



Taskin's transformation

MAZHAR UDDIN



"If you can't perform consistently for the national team, you won't see your pictures on billboards and get endorsements in near future."

Those words were from coach Mahbub Ali Zaki to pacer Taskin Ahmed, who was desperate to make a comeback to the national team in late 2019.

Taskin made a memorable debut in international cricket in 2014 and caught everyone's eyes with his pace and other attributes of a genuine fast bowler. But like many fast bowlers, Taskin's battle with injuries came as a major barrier to him becoming a regular feature in the Tigers' squad.

Apart from that, there was also a

lack of consistency and game sense in his bowling. At times Taskin was guilty of bowling in wrong line and lengths, leading to the biggest downfalls of his career.

There were a few occasions when Taskin did look in better shape and was gearing to make an impact but injuries intervened right in those crucial times.

But while experiencing the harsh reality of being dropped from the national team in all formats during 2019 and 2020, Taskin made up his mind to go for a huge transformation.

It was during that period that he asked his childhood mentor Zaki to help him with his bowling and fitness. Zaki formed a team of trainers, physio and even a dietician.

"I used to work with him in his early days but after that I got busy

with the Bangladesh under-19 team. In late 2019, one day Taskin told me that he wanted to have a transformation as a bowler. So we formed a team where we had trainers, physio and dietician. We worked on his muscle so that he can gain more strength keeping the injuries in mind.

"Being a fast bowler, Taskin is all about pace and speed. Without pace, he is nothing. Even Taskin expressed his desire to bowl around 150kph. For that, we started working on various aspects right from his body transformation to muscle development along with developing his running technique. We knew until he takes his fitness level to world-class standard, it is not possible for him to reach the goal considering his current age," Zaki told The Daily Star.

Taskin's improvement was

evident in his comeback Test in Sri Lanka as the pacer, despite not getting enough assistance from a batting-friendly surface in Pallekele, went on to bowl 30 overs in an innings.

More importantly, Taskin hit the right areas and emerged as the most successful among the three Bangladesh seamers, picking up three wickets in the only innings that Sri Lanka batted.

"It is always difficult for express pacers to bowl at a tight line and length consistently. We were working on that aspect and even Taskin realised that really well. It is also about maturity and the more he plays the better he will get. I won't say he has done a tremendous job in Sri Lanka but progress is there and he needs to continue in this direction," Zaki said.

Volleyball's rising popularity

ANISUR RAHMAN



Not too long ago volleyball was out of everyone's sight due to its irregular domestic competitions and failure at international level, but change in leadership and Bangladesh's volleyball a new boost in recent past.

Changes in the sport over the last five years have seen the national team get success at international level on the back of long-term training at home and abroad while domestic competitions are being held regularly.

The popularity of volleyball is back at rural areas with lots of invitational tournaments being held in localities, and incredibly, national players on an average earn Tk 15 lakh to Tk 20 lakh each per season, an amount similar to what a mid-level footballer gets from his club in a season.

"I used to earn approximately Tk 2.5 lakh earlier by only playing competitions organised by Bangladesh Volleyball Federation (BVF) but the amount has risen to Tk 20 lakh to Tk 25 per season since 2018 because I have been playing a lot of local tournaments across the country. I played 20 matches in Tangail and overall 35 matches from December last year to January this year," national team's captain Horosit Biswas told The Daily Star adding that he takes Tk 30,000 for playing a match organised privately.

The national team captain also explained the reasons behind the increase of popularity of the sport after a long time.

"There was no regular training for the national team until Atiqul Islam sir [mayor of Dhaka North City Corporation] was appointed president of Bangladesh Volleyball Federation in 2014. Since then we are getting regular training at home and even in foreign countries such as Iran, Sri Lanka and Vietnam. We also succeeded in a few international competitions, so the spectators are coming back to enjoy volleyball," said the captain.

In 2015, BVF organised Asian Senior Men's Central Zone International Volleyball Championship with seven nations and got

opportunities to play opponents beyond South Asia. Bangladesh emerged runners-up in that tournament to draw attention of media, which also gave a good coverage in 2016 when the men in red and green clinched the title of the same championships under the guidance of an Iranian coach.

"Popularity has increased significantly, especially in rural areas. I was astonished to see the amount of spectators in a tournament in Bhaluka, Mymensingh where eight of our players were given Tk 3 lakh each for playing one match," said Horosit, who missed the Bangladesh Games as his team, Power Development Board (PDB), withdrew with five key players testing Covid-19 positive day before the start.

"Some promising players emerged from the Bangladesh Games and they have already been roped in by some clubs but inter-district championship is also playing a great role in finding out players from the root level," said Horosit. "Earlier this year, I went to Satkhira to play an upazila-based tournament where a lot of young players participated. New players are coming out because volleyball is now played in different districts. Many players often call me to look for teams which was not the case five to six years ago."

Horosit, who is enjoys a bit of stardom in the country, believes the country's volleyball will be progressing locally and internationally if the district leagues, inter-district championship are held regularly and uninterrupted training of the national team is ensured.



EUROPEAN FOOTBALL ROUNDUP

'It will be the mental factor that decides title race'

AGENCIES



Atletico Madrid coach Diego Simeone said the team with the most mental strength will prevail in La Liga's title race, which remained on a knife edge after his side were beaten 2-1 at Athletic Bilbao on Sunday.

"People ask me what the most important factor will be and it's obvious to me that it will be the mental factor," Simeone told reporters after a second defeat in five league games.

