



(L-R) Mushfiqur Rahim, Mehedi Hasan Miraz, Shafuul Islam, Mohammad Mithun and (bottom) Nasum Ahmed undergo individual training sessions at different BCB facilities yesterday. The cricket board has allowed a number of national-level cricketers around the country to work on fitness and batting as a test case to resume full-fledged training by maintaining health and safety guidelines.

PHOTO: STAR

Familiar, but all too different

RAMIN TALUKDER



After exactly 125 days, I entered the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium in Mirpur yesterday as the country's premier cricket venue jolted back into life after the long break due to the coronavirus outbreak. Three cricketers -- Mushfiqur Rahim, Mohammad Mithun and Shafuul

Islam -- were training inside.

The first realisation was: I have to maintain social distancing and follow the new rules at the usually buzzing cricket venue. The makeshift arrangement for reporters provided ample evidence that we had entered the new normal, which was unlike anything I had seen as a professional sports reporter for the past decade.

The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) had made a number of rules for the initial resumption of individual training. Only one player is allowed to train inside the stadium at a time, with just one trainer to help. There are separate seats, water bottles and toilets. No groundsman or board official is allowed inside the ground. A second player can only enter the ground once the first player is done training.

It may have been the start of the new normal, but when it came to Mushfiqur Rahim's eagerness to train, things remaining the same as before. The wicket-keeper batsman arrived well before his scheduled time after probably playing a big role behind encouraging the board to open training facilities across the country. His outdoor practice made it clear that a professional athlete could not train at home for an indefinite period of time.

Interestingly, while Mithun and Shafuul seemed uneasy on their first day of training, it seemed Mushfiqur had hardly enjoyed a break as he was at ease with each step.

For a change, it was not possible to go close to the player and get their reactions as the board has yet to start press conferences that maintain social distancing. It came either through a video message from the board or over a phone conversation.

"I was thrilled when I found out I could train at Mirpur. I did some normal things today because it is not wise to take a huge load on the first day back after such a long break. It's totally different from what I did at home for the past few months. On the other hand, today's experience is totally different as there used to be people around even when I was doing individual training before coronavirus. But today I am alone. It's difficult on the first day but I think after a few sessions everything will be okay," Mohammad Mithun said.

Pace bowler Shafuul was also excited by the return. "I was eagerly awaiting this day. The first day was tough but I am satisfied as I returned to the cricket field after a long break. Whatever you do at home, it's not same as here. I could start after Eid but I wondered how long I could wait. Overall it's a fantastic feeling."

Fears and risks remain as the coronavirus situation in the country has not improved much, but in the end, it felt like 'here I am up on the stage' again.

'Only proper activities can reduce anxiety'

BISHWAJIT ROY



"The tough part for anyone is changing lifelong habits, but you can never underestimate the human mind's ability to adapt to any crisis or any changing situation, which has been proven time and again throughout human history."

Bangladeshi-born Canadian psychologist Ali Azhar Khan, who has been working with the country's cricketers for last few years, avowed the above words first before talking in details regarding players' challenges in new normal, where they have to maintain very necessary protocols.

England pacer Jofra Archer's breach of protocols and the breach of social distancing rules in top-flight European football leagues only shows the huge challenges in adapting to the new normal. And especially when it comes to Bangladesh sport, many think things will not be that easy.

"It is undoubtedly challenging. This pandemic has already afflicted every aspect of our lives. We have never faced such a crisis in our life. Then what we are doing? We are already starting to find ways for survival. So I am confident that our players will be able to adapt to the new conditions



very quickly," Ali said over the phone.

"My personal opinion is that we cannot wait further for the resumption of sport in our country, especially when, in my opinion, it will be easy to maintain the protocols in cricket training. Our players have been confined to their homes for the past three or four months and that is not good for their mental and physical health. Canada is at high risk in terms of infection but they still started different sport here. Other countries have also started sport following new guidelines, so we cannot wait more and I would say we could have started a bit earlier," he continued.

"You cannot force anybody, but we have

to set a comprehensive strategy to tackle this situation. In regards to our strategy, we usually outsource to the Western world but we have tackle things our way, keeping our socio-economic and cultural conditions in mind. We should understand that if players continue to work from home, they may ultimately enter a shell of fear and become depressed, which will not help with their immune system. Holding onto panic means you will be more depressed.

"You cannot fix everything overnight. You have to go through a process of trial and error. So if you wait longer, you will be lagging behind others in terms of everything. In my opinion, cricket training

can start in a full-fledged manner so that they can shake off the rust. I am sure the cricket board is working on every aspect, but in my opinion, the board can work on two separate policies -- one for domestic tournaments and other for internationals," he explained.

Ali has already started sessions with Bangladesh Under-19 players and will soon speak to women's cricketers. Many senior cricketers have also maintained communications with him individually for different suggestions during these difficult times. However, Ali believes that the time has come to think of arranging competitions.

"What we have done in the first two-three months is okay, but it's a time to face the new challenge. We have to understand that the functions of neurons are very important and rust means they will not fire. Players are going through anxiety and only proper activities can reduce that," he observed.

Cricket started to get back on the field after a few players returned to different grounds across the country yesterday, but Ali suggested more for them. "We can now think about providing them with some matches, so the BCB can think about arranging a domestic tournament which can be a good trial for what we are calling the new normal," he concluded.

