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SPORT

Sylhet Thunder pacer Ebadat Hossain's three-wicket haul forced yesterday's BBPL encoutner with Cumilla Warriors into the super-over at the Sylhet International Cricket Stadium yesterday.

PHOTO: **FIROZ AHMED**

U-19s leave with great expectations

SPORTS REPORTER

With the usual high expectations, the Bangladesh Under-19 team will leave Dhaka today to take part in the ICC Under-19 Cricket World Cup, scheduled to begin from January 17 in South Africa. The Akbar Ali-led team will board the flight to Johannesburg at 6:40pm today and are expected to reach their destination on January 4 at 5:30am.

When it comes to the Bangladesh under-19 side, expectations are always high. This time however, expectations are heightened as the young Tigers will head to the sport's biggest age-group event on the back of some impressive performances.

Last year on December 26, the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) president Nazmul Hassan, who was very optimistic about the squad's strength, said that he would go to South Africa for the first time if the team qualify for the semifinal.

"I think our team can even reach the final. Considering our performance in the recent past and our team combination, I think we have the capability of playing the final. I hope we can oblige and bring the [BCB] president there [South Africa]," said Akbar during a pre-tour press conference held at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday.

However, both Akbar and coach Naveed Newaz mentioned that they are not thinking so far ahead and will take each match as it comes.

Bangladesh Under-19 have been playing well in the recent past. The young Tigers agonisingly lost by five runs against their Indian counterparts in the final of the Under-19 Asia Cup in September after romping to the final unbeaten.

After that, they recorded a dominant 4-1 series win against hosts New Zealand in September-October. And although Bangladesh drew a two-match youth Test series at home to Sri Lanka in November, they won the five-match youth ODI series 4-0 after the first match was abandoned.

And, given that the team will have time to acclimatise to South African conditions -- a six-day conditioning camp at Potchefstroom, during which time they will play two practice matches before playing two warm-up matches against Australia and New Zealand on January 13 and 15 -- it can be said that a lot will be expected of the young Tigers when they play Zimbabwe in their opening game on January 18 at Senwes Park.

Bopara blitz lifts Rajshahi

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI *from Sylhet*

The Sylhet phase was expected to induce more excitement in the ongoing Bangabandhu Bangladesh Premier League (BBPL) with more power-hitting on the menu to entertain a larger turnout of fans compared to the Dhaka phase matches.

The first match of the Sylhet leg, between Rajshahi Royals and Rangpur Rangers, did not quite meet expectations with Ravi Bopara later reiterating that it was a difficult pitch to bat on while the turnout was low. There were still a few moments that cheered the crowd in the day game at the Sylhet International Cricket Stadium yesterday.

First, it was the Rajshahi opening pair of Afif Hossain and Liton Das who blazed Rajshahi Royals to a fast start before Bopara's unbeaten fifty lifted Rajshahi to a strong 179 for four. In the middle, Shoaib Malik played an important role to set up the 30-run win as Rajshahi restricted Rangpur to 149 for seven, picking up their sixth win in the tournament to take top spot in the seven-team table.

Afif got into his aggressive mould, dominating early on and for some time Liton looked good as well before he once again departed after a bright start, edging a Mustafizur Rahman delivery to the wicket-keeper. Afif followed his opening partner next over, with Mohammad Nabi getting his scalp. Malik came in to steady the innings along with Bopara.

While Malik was removed by Mustafizur, Bopara took charge and picked up the tempo at the end, hitting three consecutive fours in the final over from Mustafizur to remain unbeaten on a 29-ball 50.

Mohammad Naim threatened to cut loose after the exchange but after he was removed by Malik, the innings slowly withered away in chase of 180, despite a 64-run stand for the fourth wicket between Tom Abell and Fazle Mahmud.

Bopara commended the effort of Malik during a crucial period on what he considered a difficult wicket.

"Some balls were stopping and some were skidding. It was a very difficult pitch to bat on for your first 10 balls. You have to get yourself set and catch up at the back end, but sometimes that can go wrong as well. It was one of those days and I think Shoaib Malik played fantastically to put the innings together and I kept the pressure up," he said at the post-match press conference.

Bopara applauded the strong start from Afif and Liton -- 51 runs coming inside five overs -- which allowed him to take his time and explode late.

