

CAN THE NEXT-GEN hurdle an old challenge?

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A second-string New Zealand side, composed of players who will not make the cut for the Kiwis' squad for the upcoming T20 World Cup, is set to visit Bangladesh for T20s next month, with the Tigers in high spirits after successive series triumphs, including a first-ever bilateral series win over Australia.

Already favourites for the series, the only challenge Bangladesh must contend with is ensuring the young blood, who have displayed eye-catching performances in the previous two series, continue to perform.

The oft-mentioned pipeline of Bangladesh cricket seems to finally be bearing fruit, with the likes of Afif Hossain, Shoriful Islam and Shamim Hossain stepping up in recent outings and at times overshadowing the team's senior performers.

The absences of senior cricketers Tamim Iqbal, Mushfiqur Rahim and first-choice opener Liton Das in the Australia series ended up as a blessing in disguise for the Tigers, who have long been looking for life beyond the few proven performers.

Afif's confident stroke-making, Shoriful's fiery spells and Shamim's marauding entrance into the international arena have instilled confidence and given rise to hopes of an auspicious future for Bangladesh cricket.

The focus now is on how long the youngsters can continue to perform. Will these youngsters turn

into players that bring accolades to their country or will they disappear after showing glimpses of potential?

Over the years, many potential stars have fallen by the wayside after being touted as Bangladesh cricket's next big thing. The trend had genuinely started worrying the think-tank and fans, who wondered if there were players capable of taking the baton from the big four of Tamim, Shakib Al Hasan, Mushfiqur and Mahmudullah Riyad, all in their mid-30s and each with about 15 years of service to their country under their belt.

It is not that Bangladesh has not produced players with similar or greater potential than the big four in the past 15 years. In fact, more than a handful of players emerged with extraordinary promise in that time, but they never went beyond showing hints of glimpses.

Sabbir Rahman has faded to the periphery while the likes of Soumya Sarkar, Liton Das, Mohammad Mithun and Mosaddek Hossain have been struggling to establish themselves for the national team despite having international careers of more than five years.

Sabbir was so heavily backed by former skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza that it created a stir in the media when the BCB decided to cut his ban short to have the hard-hitting batsman available for the 2019 World Cup in England.

Another example of a talent blending into the background is Najmul Hossain Shanto. Although he came onto the international scene a few years after Soumya,

Liton, Mithun or Mosaddek, Najmul was hyped as the next captain of the national team by some of the country's cricket experts. That made his hitting a snag all the more glaring, with the 22-year-old now only being considered for Tests.

The energy and zeal that Afif, Shamim, Shoriful have shown in the past few weeks were also observed when previous generations including the likes of Shanto, Soumya, Liton, Mithun, Mosaddek and Sabbir came onto the scene.

What is missing in each of their cases is consistency, a lack of which has seen some of them fall totally out of the selectors' consideration. Others have long been struggling to make a name for themselves and cement a place despite years and repeated opportunities.

Will the likes of Afif, Shamim and Shoriful crank it up a notch and elevate themselves to a level that their previous batches failed to reach despite no shortage of ability? For them, the coming New Zealand series could be the perfect platform to prove their consistency right before the T20 World Cup later this year in the UAE and with an eye on the 2023 ODI World Cup in India.

With senior players like Mushfiqur and Liton expected to return for the New Zealand series after missing the Australia series, the team management's job is to accommodate the youngsters in a way that inspires confidence. That, coupled with enough exposure, could see them flourish and take further steps towards becoming the next torchbearers of Bangladesh cricket.

'We can take a lot out of this tour'

Mitchell Marsh was perhaps the only batsman who, with some authority, adapted well to slow and low pitches in Mirpur during the just-concluded five-match T20I series between Australia and Bangladesh. The right-hander was the highest run-getter in the series, with 156 runs in five games, and stood firm with the bat when others found it extremely difficult. The 29-year-old spoke about his game, challenges and other aspects during an exclusive interview with The Daily Star's Mazhar Uddin. Excerpts of the interview are below:



The Daily Star (DS): You must have been disappointed by the result of the series, but you must also be happy about your performances with the bat.

Mitchell Marsh (MM): It was a tough tour for us. All credit to Bangladesh, who made the most of the conditions. I was reasonably happy with how I played in the West Indies but certainly felt I could have done more in the Bangladesh series. They were conditions we generally aren't used to be but we all could have performed better with the bat.

DS: How difficult was it to adjust to the surface in Dhaka? Did you take any different preparations to prepare for something like this ahead of the series?

MM: It was very different to any other condition I have experienced. The positive aspect was that it was a great learning curve for our players, particularly the new players. We can take a lot out of the tour regardless of the results.

DS: What are your observations about Mustafizur Rahman's bowling in the series?

MM: He seems to have found some of his early form from before the shoulder injury. He is an extremely difficult bowler to face at the best of times with his variation and the way he disguises some of his deliveries. He bowled exceptionally well and we applaud him for a great series.

DS: You batted mostly at number six and seven in your T20I career, but have averaged over 40 since being promoted to number three, including four fifties in 10 games. Are you looking forward to being a top order batsman in this format for Australia?

MM: I have enjoyed it, very much. But as I have said before, I played in that position

largely because of the missing players and am happy to bat wherever I am asked. If that is staying at the top or in the middle order, I am fine with either as long as I am playing for Australia.

DS: What sort of changes did you have to make to your mindset after changing your batting position? It's quite different batting at the top compared to the role of a finisher.

