

What to WATCH

SONY SIX
Australia v Sri Lanka
Third T20I
Live from 2:10pm
STAR SPORTS SELECT 1
New Zealand v England

First T20I
Live from 7:00am
Bundesliga
Hoffenheim v Paderborn
Live from 1:30am (Saturday)

BARÇA KEEN TO PAY FOR NEYMAR RETURN

Barcelona were so keen to bring Neymar back from Paris St Germain that the players were ready to accept delays to salary payments in order for the club to afford the Brazilian, defender Gerard Pique has revealed. Barca spent the bulk of the last transfer window trying to lure Neymar back from PSG, two years after he left the Catalans for a world record transfer fee of 222 million euros (\$248 million). But the two clubs failed to reach an agreement before September's transfer deadline. The Catalans, who had already signed French forward Antoine Griezmann for 120 million euros and Frenkie de Jong for 75 million, were constricted in their pursuit for Neymar by UEFA's Financial Fair Play regulations.



Nine days that unveiled some ugly truths

NABID YEASIN

Since the eighth-place finish in the World Cup last summer, Bangladesh have mostly been at the receiving end of major blows. Starting with a whitewash in a three-match ODI series in Sri Lanka under the tutelage of interim coach Khaled Mahmud and leadership of Tamim Iqbal after the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) decided to part ways with former coach Steve Rhodes, to a humiliating 224-run loss at the hands of Afghanistan in Chattogram in September, nothing seemed to be going in the right direction.

Bangladesh did share the triangular T20I series trophy with Afghanistan in late September, but only after rain had caused the final to be abandoned. While till then the disappointments were related to performances on the field, the series of events that unfolded



the worst news on the afternoon of October 21 when players boycotted all cricketing activities till their stated 11-point demands -- which was later extended to a 13-point one -- were met by the BCB. But little did they know that after just eight days, they would be hit with news that the nation's premier all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan would not play international cricket for at least one year. The International Cricket Council (ICC) two-year ban on Shakib, with one of the years suspended, announced on Wednesday may have been the final blow to Bangladesh cricket, the events prior to that exposed some ugly truths about the nation's most loved sport.

In the span of just nine days infrastructural dearth, corruption in lower-tier cricket, players' demand for unrequited respect from board members, their discontent over lack of payment and other benefits, board directors' inability and lastly Shakib's involvement with a bookie were the things that either came to the fore or were said louder than ever.

When the players united for a

strike, the BCB tried to give it a different tone altogether. For the most part, out of the 11 initial demands that had been put forth, BCB President Nazmul Hassan tried to highlight the two demands that had mentions of pay-scale increment.

"We had given them [national team players] Tk 24 crore as bonus," said an enraged Hassan the day after the strike.

BCB's attempt to imbue the strike with a different agenda was only the first instance (during those nine days) of poor management. The BCB was also furious about why the players went directly to the media instead of the board with the demands, which they later claimed they would have heeded if asked first. The only thing that could explain the cricketers' move was that the most important stakeholders of the game had lost faith in the management and decided to go public instead.

The players' dip in faith over BCB could be justified from the second demand. The players wanted what the BCB had promised six years ago.



In 2013, the BCB had scrapped the traditional players' transfer system in the Dhaka Premier League (DPL) that allowed the cricketers to choose their own clubs and negotiate their salaries and introduced a player-by-choice system that Hassan had said would be in place for that season only.

The corruption in the first, second and third divisions were not unknown to journalists, players, BCB directors and even regular cricket followers. Buying and selling of points, biased and poor umpiring had been going on for a while in the lower tiers and was also talked about sporadically in the past. Only this time, however, the issue got the spotlight it deserved when the players mentioned it during their protest.

The need for infrastructural upgrade, unavailability and poor condition of practice facilities and gyms in every division, the urge for a balanced pay structure for players, local coaches and even groundsman to encourage the next generation to even consider cricket as a career -- were part of the players' demands which

gave the general public an of how far the country's cricket governance lags behind other nations.

