Star SPORT
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STRAP IN FOR A WILD RIDE

Dhaka Platoon captain Mashrafe Bin Mortaza did not attend the captain's photoshoot for the Bangabandhu Bangaldesh Premier League and sent Mominul Haque (2nd from L) in his stead, while Rangpur Rangers were not even represented in skipper Mohammad Nabi's absence. That left the 'captain's photo' a little threadbare, with only five captains present -- (from L) Chattogram Challengers' Mahmudullah Riyad, Sylhet Thunder's Mosaddek Hossain, Rajshahi Royals' Andre Russell, Khuna Tigers' Mushfiqur Rahim and Cumilla Warriors' Dasun Shanaka. PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

MAZHAR UDDIN

When the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) decided as late as August this year that they would overhaul the Bangladesh Premier League and hold the seventh edition without the involvement of franchises -- with whom the BCB failed to resolve a disagreement -- there was a possibility that events surrounding the tournament would be interesting. It was to be a special edition, named the Bangabandhu Bangladesh Premier League (BBPL), to commemorate the 100th birth anniversary of father of the nation Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

BCB also wanted the BBPL to be a platform for emerging local talent. The board, through a strange announcement by BCB director Mahbub Anam in October, had made it mandatory for each BBPL team to have one overseas pacer bowling over 140kmph and a leg-spinner who must bowl four overs each game.

So steadfast was the BCB in their leg-spin promotion that two first-class coaches were sacked for not picking leg-spinners, though available, in their playing XIs.

Come the time to act upon the ambitious words, however, and even board members tied with BBPL teams are not considering the October decree as mandatory. BCB director and Rangpur Rangers team director Enayet Hossain Siraj claimed there is no such rule in the playing conditions.

"It is not being imposed but we will try to have a leg-spinner in the team. And as for playing a pacer bowling at 140kmph, the wicket has to be of that sort. Then there is also the team combination," Enayet told the media during Rangpur Rangers[' jersey unveiling, which started an hour late at the BCB media center yesterday.

"I do not think it is mandatory. We [Bangladesh] have a lack of leg-spinners, so we have to prioritise. But there is nothing in the playing conditions. For the national interest, we will try to play a leg-spinner," Enayet added.

Meanwhile, Enayet has apparently replaced Akram Khan as team director of Rangpur Rangers. According to Enayet, Rangpur is being sponsored by Incepta, a company where Enayet holds a stake. BCB cricket operations chairman Akram is to remain with Ranpur Rangers but the role was yet to be defined at the time of writing. Meanwhile, Enayet's move has left Rajshahi Royals -- his team till yesterday -- without a team director.

It was learned that at least one team were yet to receive essential gear like helmets and batting pads despite having to play on the opening day today. Limited funds for day-to-day team operation for a few teams have been a source of frustration for the players.

Yesterday, as if to foreshadow the special edition of the lucrative tournament, there was one last comedy of errors surrounding the captains' photo session.

After a delayed start only five of the seven captains showed up and took the photo without the trophy in one final reminder of the lack of professionalism and good management that could plague the tournament in the coming weeks.

Mominul Haque came in as proxy for Dhaka Platoon captain Mashrafe Bin Mortaza, who had left the stadium, while Mohammad Nabi of Rangpur Rangers was unable to reach the venue due to traffic.

By the time the photo was taken, the helpless cricketers stood around in the darkening Academy ground premises.

Never mind the missing captains, the BBPL trophy itself has not been seen yet, having also been absent during the opening ceremony.

It seems a wild ride is about to begin today; it's time to strap in.

Focus on locals as BBPL kicks off

SPORTS REPORTER

The new-look Bangabandhu Bangladesh Premier League (BBPL) will kick off today with Chattogram Challengers taking on Sylhet Thunder in the tournament opener 1:30pm at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur. In the second match of the day, Cumilla Warriors will lock horns with Rangpur Rangers under the lights in the evening from 7:00pm at the same venue.

This edition will be one of a kind with the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) organising it without the involvement of franchises for the first time. Aside from this, this edition of the BBPL will likely also see a number of other changes, taking the board's expectations from the players into account.

This year the BCB has already touted the BBPL to be a wonderful platform for young local players, who could use the platform to prove their mettle and earn a place in the national T20 squad for the T20 World Cup in October 2020. Emphasis was also placed on the inclusion of a wrist-spinner and an express pace bowler in each squad for this edition.

