



Head coach Russell Domingo gives some batting tips to Mushfiquur Rahim during a practice session at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium yesterday. Mushfiquur had a poor outing in the recently concluded New Zealand tour but the wicketkeeper batsman can take inspiration from the fond memories he had in Sri Lanka as the Tigers fly to the island nation today for two-match Test series.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED



"I don't think it's true that we can't get a result in absence of Shakib (Al Hasan) and Mustafizur (Rahman). They don't have 10-12 hands of their own. There are other players in the squad too. I don't think this (absence of Shakib) has had an impact on the results. What is happening is that we are not being able to play as a team."

MOMINUL HAQUE
BANGLADESH TEST CAPTAIN

When table tennis broke the ice

AFP, SHANGHAI

It was 50 years ago but Zhang Xielin still remembers vividly how a shaggy-haired American table tennis player stepped onto the Chinese team's bus, a chance encounter which would shape history.

It was the world championships in Nagoya, Japan, and Glenn Cowan mistakenly hopped in with Zhang and his teammates -- an awkward moment because the United States and China were then deeply at odds.

"We were on the bus and were talking and laughing," Zhang, now 80, told AFP. "But when we realised that an American had come onto the bus, we fell silent."

The Chinese triple world champion Zhuang Zedong eventually came forward and famously broke the ice, giving Cowan a silk embroidery as a souvenir from China.

They did not know it at the time, but it was the spark for China and the United States to begin normalising relations, in what became known as 'ping-pong diplomacy'.

Zhang, a doubles world champion and later China's coach, recalled: "Mr. Zhuang understood that there was a difference between the American people and the American government, and that we should be nice to American people, so he took the initiative to chat with Glenn."



American player Glenn Cowan (right) shakes hands with Chinese player Zhuang Zedong(center) after getting off a bus for Chinese players during the 31st World Table Tennis Championships on April 4, 1971 in Nagoya, Japan. Glenn Cowan, who missed a bus for his own team, accidentally boarded a bus for Chinese players, which led to a domino of events that saw the normalization of the China-US relationship.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Photographers captured Zhuang and a 19-year-old Cowan shaking hands and smiling.

"The newspaper came out the next day and it seemed that China and the United States were about to have a relationship," said Zhang.

Days later, on April 10, 1971 the US team became the first Americans to step foot in China for nearly a quarter of a century when they were invited to play friendly matches in the country.

The thaw saw President Richard Nixon visit China in February 1972, and a Chinese table tennis squad visit the US.

In 1979 formal relations were established between the two countries.

Yao Zhenxu played Cowan, who died in 2004, during the Americans' ground-breaking trip.

Yao still remembers the score, he won 21-12, 21-14, and says that Cowan thanked him afterwards for "a serious game".

The American team were vastly inferior to the Chinese, so the hosts sometimes let their visitors win points in the spirit of sportsmanship and goodwill.

Now 74, Yao says that it was only afterwards that he realised that he had played a part in something historic.

"Because of ping-pong diplomacy we changed the world order, and the people of China and the United States started friendly exchanges," he said.

Yao appeared alongside Zhang in Shanghai on Saturday to mark 50 years of ping-pong diplomacy, with the city authorities hosting an event with speeches and friendly amateur matches.

But the anniversary comes at a time when relations between Washington and Beijing have deteriorated markedly over a number of issues, notably trade, the fate of China's Uyghur minority and a clampdown in Hong Kong.

In a recorded speech to mark the 50th anniversary, China's ambassador in Washington, Cui Tiankai, accused some in the US of "ideological bias and zero-sum thinking".

But he and Chinese state media took a largely positive tone, with Xinhua news agency hailing ping-pong diplomacy's "wonderful legacy".

Yao and Zhang hope that the spirit of 1971 can help shape future relations between the world's top two economies for the better.

"Everyone knows that the relationship between China and the United States is a bit tense nowadays," said Yao. "We hope that we can agree to disagree and keep friendly relations."

"Don't be afraid of competition, we can compete peacefully."

Mominul at ease under pressure

SPORTS REPORTER



There will be a significant amount of focus on Test skipper Mominul Haque and the rest of the Bangladesh team when they board a flight for Sri Lanka today to take part in a two-match Test series.

The Tigers will be desperate to return to the winning ways after losing their last eight international games across all formats, the latest being 3-0 whitewashes in New Zealand in both ODI and T20I series.

But following a thrashing 2-0 whitewash against a relatively inexperienced West Indies side on home soil earlier this year, Bangladesh have had to contend with questions over their approach and a lack of improvement in the game's elite format.

Bangladesh managed to win just one of their six Tests since Mominul took charge as Test captain in 2019 and the soft-

BANGLADESH IN SRI LANKA IN TESTS

MATCHES:12

WIN: 1

LOSS: 10

DRAW: 1

MOST RUN-GETTERS FOR BANGLADESH IN SRI LANKA

	Matches	Runs	Highest Score	Average	100s	50s
Mohammad Ashraful	9	751	190	46.93	3	0
Mushfiquur Rahim	6	541	200	60.11	1	3
Habibul Bashar	8	291	84	18.18	0	1
Tamim Iqbal	3	276	82	46.00	0	3
Javed Omar	6	249	62	20.75	0	1

MOST WICKET TAKERS FOR BANGLADESH IN SRI LANKA

	Matches	Wickets	BBi	BBM	Average	Economy	5W
Shahadat Hossain	6	11	4-108	4-108	51.36	4.52	0
Mehedi Hasan Miraz	2	10	4-113	6-190	35.10	4.03	0
Shakib Al Hasan	3	9	4-74	6-154	46.11	2.11	0
Syed Rasel	3	9	4-129	4-129	33.33	4.17	0
Mustafizur Rahman	2	8	3-78	5-128	27.50	2.80	0

The Tigers' only Test victory came in Sri Lanka in March 2017 when they created history in their 100th Test with a four-wicket win. Tamim Iqbal was adjudged man of the match for valuable fifties in both innings while Shakib Al Hasan made 116 in the first innings.

spoken 29-year-old must show character as a leader and lead from the front both on and off the field to bolster a demotivated team ahead of the tour.