BCB's first attempt to solve the crisis was hilarious at best. The board that had initially thought and said that the players' demands were logical, went on to air their dirty laundry in public as the BCB and the Cricketers Welfare Association of Bangladesh (CWAB) directors kept talking about the lengths they had gone to solve cricketers' personal problems in the past.

However, after the three-day strike normal service had resumed -- or so everyone thought -- with the players joining the camp on October 25 for the India tour after the BCB came to its senses and agreed to nine of the players' demands.

But then Shakib missed the opening day of the camp and, so soon after negotiating the truce with the BCB, his absence raised a lot of questions, which the BCB failed to answer. As late as 8:30pm that night, BCB cricket operations chairman Akram Khan was unable to say if the premier all-rounder would be back to training the next day, let alone knowing the reason he hadn't shown up on the first day.

The next day started with news of BCB taking action against Shakib for breaching the terms of his contract and signing a deal with a top mobile phone operator. After a daylong drama, Shakib was sent an official letter by BCB asking him to explain his actions. And while Shakib's participation in the India tour was thrown into jeopardy, just to add to the woes, it emerged on the same day that opener Tamim Iqbal withdrew from the tour to be with his pregnant wife.

On the same day, the BCB boss had suddenly summoned nine players who were playing in the third round

of the National Cricket League (NCL) so that they could be observed by newly appointed spin consultant Daniel Vettori, who was costing the BCB thousands of dollars a day. Was the BCB surprised by Vettori's itinerary and therefore decided to call players out of the blue? Coming from a board that has recently touted their long-term planning, the decision was hilarious.

The next two days would see Shakib missing training sessions, the BCB president saying that everything was 'murky' and the BCB delaying the announcement of the Test squad for the India tour.

Then came the day, October 29, when the biggest shock to Bangladesh cricket was served when Shakib was banned. The shell-shocked board directors announced a revised T20 squad and the Test squad for the India tour and a Shakib-less Bangladesh squad travelled to India on October 30 for their first ever multi-format series against India in their own backyard.

A lot of cracks in Bangladesh cricket were exposed over the past few days. It remains to be seen how the scarred Bangladesh team perform against a strong Indian side come November 3 when the Tigers will play the first of three T20Is against India. And even if Bangladesh manage to put the haunting events aside and do well against India, there would still be a lot of things that need to be repaired in the future. And if those aspects are not mended, the team's performance would be the least of the worries as cricket in Bangladesh would need to be reconstructed from the very base. Meanwhile, if the BCB decides to overlook what had happened as some sudden unfortunate events, it would only be a matter of time before the nation's cricket experiences more disastrous episodes.

Weekend WINDOW

next took matters beyond the field, shaking the very core of Bangladesh cricket and turning disappointment into shock.

October 21 to October 29 were not just nine regular days -- at least not for a cricket fan and certainly not for anyone related in any way to the Bangladesh national cricket team. The unprecedented events had so unbowed followers of Bangladesh cricket that even the random and bizarre choice of Mominul Haque to captain the Test side on the India tour in November was deemed acceptable and did not raise the questions it usually would have.

The Bangladesh cricket fraternity may have thought that they had gotten

PHL still not in the works

SPORTS REPORTER



Since the elected committee took over Bangladesh Hockey Federation (BHF) in April, there has been a loud demand to stage the Premier Hockey League (PHL) immediately.

However, the activities of the game's governing body over the last six months have given little or no indication that the league, which is the lone source of bread and butter for hockey players, would be staged.

It has been nearly 17 months since the last edition of the PHL ended in June 2018, but no initiatives have so far been taken following a power struggle between two groups of organisers' that was finally settled through the April 28 polls.

Unfortunately, the newly elected committee has already spent nearly six months on indoor and women's tournaments, neither of which have been mainstream events in hockey. Meanwhile, there were no signs of staging the much-demanded premier hockey league until the BHF executive committee formed a League Committee on Monday by naming former player Khaza Taher Latif Munna the secretary.