With the BCB at the wheel, the focus is supposed to be on young prospects like Aminul Islam, Yasir Ali, Saif Hassan and Mohammad Naim. Aminul, who has shown promise in Bangladesh's three T20Is during their tour of India last month, will hope to continue his good form for Khulna Tigers and provide some hope to the national selectors who have been searching for a quality leg-spinner for a long time. Meanwhile, Yasir will be hoping to emulate his fine form in the last edition for Cumilla this time.

While youngsters will be pumped to excel, stalwarts like Mashrafe Bin Mortaza and Tamim Iqbal will be returning to cricket after a considerable break. Dhaka Platoon skipper Mashrafe has been out of action since the World Cup in the summer. The 36-year-old pacer will have a point to prove after recovering from a groin injury that he picked up during practice in mid-November.

> For Bangladesh guys, I just say eat more dumpling, yam and banana, and get strong.
>
> **ANDRE RUSSELL**
> RAJSHAHI ROYALS CAPTAIN

Mashrafe's Dhaka teammate Tamim, who just played the first round of the National Cricket League (NCL) for Chattogram Division in October, will make a comeback to competitive cricket since his dismal showing as an interim ODI captain during Bangladesh's tour of Sri Lanka in late July.

Since its inception, this will also be the only edition that will see no involvement of the nation's premier all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan, who was handed a two-year ban (one year suspended) by the International Cricket Council (ICC) last October for failing to report corrupt approaches from a bookmaker.

It will also be an opportunity for Cumilla's Sabbir Rahman, who was left out of the T20 squad for Bangladesh's India tour after his meek performance during the tri-nation series against Afghanistan and Zimbabwe in September. Sabbir, who has since been out of the spotlight, will look to make a statement through this BBPL.

Meanwhile, Mosaddek Hossain, Afif Hossain, Soumya Sarkar and Taskin Ahmed will all be hoping to shine for their respective teams and give the national selectors a sweet headache ahead of the T20 world cup in October next year.

The usual excitement and hype surrounding the tournament is yet to reach its peak and it remains to be seen if the tournament can create some buzz when the teams step on the field today.

Both Tamim Iqbal (L) and Mashrafe Bin Mortaza will return to cricket with this BBPL after a considerable period of time. The two stalwarts, playing for the Dhaka Platoon, will be hoping to get back to rhythm under the guidance of Mohammad Salahuddin (R), the only local coach of the tournament. PHOTO: STAR

NZ face D/N challenge

Series against Australia starts tomorrow

AFP, *Perth*

Kane Williamson's New Zealand know they need to re-adapt quickly to the nuances of day-night cricket to have any hope of winning a first series in Australia for more than 30 years when this week's opening Test begins.

The tourists pad up for the first of a three-Test series in Perth with no warm-up games and in forecast 40 Celsius (104 Fahrenheit) heat, before heading to Melbourne for the Boxing Day clash then Sydney.

They have momentum from last week's 1-0 series win against England, but that came on slow and docile New Zealand wickets -- a contrast to the expected much zippier track and pink ball under lights at Optus Stadium.

New Zealand last played a day-night Test nearly two years ago against England in Auckland, while the Australians are fresh from thrashing Pakistan by an innings and 48 runs under lights in Adelaide last week.

"The old day-night thing, eh. It'll be interesting. It's just another thing to adapt to, I suppose," captain and run machine Williamson told reporters.

"Such is the international schedule -- we fly out, have a little bit of training and are straight into another match.

"The perfect preparation? It's always hard to know what that is."

New Zealand received some good news with all-rounder Colin de Grandhomme fit after tearing an abdominal muscle in the first Test against England last month.

Injured bowling spearhead Trent Boult also missed the second Test against England but has recovered sufficiently from a side strain to make the plane to Australia.

SL-Pak set for historic Test

AFP, *Rawalpindi*

Pakistan's captain Azhar Ali thanked Sri Lanka Tuesday for returning to Pakistan for the first Test tour there in a decade, after a fatal militant attack on their team in 2009 drove international cricket away.

"It's a historic occasion and all the players are excited to be part of this," Azhar, who has played 75 Tests -- but, until now, none at home -- said at a press conference in Rawalpindi with his counterpart, Dimuth Karunaratne on the eve of the first Test starting in Rawalpindi on Wednesday.

"We thank the Sri Lankan team for coming here. The last Test was also against them so their visit will send a strong message to the world that we need to support each other," he said.

