end Leicester camp

SPORTS REPORTER from Leicester



Six days in Leicester, of which three were spent training with intensity that went up in increments, came to an end for the Bangladesh cricket team yesterday. It was an optional training camp, separate from the official World Cup camp that the Tigers will embark upon in Cardiff from tomorrow. Bangladesh had a bit of downtime after winning the tri-series final in Ireland against West Indies on May 17 -- the men's team's first silverware in an ODI multi-team event -- and the camp in Leicester was set up presumably to maintain the heady momentum for the World Cup starting from May 30.

"We chose Leicester specifically because of the excellent training facilities here," Bangladesh head coach Steve Rhodes told reporters after training yesterday at the Leicestershire County Cricket Club. "They are very helpful here, the practice pitches are excellent and we can also use the centre wickets."

Only Shakib and Mushfiqur practised batting on the first day of optional training on May 19, before most of the 10 of the 15-member squad came to Grace Road in sunny weather to practise the following day. Yesterday, all 13 members were in England -- skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza and Tamim Iqbal were granted a break and will join the team from tomorrow in Cardiff.

If maintaining the intensity that saw Bangladesh win the Ireland tri-series with

an all-win record was the purpose of the Leicester training block, the camp appeared to be a successful one. There were lessons to be learnt, positive ones, from Ireland and the Tigers seemed eager to expand on them.

The sessions in Leicester had settled into a pattern. The engine room of Bangladesh's batting -- Shakib, Mushfiqur, Mahmudullah Riyad and Mohammad Mithun -- usually batted at the centre wicket. They are the middle-order batsmen who will likely be entrusted to build the innings to a point where the Tigers can launch a final assault on the true wickets that they are likely to get at the World Cup.

But that is where Bangladesh have appeared weak so far, and that is the aspect where Rhodes seemed to have dedicated extra attention in this training camp. The likes of Sabbir Rahman, Mosaddek Hossain, Mohammad Saifuddin and Liton Das -- although a fringe opener but expected to provide ballistic starts when picked -- were given extended net sessions in the outer nets. Teammates, net bowlers and sidearm wielding fielding coach Ryan Cook were all bowling to a certain plan and the batsmen were focused on getting the big hits in. Cook was bowling fast bouncers with his sidearm and Sabbir and Liton were cracking pulls and cuts, square-of-the-wicket shots essential to scoring fast runs in the death overs.

The Leicester camp will give way to an even more intense Cardiff block but the Tigers, buoyed by their Ireland success, have given themselves the best chance of being primed for more success when the business end rolls around.



Sabbir Rahman had extended net sessions in the outer nets, getting the chance to blast a few balls and ready himself for the death-over responsibilities which may fall to him at the World Cup.

PHOTO: SAKIB SUBHAN



## SHAKIB NO.1

Ace all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan received a timely boost ahead of the World Cup, reclaiming the top spot in ICC all-rounders' rankings yesterday, and he was probably being congratulated by Mushfiqur Rahim for the feat.

PHOTO: SAKIB SUBHAN

## 'We have the players to score big'

SAKIB SUBHAN from Leicester



For followers of the Bangladesh cricket team, their triumph in Ireland was of course a welcome boost ahead of their World Cup campaign in the United Kingdom, but it was also pleasantly surprising because of the way the Tigers made stiff chases -- including the one in the final where they needed to chase 210 in 24 overs -- look relatively simple.

That skill is going to be at a premium in the World Cup as the showpiece event will be played on flat batting wickets where totals above 320 are expected to be the norm, with hosts England even talking of breaching the 500-mark.

Bangladesh, however, have only had six scores of 320 or higher in their entire history, with the highest being 329 for six against Pakistan in Dhaka in 2015. But in Ireland, the Tigers chased down the home side's 292 with seven overs to spare, apart from chasing down a tough revised target in the final against West Indies with seven balls to spare.

