

'MESSI, MESSI, MESSI'

Six-time Ballon d'Or winner Lionel Messi received a hero's welcome after flying to France on Tuesday to join Paris Saint Germain (PSG) following his shock departure from Barcelona. The agreement to sign the 34-year-old Argentine is a major coup for wealthy PSG. Wearing a T-shirt that read "This is Paris," Messi beamed and waved at scores of fans who had come to greet him at Le Bourget airport on the outskirts of the French capital after his flight from Barcelona. Chanting "Messi, Messi, Messi," the fans cheered and let off firecrackers. "It's going to be mad. After all, it's a legend who is arriving," said Florent Chauveau, a PSG fan. Reuters



Lionel Messi waves to chanting PSG fans from the window of the Paris airport yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

PSG reunite Messi and Neymar

AFP, Paris

The prospect of seeing Lionel Messi team up again with Neymar will have many football fans around the world salivating.

A team, PSG, that missed out on the Ligue 1 title last season but who in the last two campaigns reached a Champions League final and semi-final, now appear well set to land a first European Cup.

The model is the Barcelona team of 2014/15 which won the treble with Messi scoring 58 goals and Neymar 39. The third man, then, was Luis Suarez who added 25 goals.

Now the third man is Mbappe. It is over to Pochettino, Messi's compatriot, to accommodate them all, and Angel di Maria, and find the right balance to make a team of champions as well as a modern-footballing version of the Harlem Globetrotters.

Not all of fans will rejoice. Many will struggle to come to terms with Messi leaving Barcelona. Others would have preferred to see him go to a club where he really could have a transformative impact, like Diego Maradona at Napoli.

But modern football is now dominated by a narrow elite financed by mega-rich owners, state wealth in the case of Qatar-backed Paris Saint-Germain and Abu Dhabi's Manchester City.

Add in Roman Abramovich's Champions League winners Chelsea and even the likes of Barcelona and Real Madrid can't keep up. It is another bitter blow for Barca, who in 2017 were powerless to stop Neymar going to Paris for a world record 222 million euros (\$264m), setting off the chain of events that led to Messi heading the same way.

Barca ruined themselves in the transfer

market trying to replace Neymar to the extent they could not keep their greatest ever player due to La Liga's financial fair play rules.

PSG are not immune from the financial difficulties caused by the pandemic, but they are better placed to survive the economic downturn. PSG lost 124.9 million euros before tax in the 2019/20 season which was curtailed by the pandemic. Last season's figures are likely to be far worse, reportedly



around 230 million euros, with PSG almost entirely deprived of gate receipts as games were played behind closed doors while French TV revenue went off a cliff after the collapse of a record deal with Mediapro.

Yet they have splashed out in the transfer market, spending 60 million euros (\$71 million) on Inter Milan right-back Achraf Hakimi and signing several big-name players who were out of contract in Sergio Ramos, Georginio Wijnaldum and Gianluigi Donnarumma. Wijnaldum was snatched from under the noses of...Barcelona.

PSG can do it because their Qatari owners are there to cover the losses and because, for now at least, French league rules do not stop clubs having a wages to income ratio of almost 100 percent, as it was in 2019/20.

What direction do Tigers take now?

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI

The historic 4-1 series win against Australia was the Tigers' most significant series win in the T20 format, considered to be Bangladesh's Achilles heel. It will be a massive confidence boost ahead of the T20 World Cup, especially for a side missing a few key players, but in terms of preparations with two months to go until the tournament, how the latest series win adds up remains to be seen. And with the New Zealand series on the horizon, what should be Bangladesh's intention going forward?

The Tigers found lots of value as a number of young players displayed the character, attitude and confidence required in international cricket.

Facing Australia's skill with the ball, there

ever T20I score.

The balls kept low, the new batsmen from both sides found going tough and even after spending time at the crease, failed to play their shots.

Bangladesh's batsmen, used to such surfaces, consistently fell 10-15 runs short when batting first and that should be concerning as the rub of the green -- a very literal one in this case -- will not favour the Tigers' away from home, where the batsman will again have to adjust.

