

Shower of sixes to ward off rain threat

SAKEB SUBHAN from Bristol

The fickle weather in Bristol allowed the embattled Bangladesh team some respite in the morning yesterday, with the sun breaking through the grey clouds during an uninterrupted practice session at the County Ground. As forecast, the clouds gathered and unloaded at 2:00 pm, cutting Sri Lanka's practice session short on the eve of the teams' World Cup match here today. The forecast for today is not promising, with there being a chance of rain throughout the day, and a washout would harm the higher-ranked Bangladesh -- with one win from three matches -- more.

It seems that at best the match will be a curtailed-overs affair and the Tigers were preparing for that eventuality. A shorter match would mean that runs have to be scored faster and big hits then become the need of the hour, and that is what Bangladesh's middle-order batsmen were doing.

The Bristol County Ground is similar in dimensions to the Cardiff Wales Stadium, where Bangladesh lost to hosts England by 106 runs on Saturday. The square boundaries are much bigger than the straight ones and the latter ones were the areas of focus for the batsmen honing their radars in the three nets in the middle.

Mahmudullah Riyad, the batsman who has transformed himself into a six-hitting finisher at number six, has had a rough time in the second and third matches -- getting off to slow starts and being dismissed in a bid to accelerate. He was hitting some of the biggest sixes not just straight down the ground against spinners but also square on the leg side against pacers. At one stage he unveiled the switch hit against a spinner. The right-hander did make a connection, but it was hard to tell whether it would have had the wings to beat a sweeper cover in a match situation.

In the adjoining nets, Mushfiqur Rahim -- expected to bat at number four -- was hitting long balls straight down the ground and over the sightscreen with regularity. Mehedi Hasan Miraz was between the two middle order lynchpins and not doing badly by comparison. Sabbir Rahman -- yet to play a match but someone who may come into consideration if the match is substantially shortened -- replaced Mushfiqur and hit a few big ones straight down the ground, as did Mohammad Saifuddin, who replaced Mahmudullah.

The focus was clear -- rain would be a crucial factor in today's game and the middle order, which has blown hot and cold till now, will have to step up and hit out to ward off not the rain threat, but the threat rain may pose to their chances in the tournament.

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Today's World Cup match between Bangladesh and Sri Lanka in Bristol could be a curtailed-overs affair as forecasts show a possibility for rain throughout the day. With that in mind, Mushfiqur Rahim was hard at work in the Bristol County Ground nets in a bid to sharpen up his hitting abilities, which could prove decisive in a shortened match. PHOTO: AFP

A new kind of pressure

SAKEB SUBHAN from Bristol

Bangladesh will be confronted with pressure of a different kind when they take on Sri Lanka today in the World Cup game at the Bristol County Ground. In the five World Cups they have played so far, Bangladesh were not expected to beat Test playing nations other than Zimbabwe, and that too only since 2007. In this edition, if rankings are anything to go by, there are three teams that the seventh-ranked Tigers are expected to beat -- West Indies, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan, ranked eighth, ninth and 10th respectively.

Added to that is the high chance of rain in Bristol today, which will affect Bangladesh more as they have just one win from three matches.

With all 10 teams playing each other once, a team would have to win a minimum of five matches (the English weather permitting) to stand a chance of qualifying for the semifinals. With Bangladesh having won one of three matches so far, against higher-ranked South Africa, and with all three matches against lower-ranked opposition to come, today's match against Sri Lanka takes on special importance.

"I think there is no relief in any World Cup match. Every match is

important for us; we have kept that in our equations from the start," Bangladesh skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza said at the pre-match press conference yesterday. "It is true that we have played the first three matches against teams [New Zealand and England being the other two] who

are set in these conditions, whereas we would need time. Even so, after winning the first match we thought that if we could win another of the first three, it would have become easier for us. We thought that we could win the New Zealand match especially, because after South Africa our concentration



Bangladesh skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza and pacers Mohammad Saifuddin and Mustafizur Rahman did their due diligence during yesterday's practice session in Bristol, where rain could play a part in today's match against Sri Lanka. PHOTO: BCB

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level, our confidence level was so high that we could have beaten New Zealand."

