

Areas in focus as Tigers return in whites

MAZHAR UDDIN from Chattogram

The recent ODI series against the West Indies marked Bangladesh's return to international cricket after a gap of over 10 months, and the focus then was on new beginnings and long-term plans. Similarly, Mominul Haque and his troops will make a return to the longest format today with the first Test against the same opponents, and the skipper will hope for a new beginning here too, as there is a lot of room for improvement.

Although the Tigers are a strong unit at home, where they utilise spin-friendly conditions well, head coach Russell Domingo and the team management would want to adopt a better-rounded approach.

The Daily Star attempts to assess the areas to work on for the Tigers in red-ball cricket.

STABILITY IN THE OPENING STAND
Bangladesh fielded three different



Bangladesh coach Russell Domingo has a discussion with Test skipper Mominul Haque (L) and ODI skipper Tamim Iqbal (R) as the other members of the team train at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chattogram on Tuesday.

opening pairs in their last five Tests but none seemed a settled option. The experienced Tamim Iqbal will have to take the responsibility but it is still not confirmed who his opening partner will be against the West Indies. Young right-hander Saif Hasan opened in the last two Tests, including his debut match against Pakistan last year, but is yet to make a mark with the bat. Left-hander Shadman Islam, who has impressed with his ability to stay at the wicket for long periods, is also making a comeback to the side after recovering from a wrist injury.

It will be important for the Tigers to settle on a stable opening stand which would be a big improvement from the recent past. The 39-run stand between Tamim and Saif against Pakistan in the second innings of the Rawalpindi Test last year is Bangladesh's highest opening stand in the last five Tests. The vulnerability in the opening

position can be gauged by the stands in their last nine innings -- 18, 3, 39, 12, 10, 15, 0, 0 and 30.

SPECIALIST FIELDERS AT CATCHING POSITIONS

Having specialist fielders at catching positions has always paid dividends for top Test teams, but Bangladesh have been found wanting in this regard. It requires special skill for fielders at slip, gully and short-leg positions where focus and concentration play a key role. The Tigers are yet to have a specialist slip fielder. Soumya Sarkar and Mohammad Mithun have been seen at slips in the past. However, it will be interesting to see whether these two cricketers eventually make it to the playing 11, which at the moment seems unlikely. With that in mind, the coaching staff will have to groom a few other options for those crucial positions.

FORMING A BALANCED BOWLING UNIT
The pitch at the Zahur Ahmed

Chowdhury Stadium in Chattogram has always been a batter's paradise with an average first innings total of 370 runs. The last time Bangladesh played a Test at this venue was against Afghanistan in 2019. They did not field any specialist pacer in the line-up and prepared a tailor-made pitch for the four spinners -- Shakib Al Hasan, Taijul Islam, Nayeem Hasan and Mehedi Hasan Miraz.

But the ploy backfired as Afghan leg-spinner Rashid Khan turned the tables and the visitors went on to register a thumping 224-run win. Bangladesh head coach Domingo had already hinted that the hosts would not go with an all-out pace attack, meaning the Tigers will once again opt for the spin-heavy strategy. However, the team management will be wary of the past record and it will be interesting to see how many seamers Bangladesh opt for this time around.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

'Crucial to put runs on the board'

SPORTS REPORTER from Chattogram

The last time a full-strength West Indies toured Bangladesh back in 2018, they were caught in the spin web of Shakib Al Hasan, Mehedi Hasan Miraz, Taijul Islam and Nayeem Hasan. All 40 wickets in the two Tests were scalped by this spin quartet as the Caribbean outfit were thrashed by the Tigers.

And even though a depleted West Indies -- without most of their regular starters -- are visiting this time, Test skipper Kraigg Brathwaite believes the previous defeats will work as the 'number 1 motivation' for his side this time around.

"We lost the series here last time, which is the No. 1 motivation for us. I played against these guys before but some of the guys haven't. We have seen footage [of the Bangladesh spinners] and from a batsman's point of view, we have our plans in place. We have to be positive, by rotating the strike, looking to be aggressive," said Brathwaite in a virtual pre-match conference yesterday.

Despite realizing the spin threat that looms, Brathwaite still backed his batsmen to come out on top of the Bangladesh spinners.

"They [Bangladesh spinners Mehedi

and Shakib] are quality bowlers but I think we have the skills to come out on top and get big runs. I am backing the batters. The guys have put in some work, and we all look forward to the challenge," added the right-hander.

The pitch at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chattogram, where the first of two Tests starts from today, usually remains dry and on the slower side, aiding spinners that come into the attack sooner.

And while Brathwaite was aware of the condition, the 28-year-old still thought that the likes of pacers Kemar Roach and Shannon Gabriel will still have a big part to play.

"I still think they will have the same role as before. We have some guys with extra pace so I think with the low bounce and correct fields, the pacers have to apply pressure as well. The ball may spin looking at the surface, but I still think pacers can be the attacking option with the ball possibly keeping low.

"Our bowlers have been doing a good job in the last year and a half, two years. It is crucial for us to put runs on the board, I think that'll be key for this West Indies team," said Brathwaite, admitting that their pacers would be the X-factor in Chattogram.



Kraigg Brathwaite

CHANCE FOR MOMINUL TO FLOURISH AS TIGERS' TEST SKIPPER

"I always like to do attacking captaincy. Maybe sometimes I had to change my style due to match conditions and situations. But I always prefer doing attacking captaincy."



SCAN THE QR CODE TO READ THE FULL STORY



PHOTO: STAR

The match officials pose for a photograph at the ZACS in Chattogram yesterday ahead of the first Test between Bangladesh and West Indies. The match will see the debut of Neeyamur Rashid (C) as the first Bangladeshi match referee in a Test match while Sharfuddoula Ibne Shahid (2nd from L) will make his Test bow.