Such uncharacteristic fast scoring has not surprised head coach Steve Rhodes, who instead pointed to the wickets that Bangladesh usually play on.

"I think you've got to take into consideration where you are playing. In Bangladesh the wickets are a little bit slower, they cut a

little bit and offer spin bowlers a lot more and cutter bowlers -- somebody like Fizz [Mustafizur Rahman] -- a lot more, so it's more of an even contest and the runs are lower," Rhodes told reporters after team practice in Leicester yesterday.

"Here there are good wickets, there are fast outfielders and it's difficult to bowl, especially with the fielding restrictions. It's no surprise that we can score the big scores that we do. It's just that we haven't had the facilities to do it before. We've got the personnel and the players

to do it and that is what we've been practising over the past 12 months and before that. Bangladesh's ODI cricket has been improving for a while now, so it's nice to see and hopefully we carry on that way."

There has been a feel-good factor about Bangladesh's optional training camp in Leicester, and according to the coach, that stems from the fact that beyond relying on seniors like skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza, Shakib Al Hasan, Tamim Iqbal, Mushfiqur Rahim and Mahmudullah Riyad, the less

experienced players have stepped up in the Ireland series. He singled out Mosaddek Hossain's unbeaten 52 in the final, Mahmudullah Riyad's burgeoning role as a finisher and Soumya Sarkar's strong recent showings, saying that Bangladesh are now 'adding up to a team'.

"We tried to play a longer batting line-up since I've been in Bangladesh. We've been trying our best to go in with maybe one bowler who doesn't bat, not three. I think that helps in the big scores because when you're chasing big scores it comes down to the last three-four overs regularly and you are going to lose wickets.

"I think we are starting to get there," he said when asked about strength lower down the order. "Sabbir [Rahman] has got extremely fast hands that helps him hit the ball hard. He is very capable down the order if we need 10 an over. If we need seven an over, he's got a brain and he'll realise what needs to be done there. Same can be said about Mahmudullah, same can be said when you look at the way Mosaddek finished that game the other day. These are some of the players, together with some of the batters like [Mohammad] Mithun as well, and [Mehedi Hasan] Miraz and [Mohammad] Saifuddin -- these are the guys we actually want there at the end of the innings. And I've mentioned some names there that will bat five, six, seven, eight, nine and there's Mash as well."



Bangladesh head coach Steve Rhodes might have chalked out his final plans for the upcoming World Cup following Tigers' last training session in Leicester yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

## '350-plus totals will be tough to chase'

In the lead-up to the 2019 World Cup, we take a look back on World Cups past through the eyes of Bangladesh's former World Cup stars. Akram Khan had featured for the nation's inaugural World Cup campaign in 1999 and another time after that in the 2003 edition. Akram, who is now one of the national selectors, had captained Bangladesh in 15 ODIs. In an interview with The Daily Star's Nabid Yeasin recently, he shared some of his World Cup memories and more.



The Daily Star (TDS): You played in the 1999 and 2003 World Cups for Bangladesh. How significant is it for a player to feature in a World Cup?

Akram Khan (AK): The World Cup is obviously a special event because it comes every four years. The exposure in a World Cup is more than in any series or tournament and its value is also higher. For those reasons, every player wants to play well at a World Cup. In 1999, we had to qualify by playing the ICC Trophy and only then could we play in the World Cup. So, at that time the excitement was totally different as Bangladesh, for the first time, qualified for the World Cup. Playing in your first World Cup is a different experience altogether.

TDS: What is your best World Cup memory?

AK: My best World Cup memory would be the time when we beat Pakistan in the 1999 World Cup. I scored 42 runs, but the most important thing back then was to win the game. Now, we win matches almost regularly, but back then it was not the case. Now the players get some monetary rewards or some assets as rewards for their performance, but at that time for a good performance of the team, the Bangladesh team would be rewarded. For instance, we qualified for the ICC Trophy and Bangladesh got ODI status and after beating Pakistan, Bangladesh received Test status. These things had huge value to us and everyone else as those were first-ever achievements for us.