"If you look at the partnerships they have built, they get to 40-50 runs in the Powerplay and generally we go on to win those games."

He was of the opinion that getting runs in Fizz's last over changed the game.

"We needed a big over at the end and we managed it. It does help the cause if you take the momentum into the second innings so it was a good over," he said.

SCORES IN BRIEF

RAJSHAHI ROYALS: 179 for 4 in 20 overs (Afif 32, Shoaib 37, Irfan 20, Bopara 50 not out; Mustafizur 2-41)
RANGPUR RANGERS: 149 for 7 in 20 overs (Naim 27, Abell 29, Fazle 34; Nawaz 2-21, Shoaib 2-27, Kamrul 2-32)
Result: Rajshahi won by 30 runs.
Player-of-the-match: Ravi Bopara.

Ravi Bopara's unbeaten 50 off 29 balls helped Rajshahi Royals reach a 30-run victory against Rangpur Rangers in a BBPL tie at the Sylhet International Cricket Stadium yesterday.

PHOTO: **STAR**

Looking forward to the BBPL: Amla

Former South Africa batsman Hashim Amla, who announced his retirement from international cricket after a glittering career spanning 15 years, arrived in Bangladesh on Tuesday to play for Khulna Tigers in the ongoing Bangabandhu Bangladesh Premier League (BBPL). Ahead of his maiden foray in the country's domestic circuit, Amla yesterday spoke to reporters in Sylhet about joining Khulna and his international retirement. Amla, regarded as one of the best openers of all time, also said that he looks forward to working with Mushfiqur Rahim, whom he considers to be the most experienced among wicket-keeper around. In addition, the devout Muslim expressed some of his views on Islam. Below are excerpts of the conversation:

SPORTS REPORTER *from Sylhet*

Question (Q): This will be your first time playing in the BBPL, how did the Khulna deal happen?

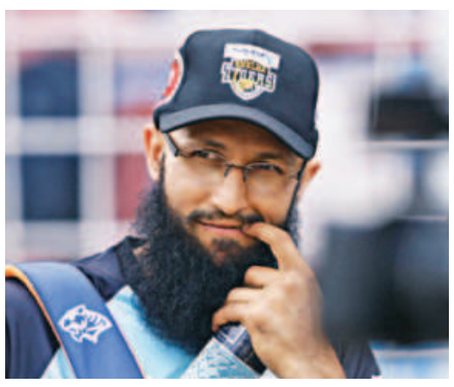
Hashim Amla (HA): Obviously, love being here in Bangladesh. Been here a few times over the years and have always loved the atmosphere, especially since the cricket culture is so fantastic that you can feel the electricity on the ground as well. Since my retirement, I have enjoyed playing a few T10 leagues here and there. Then I got the call from Khulna Tigers, asking if I was available. Fortunately, there was a gap in my schedule and so, I'm happy to be here.

Q: You signed for Surrey and then also took over as batting consultant for Cape Town. Are you enjoying this stage of your career, post retirement?

HA: Really enjoying it, every chapter in life is an exciting one. I was fortunate to play international cricket for as long as I did and this is another chapter. Thankfully I got a chance to play in the BBPL this time seeing as due to international commitments, I couldn't be here before, but it's a good time now. I was very keen to be here at the BBPL. The tournament has always been one of those things (of interest) and it is an opportunity to explore a different part of the world. Every country has a unique flavour so the experience playing in the BBPL is something I am really looking forward to.

Q: What does the game of cricket mean to you?

HA: Ever since I was six years old, I have been



with cricket. If you ask someone who is six years old (why they play), the answer would be because they enjoy and love the game. I am blessed to be able to play the game I love. It is very fortunate when someone can do what they love and plus, you get to travel the world.

Q: You could have played on for longer. What was at the heart of the decision to retire?

HA: Every international cricketer will tell you, you know yourself when its time. After the World Cup, I took some time and consulted the people close to me. Although there may still be a few years left in my body and I feel fresh and good to go, everything has its time. Everything has to move on and you have to stop at some point. No, I don't miss Test cricket since everyone gets to the stage where you realise you have played enough. I am happy and grateful. Certainly, whatever little value I can add with my experience, I enjoy sharing it. This is the next chapter and I don't miss international cricket one bit.

Q: How has being a devout Muslim benefitted your cricket?