Atletico raced 10 points clear at the top in January with a game in hand but a dismal run of form has seen their lead cut to two points and Barcelona will knock them off the summit if they beat visiting Granada on Thursday. Real Madrid are also only two points behind Atletico while Sevilla are three back in a thrilling four-way tilt, making the Spanish title race the most

compelling in Europe's top five leagues.

In Ligue 1, Lille jumped back above Paris Saint-Germain to the top of the table by coming from two goals down to beat fourth-placed Lyon 3-2.

In Italy, a superb strike from substitute Alvaro Morata was only enough to earn Juventus a 1-1 Serie A draw at Fiorentina in a result that could prove costly for the Turin club's Champions League qualification hopes.

The result moved the champions level with second-placed Milan in the standings on 66 points, but the two teams behind them - Atalanta, on 65 points, and Napoli on 63 - have a game in hand. Fiorentina are six points clear of the relegation zone.

Matteo Darmian was Internazionale's unlikely saviour once again as the defender came off the bench to score in a 1-0 win over Verona that moved Antonio Conte's side a step closer to the title. Inter moved on to 79 points, 13 clear of second-placed Milan with five games remaining.



PHOTO: TWITTER

GUARDIOLA EYES BIGGER PRIZES

Manchester City claimed a record-equalling fourth successive League Cup triumph as Aymeric Laporte's late header sealed a deserved 1-0 victory over Tottenham Hotspur on Sunday. They have now matched Liverpool's feat of winning the competition for four seasons in a row, and also join Liverpool with the most League Cup wins on eight. Even as his Manchester City players celebrated on the Wembley pitch after winning Sunday's League Cup final, manager Pep Guardiola was already setting his sights on bigger prizes. "Now we rest and prepare for the (Champions League semi-final) first leg against Paris Saint-Germain, then after that we are two games away from trying to win the most important title of the season. The Premier League is the nicest one, the one where I am most proud when we are able to do it," Guardiola said.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE SEMIFINALS

Can Chelsea maintain unbeaten run against Real?



Real Madrid's in-form striker Karim Benzema (R) vies for the ball during a training session yesterday ahead of their Champions League semifinal first leg match against Chelsea tonight.

PHOTO: TWITTER

AGENCIES



Following the proposed European Super League fiasco, the Champions League returns tonight as Chelsea take on Real Madrid.

This will be the first-leg of their semi-final clash at the Estadio Alfredo Di Stefano.

The Blues are three games away from replicating their 2008 success, but they face a stern test of progressing at the expense of the competition's most decorated team.

Chelsea coasted through to the semi-finals after claiming a 2-1 aggregate win over Portuguese outfit Porto in the quarter-finals.

Since then, they have picked up one draw and two wins domestically. That run of results included a win over Manchester City in the FA Cup semi-final and Saturday's 1-0 win over West Ham United.

After going trophy less last season, the Blues have set up a mouth-watering FA Cup final clash with Leicester. They could now grab a domestic and European cup double if they find success in the remaining cup

matches of the season.

Meanwhile, Real Madrid might be floundering in La Liga, but they have simply been superb in the Champions League.

Real coach Zinedine Zidane said yesterday he was not thinking about any sanctions against the club from UEFA in the wake of the European Super League announcement last

week.

The breakaway league involving 12 of Europe's major clubs collapsed within three days of its announcement amid a fierce backlash from fans, governing bodies and politicians.

Real president Florentino Perez was named as chairman of the project

and appears to have been the driving force behind the league, which ended in embarrassment as most clubs withdrew.

There has been talk of the founding teams being punished by UEFA for their actions but Zidane shrugged off the notion that Real could be banned from European competition.

"It's absurd to think that we won't be in the Champions League next season," he told a news conference ahead of Tuesday's semi-final, first leg at home to Chelsea.

"A lot has been said, but all we can do is focus on tomorrow's game. We're not in control of the rest so there's always going to be talk, but for me of course you want to see Madrid in next season's Champions League."

"The president (Perez) knows what I feel (about the Super League) in my heart. We're just focused on tomorrow's game."

Local media have suggested referees might now treat Real differently but the Frenchman brushed aside those suggestions.

"The only thing that's important to us is what goes on on the pitch," he said.

Cricketers leave IPL amid Covid surge

AFF, NEW DELHI

Two Australian cricketers became the latest stars to pull out of the Indian Premier League on Monday as top bowler Pat Cummins said the tournament was being kept open to distract attention from the growing coronavirus toll on the country.

Adam Zampa and Kane Richardson are returning to Australia for "personal reasons", their Royal Challengers Bangalore team said, joining Rajasthan Royals bowler Andrew Tye who flew back on Sunday.

India star Ravichandran Ashwin also withdrew to support his family on Sunday as the country staggers under 350,000 new infections and almost 3,000 deaths each day.

England batsman Liam Livingstone left the Royals last week just before Britain imposed a travel clampdown on India as its hospitals became overwhelmed and shortages of oxygen and hospital beds grew.

A handful of players, including India star Axar Patel, tested positive for coronavirus before the tournament.

The world's richest cricket league has faced criticism for continuing in empty stadiums during the crisis, with a leading newspaper group accusing it of "commercialism gone cross" as it suspended coverage on Sunday.

IPL organisers were anxious to hold the tournament -- said to general billions of dollars for the Indian economy -- after last year's event was moved to the United Arab Emirates because of the pandemic risk.

Players are being tested every two days in bio-secure bubbles where they will be based for eight weeks.