MM: Yes, it is. At three, I think you have to play to the state of the game. You could be in during the Powerplay or you could be coming in after a great start. In the middle, you are often looking to consolidate or finish.

DS: Are you willing to become a proper all-rounder, who will bowl four overs along with batting, or do you want to focus more on batting in the coming days?

MM: I am willing to do whatever is best for the team. If it means I bowl four overs, I am more than confident of filling that role as well as batting in the middle or top order. It really depends on who we have in the team, the conditions and the state of the game.

DS: How did you find the aggressive approach and the improvements from Bangladesh this time around?

MM: Full credit to them for making the most of the conditions. They probably played smarter than us in some ways as we are used to the ball coming onto the bat, fast outfields and lots of boundaries. It was almost the opposite in Bangladesh. They did really well taking the pace off the ball and using the big outfield with great running between the wickets. Again, it was a good lesson for us when we come into those types of conditions again.



Kazi Salahuddin recalls August 15

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) president Kazi Salahuddin yesterday recalled his memories of August 15, 1975 as Bangladesh commemorates the National Mourning Day.

While talking to reporters at his BFF office, the former national team captain spoke about his last memories with Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who embraced martyrdom along with most of his family members on this day in 1975.

"August 15 is the darkest day for Bangladesh and for all Bengalis. No other incident could be darker than this and the saddest thing is that we had to see and experience this," Salahuddin told reporters. "That I'm talking here as a free man is because of Bangabandhu. Independent Bangladesh was his vision."

The BFF boss spoke about how Sheikh Kamal, Bangabandhu's elder son, made an impact in Bangladesh's sporting landscape.

"Sheikh Kamal had a vision to see Bangladesh in a super position in sports world. In a short time he built Abahani, which has become an institution in the country."

"August 7 was the last time we met Bangabandhu. We have a picture of him meeting the team on that day before our departure for Kuala Lumpur for the Merdeka Tournament. The last time I talked with Kamal was August 8 at the airport, the day we left for Kuala Lumpur. I was the captain of the side. Kamal, too, was supposed to go there later. He couldn't go due to a university program. He said, 'you go, I'll come later. We will challenge Asia with this team,'" Salahuddin recalled.

Salahuddin also spoke about how he and the team came to know about what had happened on the morning of August 15 in Dhaka.

"We had a match with South Korea on August 15. We didn't have any practice in the morning. I went to the hotel for breakfast with Tanna (Tanvir Mazhar), who went from Hong Kong to see us play. At that time a Sikh guy, owner of an Adidas shop in Kuala Lumpur, approached us. He told us that a coup had taken place in Dhaka but couldn't give us any details.

"Instantly we took a taxi and rushed to the Bangladesh embassy, which resembled a crematorium to us. There was no-one except for a receptionist. We met the ambassador and he didn't know any detail yet, but gradually news started to come and we learnt of what had taken place in Dhaka," Salahuddin said.



Wins for Mohammedan, Ctg Abahani

SPORTS REPORTER

Mohammedan Sporting Club came from a goal down to beat Rahmatganj MFS 2-1 in a Bangladesh Premier League fixture at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

The third victory in the last four matches took Sean Lane's side to 39 points from 21 matches, one point behind Chattogram Abahani while Rahmatganj remained in ninth position with 18 points from 20 matches.

The Black and Whites started the match on the wrong foot, conceding a spot-kick in the fourth minute when Atikuzzaman brought down Felix Chidi Odili inside the box. The Nigerian himself stepped up to give the Old Dhaka outfit the lead.

Odili came close to doubling the lead soon but Mohammedan goalkeeper Sujon Hossain twice denied the Nigerian while at the other end a triple attempt from Mohammedan came to nothing as either the goalie or a defender or the other



Mohammedan defender Mounzir Couliadiati celebrates his winning goal against Rahmatganj MFS during their BPL fixture at the BNS yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

woodwork came to Rahmatganj's rescue. However, there was no rescuing the Old Dhaka outfit when Kamrul Islam curled

in a left-footed free-kick over goalkeeper Ariful Islam's head in the 39th minute. Mohammedan striker Yassan

Quatching's shot rattled the crossbar in the 43rd minute as the two sides went into the break with parity.

The second half saw far less action but Mohammedan found the decisive goal in the 71st minute when defender Mounzir Couliadiati smashed home from the middle of the box after Habibur Rahman Shohag's low corner was poorly dealt with by the Rahmatganj defence. Rahmatganj had defender Khurshed Beknazarov sent off minutes later, extinguishing their hopes of salvaging a point.

In the day's second match, Chattogram Abahani beat relegation-threatened Brothers Union 2-1 to remain in fourth position with 40 points from 21 matches.

Chinedu Matthew gave the port city side a 16th minute lead, but Intiaz Sultan Jitu cancelling it out seven minutes later. As the game looked headed for a draw, substitute Kawsar Ali Rabbi tapped home from inside the six-yard box in the fourth minute of stoppage time to give Chattogram Abahani their fourth win on the trot.



In the festive spirit of this year's International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples, on Friday, a friendly football match between two groups of Santal girls was arranged by 'Abolomban', a local indigenous organization, at the Kalupra playground in Dinajpur's Ghoraghat upazila. Marked every year on August 9, the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples is an opportunity to celebrate these communities and their knowledge and to raise awareness to protect the social, economic, and political rights of the indigenous communities. Elsewhere in Moulvibazar district, at the Hingajia tea-garden field of Kulaura upazila, a daylong wrestling festival took place, which also happens to be a part of the communities' century-old yearly tradition.

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