TDS: Any memorable World Cup incident or story that you would like to share?

AK: We actually enjoyed the whole 1999 World Cup. However, in the game against Scotland which we game,



there was a funny incident. Shujon [Khaled Mahmud], Pilot [Khaled Mashud] and I had taken our wives to watch the game, but unfortunately, we were all dismissed for ducks. Everyone in the team teased us after that and that was a funny thing.

TDS: Describe the challenges you have faced over the years. Previously as a player and now as a national selector.

AK: Actually, both being a player and selector have been

challenging. When I was a player, I had some individual challenges and goals. Then after I became captain, I had the challenge of how to do well with the team and how to improve the team's performances. As a selector the challenge was to groom emerging players and give them an opportunity to play. I also had to provide support to the ones who were already playing. I have actually enjoyed all these challenges and I am very happy to be involved in all these good things.

TDS: What do you think will be the biggest challenge in England in the upcoming World Cup?

AK: I think the format this time will be a bit difficult for Bangladesh. This time we will have to play well and win games. Then the opportunities will come to play in the semifinal or final. The challenge will be there because we have some injury concerns in our team, but the positive thing is that we have some good players and experienced players and young players who did well on the Ireland tour. But it is a long tour and the challenge will be to get every player fit for all the matches.

TDS: Fans are hoping for Bangladesh to reach the semifinals or even the final this time. Do you think it is realistic to hope for Bangladesh to go that far?

AK: It is natural that expectations rise when the team plays well. But this is a big pressure for the players. It is necessary to perform as a team, not only as individuals. Be it in bowling, batting or in fielding, everyone needs to give their best effort and then I think we can do anything.

TDS: There will be true wickets in England and the par score is being considered around 320 or 330. How important do you think the role of the batsmen will be here?

AK: Given the format we are playing in now, 300-plus scores are normal. Previously there would only be four players in the inner circle, but now there are five players in the inner circle. So, there is always a chance to score more runs. In England, targets of 320, 325 or 330 won't be a tough ask. But 350-plus targets will be difficult to chase. The bowlers need to do well as there is a high chance that the batsmen will dominate there. However, spinners might get some purchase at the end of June or in July.

## Mash flies to London

SPORTS REPORTER

After enjoying a brief break, Bangladesh ODI captain Mashrafe Bin Mortaza flew to England yesterday and is expected to reach London to join the Tigers for their upcoming ICC World Cup mission.

Mashrafe took a short break and returned to Bangladesh just after the Tigers' won their maiden tri-nation series in Ireland by beating the West Indies in the final. The inspirational cricketer stayed for three days and spent some time with his family upon returning at midnight on Saturday.

Before flying for England yesterday, Mashrafe told reporters at the airport: "Everyone please pray for us. We will try to give our best. Please pray for us so that we can play well."

According to the 35-year-old, the tri-nation win will certainly boost the confidence of the players. He also added that it would be important for Bangladesh to make a good start to the tournament.

"The confidence level of all the players is very good. But the tournament is different, so the start is very important. If we can start well, I am hopeful that we can do something good. It's important," said Mashrafe.

Although the Bangladesh team were in Leicester for a training camp, Mashrafe will fly directly to London to attend the captains' official press conference, which comprises all ten captains of the participating teams.

Meanwhile, the Bangladesh team will travel to Cardiff today, where they will be placed under ICC protocol ahead of the World Cup. Tamim Iqbal, who travelled to Dubai after the tri-nation series to spend time with his family, is expected to join the team there today.

On May 26 and 28, Bangladesh will face India and Pakistan respectively in official warm-up game in Cardiff. The team will then travel to London on May 29. Bangladesh will begin their World Cup campaign on June 2 against South Africa at The Oval in Kennington. The Tigers had reached the quarterfinals at the previous World Cup and they are hopeful of taking one step further under Mashrafe in what is surely the skipper's last World Cup.

