



Will this twilight usher IN THE DAWN?

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Both dusk and dawn exhibit exactly the same illumination. But, at opposite ends of the horizon, one beckons darkness and fear while the other greets sunshine and hope.

And the world, still reeling from the attack of the novel coronavirus, is once again experiencing the time of twilight, just like the time when the pandemic started and left everyone stunned. But there lies a major difference between that time and now.

While the time the virus broke out was dusk and the world

knew it was going to plunge into darkness, now it seems to be heading towards a new dawn with the hope of procuring vaccines in the coming year and returning to being normal.

Sports, much like other activities, had come to a halt in March last year. While athletes were reduced to training at home with no purpose, sporting bodies were left helpless and scratching heads over ways to resume.

But the time of helplessness passed as sports returned, much to the relief of the sports lovers and enthusiasts. From starting behind closed doors to allowing

socially distanced spectators in the gallery, from players testing positive and being left unpicked to recovering and scoring goals or centuries and achieving other milestones -- things took turns for the better gradually through the collective efforts of the players, their governing bodies, spectators and all the other stakeholders of sports.

And the efforts from all quarters need to be there in the coming months too. Health safety and protocols need to be prioritised and enforced as only that would lend confidence in continuing sports by overcoming the hurdles.

There will be bumps in the road -- like recording a season-high 18 positive tests in its latest round of testing across the Premier League clubs last week followed by the postponement of a league match between Fulham and Tottenham, the third top-flight game to be delayed by the virus. But just as the Premier League authority mentioned they had "no plans" to pause the season as they had confidence in its protocols, the hope on the first day of 2021 will be that sports will keep on rolling forward while maintaining the health guidelines with a renewed future in sight.

Jam-packed 2021 awaits

SPORTS REPORTER

After spending seven unprecedented months idly at home due to the Covid-19-induced break, athletes shook off concerns regarding the pandemic and came out of confinement a couple of months ago with hopes of year-long engagements in 2021 at both the domestic and national level.

Following the Covid-19 outbreak in early March, different national sports federations were forced to shutter their activities. Domestic competitions were suspended and participation in international meets abroad was halted in line with efforts to contain the spread of the virus.

However, national athletes from different disciplines stayed engaged with their physical activities even in confined environments.

The scenario has changed a lot now and most of the national sports federations resumed their activities before daring to stage small-scale domestic competitions with stringent health guidelines in November and December.

Staging tournaments on a smaller scale has apparently shown federations a new way to come up with more domestic and international engagements, with cricket, football, hockey, archery and some indoor disciplines leading the way.

Apart from cricket's busy 2021 schedule, football is poised to hold a lot of domestic and international competitions, with the Bangladesh Football Federation already started the season's curtain-raising Federation Cup after the national team played three international fixtures: two FIFA friendlies against Nepal in November and a World Cup Qualifier against Qatar in December.

Yesterday, the Bangladesh Football Federation declared a calendar for domestic and international events, with BFF president Kazi Salahuddin hoping for a good times in the New Year following a dismal 2020.

The BFF will not only host regular domestic events, but also introduce fresh tournaments while the senior national team will be busy playing hosts to the Bangabandhu Gold Cup, SAFF Championship, three World Cup Qualifiers. Other opportunities await during FIFA windows. Other than that, both junior men's and women's teams also have some international tournaments.

Hockey has also been in action recently, hosting two tournaments -- President's Cup in November and Victory Day Hockey in December. The federation is also in the process of staging the Premier Hockey League, which has not been held in the past two years.

Hockey will also have a busy time at home as the senior team is scheduled to play the rescheduled AHF Men's Asian Champions Trophy for the first time alongside five of Asia's top sides in Dhaka from March 11. The tournament had earlier been suspended due to the pandemic.

INT'L & DOMESTIC EVENTS	TIME
Bangladesh Games	February
Bangabandhu Gold Cup	March
World Cup Qualifiers	March/July
SAFF Championship	September
Tokyo Olympics	July
Asian Champions Trophy hockey	March
Junior Asia Cup hockey	July
Asian Archery Championships	November

The national U-21 team will also be vying to secure a spot in the Junior World Cup when they begin their Junior Asia Cup hockey campaign in Dhaka from July 1. The 10-team tournament was deferred twice due to the pandemic.

More importantly, disciplines such as archery, shooting, weightlifting, karate and boxing are likely to get opportunities to take part in the Tokyo Olympics in July as they have already applied for 'wildcard entries'. With the Tokyo Olympics in sight, some athletes are planning to participate in international tournaments to hone their skills.

While Ruman Sana qualified for Tokyo Olympics directly, other archers have already resumed training and are planning to participate in two international tournaments before July's Olympics. Bangladesh will then host the Asian Archery Championships in November. The shooting federation is also mulling whether to send shooters to international tournaments.