Eight people were killed and several players and officials were wounded when militants opened fire on the Sri Lankan team bus travelling to a Test in Lahore in 2009.

The attack plunged Pakistan into sporting isolation during its years-long battle with militancy, with all "home" venues played in the United Arab Emirates. But with security dramatically improving in recent years international cricket began creeping back starting in 2015, albeit only for limited overs.

Sri Lanka will play two Tests under heavy security, one in Rawalpindi and the second in Karachi, ending a decade-long absence for cricket's five-day format.

They will be the first home Tests for all 16 players in the Pakistan squad.

"Cricket is the biggest thing and if the youngsters can't see matches here then it's a big loss for our cricket and budding players," Azhar said.

"I am sure our grounds will host more matches in the years to come."

Karunaratne -- who refused to tour Pakistan for a limited over series in September-October this year -- shared his rival's sentiments.

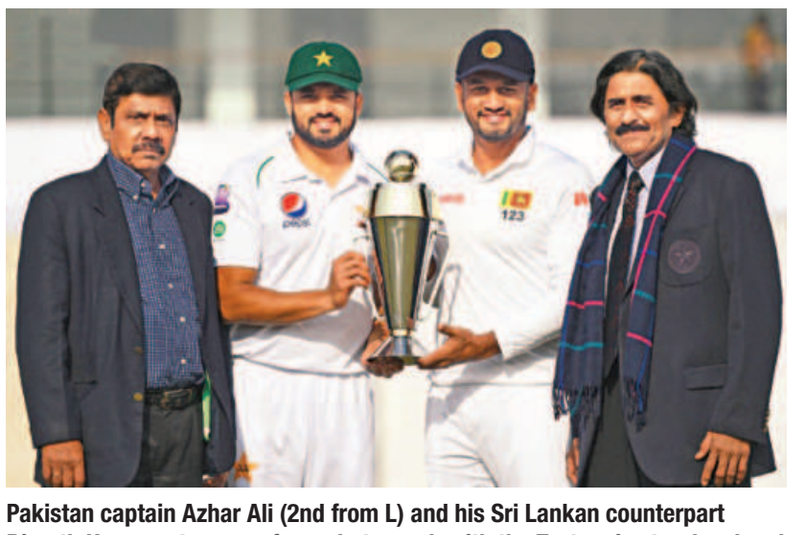
"I am really excited... The players are excited to be part of this historic occasion," he said.

Sri Lanka are on the up in Test cricket after becoming the first Asian team to win a series in South Africa earlier this year. They then drew a Test series 1-1 against New Zealand at home in August, their first fixture in the World Test championship.

Sri Lanka have not lost a series in Pakistan since 1992 -- winning two and drawing two.

They beat Pakistan 2-0 in their last series in UAE two years ago, a win Karunaratne hoped will motivate them. "We played good cricket in 2017 so that confidence is with us," he said.

Pakistan, meanwhile, are smarting from a 3-0 defeat in South Africa and 2-0 in Australia this year.



Pakistan captain Azhar Ali (2nd from L) and his Sri Lankan counterpart Dimuth Karunaratne pose for a photograph with the Test series trophy ahead of the first Test which will start in Rawalpindi today. PHOTO: TWITTER

SHORT CORNER

Manohar won't seek to extend ICC tenure

India's Shashank Manohar has said he won't seek a third term as chairman of the International Cricket Council and will step down next year, according to a report on Tuesday.

Manohar was elected unopposed for a second two-year term last year after a tenure marked by broad reforms.

But the 62-year-old former head of the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) told The Hindu newspaper that it is time for a new person to take charge.

"I am not interested in continuing for another two-year term," Manohar was quoted as saying.

"Majority of directors have requested me to continue but I have told them that I do not wish to do so.

"I have been the chairman for nearly five years. I am very clear, I do not want to continue from June 2020. My successor will be known next May." -- AFP

'No more home games at neutral venues'

Pakistan will no longer look for neutral venues to stage home international cricket matches.

"The onus will be on the other teams to tell us why they can't play in Pakistan," Pakistan Cricket Board chairman Ehsan Mani told on Tuesday.

"Our default position will remain that Pakistan is safe. We play cricket in Pakistan (and if) you want to play against Pakistan you have to come to Pakistan."

Pakistan's decade-long isolation from hosting Test ends on Wednesday when Sri Lanka will play at Pindi Cricket Stadium. -- AGENCIES