City triumph can convince Auba to stay, says Arteta

REUTERS, Manchester

Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta says their 2-0 victory against Manchester City in the FA Cup semifinal on Saturday could convince striker Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang to commit his future to the north London club.

Aubameyang, 31, scored in either half to fire Arsenal past holders City at an empty Wembley Stadium.

Aubameyang, the club's top scorer this season with 25 goals in all competitions, is out of contract at the end of next season and has not yet agreed to an extension.

"Good and beautiful moments, they are always better than the bad ones," Arteta told reporters. "As I told you, the way I look at him when I speak with him, he sounds pretty convinced. "But obviously if he can see that success and the direction we are taking is the right one, I think he will be more positive about it, yes. Hopefully it will help him to be more convinced we are going in the right direction."

The victory against City came just days after Arsenal beat Premier League champions Liverpool.

"We are really happy with what has happened in the last four or five days," Arteta said.

"To beat probably the best two teams in Europe is the nicest thing to do so credit to the players for what they are doing, their performances and the level of fight they are showing."

Arsenal will face Chelsea or Manchester United, who play on Sunday, in the FA Cup final on Aug. 1.

More clubs than ever eye slots in AFC Cup amid new reality

ANISUR RAHMAN



While the ongoing 2020 AFC Cup is yet to resume after being suspended in March in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, the process of participating in the 2021 edition has already started with the Bangladesh Football Federation asking interest clubs of the Bangladesh Premier League to submit their documents by August 5.

A majority of the clubs expressed interest to get AFC Cup Club licensing, which is mandatory to take part in Asia's second-tier club tournament, in the hope of earning tickets to take part in the AFC Cup in the altered situation due to the global pandemic.

Of nine clubs, Bashundhara Kings, Abahani, Sheikh Russel KC and Saif SC have started uploading their documents to meet the AFC Cup club licensing criteria, which includes five areas -- sporting, infrastructure, personnel and administrative, league

and financial.

The AFC will scrutinise the documents for two weeks after the deadline on August 5 before they sit with the member associations to set up new regulations for the clubs' eligibility for the 2021 edition AFC Cup.

Bangladesh have two slots in the AFC Cup with the BPL champions entering the group stage directly while Federation Cup champions take part in the play-off stage, subject to having AFC Cup club licensing, but the cancellation of the BPL due to the pandemic have made things different.

"The AFC always asks for the names for the AFC Cup after the completion of the league and we send the names of Federation Cup champions and top four teams of the league. So, most clubs who could not produce good results hardly showed interest. But now all clubs have a chance to take part in the 2021 AFC Cup following the cancellation of the league. That's why so many clubs have shown interest," said BFF competition manager Zaber Bin Taher Ansari, adding that the

AFC has yet to release any regulations relating to the 2021 AFC Cup.

Federation Cup champions Bashundhara Kings are all but confirmed for the next edition of the AFC Cup while runners-up Rahmatganj MFS will perhaps get second priority according to the standing of the Federation Cup, subject to meeting the club licensing.

"We had earlier applied for club licensing but could not fulfil the criteria. It might have been that we were reluctant to meet the criteria properly because of our standing in the league but this time we are really serious about fulfilling the criteria because we may get an opportunity to take part in the AFC Cup as Fed Cup runners-up," said Rahmatganj MFS general secretary Imtiaz Hamid Sabuj.

Uttar Baridhara Club general secretary Jahangir Alam however said that they have not applied to get the opportunity to take part in AFC Cup, rather they wanted to strengthen their professional structure and identify loopholes in a bid to improve progress further.



After the third day of the second Test was washed out, the West Indies resumed on 32-1 in bright sunshine at Old Trafford yesterday, 437 runs behind England's 469. Nightwatchman Alzarri Joseph was dispatched by England spinner Dom Bess. Shai Hope departed for 25, but Kraigg Brahtwaite steadied the ship with a half-century as the Test looks to be heading towards a draw. West Indies lead the three-match series 1-0.

PHOTO: REUTERS



With the Bundesliga and DFB Pokal trophies already in the bag, Bayern Munich's lethal Polish striker Robert Lewandowski was focusing on some outdoor exercise to maintain fitness as the Bavarians build up for their next challenge -- the last-16 tie of the Champions League against Chelsea on August 8.

PHOTO: INSTAGRAM

Fate of T20 WC to be decided today?

PTI, Dubai

On hold for the past two months, the fate of this year's T20 World Cup will be up for a decisive round of deliberation when the ICC board meets virtually on Monday, with the BCCI hoping for a postponement to ensure that the IPL can go ahead.

The global event is supposed to be held from October 18 to November 15 in Australia but the country's cricket board had, in May, expressed its inability to host amid a second surge of COVID-19 cases in the state of Victoria.

With India's case load also exceeding

the 10 lakh mark, the IPL, if it is held, is likely to move to the UAE.

"The first step was postponement of Asia Cup, which has happened. We can only start to move ahead with our plans after the ICC announces the postponement. They have been sitting on the decision even after Cricket Australia said that they are not too keen on hosting the event," a BCCI Apex Council member told PTI on conditions of anonymity.

This year's T20 World Cup will likely be held in Australia in 2022 as India doesn't want to swap its 2021 hosting rights with Cricket Australia as of now.