Sheikh Jamal notch dramatic win

SPORTS REPORTER

Sheikh Jamal staged a superb second-half performance to hand title contenders Saif SC their second defeat in the Bangladesh Premier yesterday.

The thrilling encounter at the Bangabandhu National Stadium ended 3-2 to help three-time champions Sheikh Jamal reach fourth place with 12 points from, three behind leaders Bashundhara Kings and one behind Sheikh Russell, although the top two have played a game more.

The Dhanmondi-based outfit took to the field with their confidence flying after a 6-0 hammering of Arambagh but, having adopted a high line, they struggled to match the pace of a youthful Saif SC and conceded



Sheikh Jamal players celebrate their winning goal with fans during their 3-2 victory over Saif SC at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

twice in the first half. the break, adopting a narrower shape, and pulled back two goals

inside three second-half minutes before finding the winner in stoppage time.

With Shafiqul Islam Manik defending near the center line, the Saif SC forwards utilised their speed to break through on goal but could not cash in either due to the forwards misfiring or brave saves from goalkeeper Ziaur Rahman.

In the 22nd minute, neither defenders nor the goalkeeper could stop Faisal Hossain Fahim, who received a through ball from John Okoli, dribbled down the right past defender Mozzamel Hossain Nira and drove the ball to the top-right corner.

Okoli then doubled the margin in similar fashion in stoppage time of the first half.

This time Fahim played a defence-splitting through pass for Okoli, who ran into the box

down the left before finishing clinically.

After resumption, Sheikh Jamal survived two scares before being deprived of a goal by Saif SC defender Rahmat Mia, who cleared a goalbound header from Shakil Ahmed in the 70th minute.

Five minutes later, Sheikh Jamal pulled one goal back through Solomon King, who headed home an Otobek free-kick before substitute Nurul Absar levelled the margin in the 77th minute after a powerful shot from Omar Jobe deflected into his path off the goalkeeper and crossbar.

With the match entering three minutes of stoppage time, Sheikh Jamal received an unexpected penalty after defender Riadul Hasan Rafi handled a powerful shot from Omar Jobe. Solomon King converted the spot kick two minutes into stoppage time.

Australia scrap South Africa tour

AFP, Melbourne



Australia pulled out of their Test cricket tour to South Africa Tuesday due to the "unacceptable" risk to players with the coronavirus rampant in the country.

Justin Langer's men were due to play three Tests against the Proteas, and Australia named their squad last week with the intent to fly out this month.

But the situation became untenable with the outbreak in South Africa accelerated by a new variant said to be more contagious than earlier strains of the virus.

With almost 1.5 million detected infections and more than 44,000 fatalities, it has the highest number of cases and deaths on the continent.

Cricketer Australia interim chief Nick Hockley said the medical advice was not to travel. "It has become clear that travelling from Australia to South Africa at this current time poses an unacceptable level of health and safety risk to our players, support staff and the community," he said.

"This decision has not been made lightly and we are extremely disappointed, especially given the importance of continuing international cricket at this time.

Olympics to go ahead, says Mori

AFP, Tokyo

The pandemic-postponed Olympics will go ahead this summer "however the coronavirus evolves", Tokyo 2020 president Yoshiro Mori said Tuesday, brushing aside doubts about the event.

"We'll certainly go ahead however the coronavirus (pandemic) evolves," he told a meeting of Olympic organisers and members of Japan's ruling party in Tokyo.

"We must go beyond discussion about whether we will hold it or not. It's about how we will do it. Let's think about a new kind of Olympics on this occasion," he added.

The comments come with organisers and government officials insisting the

Games can be held safely despite surging Covid-19 infections around the world, including in Japan.

Japan's Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga is expected to announce a month-long extension of a virus state of emergency later Tuesday -- meaning the measure will run until March 7 in Tokyo and several other parts of the country.

Tighter border restrictions imposed after infections surged have already forced the postponement of some sporting fixtures including this year's first Olympic test event, an artistic swimming qualifier that was scheduled for March.

The nationwide Olympic torch relay is still due to begin on March 25.



'Future of men's tennis in good hands'

AFP, Melbourne

World number one Novak Djokovic said the future of men's tennis was in good hands Tuesday, praising the new generation for showing "courage and boldness" in their pursuit of Grand Slam glory.

Djokovic, Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer have dominated the sport over the past 15 years, holding a vice-like grip on the major titles, with 57 between them.

But their reign is being threatened, with Dominic Thiem winning the US Open last year and the likes of Alexander Zverev and Stefanos Tsitsipas knocking on the door.

With the big three getting older, 17-time Grand Slam winner Djokovic said it was good to see the next generation performing well.

"It's great for the sport that we



Spain's Rafael Nadal chats with two of his teammates at the Melbourne Park on Tuesday after pulling out of their opening ATP Cup fixture against Australia, complaining of a stiff lower back.

PHOTO: REUTERS

have new Grand Slam champions," he said after leading Serbia to a 2-1 win over Canada in the ATP Cup.

"We have new successful young players that are showing the courage and boldness, coming into the

biggest stadiums in sport, willing to take on the biggest challenge in facing especially the three of us, fighting for the biggest title.

"There are a few of them that are very close. They have huge potential. Obviously there's still a lot of time ahead of them."

He pointed to Greece's Tsitsipas, Germany's Zverev, Canada's Denis Shapovalov and Italy's Matteo Berrettini as capable of breaking through.

"You have a lot of players. I think the future of tennis is in good hands, without a doubt," he said.

Djokovic, who will attempt to win an unprecedented ninth Australian Open title when the tournament begins next week, added that once players got over the hurdle of winning a first Slam, it got easier.

"I know how it feels working your way up in the men's tennis world, trying to clinch the first Grand Slam title," he said.