"The team winning is the most important, although on this slow, low, turning wicket, batsmen will probably not score many runs," ace all-rounder Shakib said after the series win.

The question now is whether the think-tank will think about another series win on low, turning tracks against New Zealand or give some much-needed focus on the



Batsmen from both Bangladesh and Australia found going tough in low, slow and turning wickets in Mirpur during the just concluded five-match T20I series.

PHOTO: STAR FILE

were many intense scenarios that played out in this series. Handling pressure situations has always been a worry for the Tigers and in that regard the just concluded series will breed necessary belief.

In essence, Bangladesh arguably gambled that the team would succeed in executing its plans. The team think-tank was reliant on the fact that Bangladesh bowling would fare better than their counterparts and although four of the five T20Is were close contests, it was largely the bowlers that made the difference, using the conditions to their fullest potential in tight situations.

Ultimately, discussions around those conditions are a different issue altogether. In terms of winning the series, there would not have been better conditions anywhere else to pull off a feat of the magnitude. The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) had insisted on playing matches in different venues and not just Mirpur but Australia, keeping the pandemic in mind, opted for just one venue.

On these wickets, neither team's scores exceeded the 131 runs that Bangladesh posted in the first T20I. In their 144-year history, Australia produced their shortest innings in any format, plummeting to 62 all out in the final T20I. It was also their lowest-

batsmen's room for improvement.

With Bangladesh not scheduled to play any more T20Is after the New Zealand series, the focus ideally should be to play on pitches that resemble conditions in UAE, where the World Cup will be played. Shakib will probably get an opportunity to play in the IPL leading up to the tournament and can use that opportunity to adapt to the wickets, but the same cannot be said of the others.

Australia skipper Matthew Wade said that the pitches in the West Indies were better suited to gauging their performances, reiterating that conditions in ICC tournaments would not be similar to those in Bangladesh. In fact, the conditions in Bangladesh were extreme, especially for the T20 format.

Ahead of the 2015 World Cup, the Tigers, went to Australia under coach Chandika Hathurusingha early to prepare and acclimatise to conditions. They lost warm-up matches to Ireland and Pakistan, but those defeats did not hinder the experience gathered from such matches. Even at the expense of losing the upcoming series, should the Tigers prepare better tracks against the Kiwis to properly gauge themselves and prepare for the tournament?

A brief window to sate yearning for loved ones

NABID YEASIN



"Bhai, do it quickly. Take the wicket so that we can go back home after such a long time away." Those were the words the stump mic picked up wicketkeeper Nurul Hasan

Sohan saying to Shakib Al Hasan in the 14th over of Bangladesh's fifth and final T20I against Australia in Mirpur on Monday.

Shakib duly obliged, scalping the final Aussie wicket of Adam Zampa to wrap up Bangladesh's five-match T20I series with an astounding 60-run thumping of Australia, finally allowing the 'hosts' to reunite with their loved ones.

Nurul's urgency for home comforts cannot be downplayed as it has been a long time since the cricketers have had a respite. The harsh realities of the Covid-19 pandemic forced the cricketers to leave one bio-secure bubble only to enter another, compelling them to stay away from their families even when living in the same city.

Prior to the series against Australia was a tour of Zimbabwe for a full series, starting from July 7. But instead of going back home after returning from Harare on July 29, the Tigers entered a bio-secure bubble at the Hotel InterContinental straight from the airport for the Australia series.

However, in spite of all the obstacles, Nurul said the cricketers had one objective in mind and never strayed from it.

"When we went to Zimbabwe, we knew it would be a long tour. We had been talking about the Australia series even when we were in Zimbabwe. We were mentally prepared to focus on the Zimbabwe series and give our best in the series against Australia as well," Nurul said.