Finally, some 31 federations have been asked to take preparations for February's Bangladesh Games as the Bangladesh Olympic Association continues chalking out how to stage the Games on a smaller scale due to the pandemic.

'It feels surreal'

AGENCIES



New Zealand captain Kane Williamson has surged ahead of Steve Smith and Virat Kohli to seize the top spot for batsmen in the MRF Tyres ICC Men's Test Player Rankings after his player of the match effort in the first Test against Pakistan in Tauranga.

Williamson had briefly occupied the top spot towards the end of 2015 but either Smith or Kohli have been number one since then. This year too, Smith was at the top for 313 days and Kohli for 51, before Williamson surged ahead of his two contemporaries from the ICC Under-19 Men's Cricket World Cup 2008.

Williamson was characteristically humble when speaking of the double honour, passing on credit to the players he has both followed and led in his time with the team.

"It feels surreal to be on there. However, I believe that it's a bit of a team reward to be honest ... it wouldn't mean much without the contributions and the efforts from all the other players that you play alongside for such a long period of time that give you the motivation and drive to want to try and move the teams forward that you're involved in," Williamson told the New Zealand Herald.

"There's also so many people along the way that have gone into trying to help me as a player and as a person and I want to thank all of them."

On overtaking the likes of Kohli and Smith, - which comes the same week he was named by the ICC to its test "Team of the Decade", Williamson was once again coy, suggesting his new ranking was loaded with some luck.

"For me to sneak up, perhaps, in some way is very surprising and humbling but at the same time I think there's other rankings somewhere that quite clearly state the successes of these other two. Year in and year out those two players, in all formats, are moving the game forward."

Williamson, who returned from paternity leave this month, hit a match-winning century in the opening test against Pakistan to help New Zealand win by 101

runs at Mount Maunganui on Wednesday.

Since making his debut for New Zealand in November 2010, Williamson has amassed one of the finest test records of any Black Cap; scoring 23 centuries at an average of 52.90 in 82 matches - 34 of those as captain.

Smith is in the middle of a rare slump in form and dropped behind Kohli after registering four single-digit scores at the halfway stage of the ongoing four-Test series against India.

Kohli, who topscored for India in their eight-wicket thrashing by Australia in the series opener in Adelaide, has returned home for the birth of his first child.

However, Black Caps fans will be well aware of the cold, hard facts behind Williamson's rise to the top and will no doubt be backing him as he attempts to lead New Zealand to the top of the team rankings next week; where a second win over Pakistan will take them there for the first time. Australia's Pat Cummins remains the top-ranked test bowler, while compatriot Mitchell Starc jumped two places to enter the top five.



Darlow denies Liverpool

REUTERS

Newcastle United manager Steve Bruce heaped praise on goalkeeper Karl Darlow after his string of fine saves helped earn a 0-0 draw against champions Liverpool in the Premier League on Wednesday.

Klopp's team lead the table going into the New Year with 33 points from 16 games, three points ahead of second-placed Manchester United who have a match in hand.

Darlow denied Mohamed Salah in the first half, turning the Egyptian's shot around the post, before beating away Roberto Firmino's goal-bound header. The 30-year-



old made another excellent save in the 88th minute to keep out Firmino's header.

Darlow has impressed after being brought into the side in place of the injured Martin Dubravka, keeping three clean sheets in the Premier League this season.

"He's had to wait patiently for his chance and certainly with the way he's trained every day -- and Dubravka's now fit -- we needed our second goalkeeper to stay fit and step up," Bruce told reporters.

"We've had to call on him a bit too much at times but there's no denying he's been terrific all season. He's done fantastically well and, at the moment, the jersey's his because of the saves he's made." Bruce said he would look to bring in reinforcements in the January window.



Atletico Madrid players throw Diego Simeone in the air after a Luis Suarez header gave them a 1-0 home win over Getafe on Wednesday in their coach's 500th game in charge. A third consecutive league victory took Atletico to 35 points after 14 games, two ahead of second-placed Real Madrid, who drew 1-1 at Elche and have now played 16 matches.

PHOTO: TWITTER

'Age doesn't matter'

AGENCIES

Portugal and Juventus ace forward Cristiano Ronaldo hinted that he wants to play for Portugal at the 2022 World Cup as he dismissed the importance of age to his success.

Ronaldo said in an interview with the BBC that he has no plans to retire by saying he hopes to play on for "many, many years" despite preparing to turn 36 in February. "It doesn't matter the age. What is important is the mind," he said.

"It doesn't matter if Cristiano Ronaldo is good, you don't know tomorrow what is going to happen. I live in the present, in the moment. The moment is good, I feel happy."

TEST PERFORMANCE IN 2020

Player	Played	Innings	Runs	Average	100	50	Highest
Kane Williamson (NZ)	4	6	498	83.00	2	1	251
Virat Kohli (IND)	3	6	116	19.33	0	1	74
Steve Smith (AUS)	3	5	73	18.25	0	1	63

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