HA: The principles of Islam are very simple. It's hard to explain (how it helped). Everything is not compartmentalized, it's together. I find this question a little repellent, a little weird to be honest. You live your life as best you can and everything else falls into place. It's not about whether it helps your cricket or not but whether you apply yourself based on your faith and do your best in every career that you are in. Whether it helps or not doesn't really cross my mind. I don't want to do something in Islam because it helps my cricket. That would be quite insincere. Practice as best you can and everything falls into place.

Q: What's your evaluation of teammate Mushfiqur Rahim and how would you like to exchange your cricketing knowledge with him?

HA: It comes naturally when you have played against each other for almost 10 years. Mushy has done exceptionally well as a captain and a player. Certainly, one of the best wicket-keeping batsmen around. A handful have been around but he has been there the longest and has the most experience worldwide, I think. He is a fantastic player and to interact with him and share our experience is something I am sure we are both looking forward to.

Q: Which Bangladeshi players do you have the best connection with?

HA: Mushy and Shakib [Al Hasan] and obviously [Mashrafe Bin] Mortaza. In our careers, we have played against each other in the under-19 stage and more.

NZ sweat on ailing Kane and Henry

REUTERS, *Sydney*

A flu-like bug that has ripped through the New Zealand squad ahead of the third Test against Australia forced captain Kane Williamson and batsman Henry Nicholls to miss training for the second successive day on Thursday.

Tom Latham, who took the captain's news conference in the absence of Williamson, said left-arm spinner Mitch Santner had also been affected by the bug but he was hopeful all three would be fit to play when the Test got underway on Friday.

"It's up in the air at the moment but a couple of the boys are a bit crook unfortunately," Latham told reporters at the Sydney Cricket Ground (SCG).

"They're going to have today off as well as yesterday, so fingers crossed tomorrow they'll be right to go.

"I think it's flu-like symptoms, I'm not 100% sure," he added. "It's gone around the team a little bit, which isn't ideal."

Eng look to end age-old drought in Cape Town

Second Test against SA from today

AGENCIES, *Cape Town*

England will look to end their age-old drought when they take on South Africa in the second Test of four-match series at Newlands in Cape Town on Friday.

'The Three Lions' were thrashed by 107 runs in the opening Test and will be hopeful of a better show in the upcoming contest. However, things aren't going to be easy for them as they are on the wrong side of both form and history.

England last tasted success in Cape Town when there used to be eight deliveries in one over. In the year 1957, Colin Cowdrey starred with the bat in both the innings as England thrashed Proteas by 312 runs. Since then, England haven't come close to tasting success at this picturesque venue.

Not just against England but South Africa hold an impeccable record against almost every Test playing nation at this venue. They have not lost at Newlands since their defeat at the hands of Australia in 1962.

In the last meeting between the two teams in 2016, Ben Stokes thrashed 258 off 198 balls in a brutal display of power hitting, collecting 11 sixes and sharing in a world record sixth wicket partnership of 399 with Jonny Bairstow (150 off 191 deliveries).

England went into that match 1-0 up in a four-Test series which they went on to win. This time they are the team needing to catch up after losing the opening encounter in Centurion.

South Africa were captained by Hashim Amla, who effectively acknowledged his lack of aptitude for the job by resigning from it after the match despite making a double century of his own to ensure a high-scoring draw.

On this occasion it is England's captain, Joe Root, who is under pressure because of his team's poor recent record away from home.

Newlands in 2016 provided an unusually benign pitch for batsmen, with both teams scoring over 600 in a first innings which only ended late on the fourth day.

It is the only one of the most recent 11 Test matches at Newlands, going back to 2011, to have ended in a draw. South Africa have won nine of the other ten, losing once. Totals over 400 have been rare, with only four instances other than the 2016 run feast.

There is a new groundsman but it seems reasonable to expect a fair contest between bat and ball this time around.

Former cricketer Atik Khan passes away

SPORTS REPORTER

Former national cricketer Abdul Atik Khan breathed his last yesterday at the age of 60 after a cardiac arrest.

Atik had been a member of the Bangladesh squad in the 1986 ICC Trophy in England. He had a distinguished club career, playing for prominent sides like Abahani and Rupali Bank.

The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) extended its deepest condolences to the family of the former cricketer and prayed for the salvation of his soul through a media release yesterday.