"We had to stay at the hotel [to quarantine]



Bangladesh T20I skipper Mahmudullah Riyad on Monday reached home to a lovely surprise from his son -- a drawing and a message that read 'welcome home'. It has been over three months -- with just a few visits in between -- that the Tigers have been away from their families, fulfilling their duties for the national team. Despite being away from their loved ones, the Tigers have not been timid, portraying mental steadiness while maintaining strict Covid protocols and quarantine as they completed two back-to-back successful series -- a series sweep across formats away to Zimbabwe last month and their first-ever bilateral series win against Australia.

PHOTO: FACEBOOK

even after arriving in Dhaka from Harare. But we had that mental preparation and we had one objective -- to stay focused till we complete the mission. That's what happened and we were very lucky that we played well," he added, also mentioning that his family had been enduring a bit of a crisis due to his wife's being unwell and that he was relieved to finally be back home.

Even before the month-long tour of Zimbabwe, the cricketers had been engaged in the Bangabandhu Dhaka Premier League, for which they had to quarantine for about a month. Prior to that, touring Sri Lanka for two Tests followed by the Lankans' visit for three ODIs kept the Tigers busy and away from their loved ones. With the stress of maintaining health protocols and undergoing numerous Covid tests, the Tigers had to soldier through long stretches of time away from family with just a few visits in between and their yearning to return home was not only understandable but natural.

With that said, Bangladesh's future assignment is already set. Mahmudullah Riyad's men are scheduled to host New Zealand for a five-match T20I series from September 1 to 10. For that, according to what the Bangladesh Cricket Board informed, the Tigers will start individual practice from August 15. The BCB also mentioned it was contemplating putting players in quarantine for the series from August 24, the same day the Kiwis are set to arrive in Dhaka.

The Tigers may now be deservedly enjoying a brief period away from cricket, but they certainly know what they need to do when they resume. At least Shakib, according to Nurul, made sure during his speech in the dressing room after Australia series win that the Tigers understand the need to 'keep up this momentum' when they face New Zealand next month.

Race for second spot heats up

SPORTS REPORTER



With the title of the Bangladesh Premier League already decided, the battle for the runners-up spot heated up as Federation Cup runners-up Saif SC, struggling giants Mohammedan SC and rejuvenated Chattogram Abahani notched victories in their respective matches yesterday.

Saif maintained their unbeaten record in the professional league against Sheikh Russel KC after handing them an emphatic 4-2 defeat at the Bangabandhu National Stadium, which also saw Chattogram Abahani beat Bangladesh Police 4-1 under the floodlights.

Away at the Bangladesh Army Stadium in Banani, Mohammedan beat relegation-threatened Brothers Union 2-0.

With their 11th win in 20 matches, Chattogram Abahani moved to 37 points, two behind Sheikh Jamal DC, who however have a game in hand. Mohammedan, meanwhile,



raised their tally to 36 points from 20 outings, staying just ahead of sixth-placed Saif, who now have 32 points from 19 matches.

On the rain-soaked pitch at the BNS, Saif SC put the pressure on Sheikh Russel from the outset and the early pressure led to the opening goal in the 10th minute when Sheikh Russel defender Asaduzzaman Babul struck the ball

into his own net while attempting to clear a rebound, with John O'koli's shot coming off the crossbar.

Sheikh Russel reacted quickly to equalise with a fine strike from Obi Moneke four minutes later.

Saif, however, went to the break with a comfortable 3-1 lead after Kenneth Ikechukwu Ngwoke drove an Abid Ahmed cross home in the 27th minute before O'koli made it 3-1 with a nod off a Ngwoke header in the 40th minute. Ikechukwu widened the margin in the 52nd minute after letting loose a 25-yard drive past keeper Ashraful Islam Rana.

Obi Moneke pulled another goal back in the 63rd minute but could not help Sheikh Russel avoid their fourth defeat in six league matches against Saif SC.

At the Army Stadium, Shahed Mia broke the deadlock to give Mohammedan a 41st-minute lead against Brothers Union before Suleymane Diabate wrapped up the victory in the 83rd minute.