The cricketer from Cox's Bazar was heavily criticised following those losses to the Windies, but when it comes to handling the pressure of expectation as a captain of the Test side, Mominul

believes he has managed to face the pressure and continue thinking positively.

"Representing the team at the international level has some pressure in it. You have to take that much pressure especially when results are not going your way. It depends on how you take it. I have digested the fact that I am the captain, so I think I can

handle the pressure. I think it is a positive type of pressure," he said.

However, Bangladesh can take few positives from their previous outings in the island nation. A historic win in Bangladesh's 100th Test against the hosts in 2017 in Colombo is also the only time when the visitors had managed to beat their Sri Lankan

Inter close in on title

REUTERS, MILAN

A rare goal from full back Matteo Darmian earned Inter Milan a 1-0 victory over Cagliari on Sunday, as Antonio Conte's side closed on their first Serie A title in 11 years.

Juventus however eased to a 3-1 victory over Genoa to keep alive their faint hopes of making it 10 successive Serie A titles this season. Third-placed Juventus moved on to 62 points after 30 matches, one behind AC Milan and 12 adrift of leaders Inter Milan.

Struggling Cagliari were proving to be a tough nut to crack in the San Siro, with debutant goalkeeper Guglielmo Vicario making several fine saves to keep the league leaders at bay.

But the visitors' resistance was broken by an unlikely source in Darmian, whose second league goal of the season in the 77th minute secured Inter a 11th successive league win.

"I like to repeat - these matches are starting to feel like victories are worth six points," Conte told DAZN. "Milan won (on Saturday) and it was important for us to keep our lead. It is not easy but we are getting used to it. "For many it is the first time being under pressure like this, playing always to win. I am very satisfied with what we are doing."



Karim Benzema's sublime backheel put Real Madrid in charge in the 14th minute in a rain-soaked 'Clasico' at the Alfredo di Stefano Stadium on Saturday while in Barcelona's awful first half Lionel Messi hit the far post straight from a corner. The Argentine had a better chance moments later from inside the area but could not beat Madrid's Thibaut Courtois.

PHOTO: TWITTER/REUTERS



'This is a huge win for Real Madrid'

Koeman furious with referee

AGENCIES



Real Madrid climbed to the top of La Liga on Saturday after Karim Benzema's flicked finish helped them claim a thrilling 2-1 victory over Barcelona in a wild Clasico at Valdebebas.

Benzema's superb piece of skill and a deflected Toni Kroos free-kick put Madrid in charge and while Oscar Mingueza pulled one back for Barca, they fell to defeat in what could be Lionel Messi's final appearance in this fixture.

Real Madrid now own the better head-to-head against both of their rivals while Barcelona and Atletico still have to play each other at Camp Nou in the run-in.

It was a riveting contest at a rain-soaked Alfredo di Stefano stadium - certainly one of the most exciting Clasicos in years

HIGHLIGHTS

➤ Real Madrid tasted the La Liga double over Barcelona for the first time since the 2007-08 season.

➤ Zinedine Zidane's side are currently on a run of three victories in football's biggest club fixture, and to find the last time they did this we have to go all the way back to the 1977-78 campaign.

➤ Barcelona have never won a league title in a season in which they've lost both Clasicos, whereas Real Madrid have won the league on eight occasions after

winning both fixtures against the Catalan side.

➤ Barcelona superstar Lionel Messi once more failed to hit the net in the Clasico to stretch his goal drought against Real Madrid to seven games; the longest of his professional career.

➤ Karim Benzema became only the fourth Real Madrid player to score at least seven games in a row in La Liga this century after Ruud van Nistelrooy, Cristiano Ronaldo, and Gareth Bale.

- that saw both teams squander numerous chances, several efforts came back off the woodwork and Casemiro sent off in extra time.

"This is a huge win for us, you could say that it was as important as a final but we'll have to keep on fighting for a while yet," said Real

defender Nacho.

With the last play of the game, Barcelona substitute Ilaix Moriba rattled Real Madrid's crossbar. "We're still in it," said Barca coach Ronald Koeman. "We've lost a game against a team who is also fighting for the league but we

have eight game left and we will fight to the end."

"It was a difficult game, the first half was ours, but we suffered in the second," said Zidane. "We deserved the victory, because we had a lot of chances to score the third."

Koeman however raged against the referee for not awarding them a penalty in their 2-1 defeat, which knocked them off course in La Liga's three-way title race.

The Catalans had two late penalty claims as they chased the game, with Martin Braithwaite going to ground both times after challenges from Ferland Mendy.

"If you're a Barcelona fan and you saw this game you'd be very annoyed with two of the referee's decisions. It was a clear, clear penalty and then he only gave four minutes of stoppage time," the Dutch coach said.