All the talk before and during the early stages of the World Cup has surrounded whether Bangladesh can reach the semifinals, and Mashrafe said that was still the aim, although two successive defeats had made it harder.

"It's not going to be easy, but obviously I'd love to see ourselves in the semis. The calculation right now is very difficult. If we managed to win one of those matches against New Zealand or England, it would have been a lot easier. But at the moment, it looks very difficult."

There is much history between today's opponents. They form the budding cricketing rivalry in Asia, with recent matches being competitive, the defection of Chandika Hathurusingha

from being Bangladesh coach in 2017 to becoming the coach of his native Sri Lanka and some heated matches such as the Nidahas Trophy encounter in 2018.

It was an indicator of how much water had gone under the

bridge that Hathurusingha's name was not mentioned once in the press conference, and about the budding rivalry, Mashrafe said that none of it would matter when the two teams meet on the ground.

"I think when two Asian teams are playing, especially Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, both teams are thinking that they will get the points from this match," said Mashrafe. "It is true that both teams are on equal footing, now whoever plays well will have a better chance."

"I think pressure will be there in every match, even the Sri Lanka match. We have to cope with those pressures and make sure we deliver. A few things can happen, go away from us, but we have to make sure that at the end of the day, we are on the winning side. From the first ball, that's what we have to target."

Even in games they [Bangladesh] haven't won, they have put in good performances which have suggested they are going to be a tough opposition for everybody, so we know that.

Jon Lewis
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ICC CRICKET WORLD CUP
BANGLADESH V SRI LANKA
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(BANGLADESH STANDARD TIME)

'He will never sacrifice a bit of cricket'

MAZHAR UDDIN

Mohammad Salahuddin, who has mentored Shakib Al Hasan since his BKSP days, received a text message from his pupil which read, "Thank you Sir", after the star all-rounder smashed his maiden hundred in the World Cup against hosts England in Cardiff on Saturday.

"From when did you become an Englishman? Giving thanks to me!" was Salahuddin's response and this perhaps best describes their fond relationship.

The dynamic between Shakib and Salahuddin is not just one of a coach and his student but rather the former Bangladesh fielding coach is more a friend with whom Shakib can share anything, be it technical issues on the field or off the field incidents. Salahuddin, who has seen Shakib grow from

a small child to a mature individual, described the champion all-rounder's character, both as a person and player, during an in-depth conversation with *The Daily Star's* Mazhar Uddin.

THE EMOTIONAL PART

Many might feel that Shakib is not very emotional and chooses to portray himself as aloof. However, it was the same Shakib that cried his heart out in front of Salahuddin after being dropped from the team during the Sri Lanka series back in 2008 and also when he was banned for six months for an off the field incident in 2014.

"When he was dropped from the Sri Lanka series back in 2008, I took him to my room and scolded him as he cried a lot. Even when he was banned for six months, I saw an emotional Shakib. But to be honest, when it comes to the reality such as injuries and other things, it does not affect Shakib mentally or emotionally as he has that realisation. I won't say that he doesn't have any emotions at all but he understands practicality. For example, when he is criticised by the media it does not affect him as he has nothing to do with such things. So, he does not react to such things, knowing that if he takes it seriously it might affect him," said Salahuddin.

THE DISTRACTIONS

For over 13 years Shakib has represented Bangladesh

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Mohammad Salahuddin



with fierce consistency, for which he is still ranked as the number one ODI all-rounder in the world. Even for the best in the business there are certain distractions while could take a player's focus off the game, however, this has never been the case for Shakib.

"He never gets distracted as he knows very well that it is because of cricket that he is able to reach these heights. That is why he is ready to sacrifice anything for cricket but he will never sacrifice a bit of cricket for anything else. Today he is Shakib only because of cricket, nothing else, and he knows that," Salahuddin explained.

RAHIM STEEL



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