"We will all sit together and then take the decision about the premier hockey league. We will be trying to hold the league as soon as possible but it is certain that the league

will not be held this year. Besides, we are planning to hold two tournaments -- school hockey and national hockey league -- and then hold the league sometime in next year," Munna told The Daily Star over the phone yesterday.

However, it has been learnt that no discussion about staging the premier league took place during Monday's executive meeting, although a member tried to raise the issue but failed to draw the attention of those present.

General secretary AKM Mominul Haque Shaeed, who went abroad following the casino scandal, had earlier promised to stage the league in between in September-October but the league seems a distant possibility as club officials, who are also in the executive committee, are reluctant to hold the league.

"I doubt whether the league will be held even next year as no one is interested in staging the league. Everyone was busy discussing school hockey, national and international hockey and the preparation of the U-21 national team," said a BHF executive member who preferred not to be named.

He also added that the departure of Shaeed made the situation worse as some six to seven premier league clubs, including champions Mohammedan SC and Dhaka Mariner Youngs, heavily depend on the financial assistance of the general secretary, who may not come forward to help those clubs to form the squads.

'Want to see the young guys play'

AGENCIES, New Delhi



The Bangladesh national cricket team yesterday braved the severe air pollution in New Delhi for nearly four hours to train ahead of the first of a three-match T20I series against the hosts, to be held on Sunday at the Feroz Shah Kotla Stadium.

Bangladesh batsman Liton Das was only briefly seen wearing a surgical mask to protect himself from the noxious air during the Tigers' first training session at the Arun Jaitley Stadium. The right-hander later explained that he wore the mask on personal grounds.

"I had some personal problems, that's why I was wearing the mask. I was not feeling well," said Liton, who however did not need a mask while batting at the nets.

"The team trained for nearly four hours and nobody complained," informed Bangladesh team media manager Rabeed Imam.

The BCCI had previously made it clear that the match would go ahead as scheduled on November 3 even though the air quality issue was brought up by environmentalists.



Bangladesh batsman Mushfiqur Rahim takes a breather while (inset) Liton Das was seen wearing a surgical mask to protect himself from air pollution during the Tigers' first training session at the Arun Jaitley Stadium in New Delhi yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

India stand-in captain Rohit Sharma said he does not expect any pollution-related problems during the first T20I.

"I have just landed and haven't had time to assess. As far as I know, the game is to be played on November 3 and will be played. We didn't have any problem when we played the Test match here [against Sri Lanka]. We are not

aware of the exact discussion but I haven't faced any problems," said Sharma.

Liton spoke to reporters after the training session and told them that 'it is okay' to play without Shakib Al Hasan, who was banned from all forms of cricket on Tuesday after the star all-rounder accepted the charges of breaching the ICC's Anti-Corruption Code.

"We are looking forward to the series because anything can happen in cricket. Shakib was injured before but we played in the Asia Cup, so it is okay," said Liton.

"We prepared well before coming here. We had a training camp back in Bangladesh and then we also have a couple of days to train here. So it is a good opportunity to adapt. Shakib is the best player on our team and we are going to miss him definitely," he added.

"If you look at our team, most of the guys are newcomers. Everybody is looking forward to seeing the young guys play their natural game and contribute to the team," Liton continued. "Our concentration at the moment is on this T20I series and we have not started thinking about the day/night Test. We obviously think about it but at the moment, the focus is on T20I matches."

The three-match T20I series will be followed by a two-match Test series, the second of which will be a day-night encounter at Eden Gardens in Kolkata.

Mahmudullah Riyad will lead the team in the T20 series while Mominul Haque will captain the team in the Test series.

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NIZAMUDDIN CHOWDHURY
BCB CEO

Actually the BCB has very little to do anything about it [Shakib Al Hasan's ban] as the concerned cricketer has already accepted it [the charges] and went into a deal. But still we will see what we can do legally. We already talked with our legal department. We will discuss if there is anything possible that we can do about it.

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